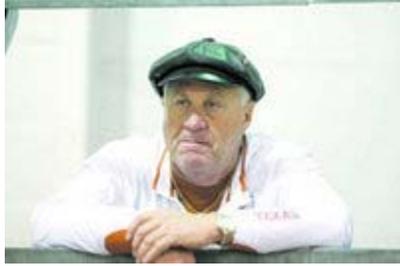


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## Keller's Bubba Thornton bound for Beijing

By BRYCE NIEMAN



University of Texas and Team USA track and field coach Bubba Thornton watches on during a meet last spring. Thornton grew up in Keller and coached at KHS before moving on to the collegiate ranks. – courtesy photo/Victah Sailer of Photo Run

In a week, thousands of the world's greatest athletes will gather in Beijing for the 29th Summer Olympic Games.

While the focus will shine on the men and women competing in the arena, one of Keller's favorite sons will be leading America's track and field athletes from the sideline.

Bubba Thornton – Keller High alumnus, former athletic director and former Indians football coach – has the reigns of the USA Track and Field program in this month's games, and said he feels honored to have been selected for such a prestigious position.

"I feel very proud and very respectful of the opportunity that I've been given," Thornton said. "You start to think about all the people that have played a role in helping prepare you for this assignment.

"It's a lot of different feelings, but this is what I do."

For the past 13 years Thornton has served as the head coach of the University of Texas' track and field team, and he held the same position at TCU the 14 years prior to that.

Over the Olympics' two-weeks competition, Thornton will be in charge of organizing nearly 60 of America's finest athletes, making sure they are on time to where they need to be and inspiring them to give their best for the pride of their nation.

In addition, Thornton works as a communicator to all of the athletes' personal coaches who won't be part of the various meetings.

"I'll coach some; I'll motivate some," Thornton said. "I will do all the things I need to do to help our athletes be successful."

### Going international

Though this is the first time Thornton has served as head coach for Team USA, it isn't the Keller native's first rodeo. He served as an assistant coach at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, coaching American athletes in the 400-meter run, 400-meter hurdles and the 4-by-400 relay.

He also led the national team at the 2003 World Outdoor Track and Field Championships in Paris, France, where the United States won a meet-high 20 medals, half of them gold.

Thornton said there are few things that compare to being a part of the Olympic Games. The opening ceremony alone is a humbling experience, he said.

"The stadium in Sydney seated 120,000 people, and as you walked in and heard our country announced, you heard the ovation and could really feel the electricity," Thornton said. "I wish everyone could experience that feeling."

Despite being around some of the best collegiate athletes for the past 27 years, Thornton said he's still amazed with the level of competition brought together on the international stage.

Thornton said he recalls the intensity of competing for a national title when he first began his collegiate coaching career at TCU. Competing for a title against the rest of the world is an even more unbelievable task, he said.

"It's the best of the best," Thornton said.

The international competition keeps getting tougher, too, he said, as the amount of training and effort that goes into an athlete's preparation has changed immensely over the past few decades.

"These are amateur athletes, but it's no amateur sport," Thornton said. "It's a very professional sport when you look at everything that goes into it today."

Thornton will have three familiar faces on his Olympic roster. Current Longhorn long distance runner Leo Manzano qualified for the Summer Games in the 1,500-meter run, while Texas alums Trey Hardee and Andra Manson will compete in the decathlon and high jump, respectively.

Among them and the other talented American athletes are Darvis Patton (100 meters) of Fort Worth and former Arlington Lamar standout Jeremy Wariner (400).

### From Keller to Beijing

In 1999, Thornton became the first person to be inducted into the Keller ISD Athletic Hall of Fame, which has honored former Keller coaches and athletes every year since.

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"He is just a tremendous ambassador of what an athlete is supposed to be," said KISD Athletics Director Bob DeJonge. "As an athlete and moving into his coaching career, he's always exemplified great character and worth ethic."

