

CHC: Lamar Alexander: A Track Record Holder

by Bill Traughber

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This interview with Senator Lamar Alexander is exclusive to Commodore History Corner and VUCommodores.com.

When former Vanderbilt track coach Herc Alley would scour the university campus for runners, he sometimes stumbled across a gem. Vanderbilt has been competing in track since 1886 as a non-scholarship sport. And one day in 1960, Alley noticed a young man running on his out-dated track.

"I liked to exercise, and I'd go down to the old cinder track at Vanderbilt," said Tennessee U. S. Senator Lamar Alexander and Vanderbilt '62 graduate. "We didn't have any scholarships for track athletes. I believe it was my sophomore year that I was down there running, just exercising on the track. A man came over to me and said he was Coach Alley and asked my name.

"I introduced myself and then he asked me if I'd ever run track in high school. I told him we didn't have a team, so he asked me to run a hundred yards for him. So, I ran a hundred yards. He had a stopwatch and said, '10.1--that's remarkable.' I knew that was fast while back then it was yards and not meters. I told him I'd never been timed before. He said, 'I have three members of a relay team, but we need four. The other three are really fast.' Coach Alley told me he never had three boys that fast before."

Alexander, 66, was born in Maryville, Tenn. and graduated from Maryville High School. He played four years of basketball, but was kicked in the eye while playing football as a freshman. Alexander said, "while playing basketball I did not shoot very well with just one good eye."

Alexander almost became a Blue Devil rather than a Commodore. When it was time for him to choose a college for academics, Alexander narrowed his choices to Duke, Tennessee and Vanderbilt. Duke gave him the best offer, but wanting to attend college in his home state he chose Vanderbilt that matched the Duke offer.

As an official member of the Vanderbilt track team, Alexander ran on the one-mile relay, 440-yard relay and the 440-yard dash. Alexander ran track for two years as a sophomore and junior. In 1961, the junior was a component of the 440-yard relay team with seniors Guy Tallent, Lynn Mayhan and sophomore Kent Russ.

"Guy and Kent could run a hundred yard dash in about 9.7 seconds," said Alexander.



Lamar Alexander

"I think the world record at that time was about 9.2 seconds. Here was Herc Alley with no scholarships, and suddenly he had three guys who could actually run for a track team. He got me to run second on the 440-yard relay team. My job was to get it from the first fastest guy to the third fastest guy.



Alexander on Maryland H.S. Basketball Team

"I found out later, that he [Alley] must have been fudging a little bit on the stopwatch because I never ran 10.1 again in my life. I ran fast enough to get on his team. My better race was running on the one-mile relay team where I ran the second leg. So, I lettered my sophomore and junior years, but didn't try to run my senior year."

A highlight of Alexander's track career at Vanderbilt was the establishment of a new school record in 1961 in the 440-yard relay. The record time of 42.7 seconds came against Tennessee on the old cinder track surrounding Dudley Field. The previous school record was 43.0 seconds and the SEC record at that time was 41.6 seconds.

The record-setting combination of Tallent to Alexander to Russ to Mayhan helped the Commodores defeat the Vols in the dual meet 99-37. So was being a part of that record special to Alexander?

"It was special for me because I wasn't that good," Alexander said. "I just had a good lesson on what it was like to be on a team with three people who were better than I was. They were terrific athletes. In fact, Kent Russ won the Southeastern Conference long jump during my junior year. He was a sensational runner and Guy Tallent was as well.

"It meant a lot to Vanderbilt that we had a competitive team in the SEC in 1961. I remember we went down there to the SEC meet and there were these guys like Billy Cannon of LSU and other terrific athletes. You can't beat them all."

With Alexander being from East Tennessee and almost attending the Knoxville university, the record was a little more special.

"I knew up going to the University of Tennessee ball games while living in Maryville," Alexander said. "We used to listen to football games on Saturday afternoons and later I was President of the University of Tennessee. I'm a big admirer of the University of Tennessee. Whenever you compete against a strong athletic university like that, the juices started flowing."

In this era of sports in the South, segregation was strong. In Nashville, the all-black Tennessee State University had gained a national reputation for producing outstanding athletes in track, football and basketball. Alexander had an opportunity to witness these athletes in person. At that time Tennessee State was known as Tennessee A&I.

"The fastest and the best guys at that time did not get to go to the SEC because that was when Vanderbilt and the other teams were still segregated by race," said Alexander. "One of the highlights in the two years that I ran was watching Tennessee A&I. They had a poor track and once a year Coach Alley would invite the A&I team to come over--both the men and women. Ed Temple was coach of the Tigerbelles. We just sat back and watched.

