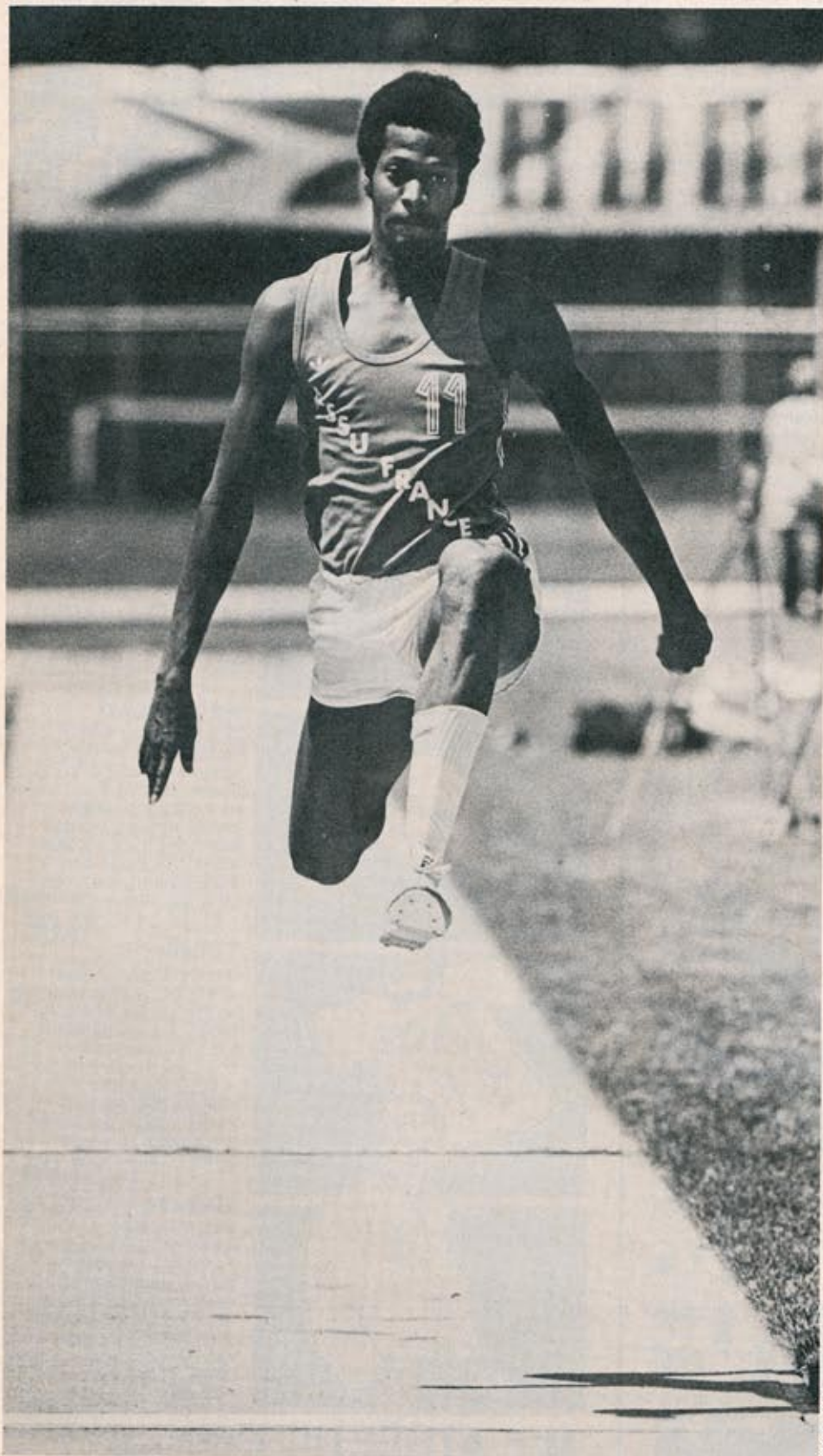


WILLIE BANKS

by David Gleason



Twice in his career Willie Banks has been carried off the field at UCLA's Drake Stadium.

The first was in a moment of stunning glory, when the 19-year-old frosh clinched the 1975 UCLA-USC dual meet with an unlooked-for 55-1.

His Bruin teammates treated him to a ride on their shoulders and the young triple jumper experienced the sweet thrill of becoming an overnight celebrity.

