

McNeill

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interested in signing her to run track for their respective programs. July 1 was the first day in which the NCAA allows college coaches to have direct contact with recruits. The schools which contacted McNeill include: UNC-Chapel Hill, N.C. State, Hampton, Howard, Tulane, South Carolina, Florida, Florida State, Miami (Fla.) and Louisville.

"I wasn't pleased with my performance at the Trials," said McNeill, who is the Class 4-A state outdoor champ in the 400. "But then I was reminded that so many other athletes never get the opportunity of compete at that level. So, I'm thankful to have made it as far as I did. When I heard from all the colleges that day, it really lifted me up."

McNeill, a rising senior with a 4.4 weighted grade-point average, figures to be a highly sought-after recruit for the upcoming school year. In the most recent national rankings on the milesplit.com website (the week of July 6), she's No. 14.

Six runners who are ranked ahead of McNeill are graduating seniors. Unless there are drastic changes in the rankings, McNeill is most likely to enter the 2016 outdoor season as eighth in the country.

McNeill can still move up in the rankings for this season. To do so, she must surpass her personal best of 53.40 seconds at the USATF Junior Olympic track nationals at Jacksonville, Fla. later this month (July 27-Aug. 2). It will be her final competition of the summer track season.

"McKinley has come such a long way," said Jarrell Elliott, an assistant who coaches and trains Parkland's quarter-milers. "I'm happy that she's put it all together. There's no doubt that she's reaping the rewards from all the work that she's put in."

By any standard of measurement, this has been a quantum leap kind of season for McNeill. In the span of one year, she improved her personal best time by nearly three seconds (2.68 to be exact), which is huge for the one-lap distance.

Even more remarkable is how McNeill continued to take giant strides late in the outdoor season. At the state outdoor championships in May, she ran a career best of 54.61.

A month later, she lowered her previous best by nearly a full second to post a fifth-place finish at the New Balance Outdoor Nationals. Even though her 53.40 is her fastest time to date, there was a feeling that she might have run faster. At the New Balance meet, she won decisively in a relatively slow heat and was never seriously challenged.

"One of the biggest changes with McKinley is her confidence level," said Elliott. "During the season she realized that she could run with the best in the state. But now she has a whole new mindset. She believes she's

among the best in the nation. A lot of that has to do with her learning to trust in her training."

Entering the outdoor season of 2015, McNeill had a tendency to hold back during the first half of the 400. She was reluctant to go out fast, fearing that she wouldn't have enough reserves to finish strong. As the season progressed, McNeill discovered that because of her training, she could get off to a fast start and not have to worry about fading badly coming down the stretch.

"For the longest time, I had it in my head that I couldn't finish," said McNeill. "This all started when I ran an 800-meter race when I was 11 years old. I started out fast for the first 300. But the rest of the way I had nothing left, so I believed that it was best for me to always start off slow and finish with a kick. It took a while for me to see that I can run fast from the start and still have something left at the end."

Start fast-finish fast was the race strategy McNeill used to eventually defeat her nemesis, Layla White of Cary. In several face-offs over the past two seasons, McNeill had never beaten White.

In February, everything seemed to be in place for victory when McNeill and White lined up for the 500-meter run at the Class 4-A state indoor championships. At the time, McNeill had the No. 2 time in the nation (1 minute, 14.04 seconds). In a tight race that went from wire-to-wire, White survived to win her third straight 500 indoor title. McNeill ran well, but had to settle for being the state runner-up.

Three months later, these two engage in another fiercely contested battle at the state outdoor championships in the 400. This time, McNeill shifted into overdrive over the final 80 meters and won comfortably over White, who entered the race as the defending outdoor champ. This was a signature moment for McNeill.

