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Northampton native, Harvard freshman Gabrielle Thomas places third in 200 dash at NCAA national championships



Harvard's Gabrielle Thomas, center, runs to a third-place finish in the 200-meter dash, Saturday at the NCAA championships in Eugene, Ore. Thomas ran 22.47 seconds. DILLON VIBES

By [MADISON LAYTON \(/byline?byline=By_MADISON_LAYTON\)](#)

For the Gazette

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EUGENE, Oregon -- Gabrielle Thomas may have decided to attend Harvard for its academics, but what she got was an athletics career that put her in its record books.

The freshman from Northampton became the first female Harvard sprinter to place at the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships on Saturday, when she took third Saturday in the 200-meter dash at Hayward Field.

The Williston Northampton alumna used a strong second-half push to propel her to the third slot in 22.47 seconds. She set a new personal record and broke her own school record. She finished behind Oregon runners Ariana Washington (22.21) and Deajah Stevens (22.25).

“I think that it’s more of a reflection of the coach, my team, the hard work we put in together,” Thomas said. “It’s really exciting to see that pay off.”

Thomas was a little slower out of the blocks, but made up for it as the race continued.

“I don’t have the best start, so I have to push off the curve,” Thomas said. “I had to think ‘this is how I’m going to win the race.’”

Thomas said she didn’t expect to do anything special when it came to athletics this season. Though the decision to continue running track was a factor in her decision to attend Harvard, becoming the one of its fastest women wasn’t on the agenda.

“What I expected was a more relaxed track and field experience where I was being coached and learning,” Thomas said with a laugh. “I did not expect to be coming to nationals as a freshman.”

Harvard associate head coach Kebba Tolbert said that when Thomas ran a 22-second 200 at the University of Florida in mid-April was the moment that he knew she could make the championships. Over her freshman season, she trimmed two seconds from her PR.

“She’s a hard worker, but (there were) a lot of growing pains just when you go from high school to college like anybody else,” Tolbert said.

Thomas also competed for the Crimson this season in the 100 meters, long jump and triple jump. But partway through the season, she found that the 200 meters was her sweet spot.

“I put my heart into the 200. I found that it’s my favorite event, so I put so much work into it,” Thomas said. “I think that, because the 100 is so short, I feel as if I make one mistake, it’s over for me. With the 200, I get that second chance to keep pushing.”

Thomas said that though a single event medal is always exciting, she is especially proud to be part of the Harvard team because of the work her coach has done to “make a really good team and a really good culture. That’s what we are, and that’s what we brought here with us to nationals.”

Accompanying Thomas at the meet were teammates Paige Kouba in the 3,000 steeplechase and Autumnne Franklin in the 400-meter hurdles.

“That’s sort of what we’ve been talking about all year is defining our program, what it means to be on the Harvard women’s track team,” said Kouba, a senior, who finished seventh in the steeplechase. “My four years have just been this amazing opportunity to witness that transformation.”

With her freshman year complete, Thomas will return to Eugene in July for the Olympic Trials.

“I think that this competition was a really good experience for me. I had never been to such a big large-scale competition in my life before,” Thomas said. “I think this was a great practice with the pressure.”

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