

Paul McMullen – Cadillac 1990



Paul McMullen wasn't a superstar while at Cadillac High School. He only won a single state title, in the 1990 Class B 1600 at 4:19.9. To put that in perspective, in the 30+ years since then, the race has never gone that slow. He didn't run cross country at Cadillac, explaining, "In high school, you want to be separate from the runners, because you think they're wimpy. I was a football man. I didn't want to be recognized as a runner."

Yet the 1600 captured his imagination. He told his coach he wanted to do it as a 9th-grader, but his knees hurt too much because of growing pains. It wasn't until his junior year that he started going 4 laps, hitting 4:36. The only recruiter who saw the potential in him was Eastern Michigan's Bob Parks. After a redshirt first year, the 6-2/175 McMullen started producing for the Hurons, winning the Central Collegiates. As a sophomore he ran 3:40.96 and made All-American. The next year he placed 4th at NCAAs. His senior year, 1995, he placed 2nd to Kevin Sullivan in a memorable showdown.

That was the year McMullen broke out on the world stage. Under Parks' guidance, he won the USATF nationals, edging East Kentwood alum Brian Hyde at the line as both ran 3:43.90. At the World Championships in Sweden, he made the final and placed 10th in a PR 3:38.23. He slashed that down to 3:35.87 at Zürich, then 3:34.45 in Cologne.

In 1996, we wrote about his first Worlds, and the account tells much about what kind of racer he was:

In McMullen's first international championship race ever, the heats of the 1500, the young American found himself a well-back 9th with 200m left. Only the top 5 would advance to the semifinal. McMullen charged around the turn and came up fast behind the one-time World Champion. Bile saw him coming and whacked him across the chest with his arm. "He

hit me real, real hard. Hard enough to where if I were 50 pounds lighter, I would have been on my back.”

Instead, the determined 23-year-old didn't lose a stride. He passed several more runners and got the final qualifying spot. Bile didn't make it. The semis gave fans another opportunity to watch the rookie, fresh out of Eastern Michigan, show what he was made of. With 500m left, just as he was beginning his charge from the back of the pack, two runners fell in front of him. McMullen got tangled in the knot of legs and went down also. He jumped up and blazed his last lap in 52 seconds-plus. He again earned the last qualifying spot and was the only American to make the final. The two others who fell came home last.

In the World Championships final, McMullen ran aggressively. “My goal going in there was not to just sit and kick at the end. I said, ‘I'm going to the front of the darn thing and I'm going to slow it down.’ I wanted to put the brakes on it. Well, you got 45,000 people cheering for you and it's pretty damn hard to slow it down.” McMullen led to nearly 800m and was in good position with a lap to go, but he got cut off by eventual bronze winner Vénuste Niyongabo of Burundi, and then spiked on the last lap. He ended up 10th.

“I learned a lot,” he says of the experience. “I'm glad I had to go through that.”

The next season was his first year as a pro and he won the Olympic Trials in 3:43.86, his winning margin just 0.02 as he showed just how dangerous he could be in a kicker's race (800 went by in 2:06.42). At the Olympics, he got stuck in his semi and missed the final. *Track & Field News* ranked him as the top U.S. performer at 1500/mile.

In 1997, after a 3:58.61 mile indoors, he experienced the freak injury that would present his biggest challenge. Mowing the grass on a hillside, he slipped and caught his foot under the blades, severing most of two toes. The comeback proved to be extraordinarily difficult, since he had to adapt to a new footstrike and stride.

The next year, he was again a force, winning the USATF Indoor mile in 3:55.84 and 3rd in the nationals 1500. He ran the mile distance 8 times, each of them under 4:00. Both 1999 and 2000 did not live up to his expectations, and he didn't get a chance to make a second Olympic team, finishing 10th in his Olympic Trials preliminary heat.

In 2001 he came roaring back, again earning honors as the top U.S. 1500 runner of the year. He placed 3rd at nationals, then ran a lifetime best 3:33.89 in Monaco. At the World Championships he placed 10th. Along the way he clocked his fastest mile ever, 3:54.94 in London. His 800 PR, 1:45.71, came in his last race of the season, in Berlin.

The 2004 season would be his final one at a high level. He clocked a best of 3:39.52 as well as a 3:58.60 mile, but did not better than 10th in the Olympic Trials semis.

Afterward, he was a familiar and friendly face on the Michigan running season, finding special joy in coaching youth with his Chariots of Fire club.

In March 2021, McMullen tragically died at age 49 in a skiing accident.