"They were Olympians. Ralph Boston was on that team. And even though Kent Russ won the SEC long jump that year, Ralph Boston would come over and practice at Vanderbilt and jumped two feet longer than Russ. That stuck in my mind to have the chance to see those several Olympians among the women and few from the men. Wilma Rudolph was also there at that time. She was amazing."

Vanderbilt competed against several of the SEC teams that were in driving distance for dual meets. Other nearby schools were scheduled throughout the year like Murray State, MTSU and Memphis State. At the end of the track season, the universities competed in the annual SEC meet.

Alley was tough in his training using Centennial Park as a place for distance running. The home track was around Dudley Field and was very slow to compete for quality times. The track was eventually eliminated with the renovation of the football stadium in 1982.

"That track slowed us down, but that's where our meets were held," said Alexander. "One time when I stretched out to hand off the baton, I missed him and fell flat on my face. I still have some cinder in my left knee (Alexander laughing). There were not many people there to watch us. It was non-scholarship and running was just fun to do. We took buses to all our meets."

After graduating from Vanderbilt, Alexander entered New York University Law School where he earned his degree. Alexander later entered the political world where he became Tennessee Governor (1979-87) and President of the University of Tennessee (1988-91). During the presidency of Ronald Reagan, Alexander joined his cabinet as Secretary of Education (1991-93). Alexander made two unsuccessful bids for the presidency in 1996 and 2000 as a Republican candidate. He became a United States Senator in 2003 representing Tennessee.



1961 Vanderbilt 440-yard relay team: (left to right) Lynn Mayhan, Kent Russ, Lamar Alexander & Guy Tallent.

Alley would achieve legendary status as a Vanderbilt track coach from 1949-71. He produced several SEC track champions and recorded an impressive 61-14 mark in dual competition from 1949-63. This includes a 40-11 record against SEC schools that offered track scholarships. Though his teams never won an SEC championship, his teams did not lose a single dual meet from 1953-58. Alley died in 1971.

"I remember the enthusiasm of Coach Alley," said Alexander. "He made something out of not very much. He coached amateur athletes and brought the best out of us. He put together some pretty good teams with some average athletes. And he gave us a chance to compete in the SEC in a way, which we couldn't have possibly.

"My favorite thoughts were being down there on my own running around the track. And here comes this fellow with stopwatch and times me at 10.1 when it was closer to 11. Then he lures me on his team because he has these three terrific runners."

Teammate Tallent distinguished himself after graduating Vanderbilt as a part-time member of the Tennessee Air National Guard. He received a direct commission as a Second Lieutenant in the U.S. Air Force Reserve in 1962. Tallent received his wings in 1964 and returned to his Nashville unit as a traditional guardsman. He flew numerous missions during the Vietnam War and retired in 2000 as a Major General. Tallent's civilian job was in real estate development. He once held the school record for the 100-yard dash at 9.7 seconds and his niece, Beth, became one of Vanderbilt's best women track runners.

"Lamar had a tremendous attitude and enthusiasm and was a real competitor," Tallent said recently. "We ran to win and figured the time would take care of itself. If we got lucky and had a good time, then that was like frosting on a cake. Beating the other competitors was the name of the game. Lamar was my hero back then, and still is today. I'm so proud of him. So proud to have been on the track team, exchanged the baton on the relay team with him, and enjoyed a little success every once in a while."

Another relay teammate, Russ, won the long jump in the 1961 SEC meet with a leap of 24 feet, one-and-a-half inches. He took a break from Vanderbilt after his junior year and was drafted into the service. Russ later graduated from Murray State and earned his graduate degree in Memphis. He became a full-time member of the National Guard retiring in 2001 as a Lieutenant Colonel. Russ flew UH-1 helicopters. His wife, Susan, is a long-time athletic director at Nashville's Harpeth Hall High School. She coaches varsity track, cross-country and was honored as an inductee into the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in 2005.

"Lamar was a good athlete and a good track runner," Russ said. "He wasn't our best runner, but he was brilliant. Lamar always tried to figure things out analytically and the rest of us just said, 'Lamar, let's just run.' We didn't see him that much except when we were running track. Of all of us, Lamar probably got the most out of his speed than the rest of us did. He didn't have the speed that we had since he couldn't develop in high school. Lamar and Lynn Mayhan really worked hard. I was kind of a slacker. Lamar didn't have the natural speed, but he gutted it out all the way to win."

