

VarsityXtra

LEGACY SERIES / WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

The Post-Gazette periodically takes a look at outstanding athletes from the area.

Best sprinter in WPIAL history

By Brad Everett
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The legend of Clinton Davis began when he was in grade school.

Most days he didn't walk home.

Heran.

"I would always get bullied," he said. "Kids would chase me home and never catch me."

Looking back, it was a case of foreshadowing. Very few would ever catch Davis. Little did the bullies know then that they were trying to run down a kid who would go on to become the greatest sprinter in WPIAL history.

There is fast, and then there is Clinton Davis.

By the time Davis graduated from Steel Valley in 1983, he was already considered one of the premier sprinters in the world. He had won three gold medals at the Junior Pan Am Games in Venezuela, beat several of the world's top 400-meter runners at the Millrose Games at Madison Square Garden, was featured in Sports Illustrated, was on the cover of Track & Field Magazine, and was a two-time Post-Gazette athlete of the year.

Records are made to be broken, but many of Davis' are still being chased nearly four decades later. That includes his PIAA records in the 200- and 400-meter dashes. Davis ran a 20.86 in the 200 his junior year and a 46.29 in the 400 his senior year. He is one of only two boys in WPIAL history to win six gold medals in individual events at the PIAA championships. He "tripled" in the 100, 200 and 400 his junior and senior years. He did the same at the WPIAL championships.

George Novak was Davis' football coach at Steel Valley. The Ironmen won a WPIAL title in 1982, Davis' senior year. Novak went on to become the longtime coach at Woodland Hills, where he coached more than a dozen players who went on to play in the NFL, among them speedsters and future-NFL players Steve Breaston and Miles Sanders.

So, when Novak gives Davis the following label, it certainly holds weight.

"He was the fastest kid I ever had," Novak said.

Rick Dunmire, Steel Valley's track coach back then, called Davis the best high school track and field athlete he has ever seen.

Clinton Davis / Steel Valley, Class of 1983

"His times at the same age were faster than Carl Lewis' times," Dunmire recalls. "He was an elite kid then."

Davis had "future Olympian" written all over him. He was sponsored by adidas and had scholarship offers from just about every college in the country. He ultimately picked Pitt, where he shared an Oakland apartment with Olympic gold medalist Roger Kingdom. But as quickly as Davis could whiz down a track, his career was pretty much over at just the age of 19. Davis was severely injured in a car accident in Coraopolis in 1985. He broke both of his legs and was in a wheelchair for about a year. After recovering, he ran in a few small meets before giving up the sport.

"I was running times that they run today 37 years ago," Davis said. "If I wouldn't have gotten hurt, I probably would have broken world records in the 200 and 400."

In the early 1980s, Davis was a really big deal. Nowadays, he's "Big Daddy," a nickname he has had for years. In fact, Davis' voicemail begins with him saying, "You've reached Big Daddy Incorporated. Everything I do, I do it big."

Davis, 54, is a jovial man with a hearty laugh who has been married for 20 years. He and his wife, Phyllis, live in Turtle Creek. Davis has six kids. He works two jobs — he's an inventory control manager at an At Home store and "does a little bit of everything" at Gabe's. He also loves cartoons. SpongeBob and Courage the Cowardly Dog are two of his favorites.

There are many memorable stories about Davis and his ridiculous speed, including one that led him to giving track a try after he moved from Braddock to Homestead before his freshman year at Steel Valley. Davis was on Steel Valley's ninth-grade football team, which was taking on a West Mifflin North team led by a freshman phenom of its own in running back Chuckie Scales.

"Scales was a really talented kid," Dunmire recalled. "He caught a pass, and a kid came out of nowhere to catch him and made him look like he was standing still. That was Clinton Davis."

Scales ended up trans-

ferring to Shady Side Academy, where he became a Parade All-American before playing at Pitt.

Davis, who ran a 4.4 in the 40-yard dash as a freshman, according to Novak, said Dunmire tracked him down the very next day to try to convince him to run track in the spring.

