

Olympic Gold Medalist Stays Fit On and Off the Track

by Perdita Savage Belk

Columbia native Monique Hennagan burst into the world spotlight as a leading lady of the gold medal winning 4x400-meter relay team at the Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia. Running second leg of the relay, Hennagan's fit physique glided along the track effortlessly, making proud not only South Carolina, but a nation.

"Winning the gold medal for the United States was a great moment," beamed Hennagan, who's teammates – Marion Jones, La Tasha Colander-Richardson and Jearl Miles-Clark – are among the running elite. "The Olympics has always been my goal, and it was definitely emotionally charged for me."

As a sprinter throughout her years at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, Hennagan reached a No. 1 ranking in the U.S. and a No. 2 ranking in the world in the 400 meters. She received a full scholarship to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she was an eight-time conference champion, a nine-time All-American and NCAA champion in the 400 meter (indoor) and 800 meter (outdoor). She was also the first North Carolina woman to win a NCAA title. In 1998, Hennagan moved back to Columbia to train with Coach Curtis Frye, who recruited her to run at UNC – Chapel Hill.

"I made her a priority for the UNC program," remembered Frye, who immediately identified with Hennagan's southern upbringing and strong Christian values. "Monique was an outstanding student, committed person and had a solid family background which I knew would enhance our program." He continued that, "she has a special talent that she sees as a gift from God. By using her talents, she glorifies Him."

So how does Hennagan stay in shape to achieve world-class status, even in the off-season? "There really isn't an off-season in track and field," she explained, "so I train pretty consistently year round." Hennagan's fitness routine mixes lifting weights and running four to five times a week with eating right. "I stay away from too many carbohydrates, and really eat lots of fruits and vegetables." Though her diet is heavy on grilled, baked and high protein foods like fish, she does admit that every now and

then her sweet tooth takes over. "I do keep the sweets to a minimum," she laughed, "but I can't resist a brownie a la mode on occasion."

Frye, who now coaches the women and men's track teams at the University of South Carolina, confirmed the importance of nutrition and fitness, even if you're not a top-notch athlete. "You have to feed the body.... your metabolism slows down if you don't eat often enough. I encourage Monique to eat four or five meals a day in moderation, concentrating on protein to build muscle and complex carbohydrates, such as fruits and vegetables for energy."

Now that the Olympic games are over, Hennagan continues to train for and compete in track events around the world. Being a professional athlete requires not only an emotional and physical commitment, but also a supportive employer. Through UPS's Athletic Training Assistance Program (ATAP), Hennagan has been able to work and train. "I am extremely blessed to work with a company like UPS," noted the international champion who often spends up to two weeks on the road. "I am able to balance my work and training priorities and succeed at both." In addition to a flexible work schedule, ATAP covers any training and competition related expenses, including plane tickets, meals, room and board, and body maintenance such as massages. Hennagan, who started with the UPS as a part-time small package sorter, is now a college recruiter, encouraging students to consider employment at the company's ground hub in Columbia.

Though her life has been a constant whirlwind of competitions, Hennagan, who has competed on six of the seven continents, remains humbled by her strong spiritual faith. "My spirituality has helped me to stay focused and make good choices in my life," reflected the African-American studies and philosophy major who hopes to be a role model for young girls and women. "Even if I stopped running today, I know that God has blessed me." ■

