

TRACK: AAU looks to get up and running in West Texas

By

Chris Amaya

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AAU Track and Field's LaMont Smith speaks alongside West Texas Track Club's Stella Neboh Wednesday at the Barrel and Derrick Restaurant in Odessa. (Chris Amaya|Odessa American)

In 1993, LaMont Smith won an NJCAA National Championship as a member of the Blinn College track team.

He won that title in Odessa and went on to become a gold medalist at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

Smith had a chance to return to the city where he made his mark in college this week, touring Odessa with the intention of helping AAU Track and Field expand in the West Texas region.

The first step toward aiding the growth of the sport includes bringing a Regional Qualifier Meet

to Odessa, something that Smith has planned to start next summer after seeing the state of the track at Ratliff Stadium.

The meet would qualify athletes to compete in the AAU Junior Olympics, also serving as a national qualifier.

"This is definitely a premier place to put on a track meet," Smith said. "I'm really, really looking forward to it and I'm excited about it.

"The facilities are awesome."

Smith, alongside Stella Neboh of the West Texas Track Club, made the announcement Wednesday at the Barrel and Derrick Restaurant inside the Odessa Marriott Hotel & Conference Center.

He was going to be accompanied by Charles Oliver, AAU Track and Field's National Chair, but Oliver missed the event due to personal matters.

The idea behind putting more emphasis on AAU track is to keep local kids active and help them gain more exposure from scouts looking to navigate them toward an athletic future, Smith added.

Hosting a regional meet would also give athletes competing for the West Texas Track Club the opportunity to see strong competition from surrounding areas like New Mexico and Oklahoma.

After talking with Oliver, Smith is set to become the district manager for West Texas and he will be in charge of setting up meets like the regional qualifier, with one of his main goals being to help the area become one of the premier districts in the state of Texas.

The AAU's involvement with the area doesn't stop at track meets, as Smith also wants to have clinics and he plans on visiting when the West Texas Track Club hosts its annual meets.

Neboh believes hosting the regional qualifier will have a positive impact on the area's track athletes and the city's economy.

"The biggest thing for me is the opportunity that it would create for scouts to come out here and see our kids, and see their talent," Neboh said. "It will help them with college recruiting."

She also has the goal of hosting the regional qualifier every year and one day hosting the AAU Junior Olympics after Odessa College finishes the construction of its new track facility to give Odessa a backup track along with Ratliff Stadium's.

Neboh said last year's Junior Olympics happened in Humble and they brought in around 15,000 track athletes, and she feels the area is well-suited for that kind of competition.

Smith said competing in AAU had a large role in the success he had as a professional because of the connections he was able to make with other athletes.

"I was able to grow, I was able to develop, and I don't have that if it's not for AAU," he said. "That's why I'm so passionate about AAU and I'm so committed to AAU because it has given me everything as far as track and field."

Smith is still working on dates for the first regional qualifying meet, but he said he is aiming for July, 2022, to host the first one in Odessa.