

WSSU spring game to benefit Second Harvest

Winston-Salem State University will have its Spring Football Game on April 11 at 3 p.m. The location will be at Glenn High School, 1600 Union Cross Road in Kernersville. Admission is free with two non-perishable food items. All food items are being donated to the Second Harvest Food Bank. For more information on Rams football, visit www.WSSURams.com.



Winston-Salem State University's football team practices.

Photo by Erin Mizelle for The Chronicle

Lady Rams

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cancelled.

Whether WSSU can put together a lengthy win streak before the end of the regular season is anyone's guess. At this juncture, that's what it would take for the Lady Rams to have a legitimate shot at reaching the .500



Photos by Craig T. Greenlee

Freshman catcher Melissa Carillo has turned in solid performances for the Lady Rams.

mark by early May when the conference championships are held in Cary.

"We're looking to get on track and hopefully, we'll be playing our best right ball towards the end of the regular season," said Hilliard-Gray. "We won't be satisfied just to win the tournament and go to the regionals. The goal is to compete and make it past the first round."

The Lady Rams, 6-2 in the CIAA, are led by three players who provide stability and versatility.

Sophomore right-handed pitcher Mercedes Hargett is arguably WSSU's best player. As a pitcher, she has a 6-9 record with 91 strikeouts and 38 walks. At the plate, she's batting .382 with four home runs and 15 RBIs. Hargett ranks among the CIAA leaders in pitching wins, RBIs and homers.

"After her freshman year, she worked hard in the off-season and I could tell the difference right away," said Hilliard-Gray. "When she came back, she was a much better player than she was a year ago."

Chyna Riley (.386 batting average) has emerged as productive utility player who can pitch and play in the outfield and at second base. Under Hilliard-Gray's guidance, Riley, a sophomore, has transitioned well as a converted left-handed hitter, who bats in the lead-off position in the lineup.

"Hitting from the left side helps Chyna to take full advantage of her speed," Hilliard-Gray said. "She's petite (5-foot-4), but plays much bigger than her size."

Katrina Bartlett, a senior who alternates between third base and shortstop, originally attended junior college and switched to playing in the outfield. Hilliard-Gray convinced her to change back to being an infielder when she came to WSSU. The move has worked out well for all parties involved.

Bartlett is the team's leading hitter (.413) and she's tied with Hargett for the team lead in home runs and RBIs. "Katrina has stepped up as one of the voices of leadership," Hilliard-Gray said. "She's aggressive at the plate and she's good with the glove."

Winston-Salem State will return to action with a doubleheader at home against Barton College on April 17 at Salem College Field. The first game is set to begin at 4 p.m.

Caldwell

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point to make a clean jump. If the athlete doesn't generate enough speed on the run-up approach, he or she may not generate sufficient lift to clear the bar. If they chop their steps on the approach, it will slow momentum and most likely result in a failed attempt.

Determining the proper take-off point is equally important. Taking off too close to the bar, or taking off too far away from the bar, will cause a missed attempt. As jumpers attempt to clear greater heights, technique becomes even more crucial.

"The key is to stay consistent with technique all the way through the jump," Caldwell said. "But it's also about spacing. As the bar is raised, you develop a feel for what adjustments to make on where to start your approach and where to start your take-off."

Tim Sullivan, a Wake Forest assistant coach who specializes in the vertical jumps, has worked with Caldwell over the past three years. There are no doubts in his mind about her capabilities for this outdoor season.

"Physically and mentally, Nyki is in a very good place right now," he said. "She's grown by leaps and bounds in her confidence level and her knowledge about training. She knows she can jump higher than what she did at the ACC

meet and she's still hungry. Is jumping 6-feet possible for her? Absolutely. It's all about Nyki competing and performing to the best of her ability.

"Now that we're in the outdoor season, we're in a new training cycle, so we're building everything towards the championships in May and June. As we get closer to the end of the season, Nyki could be one of the best high jumpers in the country."



Caldwell



Kiah Ruffin races home to score a run for the Lady Rams.



LaTaya Hilliard-Gray, WSSU softball coach

McNeill

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the team and they put me any and everywhere. But my mentality was to stay focused and do what I came out do which was to put in the work and effort in a sport that I love.

SW: Once you made the team, what prompted you to see how much you could achieve?

