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Craddock signs with Arkansas

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By Evan Mohl
Killeen Daily Herald

After months of anticipation, Omar Craddock finally revealed his college choice Wednesday.

Craddock pulled a white hat from a yellow Dollar General bag and placed it squarely on his head. After a few moments of silence, the tightly-packed crowd at Richard Milburn Academy realized Craddock's long-awaited decision from the cursive A and red embroidery – the University of Arkansas, the No. 1-ranked jumped team in the nation.

The secret – only two people knew of Craddock's choice – was out of the bag. Craddock's father, Benny, gave his son a kiss, causing the world-class triple jumper's mouth to drop.

Craddock quickly recovered from his shock and unleashed a smile. He even danced in his appropriately-colored dark red shirt.

"I had to keep everyone in suspicion," Craddock said after signing his national letter of intent. "I guess everyone thought I would stay in Texas, but I wanted to prove them wrong with a surprise."

Craddock's antics were appropriate for a kid who – no pun intended – jumped into the national spotlight recently.

The Killeen native started in eighth grade – and he only averaged a respectable 39 feet. Craddock also got in trouble frequently.

"I was hard-headed," he said. "I didn't listen and I was an instigator. I wasn't going in the right direction."

Benny, who served in the military overseas, thought track might do his son some good. He knew Craddock had ability, but it needed to be harnessed.

He found Eric Gaither, a former jumper at Prairie View A&M and founder of the club Jump Corps. Gaither, who never refuses an athlete wishing to work and improve, took Craddock under his wing.

"My goal is to give confidence to kids through track so they can feel better about themselves," Gaither said. "We try to build a community."

The two clicked immediately. Craddock improved six feet, 10 inches in one year under Gaither's tutelage.

Track focused Craddock and led to astronomical improvement.

"The triple jump is my outlet," Craddock said. "It's kept my head on straight."

Now, Craddock consistently jumps more than 50 feet. His accomplishments are numerous, some of which include:

Best indoor jump by a Texas high schooler all time (50 feet, 10 1/2 inches); No. 12 in U.S. history

Caribbean Scholastic Invitational champion and record holder

Nike Outdoor Championships gold medal

USA Today all-American

Silver medalist at the USA Track and Field Junior Olympics

USA Track and Field record holder in intermediate meet

Simplot games champ

Two AAU titles

Craddock has impressed so many people in such a brief time that he even received a phone call from six-time national champion and Olympian Tiombé Hurd. She offered her congratulations to Craddock for his college choice.

"Omar hasn't been on the scene a while, but he's quickly garnering attention," said Tony Austin, CEO of Athletic Achievement Enterprise LLC. "What separates him is his loyalty and dedication and that impresses people."

As a Razorback, Craddock will get the chance to climb even higher in the national and international spotlight. Arkansas has produced 15 national champions in the triple jump, and the university has won 19 track and field indoor titles and 10 outdoor.



HERALD/Steven Doll

Omar Craddock, a world-ranked track star and student at Richard Milburn Academy, center, receives a hug from his dad, Benny, as his mother, Angela, wipes away tears during ceremony to sign his letter of intent to University of Arkansas on Wednesday at the school.

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Craddock will join a talented jump team, including Nkosinza Balumbu, the defending NCAA triple jump champion and five-time All-American. The duo will be quite formidable and make the Razorbacks a heavy favorite.

It also should push Craddock closer to his goal of competing in 2012 Olympics.

"I've been waiting for this since my freshman year," Craddock said. "Now, I get to prove I can go away from home and prove I can do this by myself and get to the 2012 Olympics."

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