

Carl's Story

Poor and persecuted, still Johnson won the race of life

★ by Byrd Baggett

I MET CARL JOHNSON in 1968 in Austin. As the only African-American athlete on our University of Texas track team, Carl had skin a different color than mine. He lived alone in the athletics dorm. But we had other things in common: we were both freshmen, scared and homesick, and we both persevered to achieve success during our four years — we were four-year lettermen and All American selections, elected co-captains, and graduated with two conference championships. But from our four years together, the memory that will forever be in my soul is from 1971.

We had traveled to Lawrence to participate in the Kansas Relays, and on the day of competition, we had stopped at a local diner. We ordered a full meal from the menu; I probably ordered a cheeseburger and fries. As we were leaving for the track for that day's competition, I noticed that Carl had not eaten lunch, and I was worried that this might affect his performance. I had no extra money myself, but the University always gave us money for meals, and I was perplexed as to why Carl had not eaten.

Not wanting to embarrass Carl, I walked over and asked quietly, "Carl, why didn't you eat?" He replied in a very meek voice, "Oh, Byrd, I don't eat. I send the money home to my mom so she and my brothers and sisters can eat."

We were all aware of Carl's situation, but we couldn't really relate, as we never had to deal with the life challenges that he faced. For shirts, Carl cut the corners out of the mesh laundry bags we were issued for our uniforms and wear them over his T-shirts. That's how poor he was.

Of course, in that day especially, poverty and racism went hand-in-glove. On one trip to Houston we stopped in La Grange to have lunch. Upon entering the restaurant, the owner approached our head coach, who at the time was Jack Patterson. (Patterson left to become the athletics director at Baylor and was replaced by Cleburne Price.) The proprietor told Coach that the white athletes could eat in the restaurant but the [n.....] would have to eat with the cooks in the kitchen. I'll never forget how upset Coach

Patterson became when he responded to the owner of the restaurant that we would eat together as a team or would leave. As we all listened to this exchange, the owner relented and let Carl eat in the restaurant with the rest of us. This was a real bonding experience and gave us a brief insight as to what Carl had to deal with on a daily basis. You can also see why Jack Patterson was a great coach: he believed in treating everyone with dignity and respect.

Glen Sefcik, the team manager my four years, lived close to Carl's home town of San Angelo, and since Carl had neither a car nor money for trips home, Glen would take Carl home on the holidays. For this, Glen was called a "[n.....] lover."

We didn't care about skin color — we were athletes on a mission to win. And while I don't remember any racial conflicts on the team, I don't think many of us were very close to Carl. He was a very private person who kept to himself or associated with the few African Americans on campus. I don't believe we could really understand how lonely Carl was during his four years at UT.

THAT NIGHT IN LAWRENCE, four members of the UT track team unexpectedly made the finals of the sprint medley relay. Carl opened with a blistering 220 and handed the baton off to me to run the second 220. After running one of the fastest splits of my career, I handed off to Ed Wright, who ran a spectacular 440 leg. Ed made the final transition to Dave Morton as he anchored the relay with a world class 880. The result: the fastest time in the world — 3:16.7.

We were a team, and, even though we didn't always get along, we cared for each other and expected excellence.

In 1973, less than a year after achieving his dream of graduating from The University of Texas, Carl lost his life in a freak car accident.

Even though his early death was tragic, his life was triumphant, and, in an odd way, complete. He had achieved at least two major

life goals, and how many of us can say that? Carl had 1. been elected team captain by his peers and 2. graduated from college. It's doubly triumphant since he achieved his goals against such odds. It's not the number of years you live, but what you accomplish in those years. And the engine that kept him running was hope. It's been said that a person can live 40 days without food, four days without water, but only four seconds without hope. I truly believe that what gave Carl hope for a brighter future was his scholarship.

Too many people quit before the blessing. Carl didn't quit, and his story of perseverance will live in my heart forever.

Byrd Baggett, BBA '72, Life Member, is a motivational speaker and author whose current enterprise is the True Growth Academy, a leadership training seminar for managers. Recently, Carl Johnson, BA '73, was honored when a recreation center in San Angelo was renamed for him.



1972 LONGHORN CAPTAINS
Carl Johnson Byrd Baggett
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