

SAINT-DENIS, France — Her story culminated Saturday night on a purple track, with her walking a joyous lap in the rain with a flag foreign to the Olympic podium draped across her back. It was the forest green of Dominica, resplendent with yellow, black and white stripes converging around a handsome and proud Sisserou parrot.

It unspooled through Maryland's Montgomery County and the University of Maryland, through a high school classroom and a local cricket club. For Thea LaFond, it never deviated from the tiny island where she was born, from the people back home who inspired her to become an Olympic champion unlike any other.

"I was never allowed to ever forget where I came from," LaFond said.

After Saturday night, the place she came from will never forget her. LaFond won the triple jump gold medal at the Paris [Olympics](#), delivering a commonwealth of 70,000 in the East Caribbean its first Olympic medal of any color. Born in Dominica, raised in Maryland and educated as a Terrapin, LaFond hopped, skipped and leaped 15.02 meters (49 feet 3¼ inches) into her home country's history.

LaFond, 30, could envision what Dominica's cities and towns looked like Saturday night: streets packed with revelers, cars gridlocked, people yelling at televisions and into their phones. The commonwealth had endured so much in recent years. She had given the people something to celebrate.

"Oh, God, my country is never going to stop partying, are they?" LaFond said.

"And it's a Saturday? Just cancel work on Monday, guys."

"They deserve this as much as I do," LaFond added. "And I hope they are partying enough for the both of us. I don't know what I've done in life to deserve this. I don't know how everything worked out — I'm not going to say I don't know. We worked for this."

LaFond is a track and field champion born on an island without a track. She lived in Roseau, the capital, until she was 5. Her family immigrated to the United States and lived for two years in New Jersey. Her father got a job at the U.S. Agriculture Department, so they moved to Silver Spring, Md. Her mom became a professor. She attended John F. Kennedy High, where she became a track star. Her family returned to visit Dominica every summer.

LaFond competed in the heptathlon at Maryland. She remained in the area, and as she gravitated to triple jump, someone introduced her to coach Aaron Gadson. "A few months in, I was like, 'Oh, you're cute,'" LaFond said. They are now married, and Gadson still coaches her.

To make a living, LaFond worked at Kennedy. She taught special ed, math and a course she called Life 101: teaching kids how to open checking accounts, save money and not overextend credit cards.

In 2022, LaFond decided she needed to stop working if she wanted to see how far she could take her triple jump career.

“Taking off a Friday and going to Finland on Thursday [night] and coming back and being in the classroom Monday morning took a toll,” LaFond said.

When she stopped teaching, Dominica’s Olympic committee offered financial support. She and Gadson practiced at an indoor facility in Ashburn, Va., until the owner raised the price. LaFond and Gadson found, of all places to train for the Olympics, the Columbia Cricket & Sports Complex.

They rented a space about 40 meters long and 15 feet wide. The owner allowed them to make it their own: LaFond bought wood planks, and they created a runway by covering them with the same rubber-granule surface used at major track stadiums. At the end of the corridor, they dumped seven tons of sand themselves with wheelbarrows and wagons.

“Our backs were aching for days,” LaFond said. “This is what made an Olympic champion.”

Without the toil of teaching, LaFond launched her career. She finished fifth at the 2022 world championships and then fifth again in 2023. Earlier this year, she won the world indoor championship. Yulimar Rojas, an unbeatable triple jump world record holder from Venezuela, suffered an injury that knocked her out of these Olympics. LaFond came to Paris believing she could win.

On Saturday, LaFond applied pink eyeliner and wore a black-and-green bikini uniform. On her second jump, she soared 15.02 meters to take the lead. She sprung from the sand pit and screamed.

As the competition unfolded, she kept an eye on 23-year-old Julien Alfred of Saint Lucia, a sprinter with whom she had bonded over their island heritage. At meets on the track circuit, they had talked earlier about remaining confident at major championships surrounded by athletes from countries with more resources.

“We’re just as big as everyone else,” they told each other.

When they saw each other in Paris, they told each other, “I believe in you.”

As LaFond watched Alfred win the 100 meters Saturday night, she fought back tears amid her own competition.

“I was like, ‘Dang it, she went and got gold,’” LaFond said. “I have to do it now.”

Once the rain started falling, no one could touch LaFond’s mark. The last jump finalized the podium: Jamaica’s Shanieka Ricketts won silver, and American Jasmine Moore, who also will compete in the long jump, took bronze at her first Olympics.

LaFond first thought of Dominica, as she often had when she trained. Hurricane Maria devastated the island in 2017, damaging 98 percent of its buildings and causing \$1.2 billion in damage. On days when she did not feel like training, she would tell herself that if Dominicans persevered, so could she. LaFond sometimes felt helpless. On Saturday night, she provided them something nobody else ever had.

She wants to give them something else. LaFond has not been back to the island in 18 months, too focused on training. She will go back soon, and she will keep going back. A gold medal will mean more resources, and LaFond knows what she wants to do with them: On the island where she was born, she will build a track. "I want these children and the next generation to have accessibility," LaFond said. "The Caribbean is producing diamonds. The ability to just be able to hop on a track and play around, you know?"