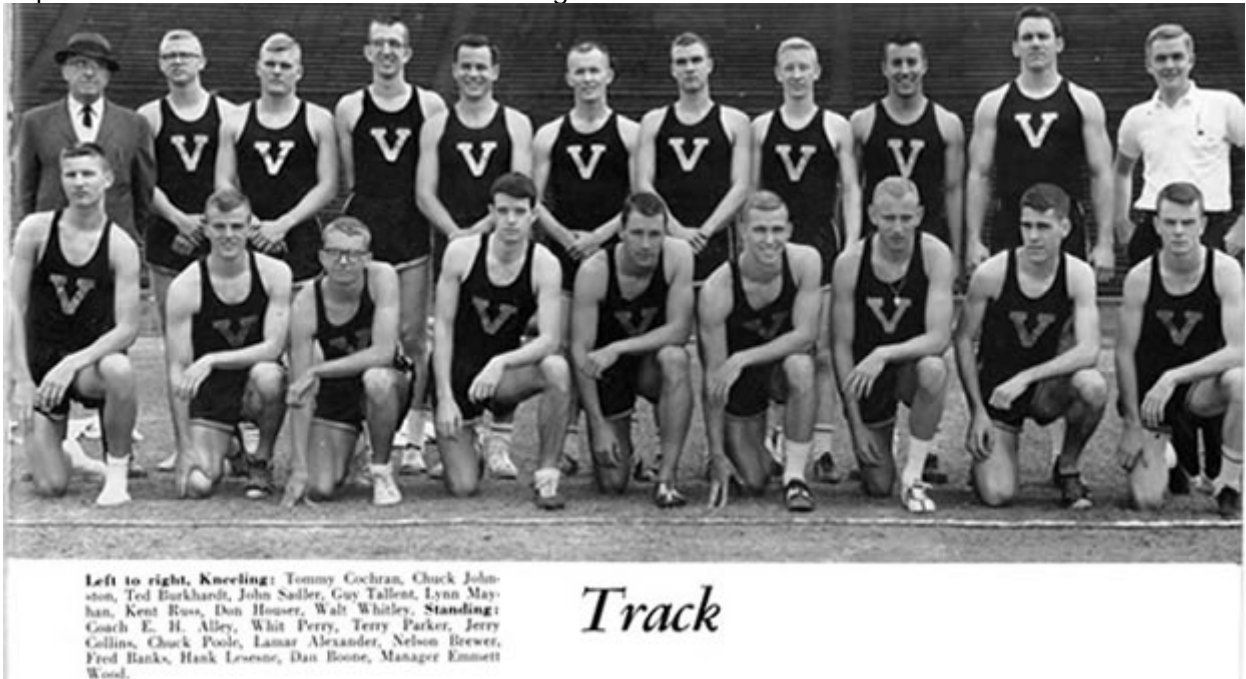
In March 2006, to celebrate the 100th year of the NCAA, the organization formed a panel that consisted of college and university presidents, athletic directors, NCAA committee members and others to determine the NCAA's "100 Most Influential Student-Athletes." The criteria was based on participation at an NCAA institution, accomplishments in one's profession, athletic success, academic achievement and their influence on Americans.

Alexander was ranked as the 59th on that prestigious list. Other notables on the listing with Tennessee connections include Pat Summitt (20), Wilma Rudolph (31),

Ed Temple (86) and Wyomia Tyus (94). Also on the list are Presidents Dwight Eisenhower (4), Ronald Reagan (11), Gerald Ford (14), George H. W. Bush (17) and Richard Nixon (48). The list is topped with Jackie Robinson, Arthur Ashe and Jesse Owens.

"That was a pleasant surprise and a real honor," Alexander said about the 100 list. "I don't think for a minute that I belong in a league of athletes like Wilma Rudolph. She would come over and run on our track once a year. She was an Olympian and I was the fourth guy to make up a relay team. But I think it does help to show that an average athlete can be part of a good program. I was very honored to have been included in that.

"I'm under no apprehension that I was a great athlete. I was an average athlete who was a little stronger on the student part than I was the athlete part in student-athlete. The athlete doesn't always mean Olympic quality. There's a lot to learn from athletics. Team work, discipline, the value of exercise, competition, and the NCAA experience is what I learned from running track at Vanderbilt."



1961 Vanderbilt track team (Alexander is in the back row, sixth from the left)

Traughber's Tidbit: Senator Alexander met his wife, Honey Buhler at a staff softball game when he worked for Senator John G. Tower of Texas. Alexander made walking famous in the state when he walked 1,000 miles across Tennessee in his famous black and red plaid shirt in his campaigns for governor.

The photograph of the 1961 Vanderbilt 4x440 relay team is courtesy of The Nashville Public Library, The Nashville Room.

Next week read an exclusive interview with Scotti Madison, former Vanderbilt All-American baseball player and the Commodores all-time career home run leader. If you have any comments or suggestions, you can contact Bill Traughber via e-mail WLTraughber@aol.com.