

# Phillipsburg runner receives Kansas Hall of Fame honor after 40 years

By DICK BOYD

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John Mason, 63, Phillipsburg, paid his dues as one of the elite mile and 1500 meter runners in the world in the 1960s. During impressive ceremonies on Sunday, Oct. 4, he received the reward he so richly deserved when he was officially inducted into the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame in Wichita as a member of the Class of 2009.

It is so fitting that he has received this honor after a career in which he not only ran against and defeated the best runners in America but represented the United States in worldwide competition where he returned unbeaten after showing his backside to the world's best, including Olympic champions.

John Mason was not born a world champion runner but developed into one with long hours of hard work and a quiet determination to be the best he could be. It wasn't easy as he had many, many stumbling blocks but used his positive mental toughness to turn them into stepping stones.

John suffered from polio in the fifth grade, broke a toe so could not run his freshman year at Phillipsburg High School, almost died from drinking polluted water after running during his freshman year at Fort Hays State University and missed the Olympics due to an illness.

His original inspiration came from his father, Paul, who made the long trip from Phillipsburg to the hospital in Lincoln, Neb. to visit his son who was ill with polio.

His father brought him two gifts that he says changed his life. One was Paul's high school regional championship medal for the mile in 1935 and the other was a tiny trophy that his dad had made especially for him, engraved with "Son -- First in Any Event".

John says these two things inspired him to get well fast and become interested in track and field. And very interested he became!

After winning the mile and half mile in the Kansas State High School Track Meet both his junior and senior years, which included a state record in the half mile, many colleges approached him about running track for them.

He chose to stay close to home and run for Fort Hays State University, where coach Alex Francis was already a legend in track and field and is also a member of the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame.

An All-American 14 times in track and cross country while at Fort Hays, John ran the sub-four minute mile or equivalent in 1500 meters on numerous occasions. He had a streak of 21 straight cross country victories while at Fort Hays, winning the Missouri Valley AAU Cross Country Meet, the NAIA National Meet and the CIC League Championships.

In practice while running for Fort Hays, John's daily routine included running around 27 miles, plus a number of wind sprints!

John's best time in the 1500 meter run is 3:37, which is the same as a 3:54 mile.

One of his major accomplishments was beating Kip Keino of Kenya in the 1968 World Games in Stockholm, Sweden, on July 19, 1968 with a 1500 meter time of 3:40.5. Also in that race was Mohammed Gammoudi, Tunisia. Both Keino and Gammoudi won 1968 Olympic gold medals later that year in Mexico City where Keino defeated another Kansan, Jim Ryun. John also defeated Keino on July 2, 1968 in Oslo, Norway with a 3:42.9 time for 1500 meters.

Also in 1968 and prior to the World Games, John ran for the U.S.A National Team against the U.S.S.R. in Moscow where he won the gold medal. During both 1968 tours (Soviet Union and Europe), John ran in a total of seven races against top international competition and won all

seven races.

Following those trips, John was hospitalized with a severe digestive tract infection, which kept him from competing in the Mexico Olympics.

In February, 1969, John toured again with the USA National Team and won all six races he ran in six weeks.

His collegiate career had come to a close and John moved to Southern California where he joined the prestigious Pacific Coast Club to continue national and international competition. For the next two years, he raced all over the world.

He ran a long string of four minutes flat miles before breaking the four minute mile barrier with a time of 3:58.4 in Berkeley, Calif., in May, 1970. After that, it became routine to see him turn in sub-four minute mile times with a best ever of 3:57.9 on April 17, 1971. In 1971, at the Los Angeles Times Indoor Meet, John ran the fastest indoor mile that had been recorded in nine years when he tied Jim Beatty's indoor record of 3:58.9 which had been a world record.

John had hopes of making the 1972 U.S. Olympic team but knee problems finally forced his retirement.

He had a great career that took him all over the world, representing the United States on eight different U.S.A. National Track Teams. He traveled overseas extensively, competing in Europe, the Soviet Union, Asia, Latin America, Canada and the Caribbean. He also ran in track meets in every major city in the United States.

It's possible that cross country was his best sport as he won the United States National Championship and set the course record in 1968 at Van Cortland Park, New York, a record that stood for an amazing 20 years!

#### Acceptance speech

"I am so humbled and honored to be named to the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame," John told the large crowd during his acceptance speech. "You have reconnected my life today with my youth and you make me feel like a young man again! That's a great feeling at this age! Honors won in our youth are wonderful but being recognized now is just fantastic! Thank you!"

"I am just as excited as a youth to be here with all of these great athletes and coaches. All the rest of the inductees are very worthy of this award and I extend my congratulations to all of them!"

