

sports

One-shot trials: is this way to pick a

By Larry Eldridge

A week ago Steve Williams loomed as this year's U.S. Olympic hero — an almost certain multiple winner and maybe the first track and field athlete to capture four gold medals since Jesse Owens in 1936.

Williams is co-holder of the world record of 9.9 seconds in the 100 meters, also owns the world record in the 220-yard dash, and had not been beaten at either 100 or 200 meters all year. He was a heavy favorite in both races at Montreal, with more gold likely in the relay events.

The 22-year-old sprinter from Florida happened to come up with an injury at the wrong time, however — during the U.S. Olympic trials. So four years of training and dedication

Game plan

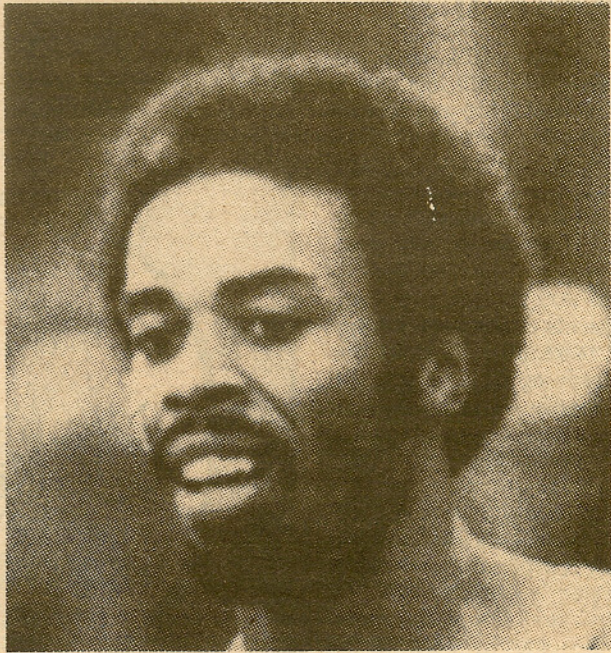
went down the drain, a great individual athlete lost his chance for glory, and the United States undoubtedly tossed away some medals.

The reason for this unhappy turn of events is the U.S. Olympic Committee's stubborn insistence on a one-shot trials system for determining the makeup of its teams. Since almost no other country uses such a system it seems reasonable to ask: is this really the right way to select an Olympic team?

Personally, I don't think an athlete with Williams' credentials should be forced to risk all on a one-shot qualifier where anything can happen on a given day. It's not fair to him, and it's not in the best interests of the nation or the sport.

Williams did have to qualify, though, and a leg injury forced him out of the competition. Quite possibly by the time the Olympic events are run in late July he will be fully recovered and will again be the world's fastest human. It won't matter, though, because our brontosaurus of an Olympic Committee insists on running things its own inflexible way and has no ability to adapt to changing situations.

Not all U.S. officials are so stubborn or short-sighted, of course. Dr. Leroy Walker, the head coach of this year's track team, has long been opposed to a system which over



Steve Williams

the years has kept various top athletes out of their events. He advocates following the lead of other countries and forming a national team from which the Olympians would be chosen as the Games draw near. Most final selections would probably still be based on competitive trials, but there would be some leeway for special cases.

Many other voices have also been raised in protest against the current system, but the USOC remains steadfast.

"We feel that this is the American way and that all candidates ... should have an opportunity to be on an equal basis at the start of the selection procedure," goes the party line. "We are opposed to any athlete being franked on the team by reason of previous performance."

Translation: "Everybody is out of step but us."

Well, not quite everybody. Great Britain has a similar

Former track star recalls when he missed Olympics

Cleveland, Ohio

Harrison Dillard knows better than anyone else just how Steve Williams feels, for back in 1948 he too was the best in the world in his event only to fail at the U.S. Olympic trials.

"I can certainly sympathize and empathize with him," Dillard says of the world record holding sprinter who had to give up during the 1976 trials due to a leg injury.

"I remember it was quite a blow to me when I didn't make it," he recalls. "Mine wasn't a case of injury, of course. I just hit one hurdle, then lost my rhythm and hit a lot of others. But I had beaten those guys consistently. There was no question that I should have been able to qualify."

Dillard is 52 now, and works for the Board of Education here where he lives with his wife and 14-year-old daughter, Terri. People still sometimes call him by his old nickname of "Bones," even though he has added about 20 pounds to the 160 which once covered his spare frame. And he still remembers vividly that time when he was unquestionably the world's best high hurdler (he held the world record and once won 87 straight races) only to miss out when it counted most.

His story had a happy ending though, for he did manage to qualify in the 100 meter dash, then even though this event was not his specialty he went on to stage a big upset and win the gold medal at London.

