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Interview no. 1682

Kelly Myrick

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

Interviewee: Kelly Myrick

Interviewer: Charles H. Martin

Project: IOH collection

Location: Glendale, Arizona

Date of Interview: September 14, 2018

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Transcript No.: 1682

Transcriber / Summary: Charles H. Martin

Kelly Myrick was a nationally-ranked hurdler on the 1967 and 1968 UTEP track and field teams. In the spring of 1968 he became the spokesman for a group of black athletes who were kicked off the UTEP squad after boycotting a track meet at Brigham Young University. The ensuing controversy over their action and the athletic department's response brought negative publicity to the university and was part of the so-called "revolt of the black athlete" in the late 1960s.

Myrick begins by describing how UTEP's dynamic young track coach, Wayne Vandenburg, assembled a talented squad of athletes from around the world in order to compete for the indoor and outdoor NCAA track championships. He recalls how in February, 1968, he and five others black UTEP runners, including future Olympic champion Bob Beamon, declined to honor a controversial boycott of the prestigious indoor track meet sponsored by New York Athletic Club, which excluded African Americans from membership. The UTEP athletes competed in the meet, he explains, because they had long-standing plans to visit their friends and families back in the New York City area, not because they opposed such protests. Stung by criticism from black activists over their participation, Myrick and several other team members discussed how to take a public stand against racial discrimination in American society. He relates that following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the group decided to boycott the upcoming track meet at BYU to protest the racially restrictive policies [later abandoned] of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which operated BYU. Because of the boycott, nine and eventually eleven athletes had their scholarships revoked. Myrick recalls how some faculty and staff, including Professor Pauline Kiska and Dean Jimmy Walker, were sympathetic to their situation and helped arrange housing and financial assistance. He also credits many members of El Paso's African American community for their support. Myrick

describes racial discrimination in El Paso at the time and the insensitive racial attitudes of senior administrators in the athletic department. During the summer Myrick chose not to attend the U.S. Olympic trials, explaining that he supported the Olympic boycott campaign led by Harry Edwards.

Length of interview 58 minutes

Length of Transcript n/a

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Date and Place of Interview: September 14, 2018, Glendale, Arizona

Rough Transcript of Interview

QUESTION: What were your coaches and other track athletes like?

KM: I came in 1966. I ran track at UTEP in 1967 and 1968. I was a hurdler, did the 120 high hurdles, and I ran the 440 low hurdles. I may have the records for that at UTEP.

Coming to UTEP was pretty stimulating because I was running with world class athletes. . . . I was a slow guy [compared to them]. They were all amazing, and they pushed me. There were lots of high-level athletes, really amazing runners. That's why they won 14 national titles.

Wayne Vandenburg was a stimulating coach. He could come out at you; he would really get into your face. He was a rewarding kind of coach, a stimulating coach. He had been a psychology major. He taught me the technique of getting close to a person. If you were tough, he'd look you eye to eye. I learned how to do that. He was so cool. He knew how to motivate you. He had graduated from UNM. He was maybe 23. He came across as the kind of guy who could motivate you.

I could have played any sport at UTEP. We used to play in the little gym. I played pickup games with Nevil [Shed], Fred Carr, Willie [Cager], Bob Wallace, Charlie West, and others. We were outstanding athletes. Lots of these guys were drafted by the NFL. They were incredible athletes. I was lucky to interact with all of them, to be their friend.

QUESTION: You came from Connecticut, so what was it like to be an African athlete at El Paso and TWC in 1966 and 1967.

KM: I was looking for the damn horses and cowboys when I got off the plane. Coach told me much later that he knew from the start that I was a unique person. I was the first one he had ever seen at the airport with a book in his hand. That book was *The*

Autobiography of Malcolm X. As a teenager I ran across Malcolm three times in New York but I never conversed with him.

We were limited for available space for social activities at UTEP, so we used the ballroom. We played cards in the dorm basement. I didn't do much socializing until after I got kicked off the track team. Most of us were first generation college students. We didn't know what to expect. Some may have gone to a community college, like Odessa College. The colleges would have been off by themselves, not downtown. We did our thing. We were all into music. I learned a lot about music. That was what we had in common. I didn't really know anything about popular music, but I learned. I had played the drums in junior high and high school. I learned a lot about music from the other guys, about jazz, etc.