"I have so many people to thank because so many helped me come to this moment. Thanks to my parents. They taught me early the basics of a 'can do' spirit and hard work."

His father Paul is no longer living and mother Millie was unable to be physically present but was present in spirit. John's wife, Juanita, was among his family members in attendance.

"I want to thank the members of my family who are present," he said. "They have always supported and encouraged me in every endeavor and I'm proud to have them all here."

"I am thrilled that my Phillipsburg High School track coach Paul Dennis is here with us. Coach saw some talent in me and he made me into a miler. Without Paul Dennis, I wouldn't be here today. Paul was a great coach and advisor."

"Then came my great college coach Alex Francis. I chose Fort Hays mostly because I was a country boy and was afraid to go too far away from home. Boy, was I lucky to get Alex Francis as my coach."

He really knew the sport and has been recognized all over the nation and here in the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame as a brilliant athlete and coach but he was much more than that. Beyond getting us ready to compete, he was a great

man who had an important role in raising us up to be the best men we could be.

"I can't imagine my track days without Alex Francis' inspiring leadership. He really was like a second father to me for so many decades."

"I grew up running on those barren plains in western Kansas, where we made up for the lack of hills in training with a great abundance of wind, which always seemed to be blowing directly in our faces and with the extremes of weather that either taught an athlete endurance or killed him. There were days that I thought it was going to kill me!"

"Kansas has bred lots of great milers and I idolized all of them and desperately wanted to become one of them. I still have an autograph from Glen Cunningham that I got from him when I was a youth and I have treasured it ever since. What a great inspirational life story he had for a Kansas boy to grow up on!"

"Later, I was a fan of Wes Santee and Archie San Romani, two more great Kansas runners who lived up to this state's tradition of greatness. In high school, through college, and then for years on the world stage, I found myself running against the great Kansas legend Jim Ryun."

"As a youth, when I looked up to these great Kansas runners, I was inspired. There was nothing about me that was anything but just average. I say to the young people of this state that you can do great things, even if you come from a tiny school in a tiny town and are just average in every way. Learn everything you can about what you want to do. Get good advice from good coaches. Follow it. Work hard! It's all within your reach. On the track, a Kansan can stand equal to anyone anywhere on earth with hard work and determination."

"Now, I have something in common with those great Kansas milers that I idolized. We're now all on the same Kansas team in the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame along with all of the other great Kansas Sports Champions. I'm thrilled!"

"My running career took me all over the world but I came home to the best place on earth, Phillipsburg, Kansas. I'm always very proud to be called a Kansan!"

"You've given me a very great moment in a wonderful life. Thank you all for honoring me so kindly!"

Other members of the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame Class of 2009 who were honored during the Induction Ceremony are: Steve Henson, McPherson, basketball star for Kansas State University; Ted Owens, Tulsa, basketball coach for Kansas University; Don Calhoun, Wichita, football star for Kansas State University and pro football; Janell Carson, Fredonia, star woman track athlete; Harold Patterson, Garden City, football star for Kansas University and pro football; Ken Mahoney, Dorrance, inventor of Toss Back basketball return; Eddie Sutton, Bucklin,



Pictured in the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame Museum looking at the portrait and biographical information on new inductee John Mason are from left, John's wife Juanita, John and his nephew, Brad Mason.

— Telegram photo by Dick Boyd

legendary major college basketball coach; Ken Swenson, Clay Center, track star for Kansas State University; Gwinn Henry, football star for Southwestern College and college coach, posthumously; Orli Cox, Ottawa, longtime high school coach, posthumously; Ken Roberts, Strong City, world bull-riding rodeo champion, posthumously; Jesse Barnes, Circleville, star professional

baseball pitcher, posthumously; Paul Endacott, Lawrence, basketball star for Kansas University, posthumously.

Master of ceremonies for the Induction Ceremony was Gary Bender, well known sports broadcaster who is currently the voice of the Phoenix Suns professional basketball team. Gary is a 2008 inductee in the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame.

Ted Hayes is president and CEO of the Kansas Sports Hall of Fame. Duane Muck, Osborne, is chairman of the Hall of Fame Board of Directors.

#### Reporter's note:

This sportswriter had the privilege of covering John Mason for the Phillips County Review in the 1960s when he was running for Phillipsburg High School.



John Mason, a world class miler in his prime, always put every ounce of strength and speed into his runs. Here he is shown at right finishing in a dead heat sub-four minute mile with Henryk Szordykowski of Poland in the tremendous time of 3:58.3, which tied Jim Beatty's clocking in the race nine years earlier which was a world record! Who knows how fast John would have run if he had not suffered bruises on his knees, side and back when he was knocked out of bed by an earthquake earlier in the week!

— Courtesy photo

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