

William Porter – Jackson 1942



In 1941, Jackson High had a pretty decent track program. Under coach Fred Janke (no relation, as far as I can tell, to later Viking coach Charlie Janke), the Vikings finished 3rd in the old 5-A League, and they had a state mile champion in Jay Woolsey (father to current Lumen Christi head Mike).

If Janke had a good eye for recruiting talent in the halls, would he have even noticed William Porter? He did no sports, and he didn't cut an athletic figure (later on, puberty sent his height skyrocketing to 6-3). The only picture we have of Porter from those days is of a small fellow slumped in his chair during a student council photo.

After his sophomore year at Jackson, Porter's parents (his dad was a doctor) decided to send him to an exclusive East Coast prep school, the Hill School in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. There he had to finally try a sport, as the school rules required it. First he tried baseball, but he got cut. So he had to join the track team. He showed up in the newspapers for the first time with a 1943 dual meet win in the 220-yard low hurdles in 26.8.

His senior year he found some success, winning the 60-yard dash in at the AAU Interscholastic Championships (yes, there was a high school indoor nationals back then) in 6.4, 2nd in the high hurdles, and 4th in the long jump with a 19-4.75 effort. He was voted the best athlete of the meet and given a watch.

Porter opted to head back home for college and started out at Western Michigan. As a freshman in 1945, he immediately became a winner for the Broncos, taking three events in an indoor contest against Notre Dame. Outdoors he again hit the Irish hard, winning the 100 yards in 9.9, the highs in 15.5 and the 220 lows in 25.0. At the NCAA Championships, he placed 3rd in the high hurdles and 5th in the lows.

Despite his success in Kalamazoo, Porter transferred to Northwestern for the rest of his college career. At the next Big 10 meet, he placed 2nd in the lows and 3rd in the highs.

In 1947, he placed 2nd to Harrison Dillard at the NCAA meet in both the highs and the lows (22.5). At the end of the year, a new publication called Track & Field News put out its first set of World Rankings, and named Porter No. 2 in his event.

1948 saw Porter 2nd in the NCAA's again, this time to Arkansas's Clyde Scott in a windy 13.8. Then in July, Porter finally won his first major race, hurdling 14.1 to take the AAU title in an upset victory over Dillard, the World Record holder who had won 82 straight races. In the Olympic Trials the following week, the heavily-favored Dillard slammed into the second and fourth hurdles hard and stopped at the seventh barrier. That left Porter to streak to the win by two yards in 13.9.

From a newspaper report of the time: "Porter, the six-foot three-inch, 150-pound son of a Jackson, Mich., physician, comes closest to being the exception proving the rule [that a great hurdler must be a solid sprinter]. At Hill School, he was too slow for sprinting [the author didn't notice that he was a national 60 champ in high school].

"Young Porter gives veteran coach Frank Hill of Northwestern full credit for developing him into an Olympic winner. Hill saw that Porter would have to make up in form for whatever speed he lacked, so turned him into a picture hurdler. He placed frames on top of hurdles, and made the former Navy ensign jump through them without scraping his shins or bumping his head."

"The result was a diving technique, with both hands extended as he sailed over a barrier. The average hurdler extends only the left hand."

Prior to his two victories over Dillard, Porter had lost to him in all 11 of their races. Dillard, meanwhile, crafted his own legend, placing 3rd in the Trials 100 and then becoming the surprise gold medalist in the sprint. Four years later he would finally win Olympic hurdle gold.

At the London Olympics, Porter won his semi by equaling the Olympic record of 14.1. Then he took sole ownership of the record with his 13.9 win in the final, leading a sweep for Team USA in front of 75,000 fans in Wembley Stadium.

Porter told *Track & Field News*, "I got off fast and I thought I had the race won. Then I hit the third hurdle and by the time we reached the sixth hurdle I was two yards behind Craig [Dixon]. Right then I thought he had me beat, but he made a mistake over the eighth hurdle and I had him for keeps. Record or not, it was a sloppily-run race. I'm surprised it was that fast. My 14.1 semi-final somehow felt faster."

Said Dixon, who finished 3rd, "in the middle of the race, I was leading. I was feeling good and thought I had the race won. That was my big mistake. At the last hurdle I was a little high, and I just wasn't driving to the tape, and he passed me. It was the first photo finish of the Olympic Games."

Shortly after the Games, Porter won the hurdles in 14.0 in a dual meet between the United States and the British Empire. That was the last race of his career. At the age of 22, he retired from sports, telling reporters, "I have a wife and no job."

September 16, 1948 was declared Bill Porter Day in Jackson, and both the champion and coach Hill came to town to address his fans.

Porter went on to a career in the hospital supply business. He died in California on March 10, 2000, at age 73.