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Program sends 11 to national meets

By Brenda Young

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ROCKFORD —

Courtney McKibben has gained a new perspective on summer track this season thanks to her participation in the Rockford FIRE program.

"It's been really fun," said **McKibben**, who competes in the 100-meter hurdles. "I love getting to run against other people and making new friends. I've been getting a lot of training during the offseason."

McKibben is one of three athletes who qualified for the USA Track and Field National Junior Olympic Championships in the FIRE's inaugural season. Eight others qualified for the Amateur Athletic Union National Championships.

Saturday, she and the FIRE track and field program's gold and platinum athletes will compete in the Rochelle Invitational. The meet will start at 9 a.m. with field events, followed by running events at 10 a.m.

This is the final tuneup meet for athletes, like **McKibben** to compete before the USATF National Championships July 22-27 in Omaha, Neb., and the AAU National Championships July 28-August 3 at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Mich.

"It's an excellent warm up for nationals for the platinum athletes," FIRE coach Tasha Cobb said. "For the Gold athletes, this is their final meet where they can learn if track and field paid off. Did I get faster? Can I compete with kids from the surrounding areas, take top places and be strong in the track and field area."

The FIRE, which stands for Fostering Identity through Recreation and Education, had more than 200 registered participants 7-18 this summer in its three-tiers — silver (recreational), gold (junior varsity) and platinum (varsity).

“This first season, we had some kids take seconds off their time and that was our goal,” Cobb said. “The ultimate achievement is to make it to nationals but for a lot of the participants this was their first time in summer track. There were some that didn’t have correct form. They had the speed, but correct form turns into an even faster time in the end.”

LaMark Foote is one of those who came out for summer track for the first time. Cobb is Foote’s mother, and she thought track would provide conditioning for him in basketball.

Foote, who is headed to nationals in the high jump, has been impressed with his progress.

“It feels good,” Foote said. “I am new at it, but I get to make it to nationals in my first year. I am excited to see how it (nationals) will be.”

Other national qualifiers from the FIRE are Nic Haab, Jesena Ford, Gerry Ford, Adejah Charles, Jatavian Foote, Bella Swan and Milia Harris.

On Thursday, the program had its final local meet at Christian Life.

Adam Smith, Director of Education and Life-Long Learning for the Mayor’s Office, said the FIRE has been a productive program in the community.

“The FIRE partnership is designed to engage all ages of young people from throughout our region in track and field, a sport where there is a place for all children to enjoy fit and activity and fun. It is our mission to use track and field to promote a healthy lifestyle and post secondary aspiration in our community.”

The Rockford FIRE program is administered by the Rockford Park District in partnership with the YMCA, Rockford Public School District and the City of Rockford Mayor’s Office of Education and Life-Long Learning. The FIRE is sponsored by Runner’s Image, WTVO-17/WQRF-39 and Lutheran and Christian Life schools.

Smith said the partners will meet to discuss improvements to the program, which may include a fall season.

“Our goal is to provide a quality recreation experience for all level of kids for our entire community for the summer,” Smith said. “We are obviously going to do some assessment and evaluation of the program, ourselves and our partnerships and decide if it’s something we want to expand or something we want to continue in the summer months.”

Staff writer Brenda Young can be reached at 815-987-1388 or byoung@rrstar.com.