

Northover eyes spot on Jamaica Olympics team

Shot putter shoots for Beijing

Zara Northover wasn't trying to be funny when she first floated the idea of the 2008 Olympics past her coach. "I was a freshman when I first sat down with (Northeastern track) coach Sherman Hart, and told him I wanted to compete in the Olympics. He laughed at me and told me I was crazy." Maybe a little. At the time, the shot putter wasn't throwing anywhere near the base-level Olympic standard of 57-plus feet, but she felt a determination that defied the odds. "I told everyone I was going to the Olympics," she said.

Now it appears her dream is on the verge of reality.

Last weekend, she qualified with a toss that went over the 57 foot mark — the base-level qualifier for the Games — in the 2008 Island Games, setting her up nicely to compete later this month in Olympic trials in Jamaica.

The Belmont, N.Y., native, who holds a dual citizenship in Jamaica, hopes to send the 8.8-pound shot even further in the mid-June event.

"If I can improve my score to an 'A standard' instead of the 'B standard' I've already achieved, I'll definitely be on a flight to Beijing," she said.

The 5-foot-5 powerhouse is bench-pressing 200 pounds, and squat-lifting 405 pounds getting ready for the big games. Her routine involves hours every day at the gym, and mental and spiritual preparation as well. "I feel like shot put is my calling from God," she said. "It really opened doors for me."

Northover came to Northeastern on a full scholarship in 2001, shortly after she discovered, almost by fluke, her natural gift for the shot. In high school, she already excelled in basketball, volleyball and softball, but Northover was pressed into service one fateful day for track and field.

"A high school friend of mine needed a partner in a shot put competition, and she asked if I'd do it," she recalled. "I had two minutes of training and then I threw 32 feet the first time out."

That was her first hint of things to come. The high school junior went on to claim four state championships in the event, and was a two-time All Ameri-

can.

Along the way, she began receiving unsolicited offers for full scholarships, and it wasn't long before she applied for, and won, a scholarship to her dream college.

"I didn't want to go to those other schools, because I always wanted to come to Northeastern. The co-op program was so exciting to me. So I put together a packet and applied for a scholarship," she said.

Her mother, Pearlene Campbell, likes to remind her that if it wasn't for her unexpected talent with the shot put, these doors to higher education, and now the Olympic games, might likely have stayed closed.

She majored in business and communications and continued to hone her skill through the help of important coaches, like assistant track coach Joe Donahue, coach Hart for the "mental preparation" and former men's track team co-captain Derek Anderson.

There have been many others who have helped shape and inspire her, from her high school days, and her career at Northeastern.

After graduating in 2007, Northover went to work for the Office of Alumni Relations but kept to a grueling training schedule: up at 6 a.m., in the gym for two hours, and at the office by 8:30. After an eight-hour day, she would continue to train, keeping fit for that big goal.

"Going to the 2008 Olympics has always been at the back of my mind," she said. When it came time to leave her job at the university this past April,



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Northover did so with the full support of her colleagues. "Jack Moynihan (the vice president of alumni relations) said to me that I should go after my dream, and know that I did so with the full support of the university," she said.

Her goal is to represent Jamaica in the games, her parents' homeland.

Having placed second in Jamaica in recent competitions in Barbados, Northover feels she is within striking distance of reaching her goal to toss the shot within the distance (60-plus feet) of the top-level Olympic performers.

She credits Hart, who remains her "mentor coach," hockey conditioning coach Dan Boothby, and other athletic trainers, family, and friends for believing in her.

"In the beginning of the year, Coach Hart and my friends and family wrote to me and said that if I believed in myself as much as they believed in me, that the sky is the limit and I will go to Beijing," Northover said. "With their support, I worked so hard to make my dreams a reality."

— Susan Salk