



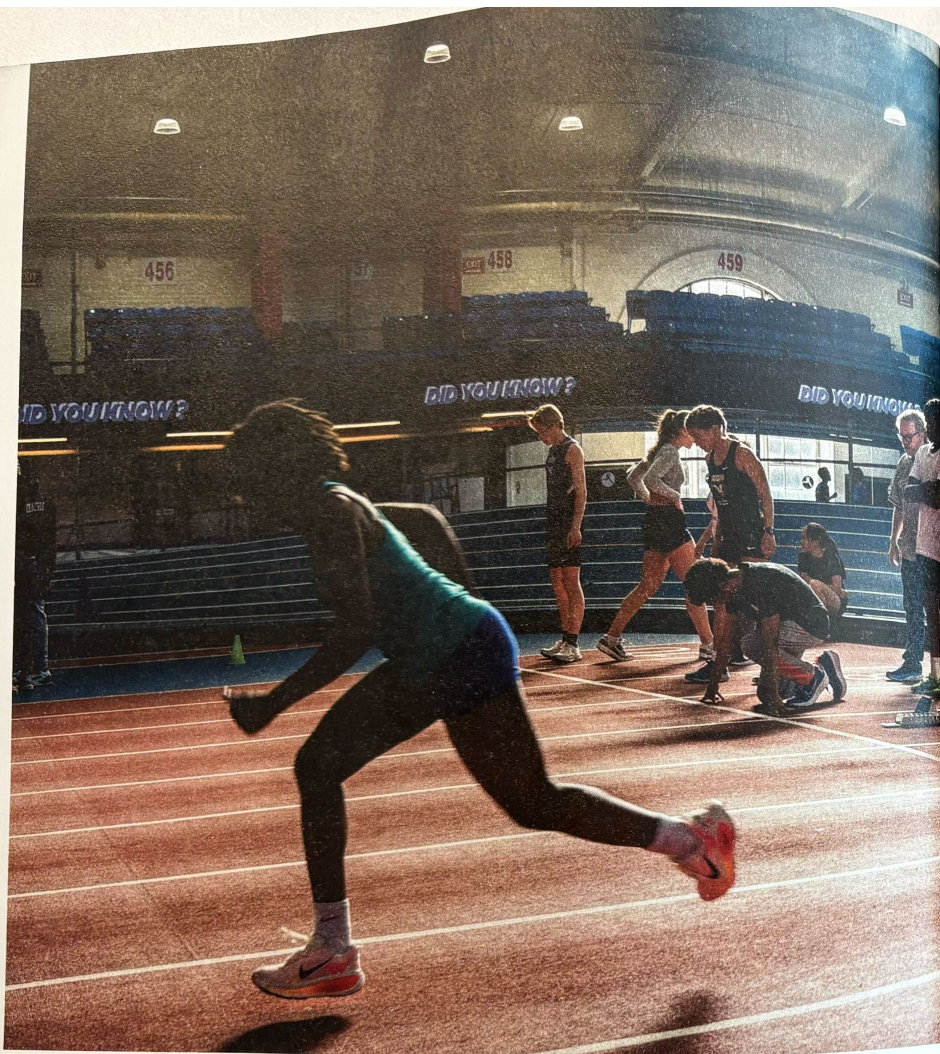
# ROAD TO THE RELAYS

Words and Photography by  
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**THE MORNING SUN** beats down on the practice area next to the University of Pennsylvania's Franklin Field as Success Academy's girls' relay team runs through their 4 x 100 handoffs. Head coach Natilee Dawkins stands nearby, watching closely. The team is fast, but the baton handoff between the first and second legs keeps falling out of rhythm.

With less than 30 minutes before the race start, Dawkins must make a decision. Not because she doubts her athletes, but because after more than 20 years as an elite runner and coach, she knows what the team needs to do on this day to win. She





swaps in an alternate for the first leg.

Time ticks down as the girls make their way to the staging area and take their spots on the track. The pressure is building. But the girls stay focused.

The gun fires.

The first leg takes off strong, quickly pulling ahead of the other teams, and the spectators are buzzing. By the final handoff, Success Academy still holds the lead by a wide margin. Their anchor, Ashanee McKellop, grabs the baton and powers forward. With 50 meters to go, and McKellop still out in front, the crowd begins to roar.

McKellop crosses the finish line, clinching the 4 x 100 relay victory for Success Academy

**Previous spread, left:** The Success Academy boys' 4 x 100 relay team waits to run at the Penn Relays on April 24, 2025. **Right:** Anchor Ashanee McKellop crosses the finish line of the girls' 4 x 100 to seal victory. **This spread, above:** Jairin Palache practices sprints at The Armory in New York City on March 27, 2025. "My dad was a national-level runner, so I've been running my whole life," says Palache. "I loved racing and I loved that I knew I was fast." **Left:** Austin Benjamin takes a moment between practice sessions. **Right:** McKellop stretches at The Armory in March.





in their high school division.