Popular legend has Dillard pulling himself together to qualify in the 100 after his hurdles failure, which makes a dramatic story, but the actual order of events was the other way around, so he was really already assured of a spot on the team when the hurdle mishap occurred.

It is true, though, that he had finished a well-

beaten third in the trials and that his subsequent victory at London was a big surprise to everyone — except Harrison Dillard.

"I always felt I had a chance," he recalled in a telephone interview with the Monitor. "I was the last one off the blocks at the trials, and I couldn't catch Mel Patton and Barney Ewell after such a bad start. I caught everybody else, though, and I knew if I got off better in London I could win it all."

Dillard's victory was followed by a 1-2-3 American sweep in the hurdles, so the United States didn't really lose anything through his failure in the trials. That wouldn't always be the case, however, and he agrees with the growing chorus of those who think the U.S. Olympic Committee's rules should be more flexible in such cases.

"There should be some way that Steve Williams can still make that team," he said. "He's proved he's the best we have. If he's healthy in time for the Games, he should get another chance. They could have a runoff."

"We've been blessed with such a wealth of talent that maybe we could afford to use a one-shot trials system in the past, but the way the rest of the world has been catching up, we can't afford to leave anybody like that off our team now."

Dillard's own story didn't end in London, for despite holding down a regular job he stayed in training and came back to redeem himself in the hurdles at age 29 by winning the gold medal in 1952 at Helsinki.

Asked what kept him going for another four years instead of calling it a day after his dramatic 1948 victory in the dash, Dillard says simply: "I was the best in the world in the hurdles. I wanted to prove it."

Larry Eldridge



AP photo

Harrison Dillard in 1952

n Olympic team?

system, and this year is paying a similar price. Ian Thompson, far and away the United Kingdom's best marathoner, had never lost a race in his life until the British trials, but he got a stitch in his side during that race and failed to make the team.

> Thompson and Williams are the big names victimized this year, but as usual there will be others sitting on the sidelines who should be competing. World amateur shotput record holder Terry Albritton had a sub-par day at the trials and failed to make the U.S. team, while pole vaulter Dan Ripley, who holds the world indoor record, was rusty coming off a four week injury-induced layoff and also missed out.

> The Williams case is the cause celebre though, for it is a doubly tough blow both to him and the U.S. team. Four years ago as a rising teen-age star Steve was struck with a similar injury and had to pass up the Munich games. This year he misses out at the peak of his powers, and by 1980 he may no longer be competing.

> As for the team, an American will probably still win the 100, but a 1-2-3 sweep seems much less likely now, and the U.S. will undoubtedly end up with one fewer medal than it could have had. In the 200 it's even worse, for Williams appeared to be the only American able to beat Don Quarrie of Jamaica.

> "We're just giving the gold medal away," he says now of that event. "Ain't nobody gonna mess with DQ but me." <

> The USOC's defense of its system is that it gives everyone the same chance, with no danger of politics or favoritism creeping into the selection process. This is supposedly more in line with the values of American society than concentrating solely on how many medals the nation can win.

> I think a good compromise would be to make the 1-2 finishers in the trials automatic team members but leave the other berth to be filled at the discretion of a qualified committee. Third place in the trials should be a significant factor in that choice, but not the only one. Nobody could complain of being "bumped" off the team, because it would be understood from the beginning that finishing third in the trials was no guarantee of selection.

Obviously, however, this is much too simple and logical an idea ever to be adopted by the USOC, so we might as well get used to suffering along with the current system.

Trials and Error

7/11/76

STEVE WILLIAMS is the only man in the world to run the 100 meters five times in 9.9 seconds. That is arrow fast, almost incomprehensible, and certainly entitles him to that elusive accolade, "World's Fastest Human."

Williams was favored in the 100 and 200 at the Olympic Trials but he pulled a hamstring muscle and blew his chance to run for personal glory and for the United States in the Montreal Olympic Games.

A petition was circulated to get Steve back in the race. Many track followers screamed indignities at the U.S. coaches and the Olympic committee for establishing an almost irreversible set of rules that prevent the very best from competing if overtaken by bad luck.

These critics believe there should be elasticity in the selections and that a series of build-up points should be counted for at least one year prior to the Games.

As it is now, the various steps toward Olympic qualifying in track are pointless, literally. To be eligible an athlete must have placed high in NCAA, AAU or Armed Forces meets but from that time on, the athlete must do it again without thought for injury, illness and bad vibes.

