

## WILLIE DAVENPORT

by Kevin Knight

**D**urable. That pretty well describes the incredible career of Willie Davenport over the high hurdles. And it pretty well describes Davenport himself, too.

At 33 (born June 6, 1943), Davenport could understandably and justifiably be satisfied with a career which spans well over a decade and includes virtually everything any high hurdler could want.

He ran in the 1964 Games but was injured and didn't make the final, won the '68 gold medal and placed 4th in '72. He once held world records for both the 110 and 120 highs outdoors and every standard indoor distance. He has won four AAU titles, three of them consecutive ('65-'67). He ranked in the top 10 every year from '64 to '75 except one (1st five straight times). He is involved in sports administration as a member of the US Olympic Committee Board of Directors and Executive Committee and as an Athletes' Representative to the AAU Track Committee.

Yet Willie Davenport isn't content to sit back and rest on his laurels. He still gets in there and battles with youngsters who were toddlers when Willie was first learning the hurdles. And he can still run with them.

For all his achievements, though, perhaps his most notable, and for him the most satisfying, wasn't even a victory. It was the bronze medal he won in Montreal for finishing third in the Olympic highs. He ran the second fastest time of his life, 13.38.

A little over a year earlier, though, it looked as though Davenport had come to the end of his road. In a semi of the AAU highs, he tore a tendon over his left knee and spent the rest of that summer in the hospital. He was told he wouldn't hurdle again. But he fought back and he hurdled again and he made his fourth Olympic team, only the fourth American man ever to do that. And he won his bronze.

Now the Director of the Youth Division for the City of Baton Rouge, La., Davenport wants one more top-level season before calling it quits, and he knows he can do it. Davenport is not only durable; he is determined.

**T&FN:** What were your thoughts after you were hurt at the '75 AAU?

**Davenport:** Because of the injury, I was more inspired that I normally would have been. Of course, a lot of thoughts went through my head, mainly whether I could compete again or not. But I was just really inspired because all the medical people said I would not be able to do it anymore. I was more determined that I would do it.

**T&FN:** Could the injury have been a help in that way?

**Davenport:** Well, I think it helped in terms of my training schedule because I knew I had to train harder because of the injury. To get back in shape, I had to work that much harder.

**T&FN:** What force kept motivating  
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you towards the Olympics when you were recovering from the injury?

**Davenport:** Besides what the doctors said, that I couldn't come back, I also found myself with the chance of becoming only the second runner ever to make four US Olympic teams. George Young was the first and I wanted to do it. That also inspired me to try to do it again.

**T&FN:** How did you see your chances of making the team before your injury and then after?

**Davenport:** Beforehand, I felt I stood a very good chance of making it. Then after, once I got back running, I had a good indoor season but my performances outdoors weren't all that great. The week before the Trials I was only sixth in the AAU. That put a lot of mental pressure on me. Then, too, the experts weren't picking me to make the team, or if I was lucky enough to make it then I would be 60th in Montreal or something like that. People were wondering why the old man was still at it, still trying after the injury. But I had something to prove to myself.

**T&FN:** Which hurdlers did you consider the main competition at the Trials?

**Davenport:** Everyone who was there. You just never underestimate anybody: Dedy Cooper had just won the NCAA, James Owens had just been second in both NCAA and AAU, Charley Foster had been hurt but I knew he would blow it out in the final. I felt any of the eight finalists could make the team.

But my definition of the winner of a hurdles race is the hurdler who makes the least mistakes. It's just that technical. Take Tom Hill: he hit the eighth hurdle. If he hadn't hit it, who knows? He might have made the team. There are so many things that can go wrong over just one hurdle and then multiply that by 10 and you can see the number of mistakes which are possible during a race. Then add the start; there are many things you can do wrong there. So the athlete who makes the fewest errors will win.

**T&FN:** How did you feel after you made it?

**Davenport:** That I had accomplished something, that all I had done since the injury had paid off. It was like picking up your pay check after working hard all week.

**T&FN:** Do you feel your age worked with you?

**Davenport:** I think it was a psychological thing: people saying I've

been around so many years, plus I was too old, plus I had been hurt, so they thought they could beat me. But I feel as good now as I did when I was 20. Look at my time: 13.38. I'm running just as well now as I was when I ran 13.2 hand-timed, when I was ranked first in the world. I think it's mind over matter. Right now, I feel I can make the '80 team if I could do nothing but eat, sleep and train.

**T&FN:** Even though you can't do that, you do have a great deal of natural ability and mental drive. Are you serious about trying for the '80 team?

**Davenport:** No. My only aspiration at this point is to be considered first again. If I can do that between now and the World Cup, I'm finished. I want to have a good indoor season and if I make the World Cup team, that will be my last race.