Thornton said he still has family in the area, but obviously, Keller is very different today than it was when he was growing up in the 1950s and early 60s, or even than when he was coaching her in the late 70s.

The Keller of Thornton's youth was a small, sleepy town, he said, that rarely received any credit for its athletic success.

"I can remember waking up and reading the sports page, and it seemed like all you could ever read about were all the big schools," Thornton said. "Keller was never in that picture."

Thornton helped break through that barrier.

The Indians twice made the Class 1A playoffs during his high school career, part of six postseason appearances in the 1960s, the program's most successful decade to date.

After two successful years at Navarro Junior College – which included an honorable mention All-American honor – Thornton played football and ran track for TCU.

He became the first Keller native to play professional football when he was drafted to the American Football League's Buffalo Bills in 1969.

Thornton played just one season with the Bills, playing mainly as a kick returner, but led the team in that category with 749 yards on 30 returns. He also caught 14 passes as a receiver for 134 yards that season.

He returned to Keller High in 1977, serving as athletic director until 1981. He was also head football coach from 1979-81, before taking the track and field head coaching position at TCU.

From those humble beginnings at a small 1A school, Thornton is now prepared to lead America's best athletes against the rest of the world.

"I would hope that it would send that message that you need to always be dreaming big," Thornton said. "It doesn't really matter where you come from."

Thornton said he feels honored to be able to carry that dream from Keller, as several other athletes over the years have gone on from the city to achieve great things in athletics and other fields.

Keller is always on his mind, he said, and he knows that this place and the people he grew up with here all played a part in whatever success he's had.

"One of the things I always tell our people is not to forget who you are and where you come from," Thornton said.

### Far East bound

Thornton was in England last week for the Aviva London Grand Prix meet, a tune-up for the Olympics.

With a limited roster, the American athletes took first in the 4-by-100 and 400 hurdles, first and second in both shot put and 110 hurdles, and second in the 200.

Thornton got to return to the Lone Star State briefly but was scheduled to travel to San Diego to meet with the rest of the team Tuesday, and then fly to China on Wednesday.

The opening ceremonies for the 29th Olympiad of the modern era are scheduled for next Friday, Aug. 8, with track and field events starting a week later on Aug. 15 at the brand new Beijing National Stadium.

"I'm really looking forward to watching that first American athlete win a gold and hearing our national anthem for the first time," Thornton said. "I hope those spectators that come to the games hear our national anthem so many times that they hum it. I hope that's what's on their minds for the rest of the games."

The Olympic Games will air locally on NBC affiliate KXAS Channel 5, as well as on NBC's cable and satellite affiliates.

### 2008 Summer Olympics

August 8-24 Beijing, China Keller native Bubba Thornton will lead the U.S. men's track and field team.

Track and field events begin Aug. 15

Games broadcast locally on NBC family of networks including KXAS Channel 5.

### Bubba's Timeline to Beijing

From a track and football star at Keller High in the mid-'60s to leading the U.S. Track and Field team to the 2008 Olympics, Keller native Bubba Thornton has traveled a long road:

**1965** — Graduates KHS bound for Navarro Junior College

**1967** — Transfers to TCU to play football and run track

**Spring 1969** — Graduates from TCU with bachelor's degree in physical education; Drafted by the AFL's Buffalo Bills

**Fall 1969** — Plays one season with the Bills. Featured mainly as a kick returner, leads team and is third in league in that category

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**1977** — Returns home to coach and serve as athletic director at KHS

**1981** — Takes over as head track and field coach at TCU

**1995** — Leaves his alma mater to be head track and field coach at the University of Texas

**2000** — Joins USA Track and Field as an assistant coach at Summer Olympics in Sydney

**2001** — First inductee into the KISD Athletic Hall of Fame

**2007** — Named head coach of U.S. men's track and field team for the Olympics

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— Bubba Thornton, U.S. Track and Field Team Head Coach