

LoJo, American's Greatest Black Pole Vaulter, Then and Now!

In Honor of Black History Month

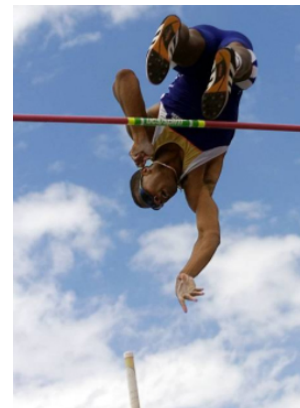
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By Christina Bailey

I wanted to post a #BlackHistory fact that is very close and dear to my heart, Lawrence "LoJo" Johnson.

Most of you may not know Lawrence as a very humble person and he does not like to boast publicly about any of his many athletic and/or coaching accomplishments. He will probably be upset with me for posting this, but this is a chance I am willing to take considering it is #BlackHistoryMonth.

Before Lawrence became LoJo, he was not the most athletic child in his early childhood. As a toddler, LoJo was very, very bowlegged. The severity of his bowed legs was to the extreme that a basketball could pass through his legs with ease without touching his legs in any way. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were told that their son would never be able to run and this broke their hearts. The news weighed heavily on their hearts. This was especially hard for his father. Mr. Johnson, also named Lawrence, was a great hurdler for Norfolk State University, VA. LoJo being their first born son, the Johnsons did what any parent would do, find an answer to the devastating news. Mr. and Mrs. Johnson did not want to let the bad news be the end of their son's future of having a normal childhood and/or life. The Johnsons sought the advice of a specialist and was instructed to strap LoJo to the crib with leg restraints during sleep times in hopes of correcting his legs to allow him to be able to walk normally in the future. LoJo also had to wear special leg braces during the day to assist in correcting his bowed legs during the day. This schedule went on for several years.



Lawrence went on to indeed be able to walk normally and even was able to run. During his middle school years LoJo was able to play baseball. During his high school years, LoJo was able to join his local high school track team in hopes to become a hurdler like his father. After being caught, by the track coach, doing back flips off the bleachers in the gymnasium with the attempt of impress girls at Lake Taylor High School, VA. Coach Conley took LoJo to his office and sat him down. LoJo just knew he was in trouble and a phone call to his parents was about to take place. To his surprise, Coach Conley begin with, "boy, you are a pole vaulter if I ever saw one. I need you to come to the track today and try out this pole vault thing." LoJo did as his coach requested of him and the rest is history. LoJo was hooked and loved the pole vault after his first step down the runway. He was able to fly!



LoJo went on to become 2 time Virginia State Champion and state record holder at 17' – 6" while competing for Great Bridge High School. This vault put him at number 3 in the country for high schoolers in 1992. LoJo was filled with dreams and aspirations of going to the Olympics one day. LoJo also earned a scholarship to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, TN.

During LoJo's freshman year at the University of Tennessee is where Lawrence "LoJo" Johnson was born. LoJo earned the nickname of "Black-Ba" from one of his follow team mates, short for the "Black Bubka". Sergeri Bubka was the World Record Holder at the time LoJo competed.

Many people will remember LoJo for his intense, relentless, stone cold competitive nature as an athlete; however most may not know his accomplishment as the first Black American to set numerous records in the pole vault while representing UT

and the US. LoJo is one of the most decorated US pole vaulters of all time. He dominated the US pole vault scene during his pole vault career. LoJo also earned his spot on the International pole vault scene during his professional career by vaulting consistently 19' - 4" as a professional athlete.

LoJo became the first Black American in history to step foot on a major World Championship podium. In 1997 at the World Indoor Championships, LoJo achieved this major accomplishment while representing the US in his professional debut. To this day, he is still the only Black American to step foot on a major World Championship podium in the pole vault. This great accomplishment in 1997 started the trend that led the return of US medaling in the pole vault after a 20+ year drought. One could argue that LoJo's silver in the 1994 World University Games with a vault of 18' - 8.25" became the year he was the first Black American to step foot on a major World Championship podium.



