

Sprinter, 11, leaves trail of broken records

KIRTHMON F. DOZIER/Detroit Free Press

Sandra Johnson is a steady influence behind her 11-year-old son, Keith, making sure he keeps his mind on schoolwork as well as sports. "I didn't know he was this good," she says. "He never got a big head from it all."

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BY CHARLES ROBINSON
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It was one of those moments that witnesses recall in hushed voices, because if they speak too loudly, they might awaken and find out it was

only a dream.

Since Keith Johnson introduced himself as a track star 17 months ago, coaches in Detroit haven't stopped talking about him. He can't step into the starting blocks without big expectations. When he stretches, they point. When he laces up his spikes, they notice. When he runs, they whisper all over again.

"There he goes. Boy, he's fast, isn't he? That might be the next Michael

Johnson, right there."

And that's from the coaches, who watched as Keith Johnson demolished a national sprint record three months (three months!) after he started

running track. They started talking about Olympics and gold medals. Some people might look at Johnson and become skeptical. He's all elbows

and angles. He's an ice cream-eating, Pokemon-loving, track-blazing phenom. A boy. An 11-year-old boy. He's a good student who tries to get

away with little stuff, like staying up late or playing too many video games. He's a kid. A really fast, really normal, kid.

"I don't know," he says sheepishly, flashing dimples deep enough to bury a

quarter. "I can't say why I run like I do."

He doesn't have to tell you. Everyone else is dying to do it for him.

Standing in the middle of the Southfield-Lathrup High track, Fermon Tate

can't go five seconds without hearing something from a child meandering

by. A self-avowed track fanatic, Tate has been involved in the sport for

years, dating to his days as an athlete at Eastern Michigan University.

Now 39, he coaches the Swift Track Club in Detroit, devoting his time to

kids and their hopes.

Pacing the track with a Superman "S" on his yellow T-shirt, Tate cuts a

cool image. He moves smoothly, and his shaved head and dark sunglasses

project a commanding confidence.

"He loves his kids," an opposing coach said.

They love him, too. That much was apparent as they skipped along looking

for encouragement. "Hey, Coach Tate! Coach, my hip hurts! How fast was my

time?"

In the middle of it all, Tate kept a steady eye on Johnson, calculating

his progress with a stopwatch.

"C'mon, pick it up," Tate said as Johnson ran by. "You see that kid Keith's running with? He just graduated from high school."

This is the way the days have been since Johnson dropped into Tate's lap

almost a year and a half ago. He runs faster than every other kid in his

age group, so when he needs pushing, he's paired with someone older. This

time it's someone only months away from college.

"Keith really picked it up at the end there! He pushed you!" Tate said to

Johnson's running companion. The college-bound runner looked back and

nodded.

Seeing Johnson push one of Tate's running stars is nothing new. It's

actually how the whole thing started. It began with a simple call from a

basketball coach.

"He calls me and says, 'Hey, I've got this kid you should see,' "

Tate said. ' "He's running circles around my kids.' "

Such calls aren't uncommon for track coaches. Some kid looks fast, you get

a call. Often, it turns out to be a false alarm. The kid isn't cut out for

track or doesn't want to be a runner. But sometimes you hit the jackpot.

Sometimes you find a kid like Keith Johnson.

"At that time I had the 100- and 200-meters national champion (in the

10-and-under age group) from the year before," Tate said. "So I figured I

would let Keith run with him and see how he did.

"Then Keith jumped in and just beat the crap out of him. I couldn't

believe what I saw. I just stood back and was like, 'Oh, my God.' "

After that, Johnson only got better. Three months later, he accompanied

Team Swift to the Amateur Athletic Union Junior Olympics in Cleveland.

This is considered the pinnacle for young track stars. For Johnson, Cleveland was like Mozart's first crack at a symphony.

In the preliminaries, he broke the national record for the 200 meters. He

broke it again in the championship race. He won the 400-meter national

championship, too, missing the record by two-tenths of a second.

"He broke the 200 record twice at the same meet," said Les Hale, coach of

the Motor City Striders youth team. "Can you imagine that?"

And Johnson doesn't just set records -- he leaves his competitors far

behind, which is hard to do in a sprint. He often wins the 200 meters by

two seconds, the 400 by four seconds. It might as well be by a mile.

Tate expects more records to fall next week in the Junior Olympics at

Orlando, Fla. This month, Johnson set national marks for the 11-and-under

group in the 200 and 400 during an AAU regional meet at Elgin, Ill. He ran

the 200 in 25.9 seconds, the 400 in 57.7. But times are recognized as

national records only if they are set at the Junior Olympics, which start

Tuesday.

"What makes Keith so good is his work ethic," Hale said. "He puts his time

in out here. You can't wait until a track meet to push a button and turn

it on, and he doesn't."

As Hale spoke, Johnson was off in the distance, slapping hands with friends. It provided a sobering backdrop to the praise heaped on

him. This

is still a kid. A really fast, really normal kid.

Talking to Johnson about the attention, well, you have a better chance

racing him. When the records were brought up, he smiled and shrugged.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't feel any different."

Before you know it, he has gone on to another subject. That's when you

find out more about him, away from the track. He loves football and basketball and can't watch enough WWF wrestling. That's when you

find out more about the track dream, that maybe it's not even his -- not yet,

anyway.

His favorite sport is football, because you can get dirty. As far as track goes, he likes it, but he admitted: "How much longer do I plan to do it? I don't know." Maybe that's the best part of it. Coaches have been careful not to put too much pressure on him, not to make him hate his sport. He knows he's fast, but he doesn't brag, except to say: "There's always this kid who says he's going to beat me whenever I see him, but he still hasn't." His mother, Sandra, has been the most steady influence, pressing him to keep his head on straight. She has made sure he kept his mind on schoolwork. He's no classroom slouch, either. The athletic trophies that cram a corner in the family dining room share the spotlight with academic accolades. He went to Woodward Academy last year and will enter the sixth grade this fall, but his mom isn't sure which school he will attend. Sandra makes sure Keith gets to all of his sports on time. Football, basketball, whatever -- she transports him back and forth, from the field to their two-story brick home on the east side of Detroit. She foots the bills for all of his trips to national meets, something that can be difficult for a single parent. "I don't know where Keith gets it from," she said with a smile. "I didn't know he was this good, but he never tells me. He never got a big head from it all." Becoming the next Michael Johnson in the Olympics isn't his top priority yet. "Yeah, I think about that stuff sometimes," Johnson said. "But not all the time." Depending on the decisions he makes, Johnson's track life could be a mainstay for years to come. Then again, he could abruptly end it, like a shooting star that burned brightly -- then disappeared quickly. Either way, he's 11. After that he'll be 12, then 13. Things like the Olympics and being the next-great-whatever are far off. He's still a young boy with a lot of growing to do. For now, youth will remain an opponent he can't outrun. Then again, he's not really trying to.

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