That type of recognition then went into hibernation, as Banks remained always a threat but rarely a winner. Never a winner in the biggest meets, he was twice runner-up in the NCAA, scored 3-4-2 in successive AAU meets and finished one spot away from the 1976 Olympic team. Something was missing.

At the AAU meet in his senior year ('78) he was once again carried from the field, but this time with the help of the medics as recurring back trouble forced him out of the finals.

The decision was made to retire from the sport and pursue other interests, chiefly, law school. But just a year later, there was Banks doing the best jumping of his life, sailing a windy 57-2¼ at the AAU, even though he eventually lost to Ron Livers' 57-7¼w. He now had a fire and dedication not previously present.

He took Pan-Am silver behind World Record holder Joao Oliveira, then climaxed the year with a big win in the Universiade.

It was in this Olympic year that Willie really came into his own, losing only two meets all year and winning the TAC and "Olympic Trials." Suddenly, he has as good a claim for the No. 1 spot in the World Rankings as anyone. Willie Banks has arrived.

Now in UCLA's school of law, Banks took time before rushing off to the library for another long night of studying to discuss his change of fortune:

T&FN: You had quite a year.

Banks: I did. I was pretty pleased. I was a little disappointed in the Olympics, but other than that, I was pretty pleased. I wish I could have broken the WR as I wanted to, but it just didn't want to come. I thought I had it at the Pepsi meet, but I kept fouling.

I'd never really had a meet where the adrenaline was flowing and the weather was as good as that was. I think if it hadn't rained, I'd have gone a lot further at the Olympic Trials.

T&FN: You had those people in the palm of your hands.

Banks: Those people are incredible. I love those people. That's the place to be in track and field. I used to think it was southern California, but Oregon has just taken over, by far. Those people are great up there.

T&FN: What made things click for you this year?

Banks: Well, I'll tell you what it was. I think that for the first time in my life, I

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realized how important track and field was to me, and I really worked at it, more so than I ever worked before. I remember when I was trying for the '76 team, I was 4th, but I really wasn't trying that hard. I was young and inexperienced, and I was jumping on pure energy.

I don't know if you've ever watched, but I'm, well, the kind of jumper that jumps on adrenaline. You know, I get excited when I jump and I think that's why the Oregon people like me so much—because they see that I get excited when I jump.

T&FN: *You respond.*

Banks: Right; that's what it's all about. Whereas other people muscle through—if you've seen me, you know I'm not very muscular [laughs]! So I can't muscle through as much as James Butts, who's a very strong individual.

Anyway, this last year, I decided that I was going to work a lot more on the technical aspects and the physical aspects of jumping, and I really concentrated—got involved in triple jumping, whereas before, it was more of a game. Sure, I did well, but I could have done so much better if I had just concentrated, and really practiced at being a triple jumper. I remember, I used to tell people when they'd say, "You're an athlete," I'd say, "No, I'm not; I'm not an athlete."

T&FN: *Oh, really?*

Banks: Because I thought that being an athlete was, in a sense, derogatory. And then I realized last year that being an athlete is something extra-super-special, and I took more of an interest in it. I really came out, and I wanted to be an athlete, I wanted to do well. And I wanted to do things that no one else had ever done.

T&FN: *How did you see yourself before that, if not as an athlete?*

Banks: I saw myself as a regular old guy [laughs]. I did! Like I said, I wanted to go to law school, and I wanted to be a lawyer and I wanted to be involved in politics and government, so I wasn't thinking "track & field." I was saying, "Yeah, track & field is good for now. But later on, I'm going to have to give it up."

Well, I gave it up in '78—I gave it up because I hurt myself, but I found out I missed it so much that I just had to go back. And for the first time, I realized how important it was to me, and I said, "Wow, track & field is really important. It's not just athletics; it's part of being Willie Banks." And that realization made me really want it; and that's when I got serious.

T&FN: *That was your senior year?*

Banks: Yes, I jumped at the nationals. I jumped the prelims, but not the finals. And it was a tough meet for me, because they had to carry me off the field, my back was so sore.

T&FN: *What was that exactly?*

Banks: Lower back. I'd never really had a good, strong back until after '78, and *The Bible of the Sport*

I'd always had real trouble with it. I thought it was because I was studying too much. But I found out that I didn't have very strong stomach muscles; so I did a lot of situps, and now, I don't have any problems with my back.

But back then, I was hurting, and I said, "Hey, forget this triple jump stuff. I'm gonna quit and do what I like to do. I'm tired of training—I've trained for I don't know how long. I can always come back and in 6 months I'll be ready."

