

## Glen Cunningham

1909 - 1988



Glenn Cunningham was born August 4, 1909 in Atlanta, Kansas, to Harry C. and Rosa A. Cunningham. The family moved often, usually by horse and buggy or covered wagon. They finally settled in the southwest corner of Kansas, living in Rolla and later Elkhart.

The seven Cunningham children always ran. Everyone in the countryside seemed to run, both children and adults; it was their favorite diversion and principal means of travel.

On cold winter mornings, the task of building a fire in the schoolhouse stove fell customarily upon the first-to-arrive, usually Glenn's older brother, Floyd. On February 9, 1917 Floyd was unaware that the night before, the literary club had left some burning embers in the stove. Someone had also put gasoline (used to light the lamps) in the same five-gallon can that normally contained kerosene used to light the fire.

Placing dried cow chips over what he thought were dead ashes, Floyd poured on what he thought was kerosene, only to be greeted by an explosive gust of flames striking him full force in the chest and abdomen. Glenn, standing in another aisle, had his pants set on fire. Escaping the burning building, they rolled in the sand to put out the fire. Then, afraid that they would have to pay for the schoolhouse, they ran the two miles home.

With no hospital available, the boys were cared for at home by the local doctor and family. Glenn's pain from the burns on his legs was sheer agony; he cried incessantly. Floyd seemed calmer, though he shook. He did not seem to be in as much pain; the burns went deep into his body cavity, destroying sensory nerves.

Having previously injured his feet and ankles by jumping off a roof, the fire no doubt damaged them further. They remained weak all his life; he was never able stand on his toes.

Neighbors remembered Floyd singing and telling Glenn stories to try to help him forget the incessant pain. Keeping the wounds clean was a painful ordeal; chunks of muscle were pulled off each time the bandages were changed. At no time was there any infection; amputation was never considered, according to the doctor's nurse. Later stories of threatened amputation may have risen from Glenn's mother voicing her own fears.

Floyd steadily grew quieter; on the ninth day, he died. Glenn remained in critical condition for six weeks; the doctor doubted he would ever walk normally again.

With dogged determination, Glenn forced himself to walk again. Month after month, he instinctively massaged and stretched the remaining leg muscles until he could at last stand, hanging on to a chair. After nearly a year, he taught himself to walk again. The next year, he walked and ran by hanging onto the tail of a mule or horse to steady himself.

Schooling was delayed by the injuries and the family moving so often. But he never lost his eagerness to learn. To Glenn, studying was exciting and he loved school. He also was intolerant of bullies, often standing up for other children by "knocking the stuffing out" of the bullies. Glenn later lived by two rules, which he called his "bull-headedness:" "Never falter in allegiance to what you have figured out is right. Never change till you find out you were wrong."

Instead of taking his lunch to school, he ran the four miles home and back every day, harboring a secret dream to some day run in the Olympics. His legs, though improved tremendously, continued at times to suddenly give way. He could never wholly count on them.

Beginning high school at eighteen, Glenn graduated with honors three years later in 1930. His parents, opposed to any kind of athletics as a waste of time, were also opposed to Glenn's continued schooling, thinking he should drop out and get a job to help out at home. In spite of this, he completed high school while working various jobs around town to help his family out, anything from turkey-plucking to wheat harvesting. He competed successfully in most of the sports offered by his school.

Working his way through college, Glenn attended the University of Kansas. Afterwards, he earned his masters and PhD degrees as well – all during the depression and dust bowl when money and jobs were scarce. Education was too important to him to waste opportunity.

During his running days, Glenn was given various nicknames, including the "Kansas Flyer", "The Kansas Cyclone", and the "Iron Man of Kansas."

People admired Cunningham as much for his character as for his accomplishments. A particularly good sportsman who never denigrated the performances of others, his humility endeared him to sports columnists. A strong opponent of smoking and drinking (he didn't even drink soda pop), fans would dutifully extinguish their cigarettes out of respect for Cunningham during his races.

Glenn married Margaret Speir of Peabody in July 1934. They honeymooned in the Orient while Glenn captained the U. S. track team. To this union was born two daughters. The marriage later ended in divorce. He married a second time, to Ruth Maxine Sheffield in 1947; to this marriage was born 10 children.

Following graduation from the University of Kansas, Cunningham earned his master's degree in physical education at the University of Iowa and his Ph.D. from New York University.

During World War II, Glenn enlisted in the U. S. Navy. Medical examiners, noting his scarred legs, told him that he'd never be able to withstand the rigors of basic training. Then someone called out to Glenn by name; the examiners, realizing who it was they had just "flunked", were quick to reverse their opinion! Following officer's training school, he established the Navy's physical fitness program. He also visited navy men suffering burn wounds, sharing his own experience with them.

After discharge from the service, Glenn and his wife opened their home to disadvantaged young people. Operating a youth ranch, they guided over 8,000 abandoned, abused and delinquent boys and girls into productive lives. Cunningham once said his work with young people had given him far more satisfaction than his athletic achievements, saying, "There is nothing as important as a child."

On March 10, 1988, after hauling a load of hay bales to animals on his ranch, he was returning to the house for a tank of water for the animals. He apparently had a heart seizure while driving the old truck, slowly drifting to the side of the road where he died. He was 78.

Fellow competitor Gene Venzke once said, "The 'seasoned' athlete of stature is very conscious of what he can contribute to the future athlete who will be taking his place. Being a 'good example' is the lasting quality of a great athlete. Glenn Cunningham was a shining example of that virtue. The only way anything in life progresses is through the process of the older person's experience and knowledge being passed on to the younger ones."

Cunningham was a member of the University of Kansas' highest scholastic honor society, Schem. His scholastic record placed him 5th in his graduating class.