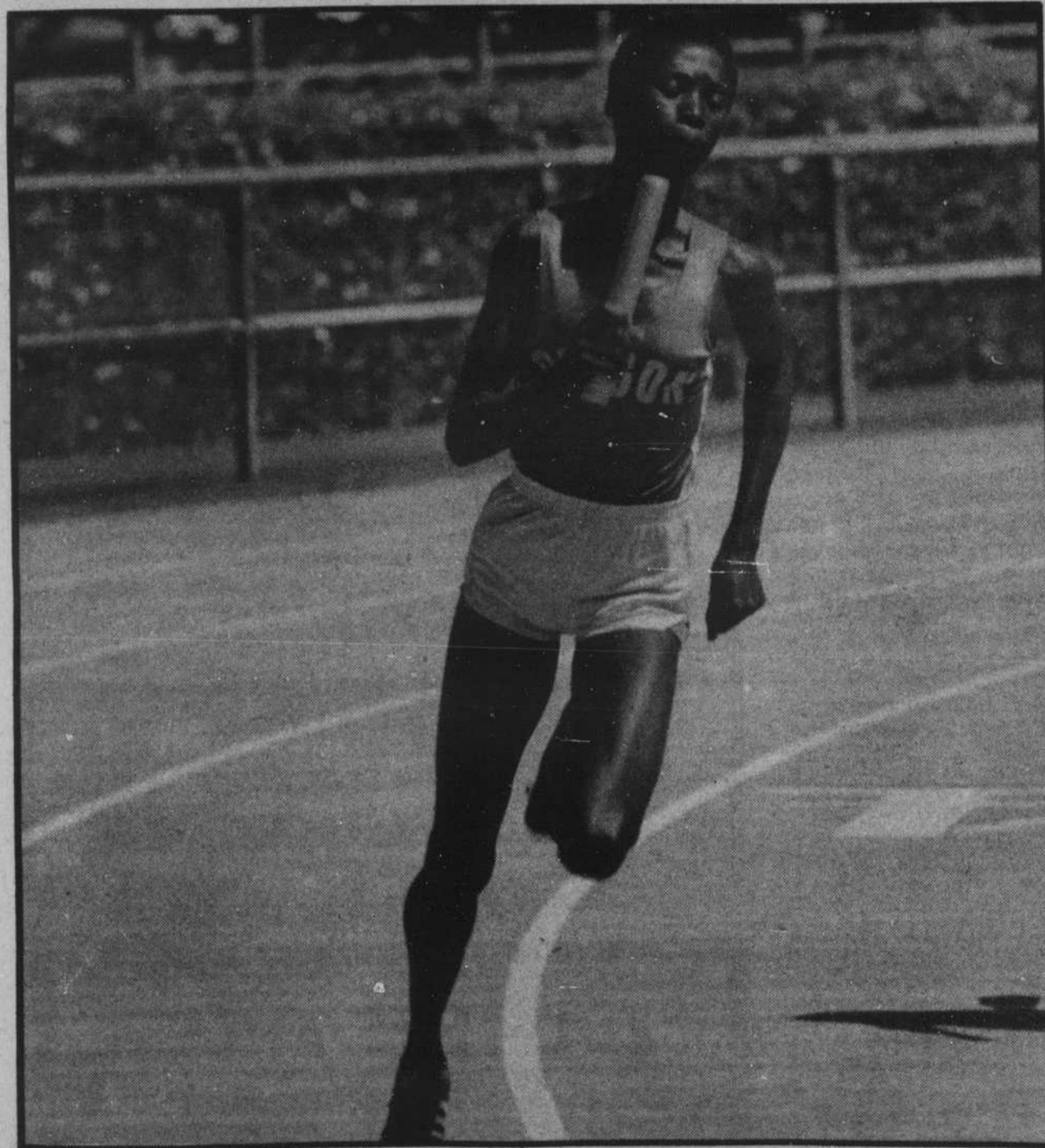


# Hometown Blues for Bakari



Homesickness is a trait as common to the student psyche as exam anxiety and the occasional hangover. Inevitably, whether once a day or once a month, that hollow corner of the stomach groans with hunger for one glimpse of the folks back home. For some, family is as close as Portland.

But for Grace Bakari, her family is a half-world and total culture away in Kumasi, Ghana. Which is a very abrupt change from her current home — a room in one of the University's dormitories, which she has occupied since April. For Bakari, a 400-meter specialist for the Oregon track team, Kumasi, her real home, is an unparalleled paradise.

