

## Nkosinza (pronounced “CO-sins-AH”) Balumbu, Triple Jumper



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**Balumbu on his way to a 6<sup>th</sup> place triple jump finish at the 2011 U.S. Outdoor National Track & Field Championships**

By Bob Burns

When Nkosinza Balumbu was a 99-pound freshman at James Logan High School in Union City, an official asked him before a triple jump competition which board he'd like to use for his take-off.

He requested the 40-foot board, which meant he'd have to hop, skip and jump 40 feet to reach the sand and not land ignominiously on the runway.

Balumbu's best at the time was 39 feet.

"Are you sure?" his coach, Dooney Jones, asked skeptically.

"Yes," Nkosinza replied.

More than a dozen years later, Jones laughs as he recounts the story.

"He jumped 42 feet," Jones said.

Though reaching the pit is no longer a cause for concern, the 25-year-old Balumbu will need to conjure up a similar fearlessness when he competes in the U.S. Olympic Track & Field Trials later this month in Eugene, Ore. Balumbu, a former NCAA indoor champion, is one of the most consistent triple jumpers in the country, having finished in the top six at each of the last three outdoor national championships.

To qualify for the U.S. Olympic team, Balumbu needs to finish in the top three in Eugene, and the top two spots figure to go to the reigning world outdoor and indoor champions, Christian Taylor and Will Claye.

Plus, a top-three finish won't necessarily guarantee Balumbu a ticket to the London Olympics. He also needs to surpass the Olympic "A" qualifying standard of 56 feet, 5¼ inches. Balumbu's longest jump to date is a wind-aided 55-3¾.

"To me, he's a 57-foot- jumper," Jones said. "It's just something he hasn't done yet."

It's not unusual for triple jumpers to improve by significant margins when the competition and atmosphere are at peak levels, which will be the case at 4:40 p.m. on June 30 at Hayward Field on the University of Oregon campus.

"Personally, I feel like I have as good a shot as anyone at making this Olympic team," Balumbu said. "I believe that a mark of 17.25 meters (56-7¼), give or take, is what it may take to achieve my goal of top three.

"Eugene is amazing place," Balumbu said. "The energy at that stadium is second to none, and whenever I compete in front of a large crowd of true track fans, it's whole different dynamic. It gives me much more adrenaline."

Balumbu qualified for the 2008 U.S. Olympic Trials in Eugene but was hindered by a hamstring injury and didn't advance to the final.

"This feels more like my first Olympic Trials since I will have a better chance to compete at a high level," he said. "But already having been in that environment will be less of a shock this time around."

At the Stanford Invitational in April, Balumbu's winning mark of 55-3<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> was aided by a wind of 2.2 meters per second, just above the 2.0 maximum allowable for legal jumps. He had earlier finished fourth in the 2012 USA Indoor Championships with a jump of 54-1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>.

In a recent training session, Balumbu encouragingly exceeded 53 feet from a shortened approach.

"My health right now is good," Balumbu said. "No major injuries that I have to be cautious about. I hope it stays that way leading up to the biggest meet of my life thus far."

Balumbu's parents moved to the United States from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Nkosinza (pronounced "CO-sins-AH") was the youngest of 11 Balumbu siblings to come up through the Mission Valley Track Club headed by Logan High School coach Lee Webb.

"He started competing when he was about eight years old," Webb said. "I took him all over the place and he did all kinds of events. He eventually gravitated to the triple jump. He learned the technique and developed the other skills through hard work."

Balumbu won a pair of California state titles in the triple jump and was the nation's top-ranked performer as a senior in 2005. In selecting a college, Balumbu visited several Pacific-10 Conference schools before choosing Arkansas, where the jumps coach at the time was Dick Booth. Booth later moved to Florida, where he tutored Taylor and Smith, now entrenched as the world's top two triple jumpers.

At Arkansas, Balumbu won the 2008 NCAA indoor championship and was a five-time All-American.

"Choosing to attend Arkansas was probably one of the best decisions I've ever made," Balumbu said. "It was hard to leave my family and friends, but I knew that if I wanted to continue jumping after college, I had to attend the best track and field program and learn from Dick Booth, arguably the best jump coach in the world. I felt to be the best, I had to surround myself around the best. I'll always be a Razorback."

After graduating from Arkansas in 2008 with a degree in communications, Balumbu moved back to the Bay Area to train with Jones, his triple jump coach in high school who is now at Castro Valley High School. Balumbu trains daily with Jones in Castro Valley and works part-time as a substitute teacher in Union City to help ends meet.

"To make really good money in my event, it's vital to be ranked among the world's top 10," Balumbu said. "I'm still far from living comfortably strictly off of track, but I know that sometimes achieving dreams doesn't come easy."

At 5-foot-10 and 140 pounds, Balumbu is one of the smallest national-class triple jumpers in the country. Claye isn't much bigger, but he possesses exceptional speed on the runway and is also a 27-foot long jumper. Taylor, who jumped a career-best 58-11¼ to win the 2011 world outdoor title in South Korea, stands 6-2¾ and has clocked 45.39 seconds in the 400-meter dash.

"I'm not the fastest or strongest jumper, but technically, I'm better than most, and I'm mentally strong," Balumbu said. "The triple jump attracted me because it's more of a technical event."

He has dedicated his 2012 season to his father, Bal, who passed away when Nkosinza was a freshman at Logan High.

"He was always so supportive and positive toward my athletics," Balumbu said. "I want to make him and the rest of my supporters proud of the time and effort I put in chasing a lifelong dream."