

NIGHT OF SPEED



The 1968 AAU 100-meter final: From left, Mel Pender, Ronnie Ray Smith, Larry Questad, winner Charlie Greene, Jim Hines, Lennox Miller, Roger Bambuck and Billy Gaines. Ben Frits

In June of '68, Sacramento saw a blaze of glory

By Bob Burns
Ben Staff Writer

Charlie Greene still remembers something his old college coach once said. Titles are what count, not times. Times vanish quicker than the smoke from a starter's pistol. Championships endure.

By that simple yardstick, Greene did the only thing worth remembering at the 1968 AAU Track and Field Championships. He won the hotly contested 100-meter dash final at Hughes Stadium on the evening of June 20, and he did it against one of the greatest groups of sprinters ever assembled.

Never mind that Greene won by just a foot over eventual Olympic champion Jim Hines and that the race was so close that five sprinters matched his winning time of 10 seconds flat. He won, and that's that.

But if ever there was a time that times did matter, when the stopwatch told a story worth repeating, it was on June 20, 1968. It was the Night of Speed.

"There will never be another night like it," Hines said. It was a moment in history when Hines and Ronnie Ray Smith became the first men to take the world record for 100 meters below 10 seconds, each clocking 9.9 in the first semifinal. Greene then clocked another 9.9 in the second semifinal, again with a legal wind for record purposes. A barrier that outlasted the four-minute mile and seven-foot high jump had been shattered three times in 10 minutes.

Earlier that same evening, Hines sent a rumble through the crowd of 10,000 by running a wind-aided 9.8 in his first-round heat. With the wind dipping just inside the legal limit of 4.473 mph for the fourth and final heat, Greene, Roger Bambuck and Jim Green tied the world record of 10.0.

Finally, at 9:45, as a late-night chill settled over the clay track, eight sprinters gathered for the final. Greene overcame Mel Pender's quick start and the powerful finishes of Hines and Lennox Miller

to win in a wind-aided 10.0.

In three rounds of races held within 2½ hours, the sanctioned world record of 10.0 was broken by three men and tied by seven others. The Night of Speed, indeed.

"The night in Sacramento was magical—a fast clay track, hot as hell, a lot of intensity," Greene said. "That was a great race for me because I beat the people you have to beat to be great."

The great American sprinters of this era take their marks in qualifying heats of the men's 100 meters this afternoon in the USA/Mobil Outdoor Track & Field Championships at Hughes Stadium. The field includes such present-day stars as Carl Lewis, Leroy Burrell and Dennis Mitchell. Burrell holds the world record at an electronically timed 9.85, a faster clocking than the slow of hand-timed 9.9s and 10.0s posted 27 years ago.

But when seven of the eight finalists from 1968 reunite to watch Friday night's 100 final at Hughes Stadium—they'll be honored at the meet the following afternoon—those times will be remembered fondly.

"I just can't imagine that ever happening again," said Stan Wright of Sacramento, the two-time U.S. Olympic assistant coach who coached four of the AAU finalists to a relay gold medal later that year in Mexico City. "It will go down in track history as one of the most significant events ever."

The eight finalists were old acquaintances who raced each other often and for free. Sure, there were the occasional under-the-table payments from meet promoters in those days before the sport became professional, but the runners usually played for more money the night before in poker games at the hotel than they ever saw at the track.

"Sometimes the race was won the night before at the hotel," Hines said. "These guys today lock themselves in their rooms, but we'd have a couple of cold beers, play cards, go to a movie. We were the best of friends off the track."

Greene was the world's top-ranked 100 performer in 1966. Hines in 1967. Pender was a 1964 Olympian who had served one tour of duty in Vietnam. Ronnie Ray Smith was a member of the legendary San Jose State teams that included Tommie Smith, John Carlos and Lee Evans.

Billy Gaines was one year removed from a record-setting high school career in New Jersey. Ex-Stanford star Larry Questad was the last of a dying breed, a white sprinter from the United States. Miller was a Jamaican who competed for USC. Bambuck was born in Guadeloupe but represented France internationally, and Sacramento was the only place on earth for a serious sprinter to be.

"I knew a lot of people were going to run fast," Greene said. "They were in the race with 'The Dudes.' Me and Jimmy were 'The Dudes.' You get in a race and look on with us, you'll run fast. No one even dreamed of beating us."

Greene wore sunglasses when he raced, day or night, and he called them his "re-entry shields." He took great pride in psyching out his opponents, but Hines, an Oakland native who ran track for Wright at Texas Southern University, was a tough nut to crack.

Hines scored an upset win over Greene at the 1967 AAU Championships in Bakersfield, and while Miller had shown he could beat them in a given race, the Americans had clearly established themselves as the two fastest men in the world.

"Beating Jimmy became mentally hard," Greene said. "I had to really rev up to beat him."

The old clay track at Hughes Stadium was hard and fast, partly because the midjet cars that used to race there packed it down. But it wasn't as fast as the synthetic surfaces that were just then coming into vogue, such as the tartan track used four months later at the 1968 Olympic Games in Mexico City.

Today, on Hughes Stadium's synthetic track, the sprinters will run heats and semifinals, followed by Friday's final. But all three rounds were held on the same evening in 1968 because it was a two-day meet.

"If we tried running these guys three times in one day now, they'd burn down Hughes Stadium," Wright said. "No way we could get away with that."

The wind for the first heat, when Hines ran a 9.8, was 6.2 mph, putting it over the limit for record purposes. But Hines thinks the wind was considerably less than that. "They just didn't believe anybody could run that fast," he said.

