

Bridlewood Olympic hopeful honoured by community

Top-ranked Canadian runner receives Paul Van Steen Award

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BY **BLAIR EDWARDS**



Esther Akinsulie accepts the Paul Van Steen Award from Bridlewood Community Association vice-president (sports) Margaret Kellaway at the Eva James Memorial Community Centre on Oct. 20. Blair Edwards

"It's great to win the award. Being from Bridlewood and having something from my home community that acknowledges the work that I've doing is really great."

One of Canada's top track and field athletes has been named the winner of the first annual Paul van Steen Sports Achievement Award. The Bridlewood Community Association presented the award along with a \$100 cheque to Esther Akinsulie during its annual general meeting at the Eva James Memorial Community Centre on Oct. 20. Akinsulie won gold in the 4x400 metre women's relay, and silver in the 400-metre dash at the world university games held in Belgrade, Serbia this summer. "It's great to win the award," said Akinsulie. "Being from Bridlewood and having something from my home community that acknowledges the work that I've doing is really great." Akinsulie is ranked Canada's top female runner in the 400-metre (outdoor), and 200-metre and 300-metre (indoor) races. "We are very proud to recognize Esther's accomplishments in honour of Paul van Steen," said Melva Peever, president of the Bridlewood Community Association.

Paul van Steen helped create the Bridlewood spring sports program for children ages five to 12, and organized local winter carnival events and Canada Day activities. He also helped to bring community-run outdoor ice rinks to Bridlewood and organized the Bridlewood Men's Hockey League. The long-serving community volunteer died in 2007 while renewing his certification as a hockey referee.

OLYMPIC DREAM

A fraction of a second translated into a four-year wait to compete in the Olympics for Akinsulie. A month before the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympic Games, Akinsulie and Toronto's Carline Muir were racing neck and neck for a spot on the Canadian track and field team. It came to a showdown, during the Olympic trials held at the University of Windsor, during the Canadian Track and Field Championships in July, 2008. Muir won the 400-metre race – and a trip to the Olympics – with Akinsulie finishing a close second. "I just missed out by (a little more than) two

tenths of a second,” said the 25-year-old athlete. “It was extremely disappointing.” But Akinsulie wouldn’t let the loss slow her down. “There are things in a season and in a career that might set you back, but you always need to remind yourself of what your goal is,” she said. “You have to have a strong desire, because every year might not go as well as you planned.”

One year later, Akinsulie has sprinted ahead of her competition, and is currently ranked the top women’s runner in the 400-metre dash (outdoor) in Canada. In August, 2009, Akinsulie anchored Canada’s gold-medal winning 4x400 metre women’s relay team and placed second in the 400-metre race, finishing with a personal best time of 51.7 seconds. Akinsulie met up again with Muir in the 400-metre run at the 2009 Canadian Track and Field Championships. “I beat her,” said Akinsulie.

THE ROAD TO LONDON

Running was just a hobby for Akinsulie during most of her years at Bridlewood Community Elementary and A.Y. Jackson Secondary schools. Basketball was always her main focus, though she always entered her school’s annual track and field meets. But in her final year of high school, Akinsulie decided to start training seriously for the 2003 Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations’ track and field meet. “I wanted to finish my last year strong,” said Akinsulie, who finished fifth in the 100-metre dash and third in long jump. During her first year at Carleton University, Akinsulie attempted to balance basketball and track and field, trying out for the Carleton University women’s basketball team. “I realized it would be impossible for me to do (both),” she said. Akinsulie chose to focus on track and field, deciding she would have a longer career as a runner than as a basketball player. But Carleton didn’t have a track team, so Akinsulie joined the Ottawa Lions Track and Field Club, which now works out at the Terry Fox Athletic Facility in Mooney’s Bay Park.

But training was only part of the equation, said Akinsulie. Canada’s Olympic athletes are often forced to juggle school, work and working out, leaving little time for friends and family, she said. The student/athlete trains two to three hours per day, five to six days a week, doing wind sprints, endurance training and weightlifting. Meanwhile, she also held down a part-time job as a dietary aide at Forest Hill Long Term Care Home in Kanata, while studying at Carleton. It was a balancing act, said Akinsulie, who was forced to study part time during a few semesters to handle her workload.

“At first I would stay out trying to be a full-time student,” she said. “But it gets hectic near the end of the second semester, because that’s when your outdoor season will start, in April, the same time as exams.” Meanwhile, Akinsulie competed in at least five national and international competitions every year, involving costly trips to Europe. “At the level I’m at now, I have to go down to Europe to find competition,” she said. Most of the top runners in the United States do not enter National Collegiate Athletic Association events, choosing to run in European races, she said. Trips to Europe and other training expenses can add up, said Akinsulie.

The Bridlewood woman is currently trying to raise \$18,000 from sponsors to cover her annual costs – money to pay for travel, massage therapy, trips to the chiropractor and other expenses. Nutritional supplements alone cost her more than \$2,000 per year. Training to compete against the best runners in the world is a full-time job in itself, said Akinsulie. “A lot of people can train for eight years to try to get to one Olympics,” she said. “It’s great, but at the same time it’s very hard.” For now, Akinsulie has her sights set on the 2012 Summer Olympic Games in London, England. “That’s what I’m hoping for – that’s what I’m training for,” she said. “One of my goals is to be (standing) on the podium.”