

Reggie Jones - Saginaw 1973



At 6-3½, Reggie Jones seemed destined to be a basketball star. That was his primary sport at Arthur Eddy Junior High, though as a 9th grader in junior high track he would usually win the 60 and 100 and sometimes the shot put.

He moved up to Saginaw High as a sophomore, making waves with a 67-yard touchdown run against Arthur Hill in an otherwise disappointing 2-7 football season. In the winter, he played forward for the basketball team. In his first outdoor track meet, he impressed by winning the 800 in 2:06.5, the 100 in 10.0, the 220 in 23.5 and anchoring the winning 4x2 (1:34.6). At the end of his 10th grade season, he had bests of 10.0 and 22.1, placing 6th in the Class A 100 and 5th in the 220.

During football his junior year, he tore a ligament in his knee—it would be an injury that would come back to haunt him in the most important moment of his track career. That 11th grade season, he still ran on it, though it hurt. He won his first state titles, 9.8 in the 100 and 21.6 in the 220, as Saginaw finished 5 points behind Oak Park in the team standings.

As a senior, Jones rode the bench in basketball as the Trojans lost 66-60 to Detroit Southwestern in the Class A basketball finals. He was obviously ready to show he could perform. Two days later, he showed up at track practice for the first time all year. That was a Monday. On Wednesday he opened his season with a blazing 9.6 dual meet victory, legal wind.

When Coach Claude Marsh asked about his goals in life, Jones told him he wanted to be a truck driver. “Coach kept trying to talk to me about track and college.” In late April, he signed with Tennessee. Then he led Saginaw to its first state title in 24 years, winning the 100 in a meet record 9.6, the 220 in 21.1 and anchoring the winning 4x2. He then went to the International Prep Invitational in Prospect, Illinois, the forerunner of today’s high school national championship meets. He placed only 4th in the 220 at the, running 21.6. He did not make the top 5 in the 100.

Despite all his high school success, Jones stunned the world with how fast he developed in college. As a Tennessee frosh, he led the Vols to the 1974 NCAA title, winning the 100 in a wind-aided 9.18 (after a meet record 9.34 heat) and taking 2nd in the 220 in a wind-aided 20.0. He was named the outstanding athlete of the meet.

At the AAU Nationals, he placed 3rd in 10.1 as Steve Williams tied the World Record of 9.9. He followed up with a 3rd in the 200 in 20.7—he was the first American. Then, in the big U.S. versus the USSR meet, he won the 100 in the rain in 10.23 over Steve Williams, who held the World Record. The next day in the 200, he ran 20.81w to beat the Olympic champion, Valeriy Borzov. That season he ranked No. 4 in the world at 100 (No. 2 U.S.) and No. 5 at 200 (No. 1 U.S.).

At the 1975 NCAA, he placed 3rd in 9.44 as Eastern Michigan's Hasley Crawford, the next Olympic champion, won. He took the victory in the 220 in 20.60. At the AAU meet, he finished 3rd in 20.59 but was the first American. He would rank No. 6 in the world at 200 for the year (No. 3 U.S.), and No. 5 in the U.S. for the 100.

On July 26, 1975, Jones won the 100 at the Opportunities Industrialization Centers Relays (catchy name, huh?) in Boston. All three watches caught him in a World Record-tying 9.9, but the IAAF refused to ratify the record, saying the timing was suspect. A year later, the IAAF stopped ratifying hand-timed sprints altogether.

In the Olympic year, 1976, Jones was NCAA runner-up in 10.33 for 100 meters to Harvey Glange, who would be an Olympic medalist. He also ran on the winning 4 x 100. However, in the 200 semis, Jones pulled up and jogged in—the first public indication that his old football injury had come back to haunt him. “What’s wrong with Reggie Jones?” showed up as a discussion in Track & Field News.

The knee pain grew worse. In the Trials 100, he faded near the end to place 7th in 10.29. In the 200, he failed to make the finals. He ended up ranking No. 4 in the U.S., No. 10 in the world. Still good numbers, but he would never get to the Olympics. The cruel irony is that he surely would have made the Olympic podium if the Games had been held two years earlier, before his knee started to fail.

He had surgery in December to alleviate the pain that stemmed from the old injury. Doctors found much more damage than they expected, probably caused by running on it before it had healed correctly. He would miss the entire 1977 season.

In 1978 he tried to come back for a delayed senior year. He ran only 10.55 in the 100, and rather than being the No. 1 sprinter in the NCAA, he was No. 4 on the Volunteer squad. He said, “I feel good about starting over at the bottom and working my way up. I’ve had to do it just like people with no talent. I’m better for the experience. It would have been easier to quit. I could have said, ‘I can’t run anymore’ and that would have been it. I have my records. Those good times are on the books. What happened in ’74 is mine forever.

“Not knowing how bad my knee was helped. I thought it was just hurting. I didn’t want it to be an alibi, so I tried harder.”

Jones left the sport when he graduated from Tennessee. He missed the chance not just to represent the United States in the Olympics, but to go on the circuit and make money (yes, it was pre-professional track, but the top sprinters were all making bank). He missed the chance to compete in the World Championships, where he could have shined while still healthy—that meet wouldn’t be inaugurated till 1983. And quite likely, Jones would have been able to recover from that knee injury with modern sports medicine. In every sense, he was a victim of bad timing.

Jones later became a teacher and coach at Hillcrest High in Memphis, Tennessee. He made a practice of hardly ever mentioning his sports accomplishments. “I don’t talk about myself because that’s something Claude Marsh taught us. He not only trained us, he taught us about life and how it’s all about the children.”

He added, “Everybody has their time. I had mine. Sure, track runners today make millions... I might not have money to show for what I did back in the day, but I wouldn’t change a thing.”