They call Kumasi the Garden City, because all around are "flowers and gardens" and other forms of greenery. Settled in the northern part of Ghana, it is the country's second-largest city, next to the coastal capital of Accra. It is the cultural center of Ghana — "a junction," says Bakari with a wide smile. And the main expression of culture in Kumasi? "Music! It is full of music!" What kind of music? The answer is surprising. "Discol," she says, taking a roll on the grass in front of the 15th Street tennis courts, obviously embarrassed at being interviewed. She went to discos all the time in Kumasi. No, she hasn't gone to any discos here.

"Music expresses my inner feelings," she says, shifting her position on the grass for what seems like the millionth time. "It's inborn."

For those who have seen her on the track, her running seems inborn, too. Although Bakari is only 5-4 and 105 pounds, she seems to glide across the track with gazelle-like strides. She brings to mind the fluid motion that Kenyan half-miler and Olympic medalist Mike Boit made popular in the mid-70s.

Her face betrays no strain or emotion as she runs; she looks the same at the start as she does at the finish. And at the tape, Bakari is usually first across or seconds behind. Her season best in the 400 this year is 53.7, a half-second slower than her personal mark. A 53-second 400 would place her among the top performers at the AAU meet.

"I like the track, the competition, the spectators," she says. "And the losers — if you are losing, they cheer you up."

Oregon track has been good to Grace Bakari. She's happy with the people she's met through athletics and the experiences she's had through life on the team.

But Bakari's experiences off the track have been less than encouraging to a

26-year-old woman who is very far from home.

The problems began when she first arrived from Ghana in April. Actually, she wasn't even here yet. Bakari was stuck at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport, and the customs officers wanted to know what she was doing in the United States with only a one-way visa. Because of poor communication channels between Eugene and Kumasi, Oregon coach Tom Heinonen had no idea that Bakari was coming.

"I tried to call in London, but the lines didn't go through," she says. She convinced them to call Heinonen at home. "They wouldn't let me talk (on the phone) because they thought I might deceive them." A surprised Heinonen convinced the officer that Bakari was on the way to Oregon for good reason. She was picked up by teammate Eryn Forbes' father in Portland.

Then came the paperwork. "She's had a lot of hassles filling out forms," says Heinonen. "There were months worth of forms, and she had to complete them the first two weeks of the (spring) term while she was competing."

Then came the food. Many dorm residents complain about the victuals they receive. Bakari's system did more than complain — it rebelled. The food was "too sweet," she says. She was more accustomed to fresh fruits and vegetables — especially yams — from the marketplace. The vacuum-packed, freeze-dried stuff offered in the dormitories gave Bakari stomach cramps. She began to lose weight, and with only 105 pounds to spare, there's not much to lose.

"We're doing everything we can to make her comfortable," says Heinonen. Both Bakari and Heinonen agree that if she could live off-campus and prepare her own food, the situation would improve immediately.

Then came assimilation into the campus community. Bakari and a friend who came from Ghana three years ago say the populace in Eugene is much more withdrawn than in Ghana. "African culture brings one together," says the friend. "Here, it is one for himself or for his family."

"I want to talk to someone," says Bakari, "but there is no one to talk to."

"You don't have to have money to enjoy yourself (in Ghana)," chips in the friend. "If you have no money, somebody will take care of you. Next time, you'll take care of them."

Back home, Bakari is part of a family of one father, three wives and a total of 21 children. They live in a compound along with several other families. As is the case with other parts of the world, the Muslim religion

that Bakari grew up with is facing transition through Western influences. She was not allowed to wear "anything like that" in public, pointing to a girl clad in short-shorts and tank top. But she was allowed to wear pants around the house.

In stark contrast to Bakari's Muslim background, long vertical scars in each cheek mark her as a member of the royal Gonja tribe. She received the scars during childhood, along with another mark on her left cheek for medicinal protection. Her father is a chief, her uncle a sub-chief. As a result, Bakari and her family are treated with "dignity" among her peers.

Asked if there were any problems with her family about being 26 and unmarried, she smiles and says, "My parents once said that if I didn't get a boyfriend, they would give me one. But I was not interested in that. I wanted to run."

And run she did, although during her ten years of prep education, "I wasn't allowed to run in school because I was too tiny." As the years went by, she competed with the Ghana national team in several African and international competitions. Last year, she traveled to Canada for the World Cup Games. There she met Boit, who is attending the University as a grad student.

Boit told her about Oregon and its program, but she had already heard quite a bit back home. "They talk about it (the University) in Ghana. They say, 'That great school.'"

