

SportsLetter Interviews

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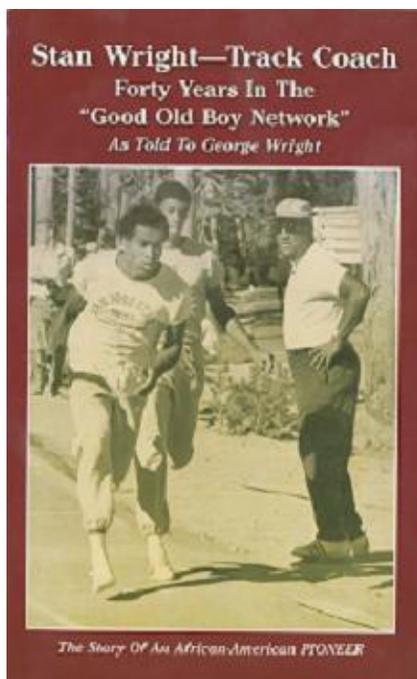
George Wright

Stan Wright was a track-and-field lifer. A sprint specialist, he served as head track coach at Texas Southern University, an historic black college in Houston, from 1951-1967. After a brief stint at Western Illinois, he coached at Sacramento State University from 1969-1979, then was athletic director at Fairleigh-Dickinson University in New Jersey from 1979-1985.

In addition, he served in various capacities with several bodies that have administered track and field in this country — the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU), The Athletic Congress, USA Track & Field — as well as the United States Olympic team.

Wright will forever be associated with two historic episodes that happened on his watch. In 1968, he was named assistant coach of the United States track team at the Mexico City Olympic Games, in charge of the sprints, 110-meter hurdles and sprint relay competitors. The United States was successful — athletes won 11 medals in six events. Two of those athletes, Tommie Smith and John Carlos, attracted worldwide attention, raising their black-gloved fists on the medal podium after the 200-meter race.

Four years later, Wright was again in charge of the U.S. Olympic sprint team. At Munich, two of his charges who were widely considered to be medal contenders, 100-meter runners Eddie Hart and Ray Robinson, did not make it to the starting line in time for their second-round heats



because Wright had consulted an old event schedule. Both runners were disqualified.

Wright passed away in 1998. Before his death, he taped 30 hours of interviews with George Wright (no relation), a former track athlete who is professor emeritus of political science at California State University, Chico. (He now teaches history at Skyline Community College in San Bruno, Calif.) George Wright used those interviews, as well as his own research, to write a posthumous autobiography entitled: *Stan Wright — Track Coach: Forty Years in the ‘Good Old Boy Network,’* privately published by Pacifica Sports Research Publications. (Those interested in buying the book should send a \$35 check, which includes postage costs, to: George Wright, 321 West Portal Ave., San Francisco, CA, 94127.)

SportsLetter spoke to George Wright via telephone from his home in San Francisco.

— David Davis

SportsLetter: Why did you decide to write about Stan Wright?

George Wright: One, I have a passion for track and field. Even though my professional life, including my publications, centered around international political economies, I never got too far from track and field. In 1997, I had finished writing an academic book and was looking for another project that I was going to enjoy. I had an idea of writing a short article about track and field for a political journal, and in the process of doing that a mutual friend gave me Stan Wright’s phone number. I had obviously known of Stan since I was a boy and had followed his career. Anyway, I called him and we spent an afternoon together and enjoyed it very much. A couple months later, I called him to wish him a merry Christmas, and in that conversation he asked me if I would help him work on his autobiography. I said yes, not knowing that it was going to take me seven-and-a-half years. It obviously began to be a labor of love. The tragedy, from my vantage point, was that he passed away very early in the process because I think I would have had a better book [if he was alive].

SL: How much of his career had you covered by the time of his death?

GW: We had drawn a complete outline of his life and his career. I feel pretty confident that we had touched all the bases related to his childhood all the way through his retirement. But what I didn't know at the moment we finished that round of interviews was that there were going to be a lot of detail questions that I hadn't thought of in that first process.