"I said, 'But I don't know anything about track.' But then he said, 'If you run track, you can get out of school early.' I was like, 'OK. That's good for me,'" Davis said, laughing.

There was the time as a senior at the WPIAL championships when he was on a star-studded 400 relay team that also included Melvin Anderson, Brad Jones and Duane Dutrieuille. Those three all played college football — Anderson and Dutrieuille at Minnesota and Jones at Georgia Tech. Anderson played in the NFL. But by the time Davis got the baton to run the anchor leg, he was well behind leader Vernon Kirk of Ringgold. Kirk played football for Pitt and was drafted by the Los Angeles Rams.

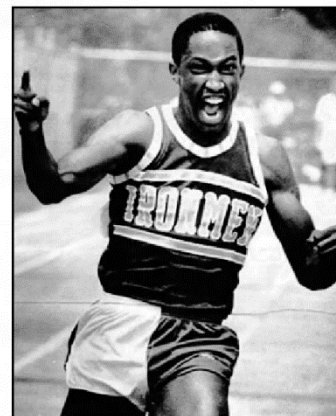
"Vernon had a 10-meter lead when Davis got the baton, and Davis ran him down, caught him and beat him by a full stride. That was an elite kid and Davis caught him," Dunmire said.

Added Novak: "It was unbelievable."

A week later, Davis ran his state-record 46.29 in the 400 at the PIAA championships, a time that Dunmire said could have even been much faster had it not been for Davis conversing with his teammates as he neared the finish line.

"He was so far ahead of everyone else that he was talking to our team while he was running the last 75 meters," Dunmire said. "If he would have pressed that, he would have run a 45."

To put Davis' time into perspective, consider that since then, the fastest time any athlete has run in the event at the WPIAL championships has been 48.32. Davis ran two seconds faster than that 37 years ago. Davis also set a PIAA record in the 100 (10.46) his senior year, but that mark was broken by Penn Wood's Leroy Burrell, a future Olympian who eventually set a world record in the event.



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Clinton Davis won the 100, 200 and 400 at the WPIAL and PIAA championships his junior and senior years.

Davis, who was inducted into the WPIAL Hall of Fame in 2011, said he didn't lose a high school race his junior or senior years. He dropped only one as a sophomore, but never got to race at the WPIAL or PIAA championships after suffering a hamstring injury at WPIAL qualifiers.

Colleges eventually flooded Davis with mail. He took official visits to UCLA, USC, Georgia, Auburn and Tennessee.

"He was one of the top five or 10 runners in the country," Novak said. "He could have gone to any school he wanted to."

Davis said he strongly considered UCLA. Los Angeles was going to be hosting the 1984 Summer Olympics, so it made sense. But Davis said he believed UCLA coaches were going to have him run in too many events. He also liked the idea of going to school close to home, so he elected to go to Pitt.

In June of 1984, Davis ran in the Olympic Trials at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, but fell short of qualifying in the 200 or 400, a pulled hamstring being one of the reasons, he said.

It turns out 1985 was even worse. First, his family's apartment caught fire and burned down in March. A month later came the car accident that nearly took his life.

"They actually pronounced me dead at the scene," Davis said. "I started to show signs of life, so they life-flighted me to AGH. I was in the room with two broken legs. The doctor said I might never walk again."

Davis did walk again, but his days of fascinating onlookers with his blazing speed were over.

His legend, however, lives on.

"A coach once asked me, 'How fast is Clinton Davis?'" said Dunmire. "I said, 'Clinton is as fast as he needs to be in any race he runs.' He was like a blur."

High school athletes of the year

Clinton Davis

By Tom McMillan
Post-Gazette Sports Writer

No one remembers much about May 15, 1980, except that Clinton Davis ran very fast for a high school freshman. Those WPIAL track championships were to be the Dwight Collins Show — Dwight Collins was fast, Dwight Collins was heading for Pitt — and not much fuss was made over a 14-year-old thoroughbred from Steel Valley, a kid who placed second in the 200 meters.

