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Running for fun

Most high-school athletes, like Raytown's girls 400-meter relay team, won't make it to state, but will still make many memories.

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Shamika Stamps might not be here if it weren't for her gray socks with the cartoon squirrels on them. She considers them her secret weapon because she thinks they distract her opponents.

It's Saturday, and Shamika and the Raytown girls 400-meter relay team will take all the extra help they can get at the district meet. The Blue Jays are seeded fifth out of seven teams, and they need to finish in the top four to qualify for the sectional meet next Saturday.

Shamika, the relay's anchor, stretches with Candace Stephenson, the first off the block. Shamika knows that Candace usually needs a pep talk to get motivated.

"You ready?" Shamika asks Candace. "You gotta push off the block!"

"We're seeded fifth," Shamika continues. "We're going to come out of nowhere."

Raytown coach Chris Reichert would have liked to have seen this attitude on Tuesday when he released the girls for a water break. They were supposed to come back to practice handoffs but instead called their parents and left.

"I'm not surprised," Reichert said that day.

Reichert wasn't surprised because Shamika, Candace, Julee Smith and Moriah Jones are the norm among high school athletes. They play, not to win the state championship or earn a Division I college scholarship, but to have something to do after school. They make friends, and yes, they take an extra-long water break sometimes.

Last year, about 85 percent of girls who participated in track and field did not qualify for the state meet. Count these four girls from Raytown in that group for this year. Even if they sneak out of districts, they won't make it out of sectionals. This Missouri Class 4 district meet in Belton is Raytown's state meet.

Aside from Julee and Moriah, who ran together at Raytown Middle School last year, the girls had never met before this school year. Now, they depend on one another for everything: Who has the baton and the tennis balls? Who is checking the team in? And where the heck is Moriah?

The Blue Jays check in and now must take their spots on the track. But first, they have to pray. They gather in a circle with the baton in the middle. They place their hands on the baton in order of the relay. First Candace, then Moriah, then Julee, then Shamika.

"I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me," they say in unison. They break, and Candace walks the baton to the blocks.

Candace is not a competitive person. She doesn't understand why other kids cry when they lose.

"To tell you the truth," the sophomore says, "I'm just a cheerful person. I don't get too mad."

But Candace does enjoy competing, which is why she'd like to push off the block this time instead of standing up.

POP! The gun goes off, and Candace stands up. Oh well. Known as the goofy one, she's much better at making her teammates laugh than pushing off the blocks.

"If I'm ever in a bad mood," Julee says, "I go to practice, and Candace is always hyper and energetic, always laughing and making jokes."

Practice is not Candace's strong suit. Reichert has to prod her to run her hardest. Candace cares a lot more about her grades than she does track. She wants to go to school out of state, somewhere like Atlanta, and work with kids when she's older.

Truth be told, this might be Candace's last track meet. She's not sure whether she will run next year. "I don't know," she says. "It's like I want to, but then I don't want to."

As she runs her 100, Candace knows she hasn't done very well for her team. Her split is a 13.60 seconds, her highest of the year. Her handoff to Moriah isn't the smoothest, but at least it's over now.

Moriah needs to make up some ground quickly, or else this is it for Raytown. Good thing she's got the genes to do it.

Moriah's father, Mike Jones, made one of the most famous tackles in NFL history. Jones, playing linebacker for the St. Louis Rams in Super Bowl XXXIV, grabbed Titans receiver Kevin Dyson's legs and kept him from scoring the go-ahead touchdown with no time on the clock.

But Moriah is only a freshman. At practice a few weeks ago, she was busy doing an

experiment. She wanted to see how much blood could rush to her head by leaning over a table. At a meet last week, she didn't want to run. She wanted some Taco Bell instead.

"If I really worked hard, I could be extremely good," Moriah says, "but I'm kind of a slacker, so ..."

In Moriah's defense, she's a freshman playing her third sport of the year. "I'm extremely burned out," she says.

As she darts down the straightaway, the rest of the field is creating even more distance. Luckily, Moriah's goal had nothing to do with making it to sectionals.

"I want to go to sectionals," Moriah says, "but I think I'm shooting for fifth."

Moriah hands off cleanly to Julee after 13.29 seconds, and even fifth place looks like a stretch.

A freshman with a smile that breeds optimism everywhere she goes, Julee is the team's hardest worker.

"I'll be disappointed if we don't make sectionals, because I know that we're really good," Julee says. "I know we can beat those teams and get third place."

Julee is the pacesetter at practice, but usually Candace and Moriah run their best at meets. Julee is startled by the length she and Shamika will have to make up, but she's going to give it her best.

"If I don't push myself at practice," Julee says, "I feel like I'm letting myself down. I'll go home and run on my own."

Julee is the girly-girl of the group. The Raytown boys team never leaves her alone at practice. "I just blow them off," she says. "I don't have a problem with telling them to shut up."

Julee chose track over soccer because she can play club soccer anytime. She's got high hopes for this same group of girls next year.

"If we get more serious, and if we don't slack, I think we could make state," Julee says. "We're fast, and I know we're good."

Unfortunately, they're not showing it on Saturday. Julee's 12.89 gives Shamika a chance to meet Moriah's goal of fifth, but nothing more.

Nobody wants this more than Shamika. Last year, she made it to state in the 400 relay as a sophomore at Raytown South. Her family moved, and she transferred to Raytown for her junior year.

"I want bragging rights more than anything," Shamika says. "My friends at South talk so much. I want to show them that I got just as good a relay team with just as much talent as they have."

Yet, when Shamika got the baton from Julee, the girl from Raytown South was too far ahead to pursue. And there was nobody behind Shamika to get distracted by the squirrels.

Shamika did every sport growing up. Her dad wanted her to be a basketball player because that was his sport. She decided to do track because Dad didn't know much about it and therefore couldn't coach her.

Now, Shamika wants a college scholarship to run somewhere. Her family doesn't have the money to send her to college because she has two younger sisters. Shamika wants to be a lawyer. "You get up, everyone gets quiet, and they listen to you," Shamika says. "I feel it in my stomach. I tell my parents, I know I'm going into law."

Shamika crosses the finish line in sixth place. Her time is 12.64, the team's best, but not enough. Raytown ran a 53.06 after coming in seeded with a 51.72. Shamika will have to wait a year for another chance at state.

"I want to say I accomplished something, that all this running, killing my shins, wasn't in vain," Shamika says. "I need to win. Competing was enough at one point, but I need to say that I was here, and I made it right."

Shamika sits down after the race, takes off her spikes and shakes her head.

"The squirrels didn't help me today," she says.

It's hard to figure out how a relay race goes wrong. Was it Candace's inability to push off the block? Was it the handoff from Candace to Moriah? Did the squirrels take a day off? Maybe it just wasn't Raytown's day.

"That was bad," Candace says after what could be her last race. "Coach said it looked like I was jogging. But it went so fast."

Candace, as she predicted, isn't shedding any tears.

"Now I don't have to come home late," she says.

That's pretty much the attitude of the Blue Jays. Life goes on. Julee will start her summer job at Super Splash soon, Moriah will finally rest and Shamika will watch more cartoons.

And they all leave with great memories. Julee and Moriah agree on their favorite moment from their first high school track season. After practice on Friday, the boys attacked the girls with water guns. The girls retaliated with water bottles and water balloons.

"I got soaking wet, and my hair was drenched," Julee says. "It was really fun, though."