I didn't know what to do when he passed away. I was deeply into the project, but wondered if I could complete it. After conversing with his daughter, who was very helpful to me, I said, 'Well, we'll just start interviewing people and doing primary research.'

SL: What primary sources were most helpful in writing the book?

GW: I probably interviewed 30-40 people. You know, memory is a funny thing: what people remember and what they don't remember is quite fascinating. When you find somebody who has a recollection of events — and those statements are backed up by the research you do — you increasingly gravitate to those people.

There were three people that stood out. A fellow named Bob Paul, who was a press attaché for the U.S. Olympic Committee for many, many years, seemed to have been in the middle of a lot of the political developments. He was retired, and I probably called him 50 times over the years. He had an incredible recollection.

Another person who had a special and unique relationship with Stan — and somebody who from the vantage point of organized track and field today is a very controversial figure — was [former USA Track & Field executive director] Ollan Cassell. Ollan was very, very helpful.

And, [1968 U.S. Olympic head coach] Payton Jordan was very helpful. He and Stan were close friends and served on the 1968 team as head coach and first assistant.

SL: What about secondary sources?

GW: Two [publications] that were very helpful, particularly for the 1950s and 1960s and early 1970s, were Track & Field News, when it was owned and published by Bert Nelson and his brother Cordner, and the L.A. Times. Track & Field News still is a very good magazine today, but it has an entirely different flavor. It's a slicker magazine with less material in it. You have to rely on the Internet to get a lot of the detail stuff. In the 1950s and 1960s, the magazine [would publish] long, long commentaries — and there were two or three long commentaries that had been written by Stan. That was incredibly helpful. Also, Track & Field News published details related to meets, times, and who ran on the relay races, and Track & Field Newsletter [also published by the Nelson brothers] complemented that. The L.A. Times was fairly helpful, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s.

But there were lots of other sources that were helpful. For a lot of the political stuff dealing with the NCAA and AAU crisis, as well as the development of the Amateur Sports Act of 1978, congressional documents were invaluable. One of these days I hope to write a serious piece about that story.

SL: : Looking back, what were the topics that you would have liked to go over again with Stan?

GW: I think I was able to construct an accurate picture of broad topics — like the Mexico City developments around the black boycott of the Olympics and the AAU-NCAA crisis. But there were small moments where I didn't know what exactly transpired, where I had some information but I didn't have the complete record. For example, in 1972 Stan was a candidate to be the head of the United States track and field team [for the 1972 Olympics]. There was a meeting of the USOC, and there was a tie vote between Stan and Bill Bowerman, and then several other ballots took place. It ended up that Stan wasn't selected. But I could not find anybody still alive that had a recollection of what happened. I could only rely on what Stan had told me and bits and pieces that other people were able to tell me. Even Payton [Jordan] wasn't privy to the details. I would have loved to have Stan tell me what happened in detail.

SL: The book is written in the first person. Was that a challenge for you?

GW: Yes and no. I know the sport so well, and most of what happened from the early 1960s through the 1980s, I was there. Many of these meets I attended. So, I didn't have to construct things out of the blue.

I spent almost every other week, for seven or eight months, with Stan. I mention in the preface that his wife had just passed away, and he was pretty lonely. So my visits were also visits to spend time with him. Ironically, my mother had died a year earlier, after 54 years of marriage to my father, which was the same length of time Stan and his wife Hazel had been together. I had just spent a year communicating with my father, so there was a certain sympathy, a certain perspective, I had on Stan.

I did write the foreword before he passed, and I read it to him. And he said, 'You've got it' — meaning, his voice.

SL: Stan coached track at Texas Southern, a black college, from 1951-1967. How did he view the integration of sports from the perspective of black colleges?