Greene and Bambuck tied the world record of 10.0 in the last heat, creating a supercharged atmosphere for the semifinals. Pender, who that morning was promoted to captain in the Army, got the best start in the first semifinal, blasting out of the blocks to a clear lead.

Hines caught Pender at 50 meters and won by a meter over Smith, Pender and Questad. The times for Hines and Smith were announced as 9.9, the wind a legal 1.8 mph. Greene, who was warming up for the second semifinal, seethed as Hines celebrated.

"Jimmy took a victory lap, and the S.O.B. hadn't won yet," Greene



"There will never be another night like it," says Jim Hines, who made a return trip to history-making Hughes Stadium this week. Ben/Craig Fritz

said. "I didn't appreciate that."

The International Amateur Athletic Federation accepted hand times only for world records until 1975, but there was a Bufova electronic photo-timer in use that night in Sacramento to help determine the placings. The first semifinal photo showed Smith to be 0.11 seconds behind Hines, which led Track & Field News and most track statisticians to adjust Smith's time to 10.0. (Several of the 10.0s run that night would be adjusted to 10.1, but the IAAF accepted Smith's 9.9 as a world record.)

Fully automatic times are slower than hand times because the clock starts ticking the instant the gun fires. But they are more accurate since they eliminate human-reaction time and break each clocking down into hundredths of seconds.

The automatic time for Hines was a remarkable 10.03, faster than the 10.06 run by Bob Hayes to win the 1964 Olympics. Hines would run an automatic 9.95 at the Olympics—a world record that lasted until Calvin Smith broke it with a 9.93 in 1983—but the 7,200-foot altitude of Mexico City was worth at least a tenth of a second, and the tartan track at Estadio Olimpico was faster than the Hughes Stadium clay.

"If you look at the surface and the long spikes we had to wear, that was the fastest race ever run," Pender said.

Greene's automatic time in the other semifinal was 10.10, third-fastest in history.

Amazing as all those hand times seem, eight of the fastest 10 automatic times run to that point came in the two 1968 AAU semifinals: 10.03 (Hines), 10.10 (Greene), 10.14 (Smith), 10.15 (Pender), 10.16 (Questad), 10.18 (Miller), 10.20 (Bambuck) and 10.21 (Kirk Clayton).

"From a standpoint of total performance, it was spectacular, possibly the most spectacular ever," said Don Putte, the editor emeritus of Track & Field News who is writing a book on the 100 greatest 100s in history. "Some of those automatic times are astounding."

So astounding that meet director Al Baeta called for a steel tape following the semifinals.

"We measured it then and there," Baeta said. "It was four inches long. That's what I remember most about that night—sweating out that measurement."

Not surprisingly, the final was anticlimactic. The wind was blowing over the maximum allowable for record purposes and everyone's legs were getting tired as the night grew cold. Greene cramped up after his narrow win and had to be assisted to his feet. No victory lap for him.

Hines was second, followed in order by Miller, Bambuck, Smith, Pender, Gaines and Questad. It was Greene's third straight win of the year over Hines—and his last. Hines won the Olympic Trials at Echo Summit and then blasted the world record in the thin air of the Olympic Games.

Of the eight AAU finalists, all but Gaines wound up running in at least one Olympic final in Mexico City. Greene, Pender, Smith and Hines teamed to break the world record in winning the 4x100 relay in the aftermath of the Tommie Smith-John Carlos victory stand protest that put all black U.S. athletes under tremendous pressure.

Miller would stick around to win an Olympic bronze medal in 1972, but Hines retired from track after Mexico City to try his hand at professional football, and the others never ran as fast again.

But they were all part of something special, and never did the spirit of those times crystallize like it did on the Night of Speed. The best sprinters in the world going at it three times in one night, like kids racing up and down the block.

"I've been told it was the end of an era, an era of keen rivalries where we ran for no other reason than pride," Miller said. "We all had to lose, but we wanted that feeling of elation that comes from running. So we raced."

Just last week, at a meet in Rome, Olympic champion Linford Christie ran in one section of the 100, Mitchell in another. Christie and Mitchell are warriors, but modern-day warriors—businessmen who don't race unless the price is right.

"You run two separate races, how do you prove who's the best? It's a whole different ballgame today," Miller said.

Hines, 48, knows he'd be a rich man if he were running today. He thinks about it often, in fact, but he knows it's out of his hands.

"I appreciate what I got to do," he said. "I ran at the time when I was supposed to run."

A time that endured.

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The eight 100-meter finalists from the 1968 AAU Championships are being flown in by Nike and Accupliff for this week's national meet at Hughes Stadium. They will be honored with former Olympic assistant coach Stan Wright during a break in the competition Saturday afternoon.

Charlie Greene, 50, lives in Silver Springs, Md. He is the summer sports director for Special Olympics International.

Jim Hines, 48, lives in Oakland, where he is starting the Jim Hines Foundation, a non-profit organization that he hopes will include homeless and battered women's shelters.

Lennox Miller, 48, is a dentist living in Pasadena. His daughter, Inger Miller, followed in her father's footsteps at USC, where she was an outstanding sprinter. She will com-

pete in the 100 and 200 in Sacramento.

Roger Bambuck, 49, lives in Paris. He served as France's national minister of sport and remains involved in French politics.

Ronnie Ray Smith, 48, lives and works in the Los Angeles area. Organizers of this week's ceremony have found him to be the hardest of the eight to track down and he might not attend.

Mel Pender, 57, lives in Stone Mountain, Ga., and is director of community relations for the Atlanta Hawks of the NBA. He served 31 years in the U.S. Army.

Billy Gaines, 46, lives in San Jose, where he works for Federal Express and owns two laundromats.

Larry Questad, 51, lives in Boise, Idaho, where he is a semi-retired financial and marketing consultant.