QUESTION: The New York Athletic Club (NYAC) track meet in 1968 was very controversial because of Harry Edwards and the Olympic boycott movement, and NYAC was racially exclusive, wasn't it?

KM: That all evolved because most of us were from the East Coast and wanted to go home on a free trip. This was our chance to go home on a free trip. The boycott was something we were all for. But if we wanted to go home and be cool, this was the time to go. But we all supported the (NYAC) boycott, but we wanted to go home.

The boycott tramitized me because I was the first black athlete to participate in any event, because hurdles were always first. Everyone clapped and shit. I wasn't really thrilled about that. They clapped for me. I didn't want to be known as the first [black] athlete to run against the boycott, because I felt like an "Uncle Tom." I didn't appreciate that. It was tragic, because I didn't want that kind of notoriety. That stung. I knew all the other big-time black athletes. We'd all run together at Albuquerque, Texas Relays, etc. They knew me and I knew them. (That's how met Terry Bradshaw at a meet once. He was a great athlete.) They knew I was a tough guy. I carried myself with a lot of weight.

When we went to the [Madison Square] Garden, we got on a bus and went in there. I had no idea if there were protests or not, although we knew that there were supposed to be protestors outside. We weren't exposed to any of that. The other guys felt the same way. We were saddened by the boycott because we were the only school to have black athletes

participating. That bothered us. We all didn't know that all of this was going on, since we came in on the bus, got off, and walked in. Ralph Boston [not from UTEP] did not participate. Our relatives and friends came down to the Garden to see us.

Q: What happened back in El Paso?

When we got back to El Paso, I'm not sure that a lot happened. There wasn't any Facebook, etc. There was no fallout; we were 2,000 miles away. The fallout [later] was about Dr. Martin Luther King. I talked to friends that asked about we just wanted to go home. It was like, "Yeah, man, I understand." The big fallout was after Dr. King's death. The athletes were not really pushing the [Olympic] boycott. Harry Edwards and others were working on the boycott movement; not so much the athletes.

I don't think we went to the indoor nationals. The Texas Relays were different too. Even though there was discrimination in El Paso, like housing, hotels, etc., Austin was clearly a racist place. A local doctor who let me stay at his house after I got kicked off the team said that Austin was so prejudiced that he refused to go back there. Vandenburg had to finagle getting us to be able to stay at a hotel near the capitol. Then Slater almost drowned in the hotel pool—I ended up saving him. That was something; all these black athletes using a white swimming pool. That was a trip.

I was always an independent guy. I was at a movie on Congress St near the capital. I remember it was "A Fist Full of Dollars," with Clint Eastwood. It was a new kind of western [movie]. . . . I walked out of the movie and saw all these black people walking on the sidewalk and I started walking with them and asked questions. They told me Dr. Martin Luther King had been assassinated. That's how I found out.

We ran the next day. I don't think there was a lot of consternation about that. Run and get it over. This was one of the few times that I actually did run [on relay team]. The relay team did well; I think we won and had the second fastest time in the country.

We were the ones completely in charge now and talking about carrying out a boycott. A couple of professors were kind of working with us. We had a big thing at UTEP, with Harry Edwards and Reies Tijerina. Tijerina was my Mexican hero, my man. I got a chance to talk to Harry a little bit about what we were going to do. I also talked to Jack Devore, a newspaper

man. He was the one who came to our meeting and was going to put it on TV. One of the professors knew him well.

There were 9 or 11 of us, and we decided that we didn't want to run against BYU. . . . We had boycotted BYU before. The black women stopped a track meet at Kidd Field with BYU. [This actually happened the week after the BYU meet.] Dean [Jimmy] Walker got involved and helped keep the kids from going to jail. He was cool, a cool white dude, a good dude. Interesting since he was from Oklahoma.

