



Bob Burns sits in a writer's natural habitat: a café.

PHOTO BY JAMES RAIK

Trial by forest

Bob Burns was indoctrinated at an early age into what have become two lifelong interests: journalism and track and field. His parents met as newspaper reporters in Reno, and he and his father both worked at The Bee for many years. When Burns was 11, his father took the family to Echo Summit in Eldorado National Forest to watch the 1968 Olympic trials unfold. The high-elevation track was used to acclimatize the team to the conditions in Mexico City, the event's host city.

A month after the trials, the U.S. team won 12 gold medals in the 1968 Olympic Games. Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who placed first and third in the 200-meter dash, raised their fists on the awards podium as a protest during an era of social unrest. It's among the most iconic images in sports, one that Burns will never forget—but the freeze-frame wasn't why Burns wrote *The Track in the Forest*. It focuses on how the 1968 U.S. Olympic team was built. SN&R sat down with the former reporter, now a SMUD public information officer, to talk about his passion for track and field.

You've spent a lot of your career as a daily journalist. What was it like writing a book?

When I was at The Bee, every once in a while you go to write a monster feature, like the history of Notre Dame football or whatever. I had to write 10 of those monster features in one chapter. It was hard to get my hands around that. But it gave me a lot of freedom. It was a challenge, but it was fun. I had the bulk of the book done in four months.

What was the thought process of coordinating the book the 50th anniversary of the Olympic trials at Echo Summit?

I had thought about writing a book about the 1968 Olympic team for about 10 to 15 years. I'd written some features for The Bee on the subject, so I had a pretty good knowledge of it. What really triggered it was that some other books came out about the political part of the '68 team. They were decent. I read them and thought, "Well, that's already sort of been done."

I spearheaded the effort to get the track registered as a California historical landmark. In June 2014, 11 of the athletes were up there for the ceremony. The guys were great. I hung out with them for a couple of days. It was in conjunction with the national meet here [in Sacramento]. I just thought, "Maybe I could do a book on the Echo Summit trials." I had a lot of notes.

Did you think about your father a lot while writing the book?

Yes. We used to go to all of the meets. He took me to a U.S.-Russia meet in 1971 at Berkeley, so that's how I really got into it. He got me a subscription to Track & Field News; I've gotten it every year since 1971.

What are your memories of going to the Olympic Trials with your family?

My sisters didn't want to go, but I did. My father had press passes from The Bee. I remember the setting among all of the trees. My father noticed Jay Silvester [then the discus world record-holder] and said I should ask him for his autograph. I didn't know who he was. I went up to him with this press pass. I was 11 years old. He looked at me and said "Are you with the media? I don't like media." Then he laughed. I lost the autograph. I wish I still had it. □

You can order a copy of Burns' *The Track in the Forest: The Creation of a Legendary US Olympic Team* from Chicago Review Press for \$26.99.



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