

## Stewart Sisters Succeed Together

by Taylor Wilson, BYU Athletic Communications



BYU Photo/Mark Philbrick

It is not uncommon for athletic twins to follow one another to collegiate sports success. Mike and Maurkice Pouncey both won a National Championship as offensive linemen at the University of Florida. Courtney and Ashley Paris dominated the Big 12 in women's basketball at Oklahoma University.

Natalie and Nachele Stewart are no different. Hailing from Spanish Fork, Utah, the twin sisters committed to the BYU women's track program more than two years ago and have not looked back since.

"I think it was an unspoken understanding between Nachele and I that we would go to the same college," Natalie said. "We are always pushing each other to do better. I believe it has made us closer as sisters and friends."

Hali Stewart, mom to Natalie and Nachele, noticed the twins' athletic potential at a young age and enrolled the girls in a summer track program at the age of eight.

"When my brother was in elementary school my mom noticed that he had a lot of sprinting ability," Nachele said. "She decided she would try her daughters and see if they possessed the talent. We did, and I have been running ever since."

Both sisters immediately realized their love for track and field after beginning that summer program. Nachele "knew it was something that I would enjoy throughout my life" while Natalie "always knew I loved track, and

that I was pretty good at it”.

That immediate love of the sport paid dividends in high school. Nachele earned high school All-America honors in 2008 for her performance in the 800m run and was named a Gatorade Player of the Year for the state of Utah in 2006 and 2007.

Natalie was an eight-time Utah State Champion in high school. Her victories included championships in the 100m and 200m twice, along with wins in the 400m, 4x100m, 4x400m and distance medley. She also placed second at the prestigious Nike National Outdoor meet in the 400m.

“High school track and field was a wonderful experience for me,” Natalie said. “My team was wonderful, my coaches were incredible, and it seemed like I was always progressing and hitting my goal times on a regular basis.”

Colleges began recruiting both runners after they experienced some of this success, and despite being recruited by many of the same schools, the sisters held some different opinions. Natalie “always had a desire to come to BYU”, but Nachele kept her options open early on.

“Oregon held a lot of interest for me,” Nachele said. “I mean, its track town U.S.A. In the end, though, I felt BYU was the place for me, and it was truly the college I had always wanted to attend.”

One common denominator the Stewarts agreed on when choosing BYU was the excellence of the coaching and team atmosphere. Natalie appreciated the fact that BYU head coach Craig Poole has been the head coach for 30 years and possessed a lot of experience. Nachele felt she could “excel in his program” and knows, in hindsight, “BYU was definitely the right choice.”

Since arriving on the Provo campus, the sisters have known nothing but success in track and field. Natalie broke the BYU indoor 400m record in her first indoor meet as a Cougar and went on to break her own record twice more during her freshman season. She also took fourth in the MWC Outdoor Championships in the 400m and competed at the NCAA West Regional meet.

Nachele started quickly as well, winning an 800m race in her second collegiate meet, the Cherry and Silver Invitational at the University of New Mexico. She competed in three events at the MWC Indoor Championships, taking seventh in the 200m, third in the 400m and first in the distance medley. She was also a member of the third-place distance medley relay team at the NCAA Indoor National Championships.

“Running the distance medley relay at Nationals is one of my best track moments,” Nachele said. “It was my proudest moment in collegiate track thus far, and it is something I will always remember.”

Both Natalie and Nachele give a significant amount of credit for their success to their parents. In addition to originally being introduced to the sport by their mother, they have felt the support of both parents throughout their respective careers in high school and college.

“My parents have always been very supportive,” Natalie said. “If the meet is close, they are always there. If it is further away, they try to find it online or just call afterwards. One great thing about them is that they never pressure me into getting better times or practicing more; they are just very supportive.”

Despite no longer living at home, the sisters still choose to share a room in an apartment. The two share not

only the room but also all the bills that go along with living on their own. Both agree that one of the best perks of living together is the ability to cut their food bill in half.

“Our relationship could not be better,” Natalie said. “I will forever be grateful for her love and friendship, but she is getting married in two months so our relationship will be changing.”

Although their living arrangements will be changing soon, their progress in the BYU track and field program will continue to move along quickly. Natalie has her focus on reaching All-American status in the 200m, 400m or a relay, while Nachele is focused on the 800m.

“My ultimate goal is to become an All-American in the 800m,” Nachele said. “I want to run a time under 2:04.00 (in the 800m) sometime in my collegiate career. Right now my best is 2:05.27, so I have 1.5 seconds to cut off.”

Now midway through their sophomore seasons, Natalie and Nachele continue to improve. Natalie continues to excel in the 400m, while Nachele has taken to starring in a new event, the 800m. She qualified and competed in the 2010 NCAA Indoor National Championships in the event, her first NCAA Nationals appearance in an individual event.

“I love so many things about being a part of this team,” Natalie said. “I love the travel, competition, my teammates, my coaches and I love being a part of a team that is truly dedicated.”

As the sisters move through their final two years of college, they will strive to accomplish their goals, continue to improve and compete with the best athletes in the country. Most importantly, Natalie and Nachele will remain the best of friends as they pursue success on and off the track.