The Penn Relays, established in 1895, is the oldest and largest track-and-field competition in the United States, drawing the nation's best high school and college athletes as well as elite runners from around the world.

For the Success Academy students, the journey to the prestigious competition begins in March, when they unite to begin their season at the Nike Track & Field Center at The Armory in New York City. It is there that the students' raw athletic gifts meet the expertise of a dedicated coaching staff who are determined to make sure they succeed.

"The kids have a bunch of talent," says Dawkins. "Next thing is just trying to develop that talent and make sure that you help them grow

in the sport."

Alongside Dawkins is Coach Jelani Pierre, who focuses on jumping, and Coach Chase Shrum, who specializes in various throwing events.

"That's why we're here. You find the raw talent, the coal, so to speak, and then you build them into that diamond," says Shrum.

One such diamond is Ashanee McKellop. "Ashanee never ran track before," says Dawkins. "Just from watching how she ran, I could tell she would be a good quarter-miler."

The full team of 90 is composed of freshman to senior athletes from the Academy's High School of the Liberal Arts (HSLA) campuses in Harlem, Manhattan, and Brooklyn. Despite varying levels of experience, these athletes share

**Top left:** Coaches Stephen Lo Russo, left, and Natilee Dawkins practice race positioning with 4 x 400 runner Mory Keita during practice in April.

**Bottom left:** Kiriah Howard, left, and Jairin Palache during the 4 x 100 at the Big Blue Track & Field Classic on Staten Island, New York, April 5, 2025. **Below:** Teammates warm up before the Public Schools Athletic League Spring Series meet at George Washington High School in Upper Manhattan, on March 25, 2025.

It's the first official meet of the season for most of the runners.







a common goal: to train hard, improve their skills, and compete.

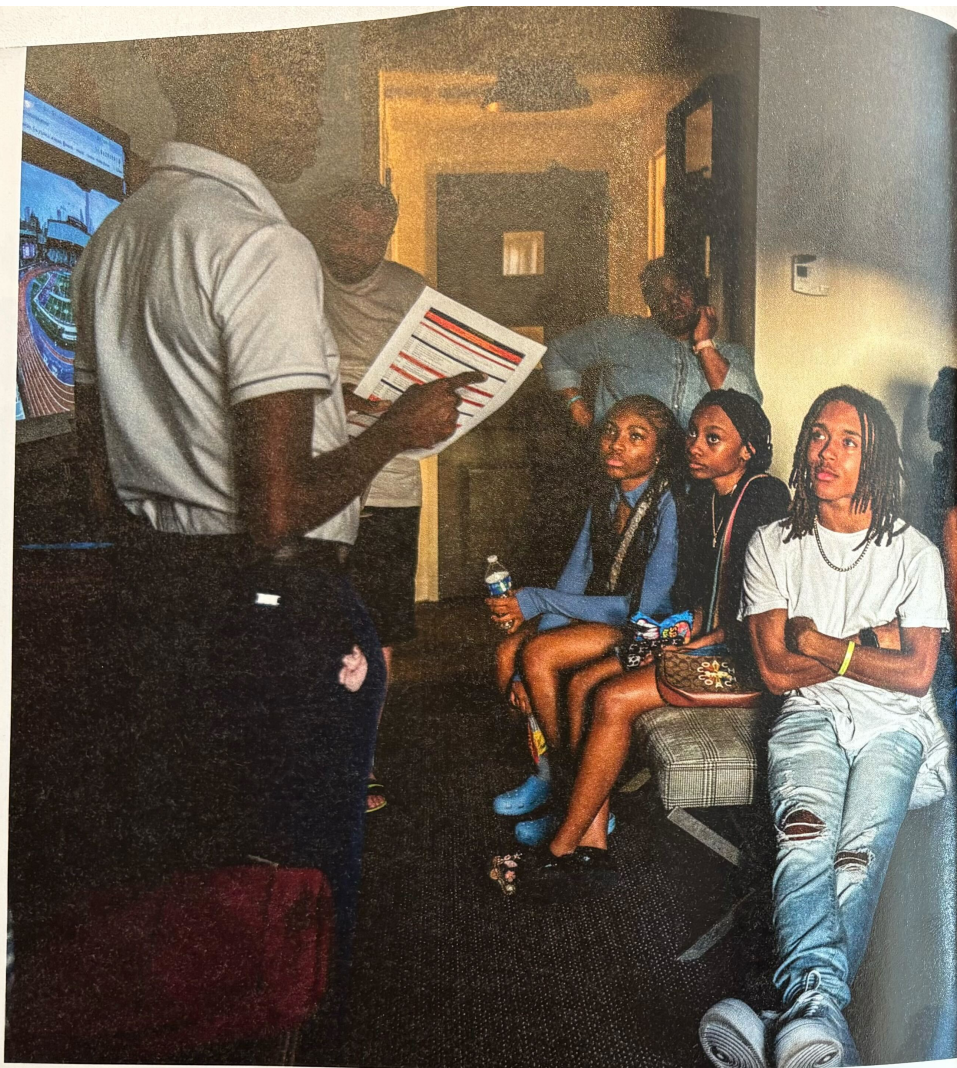
"When they step on the track, there's no question they'll do what they need to do in order to win," says Dawkins. "That's the ultimate goal."

