**Springfield native Naishaun Jernigan finds success on national stage with Chadron State College track & field**

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Former Putnam standout Naishaun Jernigan has taken his athleticism to the national stage as a Division II All-American at Chadron State College. Here, Jernigan is shown at a state championship while competing for Putnam.

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**By Danny Barletta | dbarletta@masslive.com**

Naishaun Jernigan only joined the Putnam track and field team as a junior, but just a few years later the college sophomore’s natural athleticism and effort paid off on a national stage. The Springfield native earned Division II All-American honors for Chadron State College, and placed eighth in the long jump at the NCAA Division II Indoor Track and Field Championships in March.

“It was definitely a blessing,” Jernigan said. “It was definitely a task I knew I had to complete in order to take that next step.”

Jernigan is having success now, but his journey to Chadron State didn’t start that way.

Originally, Jernigan was set to go from Springfield to Indiana Tech to compete. Soon after graduating from Putnam in 2020, though, Indiana Tech pulled his scholarship due to social media posts that the school did not approve of.



Jernigan was in a tough spot, and he had to figure out a backup plan.

He filled out athlete questionnaires for multiple schools, including Chadron State, as he looked for a second opportunity. Riley Northrup, the head track and field coach at Chadron State, said it was rare to see someone with marks as good as Jernigan’s looking to play for him, especially so late in the recruiting process. He called Jernigan to find out what was going on.

Jernigan was honest and open about everything. He admitted he made a mistake and said nothing like that would happen again.

“I appreciated his sincerity, and he’s been a great kid for us ever since,” Northrup said. “It’s worked out really good so far. I’m happy that I gave him the opportunity.”

Jernigan came to college with athletic ability but little-to-no knowledge of the correct jumping form for track events. His marks at Putnam were good, but Northrup said when he saw videos of Jernigan dunking a basketball, he knew the track athlete had so much room to improve.

“He was a diamond in the rough,” Northrup said.

Jernigan said the coaching he received when he got to Chadron State made him a much better jumper.

“At Putnam, I was jumping solely off athleticism,” Jernigan said. “Coming to college and my coach forcing the form on me and making me perfect it, now I see the difference. It definitely made my progress go from zero to 100 within a year.”

Jernigan had a strong freshman season. He qualified for the national championships in the triple jump, but the meet was canceled the day before it was scheduled due to the coronavirus pandemic. Jernigan was still named an All-American just for making it to nationals in the shortened season, but he said that didn’t feel legitimate.



It fueled him to want to be a true All-American this season.

During the pandemic, Jernigan went home to Springfield, where he did everything he could to stay in shape. He used water cases to squat and did plyometrics in his backyard.

“It was really mental toughness, especially with COVID and being in lockdown,” Jernigan said. “It was just me having to improvise.”

Jernigan also got a job over winter break at FedEx, where he had to lift boxes, which helped keep him in shape as well. The effort worked as he set a new career-best in the long jump this season at 24-feet, 3-inches. He didn’t quite match that length at the championship, where he jumped 23-feet, 10.25-inches, but it was still good enough to accomplish his goal of All-American status.

Northrup believes that Jernigan still has untapped potential in both the long jump and the triple jump.

“I still think he’s got a ton of room to grow,” Northrup said. “He’s getting by right now on his athleticism and primarily his pop in his jump. Eventually when we get to that point where we’re kind of tapped out on natural stuff, we’re gonna have to really dial in and make some adjustments to his running technique.”

Since Jernigan learned to jump on his own through other sports like basketball, Northrup said he really had to work with him to break some bad habits for track jumping, such as jumping with two feet. One of the things he has made him do is dunk a basketball off one foot, which at first Jernigan hated, but has since improved on this year.

“It’s been really fun to work with him,” Northrup said.

Jernigan saw local success in high school, but he said finding success on the national stage means something more.

“It makes me feel like I’m actually doing something for myself, makes me feel like I’m actually a good athlete,” Jernigan said. “But it’s also humbling because I know there are people out there that are better than me at jumping … It gives me a motive to lock in and work even harder.”

Now that he has qualified for nationals in both the triple jump and the long jump, Jernigan’s next goal is to qualify for both in the same season. Northrup has “no doubt” that he will be able to do that in the next couple of years.

