

Meet Ricky Thomas II, the Oyler School's one-man track team chasing his dreams

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Scott Springer with Ricky Thomas II of Oyler the school's lone track participant The Enquirer/Scott Springer



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HAMILTON COUNTY - The Oyler School on Hatmaker Street in Lower Price Hill hopes to turn adversity into opportunity. There are roughly 600 or so students, most of them economically disadvantaged.

They are currently on OHSAA probation for being unable to field two varsity sports over the winter. At schools like Oyler, numbers become an issue. Locally, Riverview East is also among a handful of schools in Ohio in the same predicament. OHSAA Constitution Article 3-3-4, requires each school to sponsor at least two varsity sports each season.

Oyler does have a track team.

His name is Ricky Thomas II and he's pretty good. At the Division III district meet at New Richmond May 19 he qualified second in the 100 and was district champ in the 200 and 400-meter dashes. Should he be among the top at the regional meet at Troy, Thomas and his coach Ray Nephew will get their picture next to the Jesse Owens statue at Ohio State's track at the Division III state meet.

"You've got to stay focused, stay hungry and want it," Thomas said of his recipe for success. "I've never made it up (to State) it would be an experience I'd like to have. It's something I could share with my hopefully future family. Some of my relatives have experienced it and they've wanted me to experience it."

A few weeks back, this wasn't possible as the OHSAA initially ruled Thomas couldn't participate because of Oyler's failure to field two teams per season. Fortunately, the lanky sprinter can now run in the postseason, but Oyler cannot accumulate points as a team.

"He's been cleared," Nephew said. "I'm just glad they reconsidered and changed their minds."

You may have seen Ricky Thomas II training in Lower Price Hill and never realized it. In frigid early March temperatures, he would climb State Avenue for a half-mile coming up from Gest Street. Once at the top, the route flattens out on his way to the fire station at Queen City and Harrison Avenue.

After a mile and half or so, he would make the icy return to Oyler. Once there, Coach Nephew would greet him with a water bottle and a few tips on the day's work.

This is the third year Nephew, a former Greenhills cross country standout has coached Thomas, one of the area's best sprinters. The workouts become "Rocky"-like when your school has no track. They become more difficult when there's no one pushing you in practice because you're the lone Madhatter (Oyler is on Hatmaker Street, thus the name).

"Today on State Avenue, tomorrow at the Taft High School track, another at the Police Academy field just off the 8th Street Viaduct," Nephew said of Ricky's training runs. "Oyler has no track, so the 'team' trains where it can, when it can."

Ricky's motivation is simple.

"I want to win medals," he said. "I love running track. It's my favorite sport. I look forward to it every year."

Thomas II is a four-time league champion, Southwest Ohio Division III 400 meter champion, and has won multiple medals against Division I and II competition at Elder, Reading, Taft, CHCA, Seven Hills, Woodward, Colerain, Mt. Healthy, Oak Hills and Taylor.

"Every meet I know people," Thomas said. "It's not like I'm out here by myself."

The running comes as the latest in the line of a talented family. His father, Ricky Thomas I, was twice a state champion as part of the 4x100 relay with CAPE (the old Cincinnati Academy of Physical Education) and placed at state in the 300 hurdles. His mother and grandparents also ran track, as did an older sister at Northwest High School.

"His dad tells him all the time that hard work beats talent," Nephew said. "I tell him all the time that I can train him smart, but I can't train him hard. Only he can do that."

Ricky Thomas II is also training hard in the classroom where he's in his second year of taking AP English and has taken AP Geography. He also works with the kindergarten class as a tutor and mentor. The top-ranked Division III 400 runner would like a shot at an athletic/academic scholarship to run somewhere, preferably with a track.

"If I got bad grades I couldn't run track," Thomas said. "School's first. If I get the opportunity to run, I'll go run."