Each athlete competes in multiple events at track meets throughout the season, which serves as a way for coaches to evaluate their strengths and build the team accordingly.

This season, the coaches select 12 runners for the Penn Relays, fielding a girls' and a boys' 4 x 100 team alongside a boys' 4 x 400 team. Chosen for their speed, teamwork, and ability to excel in relay dynamics, the athletes include Austin Benjamin, Ezekiel Grimes, Perry Thomp-

**Top left:** Success Academy runners watch teammates compete at the Big Blue Track & Field Classic. **Bottom left:** Ashanee McKellop, left, receives the baton from Alayuh Scantlebury during practice in April. **Above:** Perry Thompson, left, Austin Benjamin, and Coach Natilee Dawkins talk after their race at George Washington High School on March 25. "I have to make sure kids are in the right mindset. That's number one," says Dawkins. "Even if they're talented, they need to be confident enough that they are able to accomplish what they need to."

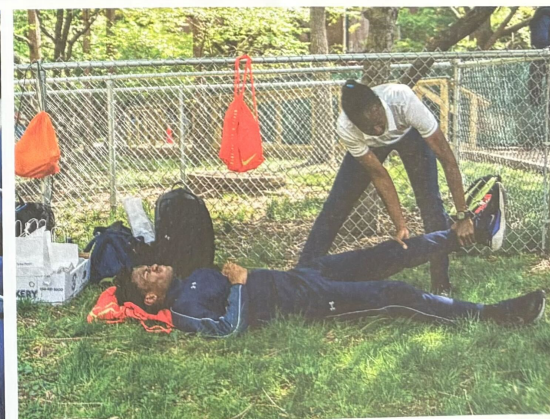




Above: Team meeting at the Logan Hotel in Philadelphia on the morning of the Penn Relays. Right: Lloyd Agoanya, left, and Joshua Tonge, right, help remove Austin Benjamin's bib after his race. Far right: Coach Natilee Dawkins provides stretching assistance to Austin Benjamin at the meet.

son, Joshua Tonge, Mory Keita, Darwin Lora, and Lloyd Agoanya from HSLA-Harlem. From HSLA-Manhattan, the team includes Khadidiatou Ndiaye, Jairin Palache, Jahzil Ross, Ashanee McKellop, and Alayuh Scantlebury.

For these athletes, the Penn Relays are a chance to test their limits and to experience the thrill of competing at the highest level. "This is our biggest meet," says Austin Benjamin. "We want to perform 100 percent." But this journey is about more than the race. It's about the process—the countless hours of training, the small victories along the way, and the lessons learned in pursuit of something greater than themselves. "I love how we're growing together as a team," says







Top: Runners wait for the baton during the boys' 4 x 400 at the Penn Relays. Above: Khadidiatou Ndiaye, foreground, and Jairin Palache wait to run in the 4 x 100. Right: Ashanee McKellop and her mother, Minteresa Bolta, embrace after the girls' win in the 4 x 100.

McKellop. "It [feels] like a giant family."

As the season progresses, the athletes build strength, increase their endurance, and refine their technique. They grow more confident, more focused, and more determined. Every practice and meet brings new challenges, but also new breakthroughs. They are not only preparing for the Penn Relays, but for the future—learning skills that will serve them both on and off the track. "The level of camaraderie that you have here feels unique," says Coach Pierre.

Ultimately, the athletes' performances at the Penn Relays marks a significant achievement for both the girls' and boys' teams, as their discipline and commitment result not only in the girls' victory in the 4 x 100, but a new school record of 43.38 in the 4 x 100 for the boys.

"It's so exhilarating," says McKellop. "We've come so far. We went from third to first in a year." Adds Palache: "It lifted a pretty heavy weight off my shoulders. It made me feel like hard work truly does pay off." 