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Saying YES to Running: Program Introduces Kids to Track and Field

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Saying YES to Running: Program Introduces Kids to Track and Field

By [Ginger DeShaney](#)

With bibs proudly pinned to their shirts, the excited young runners lined up on the Saunders Stadium track.

At Coach Thomas White's direction, the runners blazed down the track, wearing their game faces, which ranged from wide smiles to determined seriousness.

Once that group reached the finish line, Thomas prepared the next group of runners for their race.

About 60 kids ages 6-13 gathered at the Moakley Park stadium Monday for their weekly session of the Youth Enrichment Services (YES) summer track and field program.

While the younger kids took part in the developmental meet, the older kids did drills. The previous week, it was reversed, with the older kids having a meet and the younger kids doing drills.

Those drills included Turbo Jav (rubber-tipped javelins for kids), long jump (the kids had a blast soaring into the sand), and small and large hurdles.

The meets, which include running races, relays, and long jump, "allow the kids to see and track their progress," said Elliot Simmons-Uvin, support staff for the track and field program and youth recreation coordinator and equipment specialist for YES.

YES's mission is to inspire youth through outdoor experiences and leadership opportunities that build confidence and prepare them to summit life's challenges.

"First and foremost, [the program] develops some confidence and some physical skills," said Bryan Van Dorpe, executive director of YES. There's also a sense of accomplishment ... "whether it's one lap around or a mile. Each week they can see improvement."

Bryan said sometimes kids can get lost in team sports. Because track is an individual sport, "they can really excel and develop and improve."

The city-wide program meets Mondays and Thursdays at Saunders Stadium and Tuesdays and Wednesdays at English High School. Over the four nights every week, the program gets about 300 kids, said Rosa Moriello, the track and field coordinator and YES's adventure programs coordinator.

"It's been a pretty difficult summer with the weather," Rosa said, citing rain, heat waves, and smoke-filled air. Monday's session started out cloudy and dry but ended in a steady rain.

Pre-COVID, the program saw 100-plus kids a night, Bryan said. "It shows there's a real need for grassroots track and field programming where kids develop and learn and have fun with it," he said.

YES not only introduces kids to track and field but also to a healthy lifestyle, Bryan said. It's also a catalyst for making good choices.

"I mainly do track to help with exercising," said Mila, 10. "It's also really fun. My dad runs a lot and I like to run. I like doing the 400 meters around the track once."

Mila also likes doing the javelin and the relay races: "And I get to do it with my friends. A lot of my soccer friends do this, too."

Maddie, 9, likes being with her friends and running. Annabelle, 6, likes the long jump and the 100.

And the parents love it, too, said Bryan. "The kids come home tired."

Bryan is grateful for the 25-30 volunteer coaches, including adults as well as college and high school runners. He also has kids who went through the YES program themselves and come back to help, like Thomas, who is now the coordinator of youth coaches. Thomas, a star runner at Boston Latin School, will be running for Bucknell University this fall as a freshman.

"We couldn't do it with them," Bryan said of the volunteers.

YES's programming gets kids involved year-round, said Elliot. The summer program ends on Aug. 19. Then fall cross-country begins. After that, winter track starts, along with downhill and cross-country skiing and snowboarding. Then there's spring track.

Savannah, 12, loves the program and plans to run track when she gets to high school. "I learned how to do Turbo Jav and I love sprinting. I think I'm pretty fast."

“Running is fun,” she continued. “It makes me more energized and excited.”

The 7th Annual Martin Richard Memorial One Mile Invitational will be held Aug. 19 from 5-8 p.m. at Saunders Stadium.



On your mark, get set, go! Coach Thomas Whites gives the all clear for the start of the race.







