

Interviewee: Tellez, Thomas

Interview Date: March 25, 2009

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“Houston Sports”
Thomas Tellez

Interviewed by: Ernesto Valdés
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Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: University of Houston Oral History Center

EV: This is Ernesto Valdés and I am in my office on campus and I am again talking to Coach Thomas Tellez. I just want to fill out a couple of things. I didn't get your wife's name the last time we spoke.

TT: Kay.

EV: K-A-Y?

TT: K-A-Y.

EV: Does she have a middle name?

TT: Helen.

EV: What was her last name her surname; her maiden name?

TT: Hers?

EV: Yes.

TT: Oh Brownsberger.

EV: Is that like B-R-O-W-N...?

TT: ...S-B-E-R-G-E-R, Brownsberger.

EV: Okay. When you were at the Olympics when you went for the first time it must have been...?

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TT: Yeah it was exciting. It was in L.A. where I am from; where my wife and I are from. So going to L.A. was very interesting and then I was coaching the premier track and field athlete in the world at the time and that was Carl Lewis and he was trying to win four gold medals. There had been only one other person who had done that and that was Jesse Owens in 1932. So it was special and there was a lot of pressure. I felt pressure because I had never coached anyone to win four gold medals and I never talked to the coach or read anything concerning that; some of the things you look for. So we were going in and I played the percentages. The four events were the 100, 200, long jump and relay. In L.A. they kind of changed the runway around for TV so he was going in a little headwind and we practiced for the three years leading up to that, we practiced winning the long jump on the first jump because I didn't know how much energy he would expend trying to take six jumps when he could have won it on the first one and that's what we practiced. We practiced winning the long jump on the first jump because he had the 200 to go and then the relay to go and his hamstring leg was a little bit tight and Los Angeles, at night it gets cool, it gets cold it doesn't stay hot like it is during the day, it cools off. So I told him and we had practiced this, "I only want you to take one jump and win the event so we can save you for the 200 and the relay." That's what he did and he took one other one but he didn't finish the jump he just ran through. He was criticized for only taking one jump because everyone wanted to see him break the world record. But there was no way you are going to break the world record with a head wind, cold like it was and you are running all those events. You don't break the world event in those situations, you just try to survive to win four gold medals and that was our objective was to win four gold medals not break world records. It's almost impossible to

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do that. So that's what I told him to do and of course the press didn't ask me what the plan was and why we did it the way we did it. There were a lot of people upset that he didn't try to win the gold medal and try and take more than one jump. I didn't want him to take more than one jump. I was kind of mad because he took another one where he could have gotten hurt and that would have been it. He wouldn't have won four gold medals if he had gotten hurt.

EV: When you all speak, you call meaning the track folks, you talk about wind, I guess that figures in, if you hear a guy that jumped such and such against the wind or ran against the wind, that's a factor you consider into his qualities or...?

TT: Right if you run into a head wind it's a lot harder to jump far obviously. If you have a tail wind too much tail wind is illegal and the jump doesn't count for record purposes.

EV: Oh really? I didn't know that.

TT: Yeah you have to have no more than two miles per hour wind.

EV: So do they post pone the game until the wind dies down?

TT: No you jump.

EV: But if you have worlds record...

TT: It's negated if it's too much wind.

EV: I didn't know that.

TT: So everything's got to be just right. When he did break the existing world record Mike Powell beat him but they both broke the world record it was perfect conditions. There were tail winds which were over the allowed but when they jumped there were

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good winds. So the jump was legal. It doesn't make any difference how far you jump if it's illegal, or if it's too much wind they don't count it as a record.

EV: Coach the Los Angeles thing, as an observer of the Los Angeles Olympics wasn't that the one where a lady in a marathon came stumbling across the line Anderson or, a Swiss athlete?

TT: I'm not familiar with the women's marathon at the games I don't remember. I mean I have a book on the whole Olympics if you ever want to look at it and there are pictures of Carl in there but I can't cut them out.

EV: We can scan some if you have some. If I get my scanning machine and get it all from you to scan.

TT: I'll bring it. Well the Olympic games in 1984 were great games. It was at the L.A. Coliseum which I grew up going to the Coliseum so it was really special and he was trying to win four gold medals, trying to win them we never said he would win them. But we said, "We're going to try" and we did it. So the controversy was: why did he only take one long jump? That was because I didn't want to have him take more than one because the chances of him getting hurt. It was late in the evening, he already had a tight hamstring and he had the runs to go and we had another kid from Houston, Kirk Baptiste that got second and he's good. You just don't run poor and win the 200. Then you've got to win the relay and you don't know how far we are going to be behind where Carl had to run really fast in order to win it. We did but you are always taking a chance there. If some of the other three guys goof up a pass and he's 5 meters behind and he has to make it up so I plan for that, I had to. It takes a lot out of a jumper to jump six jumps trying to break the world record which I knew he couldn't. We did the same thing in

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Soul, in Seoul, Korea. It was a little bit of a situation but he took all six jumps in Seoul, Korea and he lost the 200 to his team mate, he lost it.

EV: What were the Olympics that he ran when they thought he was over 30 years old, he was 30 or something was that Japan?

TT: No.

EV: Do you know what I'm talking about?

TT: Oh he's too old?

EV: Yeah.

TT: That was Atlanta in '96 that was where he was getting old and they didn't think he could win it and he did win it, yeah.

EV: Okay.

TT: Every game that I was there with Carl from '84, we didn't go in '80 but I was on the coaching staff there and he made the team but we didn't go to Moscow. But from '84 to '96, every game is exciting. It is the best there is and it is broadcast all over the world. Even though track is not that popular in the United States it doesn't have the... but in the world it is. It is very important. When you go to Europe and you have the games or the world championships or something like that, it's going continually all night, all day showing the different events. So Carl was a world figure at that time because everybody in the world knew who he was so it was pretty exciting.

