

Mile legend Jim Ryun to be honored at the 2017 USATF Outdoor Championships in Sacramento



Photo courtesy of Track

Jim Ryun crosses the finish line in 3:51.1 minutes at Memorial Stadium on June 23, 1967, setting a world record for the mile.

Middle-distance legend Jim Ryun, the last U.S. runner to set a world record in one of the sport's most glamorous events, will be honored Friday evening at the USATF Outdoor Championships in Sacramento.

The following day – June 23 – marks the 50th anniversary of Ryun's second and final world record in the mile run. In the half-century since Ryun set his record, the mile mark has been lowered 10 times by seven men, none of them Americans.

Ryun, 75, who lives in Washington, D.C., with his wife, Ann, recently reflected on his landmark record.

"It was one of the easiest races of my life," Ryun said. "In fact, I don't ever remember running with such ease."

On June 23, 1967, at the AAU Championships in Bakersfield, Ryun clipped two-tenths of a second off his own world record, clocking 3 minutes 51.1 seconds. Racing against the best milers

in the United States, Ryun decimated the field with a 53-second last lap. Jim Grelle, the runner-up, finished 40 yards back in 3:56.1.

"I took the lead at the start with the intent of giving it away as soon as possible, but no one wanted it," Ryun said. "As the race went on, I kept looking over my shoulder, not to taunt the other runners, but because I wondered where they were."

Two weeks after Bakersfield, Ryun faced his rival from Kenya, Kip Keino, in the U.S. vs. British Commonwealth meet in Los Angeles. The 1,500-meter showdown was taut for three laps, but Ryun's withering kick left Keino nearly as far behind as Grelle had been in Bakersfield. Ryun shattered Herb Elliott's seven-year-old world record of 3:35.6 by clocking 3:33.1, the metric equivalent of a 3:50.1 mile.

Later that summer, Ryun trounced the top European, Bodo Tummler, with an unprecedented 50.6-second final lap in a 1,500-meter race in Dusseldorf, West Germany. That remains one of the fastest last laps ever run in either the 1,500 or the mile.

Though he was just 20 and would go on to make two more Olympic teams, 1967 proved to be the pinnacle of Ryun's track career. The Mexico City Olympics in 1968 gave the altitude-acclimated Africans a big advantage, and Keino relegated Ryun to second place in the 1,500 meters. At the 1972 Olympics in Munich, Ryun was tripped in a qualifying heat and didn't qualify for the final.

Ryun enjoyed a productive post-running career, representing his Kansas district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1996 to 2007. Ryun remains close to the sport through the Jim Ryun Running Camps (www.ryunrunning.com).

From 1964 through 1972, Ryun was one of the most famous athletes in the world. *Sports Illustrated* named him Sportsman of the Year in 1966 and put him on the cover of its magazine seven times. He won the Sullivan Award in 1966 and was inducted into the National Track & Field Hall of Fame in 1980.

Ryun was the first high school runner to break four minutes in the mile, and he qualified for his first Olympic team in 1964 as a high school junior. The following year, Ryun came to Sacramento to compete in the Golden West Invitational.

Kansas high school rules prevented athletes from doubling at distances longer than a quarter-mile, so Ryun took the opportunity to run the mile and two-mile in Sacramento. He won the two-mile in a personal-best 9:04.0 before returning to win the mile in 4:04.3. His last lap in the GWI mile took just 53 seconds. Many of the 5,000 fans at Hughes Stadium were disappointed that Ryun didn't break four minutes, but Ryun said he wasn't concerned about his times.

"I was more interested in winning both races," Ryun said. "I didn't need more pressure."

Two weeks after the GWI, Ryun stunned Olympic champion Peter Snell in the mile at the 1965 AAU Championships in San Diego, clocking an American-record 3:55.3.

For all his accomplishments, critics wondered if he ever reached his full potential, or if he burned himself by training so hard as a teenager. Ryun says he's satisfied with his career, but the 3:51.1 in Bakersfield does make him wonder what he how fast he might have run the mile under better conditions.

"I've been told a regular synthetic track is worth a second a lap," Ryun said. "I don't about that, but the Bakersfield track was baked clay, and by the time we ran the mile in the evening it was ground up like sawdust. If you watch the video of the race, you can see that I'm almost stepping on the curve, trying to get my footing."



1965 Golden West Invitational, Hughes Stadium, Sacramento: on the far lower left, Jim Ryun (KS) and Mike Ryan (CA) widen their lead over the field on the gun-lap of the 2-Mile event. Ryun went on to finish in 9:04.0, Ryan in 9:08.1. *Photo: Golden West Invitational archives*

Fifty years ago, it didn't matter what surface he ran on. Jim Ryun was a miler for the ages.

The USATF Outdoor Championships begin Thursday, June 22, and continue through Sunday, July 25, at Hornet Stadium. Tickets are available at www.sacsports.com.

The USATF field includes Matt Centrowitz, who last year became the first American in 108 years to win a gold medal in the 1,500 meters, or metric mile, at the Olympic Games. The men's 1,500-meter final will be held Saturday (June 24) at 2:41 p.m.

The women's 1,500 also has a strong field, headed by Jennifer Simpson, who won an Olympic bronze medal in 2016. The women's 1,500 final, which should include Kate Grace of Sacramento, is scheduled for 2:12 p.m. on Saturday.

To see the full meet schedule, see <http://www.usatf.org/Events---Calendar/2017/USATF-Outdoor-Championships/Schedule.aspx>

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Bob Burns
bburns.sacsports@gmail.com
916-802-5841