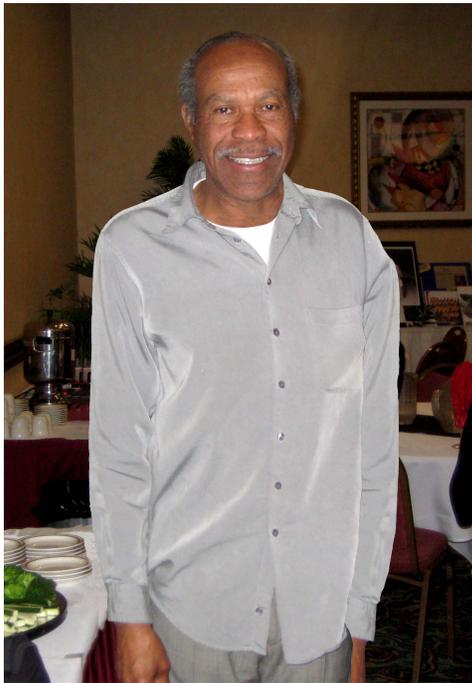


## Lee Evans Profile:

### 400m 20-Year World Record Holder to Attend the 2015 Golden West Invitational's "Olympic Day" Celebration

*By Bob Burns*



Lee Evans 2008

*Astrid Barros photo*

Lee Evans was the first man to break 44 seconds in the 400-meter dash, a symmetrical barrier requiring a sprinter to average less than 11 seconds for four consecutive 100 meters.

That alone is enough to cement his place in track history. His 43.86 clocking lasted 20 years as the world record and still places Evans among the eight fastest performers in history 47 years later.

Accomplishing the feat on the sport's biggest stage, the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, while facing down furious challenges on and off the track, gives his gold medal additional luster.

Less known is the road Evans took to Mexico City, a journey that circled Northern California tracks for three and a half intense months in 1968. It started in June with a national collegiate title in Berkeley, continued with a victory at the AAU Championships in Sacramento, and reached even greater heights during the Final Olympic Trials at Echo Summit a few miles west of Lake Tahoe.

At each Northern California stop, Evans, the world's top one-lap sprinter in 1966 and 1967, outraced Villanova sophomore Larry James, a silky-smooth runner who had emerged as his most dangerous challenger.

Those three championship races forged one battle-tested quarter-miler heading to Mexico City.



1966: Lee Evans set his first 400m WR on the U.S. 4x400m Relay team at the USA-USSR Games.

*Jeff Kroot photo*

Those three championship races forged one battle-tested quarter-miler heading to Mexico City.

“I was determined not to let Larry James beat me,” said Evans, now 68 and living in Castro Valley. “I knew I had to win those three races if I wanted to be in the Olympic Games.”

Evans will return to the Highway 50 corridor that figured so prominently in his career on June 13 when he attends the Golden West Invitational in Folsom as part of the United States Olympic Committee’s “Olympic Day” celebration.

While he claimed just about every honor available in a Hall of Fame career, Evans never competed in the Golden West Invitational. After clocking 46.9 for 440 yards in his senior season at San Jose’s Overfelt High School, an untimely leg injury prevented Evans from racing in the California state meet and Golden West Invitational.

In Evans’ absence, Ron Freeman won the 440-yard dash at the 1965 GWI in 46.8 seconds. Three years later, Evans and Freeman later shared the baton on the U.S. 4 x 400 relay foursome that shattered the world record by nearly four seconds in Mexico City.

“By missing out on the state meet and the Golden West, people didn’t know how fast I could run,” Evans said. “I think that’s why I surprised so many people in 1966.”

Evans improved to 45.2 in 1966 and won the first of five AAU championships. His trip to New York for the national meet marked the first time he had traveled beyond California or boarded an airplane.

“That was quite an experience,” Evans said. “After the AAU, I raced all over Europe and had the time of my life.”

In 1967, Evans again ranked No. 1 in the world, though he did lose to Tommie Smith’s world record of 44.5 in their only head-to-head battle. Smith focused exclusively on the 200 meters in the Olympic year of 1968.

Meanwhile, James emerged a continent away as a viable contender for the Olympic gold medal. James set a world indoor record in winning the 1968 NCAA indoor title and clocked a 43.9 split at the Penn Relays, the fastest 440-yard relay leg in history.

Evans first saw James run at the 1968 Millrose Games, where Evans won the indoor 600-yard run while James won the 500.

“I knew Larry was going to be one of my main rivals for the gold medal,” Evans said. “I remember admiring him – a handsome guy with a beautiful stride. I told myself, ‘I’ve got to stop admiring him. I’ve got to beat him.’”

Evans, Smith, Ronnie Ray Smith and John Carlos were the anchors of the “Speed City” group that trained at San Jose State under legendary coach Bud Winter. Joining them on the San Jose State campus was a firebrand of a sociology professor named Harry Edwards.

Evans and Smith were the most prominent supporters of the Edwards-led Olympic Project for Human Rights. Stories circulated throughout late 1967 and the first half of 1968 that the Speed City sprinters were strongly considering an Olympic boycott to protest racial injustice in America. Evans and Smith were subjected to death threats in the months leading up to Mexico City.