And so it was that the legend hatched without fanfare, without headlines. Clinton Davis would be relegated, good heavens, to agate type. But he always remembered May 15, 1980, because someone escorted him to the finish line, because he didn't like it. "My thing," he said once, "is winning." Across three more springs as a high school sprinter, he never lost again.

Undefeated. A pulled hamstring at the WPIAL qualifiers as a sophomore, and then nothing but finish lines snapping across his stomach. Seven straight WPIAL gold medals, seven straight PIAA golds, local and state and national records, encyclopedias of press clippings.

But he is not the Post-Gazette's Male High School Athlete of the Year merely because he leaves scorch marks on every teen-age runner in the commonwealth. Clinton Davis is above high school competition, beyond high school competition, so much so that when he was approaching the tape in the state 400-meter finals last month, he turned to his teammates and yelled, "This ain't nothin', man."

He has beaten world-class competition indoors; he is less of a sensation outdoors, where it counts, but the talent is immense, the potential boundless. He has twice turned on the mobs at Madison Square Garden, and his picture makes an occasional appearance in the New York Times.

He won the 440-yard championship at the Millrose Games, beating the very best runners on the planet, and he tied for the indoor national championship five weeks later on the same Garden boards. The national indoor high school record at 440 yards belongs to Clinton Davis. The record at 400 meters belongs to Clinton Davis. The record at 300 meters belongs to Clinton Davis. The record at 500 meters belongs to Clinton Davis.

He is 17 years old.

"Everyone knows he has great natural talent," says Berny Wagner of The Athletics Congress, the governing body of



Clinton Davis leaves the competition far behind.

Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

track and field in the United States.

And yet Davis has stimulated controversy, much of it stemming from an unusual decision to attend the University of Pittsburgh but not run for the track team. New Image Track Club Coach Elbert Kennedy, the architect of the decision, has been accused of manipulating Davis; he denies the charge, insisting that staying home to run for New Image will increase Davis' chances to make the 1984 Olympic team.

But Jim Bush, the veteran track coach at UCLA, was incensed enough to suggest Davis was accepting under-the-table payments from a show company. That brought more denials. And then Davis had his high school eligibility questioned because he ran in a series of Grand Prix indoor meets in which prize money was offered.

"We just hope everybody leaves us alone," Kennedy said after the WPIAL ruled in favor of Davis.

Dreams of the '84 Olympic team — this was a longshot to begin with — gained momentum when Davis undressed the world's best 400-meter runners indoors and finished first in the USA/Mobil Grand Prix standings. They have now been doused with bucket of realism. Davis has never won a meet against world-class competition outdoors, and at The Athletics Congress national championships this month in Indianapolis, he was eliminated in the semifinals of the 200-meter dash.

Kennedy, for his part, was not in shock. "He's way behind these guys because he's just out of high school," says the man who will chart Davis' future in track. "He won't run really well until

July and August. His best times last year were in August.

"At the TAC meet, he was in a semi-final heat with Carl Lewis, and he was leading Carl on the curve. He lost out in the last 40 meters. The difference is these guys are bigger, stronger, older and in better condition. He couldn't quite stay with them. But they didn't run away from him."

It wasn't like that in high school, when Clinton Davis gave the other guys a splendid view of his calf muscles. He holds state records in the 100-, 200- and 400-meters; as a senior, he also anchored Steel Valley to a come-from-behind state victory in the 400-meter relay.

He has run the 200 meters in 20.39 seconds — the fastest high school time in the nation last year — and the 400

meters in 45.4. His top times this year are 20.65 in the 200 and 46.27 in the 400.

"He's going to the junior TAC meet this week at Penn State," says Kennedy, "and he'll probably run a relay at the National Sports Festival. He has everything in perspective right now. He realizes track goes up and down ... that preparation, what you do on the practice field, dictates what you do in competition."

It is a new outlook, a new approach, because for three years he has trampled the competition into the infield.

Other Post-Gazette Male High School Athletes of the Year have been Dan Marino, Bill Fralic and, yes Dwight Collins. Clinton Davis, the skinny kid from Homestead, is the only one to have won it twice.