**T&FN:** Turning to Montreal, how did the final go for you, what went through your head?

**Davenport:** During the race, the only thing going through my head was to get to the finish line before anyone else. Before the race, a lot of thoughts went through my head: the talk about my age; because of my injury people were overwhelmed at my recovery so, hey, I would just have to blow it out from the start and hang on at the end. So I got to the eighth hurdle and reached down for something more and it wasn't there. I just held on to what I had because that's where I ran out of gas. I had a chance of winning at eight. If I had been able to accelerate at that point, then I think I might have won. As it was, when we hit the line, I thought I was second.

**T&FN:** What were your reactions to placing third?

**Davenport:** Well, I was happy just to get a medal. Here again, I felt fortunate just to make the team. I'm thankful I won the bronze medal, because that was icing on the cake.

**T&FN:** What were your feelings on the victory stand? Does that get old?

**Davenport:** No, it doesn't get old. It's very difficult to describe the feeling. You just feel great and I felt especially good because I had made the team and then had been fortunate enough to win a medal.

**T&FN:** What race in your career has meant the most to you?

**Davenport:** I think the Montreal race. It's easy to go to a meet as a favorite. But it made me feel good to be an underdog and then go to the Olympics and do well. The thing about Montreal was that I was an underdog way back. But I beat the odds.



*Tragedy and triumph for Willie Davenport at Eugene—felled by a knee injury in the '75 AAU; celebrating making his fourth Olympic team a little over a year later.*

**T&FN:** *Have the Olympics changed much since your first in '64?*

**Davenport:** I don't think the Games have changed that much, but I have become more knowledgeable of what goes on at an Olympics. I've been in four and I can see differences in all four as far as politics, athletes, communication with other countries and communication with other athletes. I now know more about how the Games are run, what it takes to be an Olympian, what it takes to be the host country, what it takes to be a member of the US Olympic Committee. Being both an athlete and a member of these committees has helped me learn what goes on.

**T&FN:** *How do you feel about our "one-shot" selection process?*

**Davenport:** I feel we have the best system for selecting our Olympic team. We select our team based on head-to-head competition at a specific time and place once every four years, just as the Games are held at a specific time and place once every four years. In team sports, like basketball, we need to select a team earlier. But not in track or swimming, where the athletes are young and things change so fast. Someone might be great now, but in three years he might not be.

**T&FN:** *How do you feel about America's attitude toward track, compared to European countries?*

**Davenport:** The American public doesn't support amateur sports in general simply because of the old tradition that "Money goes where money is." The professional sports get all the support and the non-pro sports don't.

We have to do two things in the US: develop and promote. One of my suggestions is that after the Olympics take the three athletes in each event and make teams and then tour across the country. Hit the small communities, the suburbs. Say in the hurdles, I might be the featured competitor and let anyone from that particular town or area compete against me.

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Maybe come back more than once so they can meet us more than once, or throw with Al Feuerbach or run against Fred Newhouse. This will bring out the parents, the relatives, the marginal fans, as well as the usual track fans. The money made from the gate would go into a community development program on an ongoing basis. It would also keep Olympic athletes in condition under competition. This would promote the sport and develop those athletes who compete against the Olympians.

**T&FN:** *Since 1964, have you seen much change in the attitudes of athletes towards the Olympics?*

**Davenport:** There's no difference between an athlete who made the team in '64 or '76. He has still worked hard and trained and that desire to win is still there. But it's the in-between years where the problems begin.

Nobody felt I would make the '76 team. So I had to get myself from Baton Rouge to New York, Los Angeles, wherever the best competition was, to keep myself in condition with that competition. But nobody wants to support an athlete until he makes the team. That's the problem. That's also why we see athletes "come out of the woodwork" every Olympic year. Just the word "Olympics" is enough to inspire our people to go out and try to make it. The attitude and desire to win is still there.

**T&FN:** *What would you suggest to give the non-collegiate athlete more support?*

**Davenport:** Subsidies. I'm not saying pay athletes \$50,000 or anything like that. Just put them in an environment where they can train and know that their families are being taken care of back home.

We have to have a developmental program in this country and it has to start now. If we don't come up with a concrete program of support for our post-graduate athletes, and right now, we're going to be



under the water come Moscow.

The United States really isn't getting any worse; it's just that we're not getting any better. That's our problem. Many other countries, especially in Europe, are really into developmental programs, and not just in track but in many sports. They are developing athletes much faster than the US.

Our only development system in the US is in the collegiate ranks and that's only for nine months of the year. After June we have no other development program for our athletes, collegiate or post-graduate. There are some meets, but they are for the elite athletes who make the national team.

After the Olympic Trials or the AAU, there isn't anything for our fourth-through-eighth place men to do but pack their bags and go home. This is where a development program comes in. Many of our future great athletes are in those place-winners and we have to support them too.

But most of them are through competing right after the nationals. They don't compete again until the indoor season, which isn't until the next January. What are they supposed to do for those six months? We leave our athletes stored up in the attic.

Frank Shorter said it very well: "The US shakes the plum tree every four years and gets the best plums and leaves the rest to rot." We have to fertilize that plum tree in order to get more of the best plums from it. □