“You’re always scared when someone threatens your life,” Evans said. “They gave us a time that they were going to shoot us. In hindsight, they were probably just trying to scare us, but we didn’t know that at the time.”

Evans responded to the pressure by putting his head down and training harder than ever. At the NCAA Outdoor Championships in Berkeley in mid-June, Evans clocked a meet-record 45.0 for 400 meters to finish four-tenths of a second in front of James. Evans handled James again later that month at the AAU Championships in Sacramento.

After beating James yet again at the Semi Olympic Trials in Los Angeles, it was on to Echo Summit for the Final Olympic Trials in September. No one knew how fast America’s top sprinters could run with the reduced air resistance of the site’s 7,377-foot elevation, but they were about to find out.

In a pre-Trials race at Echo Summit, Vince Matthews clocked 44.4 to shatter the 400-meter world record. Evans ran 1:14.3 in the infrequently run 600 meters, a time that wouldn’t be surpassed until 1984.

The Trials 400 final on Sept. 14 was out of this world. Matthews set a suicidal pace, clocking 20.7 at the halfway point. As the leaders emerged from behind the Ponderosa pine set inside the track, Evans and James were neck and neck. Evans crossed the finish line in 44.06, and James was well inside the previous world record in second (44.19).

James actually received credit for the world record since Evans was wearing “brush” spikes on his Puma shoes that prevented his time being accepted as an official world record. Carlos was denied a world record in the 200 for the same reason. Statisticians have always regarded their Echo Summit times as legitimate.

Evans, Smith and the other black Olympians decided against boycotting Mexico City, vaguely speaking of personalized protests. When Smith and Carlos were evicted from the Olympic Village following their raised-fist salutes while accepting their medals for the 200 meters, the spotlight shifted to Evans. Given his outspokenness, what would he do on the victory stand?

First he had to get there, and Evans almost didn't bother. Deeply upset by the Smith-Carlos imbroglio, Evans considered withdrawing from the 400 in support of his teammates. They urged him to run, and Evans earned the top spot on the awards stand by defeating James in an epic duel, 43.86 to 43.97. Freeman, the 1965 Golden West champion, was third in 44.41.

In an interview given shortly before his death in 2008 following a battle with cancer, James paid homage to his rival's competitive spirit.

"My whole strategy was based on time," James said. "My plan was to run 43.9. I went over it three times a day in my mind. I found out that Lee's mindset was different. He always visualized beating the competition. His approach prevailed."

In Mexico City, the three American medalists wore black berets to the medal ceremony but removed them before the playing of the national anthem. Two days later, Matthews joined Freeman, James and Evans in shattering the 4 x 400 record with a gold-medal run of 2:56.16. Their relay mark wouldn't be bettered for 24 years.

"I think I did a really good job (in Mexico City) with all that pressure on me," Evans said. "We ran fast because we were highly motivated."

Evans continued on after Mexico City, winning national titles in 1969 and 1972. He made the 1972 Olympic team in the relay but wasn't able to claim a surefire third gold medal. Matthews and Wayne Collett were kicked off the team after their own medal-stand protest following the open 400, and John Smith had a hamstring injury. The U.S. didn't have enough healthy runners to field a team, forcing Evans to watch the final from the stands.

"What happened in Munich was like getting a divorce," Evans said. "I couldn't talk about it for five years. Two Olympic gold medals is nice, but three would have been better."

Evans ran on the short-lived pro track circuit in the mid-1970s before embarking on a nomadic coaching career that took him from San Jose State to several African countries and a head position at South Alabama.

The last few years have been difficult for Evans. He had a tumor removed from his brain several years ago, and while he appears to have made a complete recovery, he was caught up in a doping scandal while working as a coaching consultant in Nigeria.

Last year, Nigeria's national federation banned Evans and another coach for allegedly providing a 16-year-old female sprinter with performance-enhancing substances that "may have been responsible" for her failing a doping test. Evans said he is innocent and that he's suing the minister of sport for damages.

"I gave the athlete amino acids – nothing but protein," Evans said. "It came out in a hearing that she had a previous coach who may have given her something else. I'm

positive that I'll be cleared. I want to clear my name and get back to coaching young people."

In a recent phone interview, Evans said he was planning to move to Stockton, where he plans to start a youth sports academy featuring track and swimming.

"It's a chance for me to give back," Evans said. "Try to get kids off the street and help them be productive."

If Evans has any regrets about his track career, it's that it ended too soon. Today, it's not unusual for sprinters to continue competing into their mid-30s. Evans was 22 when he broke the 44-second barrier.

"I know I didn't reach my peak. We were skinny guys who never lifted weights," said Evans, who weighed 158 pounds in Mexico City. "Look at Tommie Smith and Usain Bolt. The only difference between them is that Bolt lifts weights.

"I could have been a good 800-meter runner. I ran a 1:48 split in a relay, but every time I'd asked Bud (Winter) to let me run the 800, he'd point to a picture on his office wall of me beating Ronnie Ray Smith in the 200 and say, 'You're a sprinter, not a middle-distance runner.'"

Evans laughs at the memory.

"Bud was old school," he said.

So was his incomparable 400-meter sprinter.