EV: He apparently hit a bump in terms of, I don't know how to word this and I don't mean anything by it, but he never reached the popularity in the United States I guess that most guys in his position I think would have wanted. I noticed a lot of the research that I've read on him said that he was...

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TT: Well I think that Carl was, you might say, controversial in the fact that he did what he thought he should do, not what anyone else thought he should do and he just, he was very independent. There was nothing wrong with him, he was very independent and he just didn't go, he wasn't like a willow in the wind. He believed in certain things and that's what he believed in and that was it. My job was to coach him and that's what I did, I coached him for those years, 18. I coached him for 18 years. He got ready for every Olympic game and that was our objective it wasn't anything else except for getting ready for each Olympic game and doing the best that he could do. He did that. You know he was controversial; he was different in a lot of ways. He wasn't what people thought he should be, like he should be Jesse Owens and be thankful for this opportunity to compete for the United States and be humble and everything. He's not that. He's wasn't that kind of a kid. He was independent. His parents were both educated, they were both teachers. They had their Masters degree. Carl came up during the civil rights movement. He was definitely not like Jesse Owens; I mean he was Carl Lewis and his parents were upper middle class and he was a different kid then what people expected him to be like. He was different, he's intelligent, he has his own ideas and he sticks with them no matter what.

EV: The public expectation I think works some of these guys, pressure is in the _____. I happened to be watching the biography of I don't know what it was the NFL channel but they had a little blip on John Riggins of the Redskins who was just an absolute, "This is the way I am. Like it or don't like it." The guy was of course a great athlete, a powerful athlete.

TT: Well he was kind of that way but I think Carl was a good guy and he did his job and he was controversial and opinionated about certain things and that's the way he is.

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EV: Did he get his degree here from U of H?

TT: I think he did I'm not quite sure about that.

EV: Okay. Tell me about this guy Baptiste you mentioned? I know him only by name.

TT: Well he came up and ran for the University of Houston and Carl had gone, well Carl didn't go all four years competing for us but he stayed here and trained. Then Kirk came up right after him so they trained together. Carl took him under his wing. They both made the Olympic team and they both got first and second in the 200 meters.

EV: Did you have any other athletes that went to the Olympics during your tenure as coach here?

TT: Oh yeah. Oh you mean athletes from the University of Houston?

EV: Right.

TT: Well I had Joe Deloch who made it and is a gold medalist, Carl and Leroy Burel and Kirk Baptiste, Carol Lewis.

EV: Was she as dedicated to the sport as her brother?

TT: I think that Carol in L.A., she made the team and she sprained her ankle two weeks before the games training she was just working on the runway and she hit, she wasn't paying attention and hit the side of the back end of the pit and she sprained her ankle, otherwise she probably would have gotten a medal and that kind of threw her off. She really wanted to do well and she was capable of getting a medal and I think she would have, however, she sprained her ankle and she couldn't jump, she jumped but she didn't jump far. So I think that really hurt her, to train that hard and she wanted to get a medal and she didn't. But she continued to train and make the Olympic teams but she

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didn't medal. Other than that she was good. She was a heck of a competitor, just as...maybe a better competitor than Carl.

EV: Really?

TT: She was tough, yes. She was very tough. She was very capable, a very good athlete.

EV: When you were at these Olympics did you ever go off and watch other events that didn't have to do with track or were you pretty much there...?

TT: No I really didn't have the time to go and watch. I watched them on TV but to get tickets to them, no, I couldn't afford to buy tickets. I guess I could have gotten tickets if I wanted to. They asked all the coaches if they wanted tickets that were on the staff. Now if you're not on the staff you don't get anything you have to buy them. But if you are on the staff you can get certain tickets to certain events but I really didn't go to any other events. I watched it on TV, it was easier to watch on TV for me and because I had other things I had to do. Especially if you are on the staff, then you have, they are asking you to do a lot of things. So no I did not go to any other events that I can remember.

EV: Laughter.

TT: I know you would think that I would go to everything but when you are involved in track and field and you are on the staff you don't have time to go to all that. Maybe you have time but I just didn't take the time to go.

EV: Did your wife go with you every time you went?

TT: She went to, obviously she went to L.A. and she went to Barcelona and Atlanta. I don't think she went to Soul but she went to the rest of them.

EV: Man Barcelona is the one that was just _____.

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TT: Oh yeah that was great I loved that.

EV: The beginning ceremony when that guy shot that arrow that was... They had it on Youtube and every once in a while I'll just bring it up and watch it again because it is such an amazing, gutsy thing to do.

TT: I know it. It was amazing.

EV: When he got there I thought, "What in the hell is he going to do with that bow and arrow?" and when it snapped it was "Man!" I mean anything can knock that arrow to the side. A little gust of wind. Boy just shot that thing and _____.

TT: That was unbelievable. Some of the things they do at those games are really phenomenal. Beijing was incredible. They did some great things there.

EV: I thought the opening ceremonies at Beijing were a little showier than what I would have liked but everyone else just went ape so who the hell was I to say? What they did with technology and getting all those people to acrobat with that split second stuff.

TT: Yeah I know it was pretty amazing what they did there.

EV: But you have been to China before?

TT: Yes when it was not taken over by the west. There were still a lot of bicycles and a lot of people with the same kind of uniform on and no cars and now it is totally different. I mean I couldn't even believe it was the same country.

EV: When you came to down do you have an apartment here or do you?

TT: I don't own an apartment a friend of mine just lets me stay at a little farm house about 20 minutes outside of town.

EV: That's all I have in terms of recording I just had some of that stuff I needed to get.