LoJo is the only pole vaulter to clear 19' - 0" at Penn Relays. He did this in 1996. This record is still standing and has been standing for 20 years. LoJo still holds the pole vault NCAA Outdoor Record at 19' - 7.5", set in 1996. This vault also became the Outdoor American Record that stood for 8 years. LoJo's vault still remains the facility record at Tom Black Track on University of Tennessee's campus. LoJo also still holds the SEC Indoor Pole Vault record at 18' - 8.25" set back in 1994. LoJo held the NCAA Indoor pole vault record at 19' - 1" set back in 1996 that stood for more than a decade. LoJo currently still holds the NCAA Outdoor Meet and All-Time pole vault record at 19' - 7.5" set in 1996.

LoJo earned the Indoor American Record in 2001 while competing in the US Indoor Championships held in the Georgia Dome. LoJo went on to win the 2001 World Indoor Championships in Lisbon, Portugal with a winning vault of 19' - 6.25". LoJo became the 1st American to win a World Championship in the pole vault. LoJo has set numerous collegiate records and stadium records across the US.



LoJo earned his spot on 2 Olympic Teams by winning the pole vault in both US Olympic Trials. His first Olympic Team membership was earned in 1996 and then again in 2000. LoJo placed 8th in the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. This earned him the highest American pole vault competitor in the 1996 games. LoJo went on to earn a Silver Medal in 2000 while competing in the Sydney Olympic Games. LoJo is the first and only Black American pole vaulter to step foot on the Olympic Podium.

LoJo was not just a great pole vaulter, he also competed in the decathlon while attending the University of Tennessee from 1992 - 1996. During LoJo's freshman year in 1993, he was the SEC Decathlon Champion (score: 7,576). LoJo set the collegiate and World Junior Pole Vault Decathlon Record while competing in 1993 with a winning height of 18' - 0.5". He also won and set the Pan American Junior Athletics Championships Record in the pole vault in 1993 with a winning height of 18' - 8.75". LoJo still holds the SEC, World Junior and NCAA Decathlon Pole Vault Record at 18' - 0.5" set back in 1993. LoJo was also a 110H hurdler.

LoJo set the SEC Decathlon 110H hurdle record at 14.021s that stood for over a decade until it was broken in 2007 by a fellow Volunteer. After LoJo's freshman year at the University of Tennessee he decided to focus on the pole vault only. He did compete in the decathlon during the remainder of his time at the university where he was needed to assist in scoring points in the SEC Championships for the track team.

LoJo is an Olympic Silver Medalist and World Indoor Champion. He also has 7 US National Titles, 4 NCAA Titles, 6 SEC Conference Titles, 6 All-American Titles, 7 All-SEC Selection Titles and 3-time SEC All-Academic Team Member. LoJo is the only American vaulter to begin a competition with a 19' - 0" opening height and win the competition. Sadly, with all his

accomplishments, records and titles in US Track and Field, LoJo has NEVER been ranked #1 in the US by Track and Field News - *"The Bible of Track and Field"*. Mind you LoJo was rarely beaten by an American in an International or American competition after turning pro. When LoJo competed the ranking systems were based on "Popular Opinion Votes" and not based on the athletic accomplishments. In the early 2000s, the ranking system was changed to truly honor the athletes' performance and not based on opinion within Track and Field News.



In 2004 after not making the Olympic team, LoJo decided to take a break from competing professionally and focus on his family; however, competing was never far from his mind. He dabbled a little in private coaching and then was asked to assist in a local private high school in Knoxville, TN.