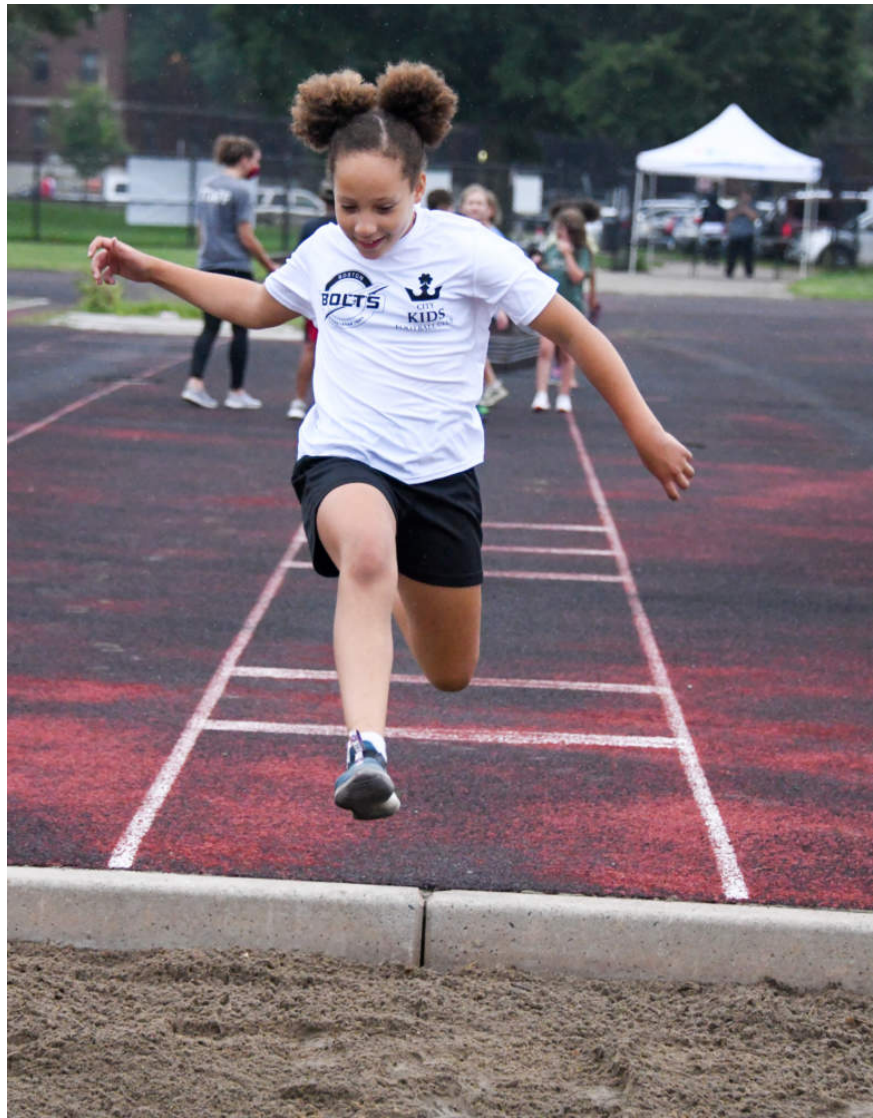


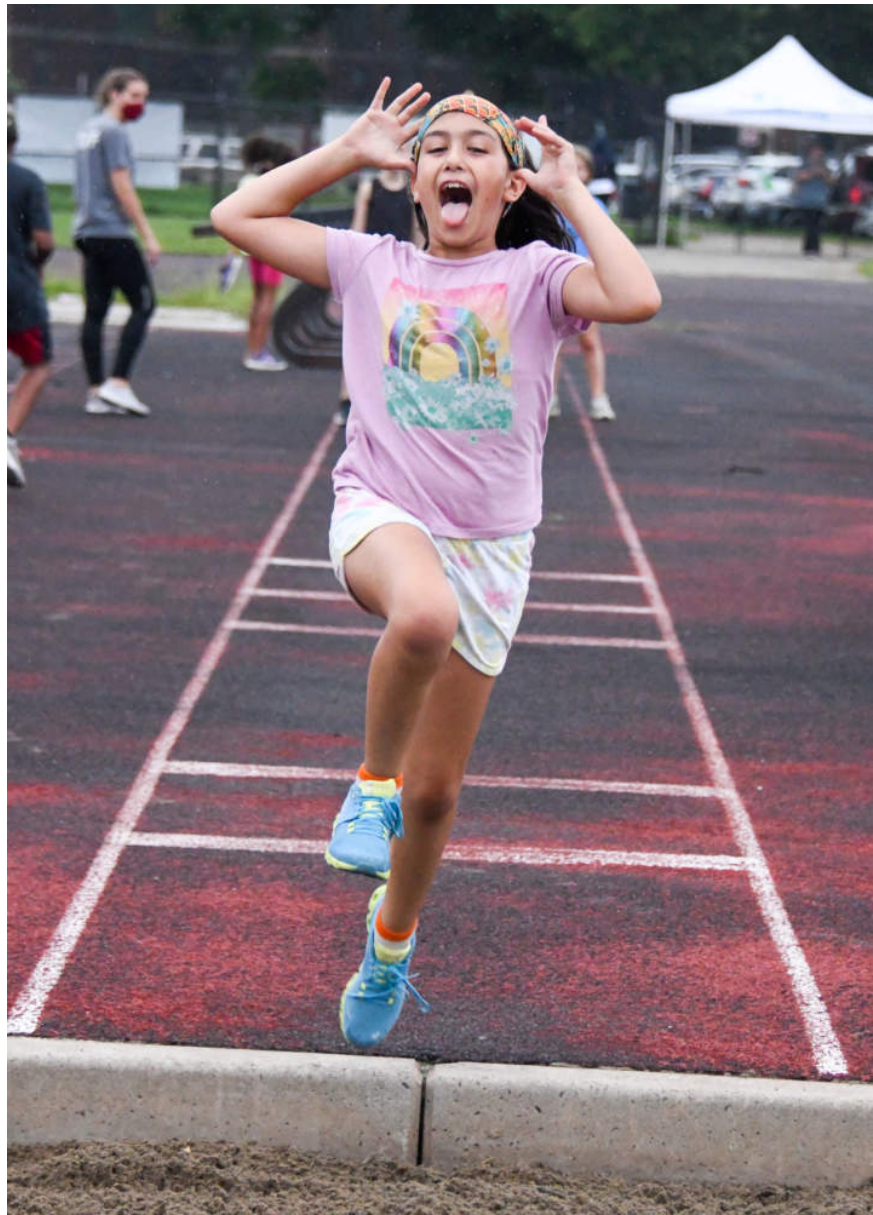


























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