GW: He was a military veteran, although he didn't serve overseas, but he had the mentality of black veterans — that the country was going to be better and new opportunities were going to emerge. He went to Springfield College, the best physical education school in the country, to become a coach. Then he got a Master's in education at Columbia University's Teachers College, which was the best teachers college in the United States. He expected to get an assistant coaching job at a Northern university, but he and a number of his colleagues — Leroy Walker was one of them — couldn't find work in the North, even though they were very prepared.

What Stan and others like him did was to go south, dealing with Jim Crow and the specifics of the all-Negro colleges, but they brought with them an expertise and a Northern veterans' mentality, not with the intent of being Civil Rights activists to change the environment around them, but to expose these young men with perspective, knowledge, and skills that were going to open their lives up.

One of the important points about Stan and his black contemporaries is

that they weren't radicals or activists in a political sense. But they were activists in their own way because they were change-agents. They were consciously changing people. They wanted them to be highly skilled and confident. And, with those skills, doors would open for them.

Stan wasn't just a track coach. Track was a vehicle for a lot of things.

SL: One point that you make regarding black colleges was that, through the 1950s, they were the only schools that provided organized collegiate competition for women. Why did black colleges do this?

GW: Not all the black schools had women's programs. I think it had to do with the attitude of the individual coaches — the energy and the commitment each coach has. The most successful women's program was at Tennessee State — and that was [because of] Ed Temple.

SL: Wright coached Jim Hines at Texas Southern and with the U.S. Olympic team. Did Wright consider Hines to be his most successful student? What was Hines like as a sprinter, style-wise?

GW: Jim was, on paper, his most successful sprinter. He won two gold medals in '68 [in the 100 meters and the 4x100 relay]. When Stan first saw Jim, when he was a freshman, he knew Jim had the skills to be an Olympic champion. The question was, did he have the discipline to train? And, was he a good student? Bottom line, Jim accomplished both those areas.

He did have some technical flaws. He had a tendency to jump out of the blocks — he had some false starts and was disqualified in meets. By '67 and into '68, he was prepared to be the sprinter that he became.

I saw Hines run a bunch of times. Compared to [1964 Olympic 100-meter gold medallist] Bob Hayes, Jim ran more erect. His lower torso was very slight. He had strong arms, very thin legs and just a fluid form.

SL: Wright was vehemently opposed to the proposed boycott of the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games by black athletes. Why was he against the boycott?

GW: Part of it was his general conservatism — and I don't mean Republican conservatism. I mean he had a strong belief in working within the system. The men of his generation had that attitude because the system was changing for them. They had experienced racism, whether it was in the North or in the South, in the 1920s and 1930s, and they had experienced the war. After the war, there were changes — in some ways quite profound. They were right at a position where they could benefit from those changes, particularly if they had gotten a university education.

Stan realized how talented the key runners were, and there was never any debate in his mind that they were not going to medal. He had this perspective that winning an Olympic medal was an enormous honor, but it was also a vehicle to have a forum, after you won the medal. His view was, if you win the medal, you're going to be in the spotlight for the rest of your life and say whatever you need to say.

There was a clear generational difference of opinion and perspective. I'm of Tommie Smith's and John Carlos' generation — and there was an urgency, like it's not going fast enough.

SL: What actions did he take against the boycott?

GW: I don't think he took any overt actions. Whenever he had the opportunity to speak, in some public forum or in interviews, he would be critical of the boycott. He never told any of the athletes not to do anything.

SL: What was his opinion of Harry Edwards?

GW: He didn't like Harry Edwards because he thought Harry Edwards was a firebrand and an opportunist. He thought he was misguiding young men in ways that were going to be harmful to them.

I tried to get some conversation with Edwards, and it was very, very difficult to reach him. That was a tightrope I had to walk through the process — I had to suspend my personal views — because Edwards was a hero of mine when I was a young man. I had been an athlete — I had quit the track team at Cal State Chico when I was a senior because of the racism the coach exuded. This pre-dated '68 by two years. Edwards made

a lot of sense to me, in critiquing the racism of the sporting establishment.