But then I missed that summer of '78, and the winter. I'd been watching all my friends, and I'd go to the meets, and I just said, "Hey, this is what I want to do. And I want to have fun at it." It's not something that I have to get paid for or anything like that. It's just something that I enjoy doing, because I'm pretty good at it and it's fun to do.

I meet a lot of people, and I have a good time when I'm traveling with the guys, and it's just a bunch of fun.

T&FN: *You hadn't really seen it that way before?*

Banks: No, I thought of it merely as something that I had to do in order to go through college, because I couldn't afford to go through without a scholarship.

T&FN: *I think a lot of athletes come from the other direction. They say, "First thing I was ever good at was sports, and I always thought of myself as an athlete." And later on they say, "Well, there's more to life than basketball or track." But you seem to be coming from, well, a different self-image.*

Banks: Most athletes hang around with athletes. I kinda stayed away from athletes, and got involved with student government, so I hung around with student government people in college.

I was on the Educational Policies Commission, and got to travel up and down the state and do all kinds of political things.

I was having a great time; I had a budget of \$30,000, so I just had the greatest time. I had my own publication, and I was living the high life, in the sense that I was doing what I wanted to do: government.

And track, yeah, I'd make practice, and I'd do it. I think if I would have taken it a lot more seriously, if I had quit student government and just booked and done track & field, I think I might have been better.

T&FN: *Law school is quite a challenge, I guess.*

Banks: Hey, one of the toughest. It's killing me.

T&FN: *Something you've always wanted to do?*

Banks: My great uncle is a lawyer, and he impressed me very much. Ever since I was a kid, about 8 or 9, I've been interested in being involved in law.

So I set my sights for it. I applied to UCLA law school the first time around after I graduated, and I didn't get accepted.

So I prepared myself a little better and reapplied, and I finally made it in, so I'm like the happiest man in the world.

T&FN: *This year, did you set a particular goal?*

Banks: I wanted the World Record. How many times . . . I don't know [sighs]. I really think that I could have had it at the Pepsi meet. I don't know how many times I've jumped over the American Record, but that stinking wind is always there, and you start thinking, "Why can't I do it without the wind?" Well, I don't know. Maybe I've got a lot more strength work to do.

But I think that if I keep up my workouts and just keep consistent, I've got to do it one of these days, and the wind's not going to be there.

T&FN: *How did you feel about the boycott?*

Banks: I don't . . . I'm not upset anymore, OK? I've decided we did it, and that's it. So for all practical purposes, I've just blanked it out of my mind.

But I think we made a couple of mistakes. We let the President tell us what to do. The President said, "You can't go, and if you try to go, we'll hold you back." Now, what is that? That's not freedom, that's not democracy.

Of course, not everyone agrees with that. Have you ever been to Oceanside? It's a very conservative place. I had to go down there and make a speech about the Olympic boycott, my feelings. You can imagine how touchy a subject that was!

If it had been a Republican President, I'd have been in a lot more trouble. I tried not to make it political, as Democrat versus Republican. I tried not to attack Carter as a person; I said I think it weakened our policy. It went over really well.

T&FN: *You sound like you want to be a politician.*

Banks: I want to be involved in government, somewhere in the local sector. That's what I've always been interested in—small-time, local politics.

T&FN: *Do you know why it's interesting to you?*

Banks: Because it's a challenge. I like the challenge, the freeflow, the affecting other people's lives. . . and the competition of it.

You know, I'm a competitor. I've always been competitive in everything I do. I just compete, compete, compete. I guess it's my nature. That's why I do track & field. □

William Augustus Banks III was born March 11, 1956, at Travis Air Force Base, California. He stands 6-3/170 and was coached at Oceanside High School by Ken Barnes and at UCLA by Jim Bush, Tom Tellez and Jim Kiefer. His progression, with world and U.S. rankings in parentheses:

year	age	team	class	LJ	TJ
1973	17	Ca HS	Jr	23-11	49-3/4
1974	18	"	Sr	24-1/4	51-3
1975	19	UCLA	Fr	25-11/4 (x, 9)	55-1 (x, 8)
1976	20	"	So	25-8/8	54-8 (x, 4)
1977	21	"	Jr	25-10/4 (x, 8)	55-4/4 (5, 2)
1978	22	"	Sr	25-2/4	55-11/4 (x, 3)
1979	23	IAA			56-6/4A (5, 2)
1980	24	ACA		25-10/4	56-2/4