

# Rare high school athlete featured on SI



by Larry Vaught

Having an athlete featured on a Sports Illustrated cover is not a rarity for the University of Kentucky. However, it's usually men's basketball, not track and field, that is featured.

But the July 17 Sports Illustrated cover featured incoming freshman Sydney McLaughlin for being named Gatorade High School Athlete of the Year for the second straight year — something no other high school athlete had ever done.

She finished sixth in the USA Track & Field 400-meter hurdles final with a time of 53.82 seconds — a world-record for athletes under 20. In 2016 she became the youngest person to make the U.S. Olympic team in decades.

Kentucky coach Eric Floreal intends to have her compete in the 100-meter hurdles and long jump as a freshman to give her a break after almost non-stop competing in the demanding 400 hurdles.

Kentucky volunteer assistant coach Kendra Harrison is the 100-meter hurdle world record holder.

"I am really excited to see new talent and see this program succeed and adding her to the roster will do that," Harrison said. "I will treat her like all other athletes, but she is really talented and will also help push me. She is already such a big name for track and field for young athletes.

"It makes me feel good and appreciated that she said one reason she was coming here was to be around me. It's hard to put into words what that means. I like to think of myself as a regular athlete but anyway I can help Kentucky getting recruits here, I am down for it."

McLaughlin dominated high school competition. But how good can she be?

"The sky is the limit for that girl," Harrison said. "She still has not done a lot of collegiate workouts. She is already way beyond

where I was at that age."

## Romeo Langford

He might not have played as well or as much as he wanted — and a minor injury contributed to that — during the FIBA Under 19 World Cup, but that won't impact the way New Albany (Ind.) guard Romeo Langford will finish the summer or his final high school season.

Langford scored 44 points in a regional semifinal loss to end his junior season. That gave him 2,079 career points meaning he needs 1,056 points this year to break Damon Bailey's state record of 3,134 points set in 1990. Only four players in Indiana history have scored 1,000 or more points in a season and Langford would have to average 36 or more points per game to reach that mark. He finished last season averaging 28.7 points, 8.9 rebounds, 3.4 assists and 2.1 blocks per game.

"He really is cool as a cucumber," said New Albany coach Jim Shannon. "He doesn't let anything phase him. He is able to go out and give his best in any situation. If he comes up short, he is able to accept it and move on. He is very mature

"He's never too high or too low. He is very well grounded. A lot of that comes from his upbringing. He has been raised well."

Langford, the No. 3 overall prospect in the 2018 ESPN 100, says he's a better player than he was a year ago. Kentucky, Louisville and Indiana are all recruiting him along with Duke, North Carolina, Purdue and many others. He insists living just across the Kentucky-Indiana border in New Albany just 20 minutes from Louisville has made handling the recruiting pressure easy.

"I have a whole bunch of fans from every school that every day tell me I should go to their school," Langford said. "It's kind of easy just to ignore them because there are so many. It's just them talking about their school. They are just doing what they think they have to do for their team."

"My dad helps me a lot with recruiting, too. He does mainly the talking with college coaches. They do not have my (cell phone) number. I don't have to worry about coaches texting me or taking up my time. He takes care of that for me."

Shannon says college coaches contact him about setting up meetings or coming to a practice or game. They also sometimes want to set up a meeting in the coach's office.

"But all recruiters go through Tim Langford. I am just there to facilitate. They are in full control of his recruiting," Shannon said. "I stay plenty busy with college coaches and media interviews about him. There is going to be a documentary about him. There have been film crews at school following him around. He keeps me pretty busy."

But Langford is also getting better. He says he's better than he was a year ago and Shannon quickly agreed and said not making the USA under 17 team in 2016 had something to do with that.

"He hadn't been told no in a long time. He has always excelled on the court," the coach said. "When he got told no (about being on the team), it was the first time that had happened. Romeo and his whole family handled it well. They had no regrets about trying out. They had nothing vindictive to say about the process."

"But it made him work even harder. He is still a quiet, unassuming person, but he has become more vocal on the court. Some of the greatest players of all time are that way. He leads by example but I think his senior season he will be more vocal and take even more of a leadership role." So what does he do so well that Kentucky, Louisville, Duke, North Carolina and others are pursuing him so hard?

"What he does best is everything. He goes take to rim, can pull up and hit a short range jumper, is capable of hitting 3's and is an excellent free throw shooter. That makes for a heck of an offensive player. He's not at all selfish. Probably as selfless as any player I have ever coached and certainly selfless in an era where people of his magnitude have a me thing a lot of times," Shannon said.

"He never runs to me about stats or getting more shots. He's chasing Damon Bailey's record, but I would never expect him to say anything to me about that or leaving him in a game so he can score more. For all he has ahead of him, he will not be concerned about the record. He'll worry a lot more about helping us win."

Langford expects to cut his potential list to about seven in the next few weeks but has not indicated when he might make a college decision.

## Cameron Reddish

Pennsylvania prep



Kentucky signee Sydney McLaughlin became a rare high school athlete to be featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated.

standout Cameron Reddish, a 6-7 wing, has a slew of big-time offers including Kentucky, Duke, Arizona, UCLA, Villanova and Maryland. He expects to cut his list in the next week or so, take official visits and then make a college choice in November or December.