We met and we decided that we did not want to go to Provo and didn't want to run against them because they, the Mormons, thought we were inferior, disciples of the devil. And Martin Luther King has just been assassinated, and that didn't help at all. We thought we needed time to process all of this. The country was in turmoil, the country in mourning, black cities were burning, etc.

Dr. King's death spearheaded all of this. At the time the track team didn't have the same problems like football and basketball athletes did, problems about food, cleaning up the dorm, the white girl issue. The track team never had that kind of issue. We were winners, man! Vandenburg took us all over. Vandenburg was more in line with the athletes; he tried to do what was right for you and help you.

He saw me in high school and asked where I was going to college. I told him probably to Ohio State. He told me that if I'd come to Texas Western he'd take me all over the world—I liked that. That was his rap. What I didn't know was that he'd seen my momma. What was unique about Wayne was he got . . . Dennis Nissan gave Vandenburg about 6 brand new cars and Vandenburg took us on a whirlwind tour, used them to take us to Nebraska, Kansas, Kansas State, Oklahoma, all over the country. He took us to the top schools. I learned that under lots of big football stadiums there were [dorm rooms]. There were not a lot of hotels to stay at. We would stay there. . . .

The interstates were still being built. We drove on I-10 when it was under construction. I-10 in El Paso moved hundreds of black families to the Lower Valley, so we would go out there on Alameda Avenue to parties. They said we couldn't, but we'd drive on

it anyway. It wasn't until after 1970 that Mexican Americans started going into neighborhoods north of I-10.

I didn't want to participate; I didn't want to go to BYU. Beamon didn't want to go, but he was walking the line. . . . I ended up being the leader. I was the one who had to tell Vandenburg we would boycott. I didn't ask to be the leader. [Later] I was the one written up in *Sports Illustrated* and the Jack Olson book. I ended up being the leader, I didn't want to be, but I ended up being the leader because I felt so gung-ho about not going

I wasn't afraid to compete. I was one of the top 3 of hurdlers. They couldn't beat me. The [NYAC] meet was still in my head, and I wanted to make friends. I wanted to show that I wasn't again kowtowing to "the wishes of the man" by running up there. I had more to prove than I did in New York, when they clapped for me for being the first Black person to run. It pissed me off that they clapped for me, because it [the hurdles] was the first event. I didn't want to be the first, didn't want them to clap for me. I was a radical. I had read Malcolm X. I was a black radical on campus.

I told Vandenburg and he asked if I was talking for myself or the entire team, and I said, yes, the entire team. Years later I met him in Austin when I was running a housing program, and he complained that I wouldn't give him any cheap money. I told him he wasn't doing public housing. Eddie Joe Shirley was a white guy who's now in Lubbock. He still goes with the brothers. He goes all over with us. The other athletes, like the ones from Jamaica and the Bahamas, they didn't try to get involved in black American affairs. We were friends, but that was our thing, not theirs.

Lots of the white guys wanted to know what this was about. We talked to them. We said we were not anti-white, just anti-Brigham Young. They felt that here we have a really good team, and now all of a sudden . . . it gave them a bad feeling. A lot of the white athletes were from Australia or Brazil. I think they were sympathetic to how we felt as black athletes, because they came from different countries.

The school's attitudes was, "We're going to get these *Nigras* [*Nig-rahs*]." That's how they talked. We were *Nigras*. McCarty was that way. I don't think Bowden was quite that way. The former coach from West Point, he wasn't racial with the [N] word, but he was racial

with our culture. He said we couldn't get enough to eat, always hungry, liked fried chicken, collard greens were bad, etc.

We didn't really feel the scholarship thing. I don't know what time we realized that, hey man, they might take away our scholarships. Then the black community in town came together to raise money for us.

They [the team] went up there [to Provo]. John Nicols got into a fight with folks in Provo. When he came back I think he was upset with himself because he went. John was a real radical. He was a provocateur He was something else. Maybe a couple of guys got into fights because they went up there, didn't have their heads on straight . . . He was always radicalized. I don't remember if he went to our meeting or not. . . .