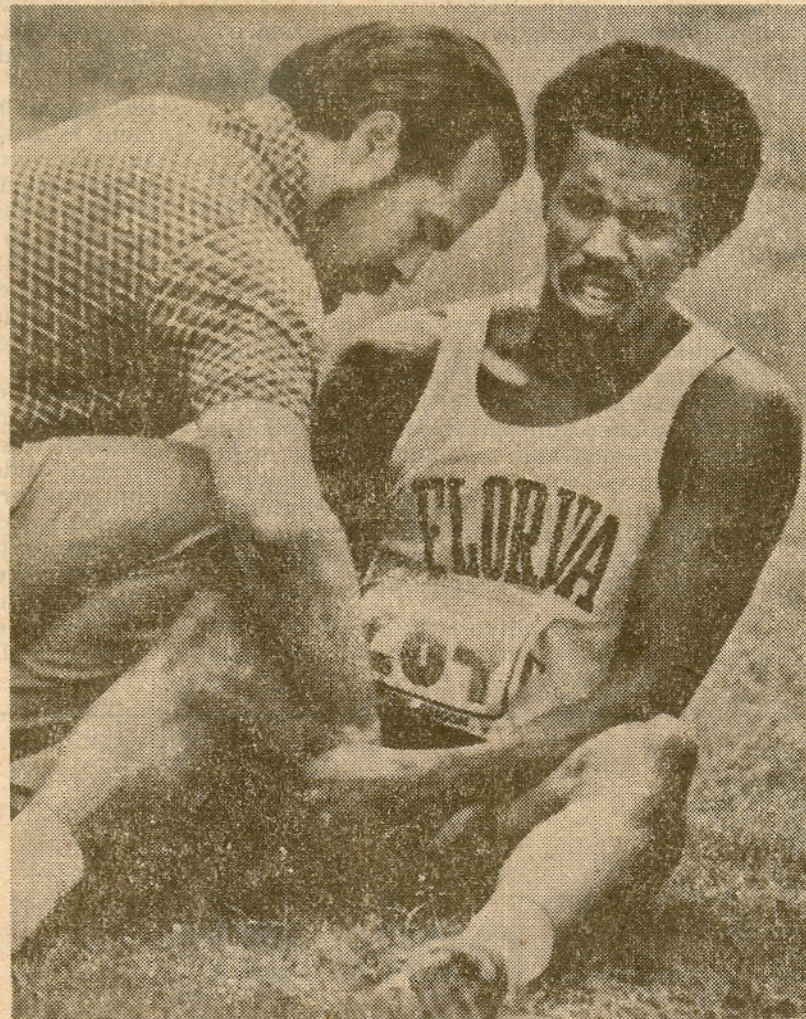
So Williams and many others who couldn't finish first, second or third on the fateful day were simply pushed aside. It is a wurra-wurra, as they used to say in the comic pages.

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IN A country like New Zealand, where only a few reach Olympic caliber, this kind of condition does not exist. The best are invited and where possible, sponsored by state money.

But the United States has long been dominant in track and field, a major high school and college sport, and despite complaints of non-support and "don't-careism" we continue to develop hundreds of world class runners and jumpers. Officials have thrashed about for a solution over 50 years; if they count points toward qualification, which events or meets should be selected? Obviously after the selection there will be new hassles.

In 1964 there were two Olympic trials, one on each Coast. If an athlete failed in one he or she had a second chance in the other but again the same difficulties arose, because



Steve Williams grimaced in pain as a doctor worked on his leg in Eugene

where one was aided, another was lopped off. Bob Hayes, winner of the 100 in the Tokyo Olympics of 1964, liked the double trials which gave him a another shot, but the Olympic committee was unhappy after the accounting. Neither Trials drew enough to realize the kind of profit needed to help finance the large track team across the Pacific.

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AND THAT is another angle. Los Angeles wanted this year's Trials in the Coliseum but on a long weekend only. Eugene, Oregon, an exciting place during track competition, agreed to stage the events over ten days to simulate the actual Olympic schedule. Large crowds went every day of the week. The athletes said it was a joy to compete before such enthusiastic spectators.

One may well wonder about the schedule. Although it follows Olympic procedure it means little to the individual athlete or event. If you high jump, for example, you will compete in trials one day and finals the next. Your stint is for two days and then you are free. It makes no difference to you

that the others must compete another time and another hour.

> The most successful Olympic Trials of all time were held in Stanford Stadium, 1960. In two days the crowds totaled more than 120,000 and the athletes were delighted, except those who hit the hurdles or fouled in the long jump pit or pulled a muscle, or whatever.

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OFFICIALS argue that rules are rules and when applied without equivocation the result is no longer in human hands, but rests with a higher authority. Who can say (they ask) in what race a new star will be born? Or who can deny a third place to a person who has trained four years to make the team.

In other, less popular sports squad members are selected by committees, but track and swimming, among several on the Olympic program, simply have too many upcoming, youthful candidates. It is regrettable that Steve Williams is not on the U.S. Olympic team but on Trial day, his star was out of orbit.