

Marquette and the Olympics



Jumpin' Jack

by Bill Grimes

John Bennett, silver medalist in the long jump at the 1956 Olympics, is one of the recent inductees to the Marquette M Club Athletic Hall of Fame.

Bennett, a 1954 graduate of MU with a B.S. Degree in Business Administration, won two titles in the long jump prior to his second-place finish at Melbourne, Australia, behind American teammate Greg Bell.

John Dale Bennett was born Nov. 14, 1930, in Grand Forks, N.D. Bennett starred at Grand Forks Central High School as an All-State halfback on the 1949 football team, captained Central's basketball team in 1949-50, and won three state track titles, two in the broad jump and one in the high jump. His senior year was marred by a broken leg suffered one week before the state meet, denying him a chance to defend his titles. Bennett called the injury the biggest disappointment in his athletic career.

Meanwhile, Marquette Track Coach Bus Shimek was leading his Hilltoppers to a position of prominence in Midwest track. Shimek had heard about a rising star in North Dakota through Dan Harnett (Law '53), who gave Shimek some clippings of Bennett's performances.

"Marquette was fairly well respected in our neck of the woods," said Bennett. "I talked it over with the family and decided to go . . ."

Bennett earned four varsity letters at MU, became a world-class competitor in the broad jump, and starred in the high jump, winning the event at the Central Collegiate Conference Meet with a leap of 6' 5 1/2"

However, in his specialty, the broad jump, Bennett won two consecutive NCAA outdoor broad jump titles with leaps of 25' 3 1/4" at Lincoln, Neb., (1953) and 25' 10 3/4" in 1954 at Ann Arbor, Michigan. He also won the 1954 AAU broad jump crown with a spring of 24' 10 3/4". In addition, he captured the event at the Central Collegiate indoor and outdoor meets ('53 and '54).

"Bennett had both the speed and spring to be a great broad jumper," said Shimek.

"He had the knack of consistently hitting the takeoff board in the correct place which is necessary for one to be a great broad jumper." Bennett also had good height on his horizontal jumps, according to Shimek, and was a "wonderful competitor."

In 1956, before the Olympics, Bennett outlined four major reasons for his success. First, he possessed a "certain amount of natural spring," devel-

oped by years of high jumping at both Central High and Marquette. Secondly, he credited both his family and Coach Shimek for a great deal of encouragement. Thirdly, Bennett praised Coach Shimek for "setting some goals for me that even I wasn't sure of and proving to me that they were possible." Finally, Bennett had the "desire to learn jumping technique and do it better than anyone."

Upon graduation from MU in 1954, Bennett was drafted by the U.S. Army. It was while representing the Army that Bennett qualified for the Olympic Games. Bennett served at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., and Fort MacArthur, Cal.

"The Army knew I was coming, knew that I had athletic ability, and wanted to keep me sharp for the long jump," said Bennett. Interservice competition was keen in the 1950s, and many of the best collegiate athletes would enter the service upon graduation.



"I don't suppose it's much different now than it was then," said Bennett. "It's hard for one not affiliated with a track club or other organization to maintain the high level of physical condition necessary for top-flight international competition."

Bennett competed abroad four times—in addition to appearances at the Pan-American Games and the Olympics—traveling to Europe and South American and compiling a record of 31-0 in his specialty. Also, he won the broad jump in several service meets, including the Fifth Army, Sixth Army, All-Army, and interservice meets.

Bennett's career featured many outstanding performances. However, his personal record jump of 26' 3 3/8" in the 1955 Pan-American Games was tinged

with disappointment. That jump, in the same pit that Bob Beamon established a world record 13 years later in Mexico City, gained Bennett only second place as an Army teammate, Roslyn Range, jumped 26' 4". "I had hurt myself in practice several days earlier and I was really risking severe injury by competing," said Bennett. "I was at only 70 percent effectiveness." Despite the injury, Bennett had a leap of 26' 6" which was nullified by a foul.

After the Pan-Am games, Bennett continued his quest for an Olympic berth. At the Olympic trials in Los Angeles on June 29, 1956, he tied for first place in the broad jump with Indiana University star Greg Bell with a leap of 25' 8 1/2". Bennett's effort at the trials produced the fourth best leap of 1956.

Having made the Olympic team, Bennett continued his training which consisted mostly of sprints and run-throughs designed to sharpen technique while avoiding the strain of actual jumping. Bennett said in 1956 that, "I jump very little only because I often hurt myself doing so." Nevertheless, Bennett generally jumped 23' to 24" on Thursdays before Saturday meets and jumped better than 24' 1" in six pre-Olympic meets.

On Nov. 24, 1956, Bennett had a best jump of 25' 2 1/4", behind Bell's winning jump of 25' 8 1/4", winning the silver medal.

In his athletic swan song, Dec. 5, 1956, at Sydney, Australia, in the meet between the U.S. and the British Empire, Bennett leaped 25' 8", second to Bell again. He contemplated competing early in 1957, but soon hung up his spikes for good.

After his discharge from the military, Bennett was employed in store management until 1975, when he opened his own men's clothing store in Sun Prairie, Wis. He now owns Bennett's Mens Wear in Waunakee, Wis., and resides in Middleton with his wife, Therese. The Bennetts have three grown daughters, Denise of Green Bay, Renee of Dane, Wis., and Claire of St. Cloud, Minn.

Bennett, known as "Jumpin' Jack" during his Marquette days was recently named to the M Club Athletic Hall of Fame, along with track teammate Bob Allen, basketball greats Gene Berce and George Thompson, former basketball Coach Al McGuire, and trainer Bob Weingart.

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