

The Oregonian

With mother's encouragement, Alvas Powell overcomes humble beginnings to rise to prominence with Portland Timbers

By Jamie Goldberg
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Angella Powell stood outside the door to her home in the remote eastern part of Jamaica, sweeping away dust from the doorstep as she waited anxiously for her son, Alvas, to return home.

When she finally saw him walking up to the house, she paused expectantly.

There on the doorstep, [Alvas Powell](#) told his mother that he had received his visa and would be leaving Jamaica and the town where he grew up to play professional soccer for the [Portland Timbers](#) more than 3,000 miles away in Oregon.

Angella immediately dropped her broom and wrapped her arms tightly around her son. They stood together outside for a long time that day in June 2013, as Angella sobbed into the 18-year-old's shoulder.

Powell had never visited the United States, and neither son nor mother had ever heard of Portland. But ever since he was a youngster, Powell had shown immense soccer talent and, with his mother's unwavering support, fought to move up the ranks in Jamaica in hopes of fulfilling his unlikely wish of one day playing pro soccer abroad.

He finally had a chance to make his dream a reality.

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Danvers Pen is a small farming community in southeastern Jamaica, a humble town of about 1,500 in St. Thomas, the Caribbean island's most impoverished parish, [where more than 32 percent of the population](#) lives in abject poverty.

This is where Angella Powell raised her seven children, even after their stepfather left her, working as a domestic worker cleaning houses and washing clothes as she struggled to support her large family.

"I didn't have a perfect job," Angella said. "I would do washing and cleaning for people, whatever I could. The money wasn't great, but I just pushed on. It was really rough on me, really rough."

Despite the struggles, Angella worked fiercely to provide for her children, especially her only son, Alvas, the third youngest.

Even while he was in primary school, it was clear that Alvas was athletically gifted. He would run track -- the sport that has earned Jamaica international recognition -- and always come home with medals.

But it was on the soccer field that Alvas found his calling.

"He started playing in primary school and I would go to every game," Angella said. "I didn't miss a match. I knew back then that he was very good. I knew he was going to reach his goals. He was meant to make it."

Even though there weren't many opportunities for Alvas to play at a competitive level within Danvers Pen, his talent was impossible to overlook. By age 9, he was competing for a local club and, as he moved into his teenage years, he started getting noticed by teams throughout Jamaica, as well as the national team program.

"Growing up it was not easy for me or any other kid in my community," Powell said. "There are no opportunities. You have to fight for what you want in the community."

Powell's talent and hard work earned him a call-up to the U-17 Jamaican National Team at the age of 16. Soccer was Powell's passion and the call-up was exciting, but making it at the highest level would cost money and require significant travel.

He told his mother he would forgo the opportunity and stay in Danvers Pen, but she told him he had to go and chase his dream.

"My mom is a big part of my life," Powell said. "No matter what, she sacrificed herself just to give me things because I didn't have a father there. My mom is my father and mother in one, so she played a big part in my life growing up."

Powell went on to represent Jamaica at the 2011 FIFA U-17 World Cup, before finally making his debut with the senior national team in 2012. That same year, he joined Portmore United FC, which plays in the Jamaica National Premier League.

The young and raw right back made just 10 appearances with Portmore before the [Portland Timbers](#), who had seen Powell play for the Jamaican National Team, offered the teenager an opportunity to come to the United States on a loan deal.

"When he left, I cried one whole week because I missed him," Angella said. "But every day I calmed down and I told myself, 'This is what he needs to be doing.' I had no idea what Portland was about or what it was like, but in my faith I knew it must be somewhere good. He's going to play soccer."

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During his first few weeks in Portland, Powell just wanted to go home.

The Timbers' youngest player was soft-spoken and shy, and had trouble mustering up the confidence to talk to his new teammates. He would quietly attend practices, then shower and leave as quickly as possible, scurrying home to his apartment in Southwest Portland to call his family back home.

But fellow Jamaicans [Donovan Ricketts](#) and [Ryan Johnson](#), and African players [Pa Modou Kah](#) and [Futty Danso](#) were quick to take Powell under their wings. Kah would often try to force Powell to talk in the locker room, hoping to help the teenager overcome his shyness.

And playing in a soccer-crazed city like Portland made adjusting to the Timbers a little bit easier.

On Aug. 3, 2013, when the Timbers returned home to Providence Park after two games on the road, Portland coach [Caleb Porter](#) decided to give Powell his first start in a Timbers uniform.

As he stepped onto the pitch that night and looked up at the waves of frenzied fans in the stands, Powell was overwhelmed with excitement.

Just months before, he had been playing at a local sports complex in Jamaica, where it was considered a stroke of good fortune when fans decided to attend games, and the referees sometimes failed to show up when it rained. Now, he looked up at the crowded stands, some 20,000 strong, where fans stood chanting rhythmically as they waved handmade flags above their heads.

"I had a lot of goose bumps," Powell said. "It was just unbelievable. I thought I was dreaming."

Powell started just four games in 2013 before Porter decided to use a veteran back line to stabilize the defense down the stretch and lead the Timbers into the MLS playoffs.

Still, the Timbers saw immense promise and potential in Powell and brought him back again on loan in 2014.