SL: Who did you talk to from the 1968 team — from Hines to Tommy Smith to Lee Evans?

GW: I interviewed most of those guys. I never was able to speak to Carlos.

SL: What was Wright's relationship with those sprinters?

GW: Bottom line, it was respect. He had respect for them, and they had respect for him. It's that bond that athletes and coaches develop when coaches are helpful to athletes and take them to places they hadn't been before.

He had coached those guys in 1966, when he was the national coach and they were supposed to run in meets in Berkeley against Poland and in Los Angeles against the Soviet Union. But the Soviets pulled out, protesting U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and Poland then backed out. So, they had two all-comers meets that summer. In that meet in L.A., Tommy and Lee ran the 1,600-meter relay that Stan coached — and they set a world record. It was first time any team had ever been under three minutes. That experience and others created a bond between those guys.

That made the story around '68 so fascinating because it wasn't black and white — there were lots of complex nuances in the relationship.

SL: Wright was criticized for Smith and Carlos' actions in Mexico City. Could he have prevented what happened on the podium?

GW: I don't think he could have. I don't think he would have wanted to put himself in that position. I don't think he wanted to deal with those young men in that way. He would have rather they not do what they did. He was a very moral man and a very loyal man. And he was very respectful of other people.

SL: Wright took responsibility for what happened to Hart and Robinson in Munich, but he also felt that he was persecuted by the media because of

that. Do you feel that he was wronged by the media?

GW: I think it was a tragic mistake for the athletes, although within the context of the Black September killings of Israeli athletes at Munich, missing a race is nothing compared to that.

Point two, there were things that he could have possibly done to prevent that from happening. But the way Stan operated was, he was a team player. There were procedures that had been established by the head coach and the manager [of the U.S. track team]. Stan just assumed, because of how he got the schedule, that he had the correct schedule. I don't think he had any reason to think that it was the wrong schedule. So it was a tragedy, it was a mistake on his part, it was a bureaucratic snafu.

SL: Because of this incident, Stan and Howard Cosell had a long-standing feud. Why weren't they able to make peace?

GW: I was a longtime fan of Cosell's, particularly because of his relationship with Muhammad Ali, but when it comes to Stan, I was really disappointed in what happened. [In 1972,] Stan walked into the beginnings of modern, sensationalized journalism. And, Howard Cosell was one of the inventors of the sensational.

Clearly, Cosell was an opportunist. He was promoting his career. He had developed a niche as the intellectual sports commentator, and he couldn't break out of that.

There was never going to be a chance for them to make peace. Cosell never let up, and Stan was a very prideful individual. He was never going to cower from someone who treated him that way. He was encouraged by other people to sue Cosell — I think about statements Cosell had made in his autobiography — but Stan backed out of it because he was counseled by his lawyers that it was going to be very expensive.

SL: Do you think that incident in Munich — and Cosell fanning the flames — cost him some of his reputation?

GW: I don't think it affected his standing within the track and field

community. That winter, Stan was re-elected chair of the men's AAU track and field committee. Maybe [it did] with the public that was aware of that incident. They mainly remember the interview Stan did with Cosell.

I think what had more impact on Stan's life was him not getting the head coaching job at University of California, Berkeley in 1970. That was big-time disappointment for him.

SL: Do you think he was disappointed that he was never the head coach of the U.S. Olympic team?

GW: Yes, he thought he deserved the '72 job. One thing was that Bowerman was a NCAA guy, and Stan had been an AAU guy. There were probably more NCAA votes than AAU votes. That's one way to read it. There's nobody alive who's prepared to tell me what were the real reasons Bowerman prevailed.

By 1976, when Leroy Walker was [named] coach, Stan had moved on. He still coached until about 1975, but after the Berkeley thing, he was getting his kicks as a track and field administrator and the politics of track and field.