In 2007, Lawrence decided to start coaching on the collegiate level at University of South Carolina and became the first paid pole vault only coach in colligate history. During his short 4-year span at USC, LoJo transformed the male and female pole vault program into a fierce competitive squad that proved to be very successful during his time at USC. LoJo coached his athletes to 2 SEC Titles, 5 All-America Honors, 17 NCAA Qualifiers, an NCAA East Region Silver Medalist, an SEC Championship Silver Medalist and 5 SEC Championship Bronze Medalists. This was accomplished with a majority of "walk on athletes" on the roster. LoJo only had one partial and one full scholarship athletes among his vault roster. In addition to athletic honors his vaulters earned, they also rewrote the USC records and changed the top 10 Vaulters of All Time on both the male and female sides of the record books. In 2010 while coaching the male pole vaulters, LoJo assisted in ending the SEC Championships domination from his alma mater, the University of Tennessee.



In the summer of 2011, LoJo resigned from the University of South Carolina to develop Team Vault Assault and LoJo Vault Assault to promote pole vault safety, development, and performance online and to take a shot at another Olympic trials in 2012. Unfortunately, during a training exercise in the spring of 2012, LoJo was ran off the road while engaging in cross training on his bicycle. This incident severely injured his lower back and LoJo could not finish his goal of making his 3rd Olympic team.

In 2013, LoJo put all his energy into Team Vault Assault (Team VA) to showcase the athletic development he instilled in his athletes. He now is assisting athletes of all ages and levels, male and female in athletic development while specializing in the pole vault.

On the scholastic level, LoJo and Team VA have produced multiple state champions and several national championship finalists with less than 30 athletes since 2012. LoJo began coaching at Germantown Academy as an assistant coach in 2016 and has since produced 4 Inter-Ac Champions, 2 PISAA champion, and the girls' GA school record holder in the pole vault, as well as supporting the boys team to their first Inter-Ac championship title in over 30 years.

Team VA is not just a pole vault club. In 2015 Team VA expanded the club to include sprints and hurdles. Team VA is a traveling competitive track and field team (club). Team VA has produced several HS State Champions and All-Americans while maintaining no more than 10 vaulters per year. In 2016, Team VA was expanded again to 20 vaulters per year after

receiving requests and inquiries from vaulters wanting to become part of Team VA. Team VA has also expanded to providing assistance to the throws and jumps.

LoJo has always been a student of his event and now enjoys teaching what he has learned from his HS, collegiate and professional career with his athletes.



TEAM VA
"THE NEXT GENERATION OF ATHLETES"

LoJo tells his athletes all the time, "If it were not for track and field and if I never picked up a pole, I would not have traveled to 23 different countries, have seen almost every state in the US, meeting entertainment legends from musicians, athletes, movie stars to writers. Hard work and sacrifice does pay off no matter what you put your focus in. It is only a matter of what you are willing to sacrifice to achieve the goal you set for yourself."

When asked why LoJo does what he does now in working with our youth, LoJo's reply is, "I give back because I enjoy what I do and if it wasn't for the track and field and pole vault my story would be very a different one. I never had a pole vault coach in high school and I want to help out in any way I can to ensure the proper way of learning the pole vault throughout the country and world, even if a school does not have the resources required to properly teach how to pole vault. There are ways to teach the pole vault to ensure success in the vault without having the state of the art equipment or just the basics. I believe the greatest advantage I have in teaching how to pole vault, is thinking outside the box. Every athlete is different and have different experiences and skills. I take what they have and build from there."

LoJo, LoJo Vault Assault and Team VA have started a [Community Outreach Program](#) to honor his commitment to give back to the community where athletes cannot afford to learn how to pole vault. The program is designed to expose inner-city communities and athletes to the pole vault in hopes to kill the stereotype that "Black People Don't Pole Vault". LoJo is a prime example that Black people can and indeed do pole vault. Not only can they pole vault but they can also be very successful in doing so.

"Shoot for the starts and fall among the clouds!" – LoJo, tells his athletes.

Team VA's mission for the community outreach program: Help support challenged communities by improving collegiate opportunities through the Pole Vault and Track & Field.

Click [here](#) to read more about the [Vault Assault Community Outreach Program](#).

Please click [here](#) to donate to Team VA via PayPal Giving Fund. Team VA is a registered 501(c)3 Non-Profit origination.

Direct Link: <https://www.paypal.com/us/fundraiser/charity/2296740>