"We were bringing him into Portland not as a starter, but as someone we could develop into a starter," Timbers general manager [Gavin Wilkinson](#) said. "He's someone who we felt had a lot of potential. Potential is a dangerous word because eventually you have to reach that potential, but we just felt there was a big upside there and we wanted to try to tap into that."

Early in 2014, Powell saw some playing time for the Timbers and even had a few opportunities in the starting 11.

But the right back still had a lot to learn. That became abundantly clear May 17 when he took a heavy touch against the Columbus Crew and tried to recover by making a late and reckless

tackle on Crew defender Chad Barson. Barson went flying. Powell [was issued a red card](#) and dejectedly walked off the field with his head down.

Soon after, Powell was on a flight to Sacramento to join the Timbers USL PRO affiliate, the Sacramento Republic, on loan.

"I thought that was important to send him on loan because he needed to, in some ways, appreciate the opportunity that he had here and he needed to see the other side of what could happen if he didn't make it here," Porter said. "He needed something to wake him up a little bit."

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Powell's loan to Sacramento didn't go quite as planned.

The young defender felt isolated and unhappy in California's capital and he struggled on the field. Powell made just two appearances for the Republic before they decided that he wasn't going to fit into their starting lineup. They ultimately told the Timbers that they were sending him back to Portland.

Shortly after returning to the Rose City, Powell met with Porter to discuss the loan stint. The Timbers coach was frank.

"Hey, listen, that didn't go that well," Porter says he told him. "So, what are you going to do now?"

Porter was talking to a much more mature Powell. Even though he had struggled in Sacramento, he had returned to Portland with a newfound determination to fight for playing time.

"While I was on loan, I would tell myself, 'If I go back to Portland and I get one more chance from the coach, I'm just going to take that chance,'" Powell said. "I realized that I don't want to go back home to Jamaica and sit around and do nothing. I want something from this. I want to prove that I deserve to be on this team, I deserve to be starting."

In practice, Powell began to concentrate even more intently on his coach's directions. He had always been athletic, with explosive speed that allowed him to get up in the attack, but now Powell started focusing on his defense. His one-on-one defending quickly improved as he learned to stay mentally focused and maintain his composure.

Powell earned another shot in the starting lineup when the Timbers took on Alpha United in Guyana in CONCACAF Champions League play in August. He made the most of the opportunity, scoring on a rebound as Portland rolled to a 4-1 victory.

The performance earned Powell a surprise start in Portland's next MLS regular-season game against the Vancouver Whitecaps.

From the get-go, it was obvious that Timbers fans were watching a much more composed and tactically sound Powell. He looked strong on defense and proved to be crucial in the attack as well. Powell [broke the game open for Portland in the 54th minute](#) with his first-ever MLS goal as the Timbers beat Vancouver 3-0.

A week later, Powell scored again against the San Jose Earthquakes and went on to start every game down the stretch in 2014. In the offseason, the Timbers signed Powell to a multiyear deal. He's been a mainstay in the starting 11 ever since.

"He's grown a lot over the last couple of years," Timbers veteran [Jack Jewsbury](#) said. "You see now, he's a threat game in and game out."

Although Powell still shows his youth at times, he has grown into a talented and consistent starter, and the Timbers believe he has the potential to grow into an even more dangerous player.

There are moments when Powell's immense skill and athleticism shine through, like in April when he cleverly duped U.S. National Team defender Brek Shea with an impressive pullback move. Or this past month when he sprinted up the right wing, took a pass from [Dairon Asprilla](#) and sent a perfect assist into the box for [Fanendo Adi](#) against the New England Revolution.

Now, when Porter watches Powell play, he can't help but be reminded of another speedy right back he coached while at the University of Akron: [DeAndre Yedlin](#). With his speed and unmistakable potential, the former Seattle Sounders defender burst onto the international scene at last year's World Cup and shortly afterward signed with English Premier League side Tottenham Hotspur.

"I think Alvas is starting to make a statement as one of the better, most complete right backs in MLS," Porter said. "He's still got to continue to perform, but I coached DeAndre Yedlin for two years and I would say Alvas is in that caliber, no doubt about it. Athletically, technically, his ability to step forward in the attack, his ability to defend -- I think he has the potential to be that type of player."

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Angella Powell keeps a collection of photos of her son playing for the Timbers that hang on the wall in her home back in Jamaica. Sometimes, she will wake up in the middle of the night and stare at the photos, a smile beaming across her face.

Even though she rarely sees him anymore, the bond between mother and son has never wavered. Angella speaks to Powell over the phone daily -- she says she can't go any longer than a day without hearing his voice. And Powell has never lost sight of his roots, either. He sends part of his paycheck home to support his mom, helping her just as she supported him along the way to achieving his dream. She recently received her visa and hopes to finally make an extended trip to visit her son in Portland and see him play.

"I tell him, 'I'm not around you, but do your best,' " Angella said. "'The whole world is watching you.'"

Even now, when Powell jogs out onto the field at Providence Park, he can't help but feel a rush of excitement as he looks up at the thousands of rabid fans in the stands, cheering in unison in support of his professional team. But as his eyes scan across the crowd, there is still a gaping hole. Something is still missing.

Someday soon, he hopes his mother will join him in Portland, and as he surveys the crowd, he will catch her eye and pause to savor the cherished moment.

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