SL: How did the NCAA-AAU strife during the 1960s and 1970s affect the sport?

GW: The most dramatic example occurred in 1965, when the NCAA said that any athlete competing in AAU-sanctioned meets could lose their scholarship and their schools could be put on probation. That spring, there were hardly any college athletes running in AAU meets. This led to controversy around the 1965 AAU meet and the [selection of] representatives for the national team that year running against the Soviets and the West Germans.

The broader problem was just the lack of cooperation and the atmosphere of duplicity . . . because what we're really talking about is power. Who controls the international team? The NCAA wanted that control. As the NCAA increasingly became more influential and economically more viable through the 1950s and 1960s — as television entered the picture and the

NCAA was making more money through college sports — it had more leverage than the AAU.

I don't think it affected many athletes on the ground, but the lack of cooperation and the hostility between the two institutions was quite dramatic.

SL: Wright's involvement in track began when it was still a prominent sport in America and ended when track was perceived as a fringe sport. Why do you think track lost importance after the 1960s?

GW: One reason is the proliferation of professional sports, promoted by television and, structurally, by the nationalization of the American economy. Before Jim Crow, you're not going to have professional sports in Atlanta. Once Jim Crow is abolished, and the South is now economically integrated into a broader market, you see proliferation of sports there.

Meanwhile, the system of sport changed. When we were growing up, we played every sport: we played football in the fall, basketball in the winter, and baseball in the spring. And, you ran track. As sport becomes increasingly specialized for kids now, they're not allowed to — and they don't want to — play anything but basketball and football year-round. So, you're seeing a big vacuum being created.

Also, when you look at the L.A. Times sports pages in 1962, every day in the run-up to the Coliseum Relays you see multiple articles with three-column photographs. Now, you can't even find track results in the agate.

Another reason is that track and field became discredited. When you see an article in the paper, it's generally about some problem, not some success. In the 1960s, it was the NCAA problem. In the last 15-20 years, it's drugs.

Another reason that isn't discussed very much is one that I feel is very significant. When there was the Cold War, track was popular in the sense that the U.S. was going to go against the Russians — and whoever wins is the better system. I went to the 1962 U.S.-U.S.S.R. meet at Stanford; there were 81,000 people each day. I went to other meets in Los Angeles;

there were always 50-60,000 thousand people. Once that kind of political environment began to dissipate, that focus began to dissipate as well.

The real capper is that most Americans are very chauvinistic. As the sport declines in popularity and the U.S. is now not the dominant nation internationally [in track], it's very difficult for Americans to root for somebody from another country or to accept that somebody from another country is better than an American. So, it became harder to sell track and field.

SL: How did the issue of professionalism affect track's status?

GW: When we came along, there was no real money in the sport. There was under-the-table money, perhaps, but you couldn't make a living with it. A young person competed through college, maybe one year after college, and then they had to quit.

With professional sport, if you're Michael Johnson or Carl Lewis, you can make a million dollars or more. You can stay in the sport for 10-15 years, if you're lucky and good enough. What that did was create this elite class that are international business people. There are no good meets in the U.S anymore — you got to go to Europe.

What I think has happened because of that, with the longevity of these careers and so much money going to the top athletes, is that when young, talented people come out of college, they need five or six more years to reach their peak. There's not enough money to sustain a lot of those second-tier athletes to continue until they're 26-27. That is problematic in terms of broadening the depth of track and field in the U.S.

SL: Finally, looking back, what is Stan Wright's legacy?

GW: I think his legacy is his success at technical skills, related to relay running and coaching sprinters, and the number of Olympic champions that he was responsible for.

When I think of Stan, his contribution is not public. It's to the people he rubbed elbows with him, both his athletes (male and female) and his

colleagues. No matter what the issue was — Mexico City, Munich — most people I talked to loved Stan Wright, because of his honesty, his dignity, his fairness, and the knowledge that he brought to the scene.