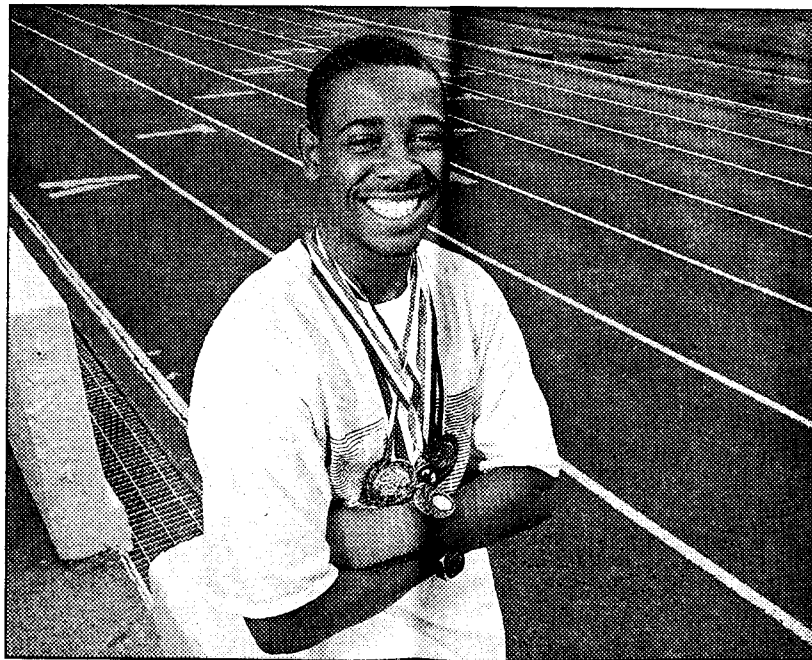


Buffs sprinter goes overseas to find faith in himself



Brian Corn/The Wichita Eagle

Kenyatis Griffin, a junior sprinter at Wichita Southeast, shows off his medals he won while competing in Europe this month.

■ Kenyatis Griffin brings three medals and more confidence back from a tour of Europe.

By Keri Wohlford

Wichita Eagle correspondent

It's a Tuesday evening, and members of the Wichita Athletics, an AAU track and field team, are at Coleman Middle School working on their individual events.

After winning three medals at international meets in Europe, team member Kenyatis Griffin is more self-assured. And he is ready to work harder.

To perfect his form for the quarter-mile race, Griffin does slow running drills with intentional movements. For the rest of the 2½-hour practice, he internalizes the rhythm of his stride and runs several 400-meter sprints.

"I've been pretty impressed with him," says one of Griffin's AAU coaches, Robert Hamm, who competes in hurdles races for the University of Kansas.

"I think with him it's more mental. He's very talented, but his mental focus will take him to the next level."

HOMETOWN SPORTS

Griffin has already tasted the next level somewhat, an experience that has motivated him even more.

A couple of weeks ago, Griffin, who will be a junior at Wichita Southeast, got a taste of international competition when he ran in three meets during the Track and Field Sports Tour in Europe.

He was the only male from Kansas among the 40 American athletes who went on the tour. He competed in Holland, Belgium, France and England.

"The tour was only 12 days, but I could see a difference in him already," said John Wright Jr., another of Griffin's coaches. "I think it was more of a confidence factor. Before, he had the idea he could run with anyone. And he found out he could.

"When you have a runner who can go over to Europe and hold his own, you've got a world-class athlete."

Griffin is proud of his accomplishments overseas, but he looks at the trip as more of

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an educational experience, a collection of memories he feels fortunate to have.

Therefore, each physical reminder of the journey is cherished even more. He even presents each reward and each memento carefully, making sure to relate the impact it has had on his life, even if he's still winded from practice.

"I almost came in first place," he

says while caressing his 400-meter silver medal from the first meet. "I thought I was going to hit a 49 (seconds), then this big dude came striding past me."

He moves that medal aside and goes on to the other two.

"It's not like you can just make first and second place at these meets," he says, holding up two third-place medals side-by-side.

The final possession Griffin pulls from his bag is his most prized one: his name card from the tour. It is now

covered with signatures of star athletes who coached him in Europe. Griffin's favorite among the athletes he met was Tyree Washington, who just ran the 200 and 400 at the Goodwill Games in New York.

"I had a real conversation with Tyree Washington," Griffin said. "He actually stood there and talked to me and my mom. He got me thinking I can really make the Olympics if I want to. That was my highlight."

The training Griffin received was

intense — running, conditioning, form work. Coaches taught him the correct way to sprint — on his tip toes. They even devised a weight-training plan intended to increase his upper-body strength.

"They did train us hard, but it's about what you want to do — what you feel for yourself," Griffin said, pounding his chest twice with his fist. "I want to be a champion. A champion always pushes himself past the normal level of training."