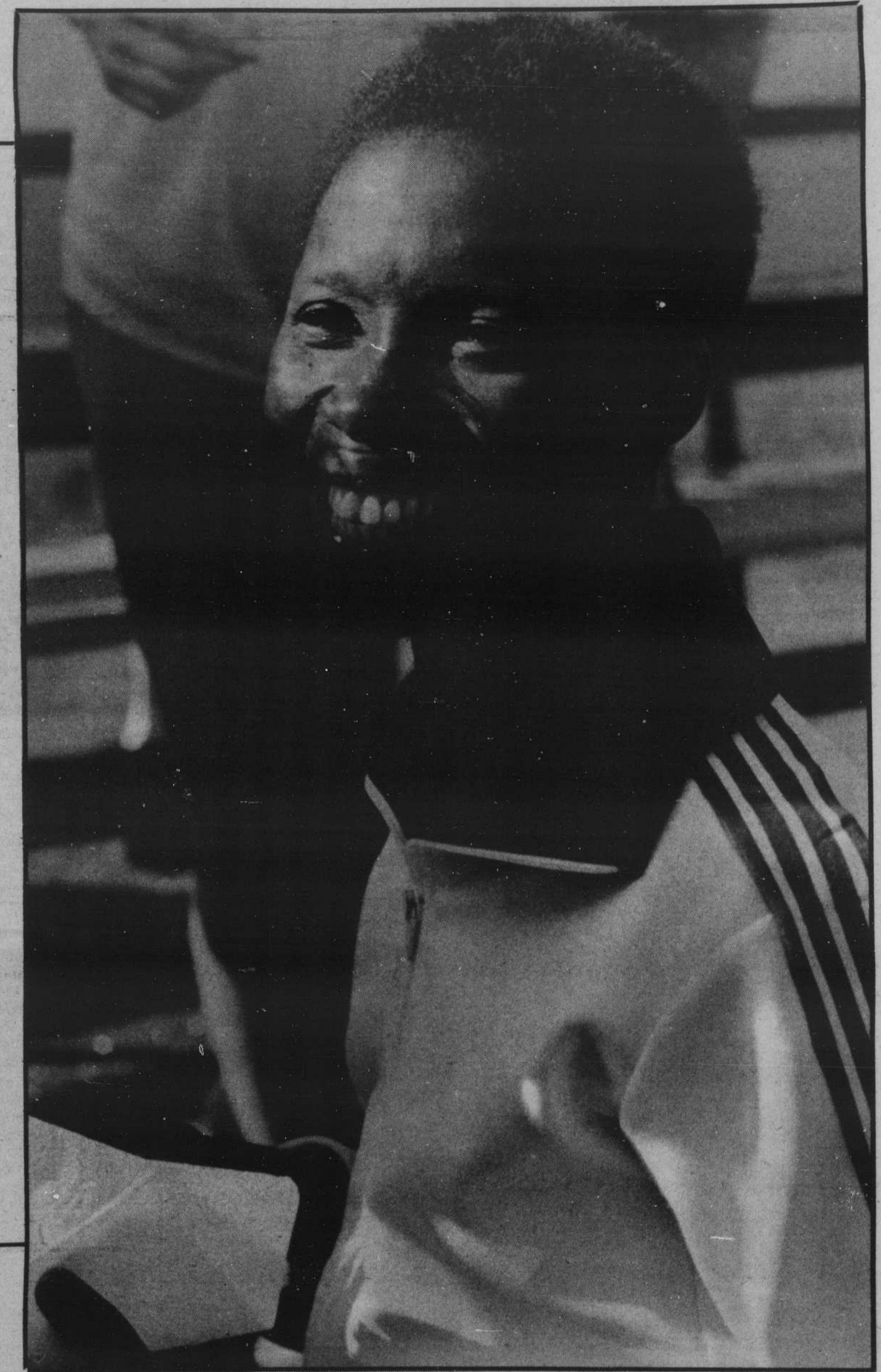
But right now Bakari is not sure whether it's great or not. "Back home my parents need me." She actually expresses fears of death if she continues to eat the food she's offered here. "I'm afraid to die over something that I could change (control)." The problem is that she has no ticket home. Her only chance this summer is if the Ghana Olympic Committee pays her way to Moscow.

Heinonen isn't very worried about Bakari. He understands homesickness when he sees it, and believes time will provide the best medication. He says Boit (while attending college at Eastern New Mexico) and Oregon's Alberto Salazar both had their tickets ready to go home early in their collegiate careers, but they both got over it.

"It'll just take some time," says Heinonen. "She was being pulled in a lot of directions all at once — new school, new term, cold winter, no money..."

"Everything is getting better now."

Story by Jody Murray  
Photos by Steve Dykes



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