McNeill: I was inspired to get better because of all the teammates who were NCAA qualifiers and/or nationally ranked in their events. I had to do everything I could to keep up with them (in workouts). To do that, I knew I would have to dedicate myself to working hard. If I didn't make it, I could still be satisfied because I would know that I poured all of myself into it. But I thank God because He blessed me and made it possible for me to excel as a track athlete.

SW: You've decided to turn pro when your track days are done at WSSU. What sparked your desire to compete at that level?

McNeill: I had never thought about being a professional athlete. That's something that really became clear to me not so long ago. I think that everybody in track and field should have the dream of eventually competing as a professional one day. Since I wanted to follow in the footsteps of some of my nationally-ranked teammates, I set some short-term goals. I wanted to be a national qualifier and it happened. Then, I wanted to make All-America and that came to pass, too.

Now, my No. 1 goal is to be the NCAA Division II (outdoor) national champion in the triple jump. That's what I'm working towards right now. I've put in a lot of work and was able to accomplish my previous goals fairly quickly. So, I feel like the next step for me is to take it to the professional level. Achieving those short-term goals helped me realize that it's possible for me to make good on my long-term goal to compete as a professional athlete.

SW: You've done a little bit of everything in WSSU track. It seems like the heptathlon would be a good fit for you once your college days are done. What are your thoughts about that?

McNeill: The heptathlon has been brought up a few times by my coaches. I'm not opposing it. But I know my passion is in the jumps. I've put in a huge amount of effort and work into everything they have me doing. I feel like I'm dedicated enough to each and every event. If I can put that same amount of energy into just one specific event, or maybe two jumps, who knows how far I can go from there?

SW: Tell me about track and field at your high school (Greensboro's Grimsley). Did it help prepare you for college competition?

McNeill: It made me appreciate the sport more. It

helped me to grow my love for track and I learned all about the value of hard work. When I was at Grimsley we didn't have a great track and we didn't have a lot of people. It wasn't the ideal place to have a track team. In practices, it felt like we were running on concrete. In making the transition from high school to college, that's what I carried with me. You have to work hard. It's not about you, it's about the team. Those are the values I carry with me today.

SW: You've earned multiple All-America honors over the past three years. What do you most want to accomplish by the time your college track career is over?

McNeill: One thing that's really been on my heart in recent weeks is to pour into my teammates. I want to tell them what I know and what I've learned. If you love the sport, then it's mandatory that you put some effort into it. At the college level, it requires a lot more out of you, so it's not as easy. It's not about the athlete's feelings. It's about the team, it's about the sport. It's about what can you do to help the sport to grow.

SW: Has your career turned out the way you thought it would?

McNeill: When I first got here, I didn't have any great expectations for myself. It was like I was dreaming. I never thought I would be able to accomplish in the manner that I have. There were so many great people who were already at WSSU before I came. Compared to them, I wasn't so sure about how well I could jump or how well I could run. The only thing I knew for sure was that I could work hard. Even if I wasn't all that good, I was going to make sure that I would continue to show progress over the weeks to come. Track and field was something I really wanted to do. That's my passion for the sport.

SW: What's been your biggest challenge as a college athlete?

McNeill: For me, any type of transition is a challenge. In my sport, I went from the jumping events to hurdles and being part of the 4x100 relay. Making transitions gives me an uncomfortable feeling. I try my best to do what I can. But I have my coaches helping me. They've held my hand and walked me through and I've gotten great support from my teammates. With that kind of support and encouragement, it's been so much easier for me to deal with transition. I really appreciate that.

SW: When you compete in the long jump and triple jump, you always start to clap and then others join in with you. How did that start? How does it help?



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

Tajanel McNeill is one of the premier triple jumpers in the NCAA Division II.

McNeill: There are a lot of jumpers who do that already. My jumps coach (Austin Davis) got that started with me. In practice I was always analytical and always striving to be perfect in every detail. He felt I could do better if I learned to relax during competition. So, he suggested that I start a slow clap right before I take off down the runway.

I was so scared and afraid to try it. I'd seen it done before, but didn't think it would be any good for me. When we tried it that first time in practice, I was so worked up and nervous, but excited at the same time.

I'll never forget how it all came together. I jumped farther than I ever had before (a personal best). I forgot all about technique and everything else. That's when I found out that the hand clap helps me to relax and do what I already know how to do.