"All I remember is how hard I worked in those weeks leading up to the state meet," McNeill recalled. "The rivalry with Layla is a friendly one, but she was always the one who won. I reached a point where I got tired of losing to her. I wanted it so badly that I could taste



Photo by Craig T. Greenlee

McKinley McNeill of Parkland hopes to improve her national ranking when she competes in the USATF Junior Olympic nationals later this month in Jacksonville, Fla.

it." Aside from this year's state outdoor championships, McNeill's most memorable moment came at the New Balance outdoor nationals in the Swedish Relay. Running the 400 anchor leg, McNeill blazed the final lap with a personal best split of 53.1. When McNeill got the baton, Parkland was fifth. McNeill ran down four runners as the Mustangs ended up second in their heat and third overall.

The bronze medal finish was considered a somewhat of a surprise. That's because Parkland had two new runners who had never run on the "A" team prior to the outdoor nationals.

"This past season was bittersweet for me," said McNeill. "Six seniors have graduated and we were all like sisters to each other. But I'm excited about next year and I like the group that we have coming back. Yes, there's some work for us to do, but I have no doubts that we're going to be fine."

Looking ahead to McNeill's senior season, Elliott believes she has a reasonable shot at breaking the state record of 52.8 seconds. But he's also quick to acknowledge that so much depends on her mental outlook.

"The big key is whether or not she stays hungry," he said. "I'm happy to say that I see no evidence of McKinley becoming complacent. She should be the best at the 400 and 500 in North Carolina. As long as she keeps doing what she's doing, the sky's the limit."

Hamlin

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what happens."

As a former Camels assistant coach (2005-2011), Hamlin is acutely aware of all the challenges. But he also has a fierce determination to do all he can to help Atkins football ascend to heights that it's never reached before.

Hamlin assumed command of the program in February. Since then, he's been asked the same question on multiple occasions.

Why Atkins?

"The most honest answer is that they gave me an opportunity," said Hamlin, who spent the last four seasons as an assistant varsity coach and head junior varsity coach at Reynolds. "One of the reasons that I even applied for the position is because of the growth I've seen. At one time, Atkins had about 400 students, now that number is up to around 600.

"Academically, the school is outstanding, which means that I don't have a lot of problems with eligibility. Since I've been here before, I know what the potential is. It's going to be a challenge to see if I'm that guy who can provide that spark to get Atkins on the right track."

Hamlin believes that one of the biggest challenges he faces is getting Atkins supporters to understand that high-quality academic schools are more than capable of producing top-flight football programs.

Atkins is the only high school in the county's STEM program (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math). STEM schools offer curriculum to help students prepare for careers in those highly specialized fields. Hamlin feels there's a misguided perception among supporters in the Atkins community that a STEM school cannot field a good football team.

"It's like there's a stigma that smart kids can't be good athletes," he said. "I spoke with the head coach at the Duke [David Cutcliffe] at a clinic about this. People believe Duke can't win at football because of its academic standards. That's one of the biggest challenges we face at Atkins.

"Our young men are working very hard and they want to be coached, they want to be taught. Being good in the classroom helps with their understanding on the football field. For our players, it's a matter of them getting past that stigma in their own minds."

During spring practice, Hamlin refused to make any assumptions about any of his players. The coaching staff placed heavy emphasis on mastering the basics and developing strong work habits. In essence, Hamlin implemented a "Football 101" kind of approach, which ran the gamut from getting into the proper stance to executing the right techniques for blocking, tackling and catching the football.

According to Hamlin, 34 players came out for spring ball, which is considered to be a reasonable turnout for a Class 1-A school such as Atkins.

"For where we are right now as a program, I was pleased with our spring numbers," he said. "We started at the bottom, just like we would if we were at the Pop Warner level. We sent the message early-on that hard work is what produces good results.

"The team motto for this year is: 'Earn it.' It won't matter what they did last year. It won't matter how good they think they are. Whatever they get, they're going to have to earn it each week. I believe we can win four games this season. But the main thing I want to accomplish is for them to learn how to compete in every game."

towards it. There are folks who say that we won't be successful. But I say give me a couple of years and we'll see

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