

# Carl Lewis

*“My thoughts before a big race are usually pretty simple. I tell myself; get out of the blocks, run your race, stay relaxed. If you run your race, you’ll win. Just run your race. Channel your energy. Focus.”*



LONG BEFORE he taught me anything, my father was quite an athlete himself, willing to try new things in order to grow, even if that meant leaving his family behind in Chicago. In the late 1940s, William McKinley Lewis, Jr., left Chicago to play football and compete as a sprinter for Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Bill Lewis was the first member of his family to leave Chicago and the first to attend college. He was tall and handsome and alone.

Evelyn Lawler was the daughter of a pipe-shop worker in Gadsden, Alabama. Her father, Fred, was born in Alabama in 1897 and would live there all of his seventy-two years, always in charge when his seven children helped during cotton-picking season, but never during school hours. Fred Lawler did not let his children miss school. Fred was always in a hurry, and so was Evelyn. She played basketball and ran track in high school, and it was her talent in track that helped her become the first of her family to attend college. She got a scholarship to Tuskegee to longjump, highjump, sprint, and study to be a physical education teacher.

Bill Lewis and Evelyn Lawler met at Tuskegee, fell in love, and got married soon after Evelyn graduated. Bill would get his degree a year later.

Bill and Evelyn Lewis were prepared for more than running and jumping. They took teaching jobs in Montgomery, Alabama and started a family. I became son 3 in 1961. In late 1963, my parents moved us to Willingboro, New Jersey, a quiet, middle class suburb of Philadelphia.

In 1969, my parents started building a tradition in track and field. Few people in Willingboro cared about the sport before the Lewises showed up. My mother, teaching at Willingboro High, could not talk the principal into a track program for girls. On her own, she coached a few promising girls a year, but that was it. My father, teaching social studies at the other high school in town, John F. Kennedy High, coached boys in sprinting, but there was no girls' track there either. My mother wanted young girls to have the same opportunities she had in sports, so she and my father established the Willingboro Track Club. It started with a dozen or so girls, the youngest of them nine year-olds, with two practices a week at Kennedy High. Before long, some boys wanted in, and they were accepted.

Taking me and my sister Carol to the track saved baby-sitting money, so we naturally became interested in track and field. The longjump pit was our baby-sitter. Sometimes Carol and I tried to imitate the drills everyone else was doing, but most of the time we just played in the sand, building castles in the pit, then smashing them while our parents were busy with their athletes. At

first, playing in the sand was a lot more fun for me than paying attention to what Mom and Dad were doing.

It was Carol, even though she was younger, who noticed first that running and jumping into the sand could be fun too. When she was six years old, Carol started competing in any event she wanted to try and she was amazingly good, bigger than most boys her age and much more talented than most, including me. I started to learn what I could about track, but I was a very slow starter, too small, too shy, and too overshadowed by Carol for anyone to notice me.

In 1971, my parents started sending teams to novice meets in Philadelphia. The club held dances and raffles to raise money, and my parents kicked in some of their own so that nobody would be left out. The meets in Philadelphia were named after Jesse Owens, who, my father told us, was the best track athlete ever. My father told us that Owens had won four gold medals in the 1936 Olympics. We did not really know what that meant, but my father spoke so highly of Owens that we were impressed. Before leaving Chicago, young Bill Lewis had seen Owens every now and then when the track star was working as a district manager for a dry-cleaning chain. When Owens stopped at a local store, Bill and the other neighbourhood kids would gather around and bombard him with questions. In his dress clothes for work, Owens would demonstrate his sprinter's start. The kids of Chicago loved it.

At my first Jesse Owens meet, my father introduced me to Owens, who was fifty-seven then, and took a picture of my cousin and me with him. Owens did not recognise my father, of course, but once he was reminded of the dry-cleaning store in Chicago, he recalled the good old days there. It was a very brief meeting and I was just one of hundreds of kids who met Owens at the meet. I did not win anything that day. But I do remember one thing Owens said to me: 'Have fun.' He wanted us to know that having fun was the most important thing we could do.

Back at home, Carol and I held our own track meets. We took a pile of sand my father bought for a patio and turned it into a longjump pit, spending the better part of an afternoon leaping into it. We used tables and chairs as hurdles, competing against each other for hours and hours when nobody else was around, and Carol usually won. She would celebrate, parading around the house with one of our mother's medals or trophies as if she had just won the biggest meet in the world.

I was small for my age, the runt of the family, the non-athlete, and my father wondered if that was the way it would always be. He figured that little Carl must

## ***Publishers Comment***

***I spoke with Carl Lewis on his recent visit to Sydney. His career and success since his school days is legendary. He is a most articulate speaker and an exemplary role model. He is the greatest athlete of all time having won 9 Olympic Games and 8 World Championship Gold Medals. In doing so he has been involved in setting 7 World Records. Carl Lewis was voted track-and-field athlete of the decade for the 1980s and recorded 65 straight victories in the long jump between 1981 and 91. He made every US Olympic Team since 1980.***

***Carl Lewis turned personal failure into success.***

have gotten the non-athletic genes in the family.

Being the loser in the family was so frustrating.

One day, after another meet and another loss, I came home and complained to my family that I was tired of losing. The only thing I could do was keep trying. I pinned pictures and articles about track and field on a bulletin board in my room, and I started setting goals, writing them down and tacking them onto the board. The goals were simple, nothing too grand, but they gave me something to shoot for, a time in the 100 yard dash or a distance in the long jump.