Most of us [finished] the semester. I guess that meant that we didn't have tutors any more. I don't know if we could go to the training table. I think we moved [to another dorm]. . . . I don't really know. The local black community members responded okay, but they didn't respond to me because now I was a total radical. They didn't accept me into the Omegas, so I never got into a fraternity. Not that I really wanted to; I didn't really understand what that was really about. I was a radical. . . . I guess I was. I was radical when George Wallace came to the city . . . downtown meetings . . . go down and break them up.

One [teammate] went to Ohio State and graduated, another down went to Texas Southern and got his B.A. and his masters. I think Beamon went off to Florida and then New York and got his degree. David Morgan, who was the captain of the track team at the time, he finished his degree at UTEP. I think Larry Page . . . he went blind at 22 and became smarter than ever. After that he got A's, he could play the drums, play the piano but he couldn't do it before. He could do it now; he could do everything!

The faculty members were pretty good except one guy. I had a math teacher who tried to ramrod me. Some of the other faculty members were getting on basketball players because they were with white women. They got after the white women because they couldn't get the players, wanted them off the team. Haskins and the whole university came down on them.

With the track athletes, it was great, because we had Mrs. Pauline Kiska, a Russian teacher. She took in two of the athletes. A doctor took me in. Dr. Bornstein took another athlete. Faculty members like Paul Grocer and Kevin O'Neal, Wingate, there were a lot of good people. Brad Barty—they were good folks. It was rough at first. There was Dr. or Mr. Winn [or Webb], he was a Spanish teacher. . . . Dean Walker was very sympathetic. Even Joe Ray, who was the president back then, he was a pretty good guy too. He really was.

I think this was UTEP's first attempt to deal with black athletes in numbers. Up to then there were one or two basketball players, like Brown in 1956, and I came 10 years later. Now there were more, and they were winning. I never thought about it being a challenge to their authority. I think they just didn't want to see athletes, especially black athletes, to be able to pull off that kind of boycott and have that strength of unity. I'm sure McCarty was putting a lot of pressure on Vandenburg. Vandenburg had created what he wanted to do—he had created the best track team in the country. He knew it. He tried to deal with us on a rational basis, but at the same time you knew he was dealing with the establishment. He didn't even have a place to stay. He stayed in the football dorm with his wife, who was a millionaire. . . .

QUESTION: Did you ever talk to Beamon about the Olympics? He came back to the campus after the games and was honored by the students with "Bob Beamon Day," even though he had been kicked off the track team.

Beamon was inducted into the [UTEP] athletic hall of fame some 7 or 8 years ago. In 1986 I was the black alumnus of the year. It's all written down. . . . Beamon was still here. Beamon's wife Bertha was working in El Paso. That was another tragic story--you couldn't [rent] a house easily. You had to go way out to the Northeast. . . . He was a gifted athlete. Beamon could have played basketball too. He could leap! . . . I could have gone to the Olympics, but we were boycotting. [Kareem] Abdul-Jabbar, Calvin Murphy, others, [didn't go]. I had interest in going to the Olympics, but then Dr. King, the BYU thing, Harry Edwards, etc., pushing the boycott. That was a big thing to the athletes who were really concerned about injustices and inequities going on in the country. A lot of athletes just didn't want to participate. People in Connecticut were bragging about how I would be in the Olympics.

I wasn't surprised Beamon went. I was surprised that we actually had 7 UTEP athletes at the Olympics, an Australian, two or three from the Bahamas, 1 from the Dominican Republic, Bob [Beamon]. I'm missing one.

I didn't know Tommy Smith that well; I just knew he could haul it. I knew John Carlos a little, met in 1966. He came to East Texas [State College], and we would see each other occasionally. I was proud of Bob, because we ran together and did things together, and also Tommy Smith and John Carlos. The night before they did this, my friend from the Dominican Republic, Jose L'Official, told us they all met that night, and Tommy Smith and John Carlos said that they were going to do this [the so-called "black power" salute on the awards stand].

I was proud of Bob. I never had any regrets about not going to the Olympic [trials]. I would have been one of them or an alternate. Vandenburg always liked to tell the newspapers that I was a world class hurdler. That was pretty good. [laughs]

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