He was one of three high school players on Team USA coached by John Calipari that competed in the FIBA Under 19 World Cup in Egypt. He averaged 10.7 points and 4.3 rebounds per game.

Reddish admits Kentucky's stock has risen because of his time playing for Calipari this summer. He would not say that UK was his leader, but told media members at last week's Peach Jam that the two "got a lot closer" during their time together.

## Bunchy Stallings

Kentucky junior offensive lineman Bunchy Stallings lost his mother, Cynthia Stallings, age 53, earlier this month when she passed away after a long battle with cancer.

Not only is Bunchy Stallings one of UK's best offensive linemen, but he might also be one of the team's most under appreciated players. He was a top 40 recruit in Alabama when he decided to play at Kentucky.

That was after then UK offensive coordinator Neal Brown, now the head coach at Troy, and UK offensive line coach John Schlarman were caught in a rare Alabama snowstorm that paralyzed the area. The UK coaches had



Romeo Langford of New Albany, Ind., is one of the nation's best prep players but is in no rush to make his college choice. (USA Basketball Photo)

to abandon their car, walk a mile to Stallings' high school and then spend the night at the school with many others because of the weather. Stallings now wears No. 65 in honor of Schlarman, who also wore 65 during his UK career.

I reached out to Stallings on Twitter because even now I still miss my father and I know it is hard to lose a parent.

"Thank you and you know it's not easy but you understand they're in a better place," Stallings replied.

## Clevan Thomas Jr.

Probably no Kentucky receiver appreciates what offensive linemen do more than freshman Clevan Thomas Jr.

"I will block. I am a physical guy. I can block. I will block all game. As long as we win, I will be fine doing whatever," the 5-11, 205-pound Thomas said. "Actually, I blocked basically my whole life."

"As a child, I didn't play receiver until my ninth grade year. I played O-line and tight end. They were like I was too big to be a receiver. I was slow back then. So I know how

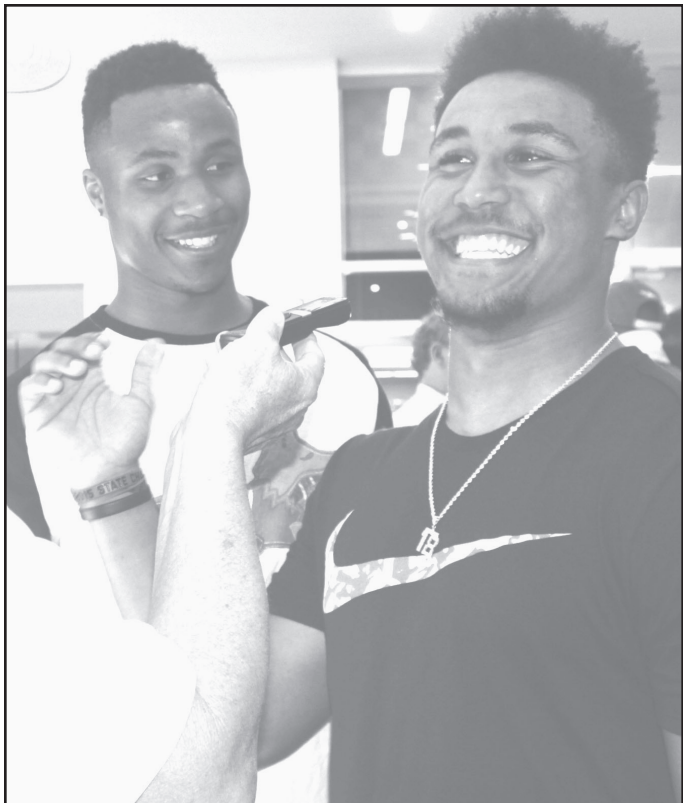
to block. I was in 3-point stance. My blocking is not a problem."

His father, Clevan Thomas Sr., said his son hit a "growth spurt" at age 8 or 9 and played offensive line. At age 14, his father got him involved in track to make sure he could maintain speed with his weight.

"When he was young, I was coaching Pee Wee football," Thomas Sr. said. "I let all the kids play running back, quarterback, safety, receiver. I moved them all around. I just wanted them all to play for fun. As he got older, I kind of wanted him to play defense because that's what I played."

Thomas Jr. has an outgoing personality, but also likes challenges. Kentucky coaches believe he can contribute this season because of his ability to make catches in traffic. But he still knows the offensive linemen have difficult jobs, too.

"This O-line is big. I look up to them and I am like, 'Dang.' But without them, you don't have an offense. Trust me, I learned that the hard way," Thomas Jr. said.



Receiver Clevan Thomas Jr., right, has no problem blocking because early in his football career he was an offensive lineman. (Amber Tyler Photo)

## Quotes of the Week

**Quote of the Week:** "Bradley Dale Peveto is one of the best recruiters I've ever been around in this league," Mississippi coach Hugh Freeze on the former UK assistant who is now coaching at Mississippi.

**Quote of the Week 2:** "I expected him to be really good. I was impressed that such a highly ranked guy participated when he didn't have anything to prove," Cats Illustrated.com publisher Justin Rowland on UK commit Marquan McCall of Michigan at UK's summer camp.