Finally, I won a local Jesse Owens meet in Philadelphia, placing first in a 1973 long jump competition for twelve-year-olds. Once again Owens had come to town for the meet named after him. He wandered by, saw how much smaller I was than the other kids my age, and told them, "You should learn a lesson from this smaller guy. He was determined and he really tried hard." For once, I felt good about what I was doing. I had qualified to go with other members of the Willingboro club to a national Jesse Owens meet in San Francisco.

My parents always treated us like young adults, not kids, even when we were real little. They did that because they wanted us to be individuals, to learn how to take care of ourselves, to achieve things on our own.

When I saw my older brothers doing what they wanted to do – shopping, going out to eat, leaving to see a movie I also wanted to do things on my own. First, I would need to make a few dollars. So I got a newspaper route, delivering the Burlington County Times in Willingboro when I was in junior high school. My parents had told me that my only jobs were school and sports, and that I should do those as well as I could. So the decision to deliver papers was entirely mine. I enjoyed riding my bicycle up and down the local streets, running up and down the sidewalks, jumping over bushes and steps, tossing rolled-up papers as close to the front door as possible. It was always a challenge to see how quickly I could get done.

My second job, when I was sixteen, was cooking hamburgers at McDonald's. But that didn't last long. I hated flipping burgers, and I was embarrassed when friends came in to order.

Sophomore year of high school, I finally started growing. And once I started, it seemed like I wasn't going to stop. I grew between two and three inches in just a few months, and my legs had trouble adjusting. My knees were killing me, and for a while I even had to walk with crutches to ease the pain. But the growth was good. Finally, I was not a runt anymore. I was the size of most of my classmates. If my wobbly knees

would catch up with the rest of me, I figured, the added height would help me run faster and jump better.

At the end of the year, I longjumped a little better than 22 feet, and I was thrilled. For years, the school record at Kennedy High had been 22 feet, 2 inches. Only a few high schoolers in the whole county had ever jumped beyond 22 feet, and the record was 22 feet, 8 inches.

In an important relay race, we were running on the grass infield, not the track, and I was wearing the wrong spikes for grass. They were too short. I started slipping, and once I started slipping, I got scared. I lost, and I felt the lowest I had ever felt after a race. We were supposed to have the best relay team in South Jersey, and I had just lost the race for us. I couldn't believe I had run so badly, and couldn't believe I had let down my teammates. They couldn't either.

They went on and on, and I had to sit there and take it. They were older, and they were right. I had definitely messed up. They were so vicious about it, and I was so hurt. When my teammates left the tent, I sat there alone, crying.

That night I made two decisions. **One**, I was going to transfer to the other high school in town. All year I had thought about switching to Willingboro High. It was closer to home, so most of my neighbourhood friends went there, and I wanted to be with them. The way I was treated after the relay convinced me that I should transfer. **Two**, I was not going to be humiliated on the track again. I was either going to quit or I was going to dedicate myself to working harder than I had been. I told myself, If you're not willing to work hard and make the sacrifices you'll have to make, then quit—just get out of it. But I was not going to quit. Just the opposite. I was going to commit myself to being more competitive than ever.

Junior year—my first year at Willingboro High – I put a '25' on my jacket. It was a symbol. I wanted to longjump 25 feet before leaving high school. A lot of people laughed at me, telling me I was crazy to think I could jump that far. But my parents had taught me to set goals, and I was not going to change my goals based on what other people thought of them.

My time in the 100-yard dash kept getting better. First 9.7 seconds, then 9.6, and the times kept coming down. At the national age-group meet in Memphis, I ran the 100 in 9.3 seconds. In a year, my time had dropped from 10.6 to 9.3.

My jumps were also getting a lot better. I made that goal of 25 feet – several times – so nobody was laughing any more about the number on my school jacket. At the Eastern States schoolboy track-and-field championships, I jumped 25 feet, 3 1/4

inches. The next day's newspapers started to compare my performance with the jumps of a great athlete I would hear a lot about in the years to come. The winning jump was only one-quarter of an inch behind Bob Beamon's meet record, the papers said. But that was just the beginning for me. At the meet in Memphis, I jumped 25 feet, 9 inches.

Everything was happening so fast. I had always set goals, but I had never imagined that I could improve so much in just a year. I was sixteen, and all of a sudden I was one of the best high school track athletes in the country. I couldn't believe it.

By now, I was getting pretty good at accepting awards. Reach with your left hand, shake with your right, and smile for the cameras. The only problem was when I had to speak. The worst was when I was introduced at a banquet as the state Long Jumper of the Year. The other award winners had said a few words, and I was expected to stand behind a podium and do the same.

But I had nothing to say. I had always been shy, and now I was a wreck. Ten seconds behind that podium seemed like two hours. A few hundred people in the audience seemed like a few million. Every set of eyes was focused on me. And my throat was one big lump. I never felt this nervous when I was competing. But this was different. I was totally uncomfortable. I was frozen.

Finally I got out a 'thank you'. But even that was a struggle. I could not wait to get out of the place, and I was determined that something like that would never happen again. After all those years of being shy, I didn't expect to be Mr. Perfection as a public speaker but I didn't want to be totally helpless, either. Whatever it would take, I would work on being better in public. I never wanted to be so uncomfortable again.

*Excerpt from: Inside Track, by Carl Lewis with Jeffrey Marx (Simon & Schuster publishers)*

