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Surprise

# Small park in old town Surprise honors 3 Olympic track talents

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By Richard Smith, Today Staff

It's a fairly nondescript, blue-hued park in an alleyway on the eastern end of Surprise's Original Town Site, with paint peeled off its basketball court.

Decades-old houses, vacant lots and a large water tank are among the neighbors of Three Star Park. Only small plaques at the park's entrance and on the wall of the restroom are outward signs of the story that makes this small park in an almost forgotten corner of the city special.

The journey of this park and the three stars it's named after began in the neighborhood that once was all of Surprise. From there the legend went to Dysart High School, tracks and long jump pits throughout the state and country, then to Seattle and Los Angeles and almost to Moscow.

This story spans 1975 to 1989 and is a largely unknown tale to the new city that sprung up west of here since.

LaMonte King, LaNorris "Crickett" Marshall and Tim Williams — three cousins from a then-tiny farming town west of Phoenix — were poised to make the United States national track and field squad. Their best chance to sprint and jump in the Olympics was dashed by the 1980 boycott of the games in the then-Soviet Union.

"We put Surprise on the map," Crickett Marshall said. "We were just dirt boys that were able to run and jump with anybody in the world."

### Dysart days

Chester Marshall bought 5 acres in what was then named, but not incorporated, as North El Mirage. That was enough to bring along all his children and their

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Nick Cote

### Three Star Park

Tim Williams of Surprise, with his mother, Minnie, at Three Star Park in Surprise. The park was named after Williams and his two cousins, LaNorris "Crickett" Marshall and LaMonte King, who were Olympic-class track athletes in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1980 Moscow Olympic boycott derailed their best chance. (Nick Cote/Daily News-Sun)

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growing families. The three stars are all Marshall's grandchildren.

King is the oldest, graduating from Dysart High in 1977, Williams' freshman year. Marshall graduated in 1978 and Tim in 1980.

Dysart track did not begin with this trio. During Roy Fenton's state and national hall of fame coaching career, the Demons won the 1972, 1973, 1974 and 1976 state 3A track titles and 1977 and 1980 4A state titles. They also finished as runner-up twice more in that decade.

The cousins didn't remain Surprise's secret for long, taking the Phoenix track scene by storm as they battled — and beat — bigger schools.

"They might not have known where Surprise was, but they knew who Dysart was," Tim Williams said.

The cousins traveled to meets in California, Chicago and New Mexico. Dysart track meets became events with more than just friends and family traveling around the Valley with the team.

Four decades later, Fenton still cherishes his Dysart memories, especially since the school, which served a largely poor, rural area, often received an unfair rap.

"I wouldn't trade Dysart High School for any place in Arizona," Fenton said. "The kids had wonderful attitudes and great work ethic. It didn't have the best reputation from people who had no idea what it was actually like."

### **Olympic dreams dashed**

A Dysart parent stationed at Luke Air Force Base introduced King and Marshall to Bruce Frankie, then coach at Washington High School and now an assistant at Grand Canyon University. They trained with South Mountain star and 17-year-old 1976 Montreal Olympics bronze medalist Dwayne Evans.

King said Fenton gave them a foundation in terms of conditioning and structured training for each event, which was rare in the 70s. Frankie added to this base by teaching them advanced running techniques.

By 1980, King was a star at Arizona State, the AAU national champion 200-meter runner and top five in the long jump. Marshall had just finished at Mesa Community College and was posting top-five national times in both sprints.

And after just finishing his senior year at Dysart, Tim leaped into the elite class. He won the national youth title that summer and was posting marks that made him a contender for an Olympic spot, as well as a football recruit.

But President Jimmy Carter announced the boycott in January and it was finalized by May, turning the Olympic trials into a routine meet.

King placed fourth in the 200 meters and eighth in the long jump. Marshall ran the 100 and 200 on a broken foot and did not place. Tim stayed home.

At ages from 20 and 18 at the time, Marshall and Williams did not realize they had missed their best chance for an Olympic berth.

"At that time you heard about going to war with Russia and (East) Germany, so I didn't want to go there anyway. I figured we would get held hostage," Tim Williams said. "It wasn't a letdown, but I thought I'd have another chance. I don't think about it now, I moved on."

At age 21, King said he had a better idea that in the days before advanced medical procedures and therapies, the window was closing fast.

"I was very disappointed and I didn't understand many things politically. What little I did know was that in the ancient times wars stopped for the Olympics and now we weren't going to the Olympics because of the (Afghanistan) war," King said. "I also knew the shorter you go in the sprint, the shorter the life cycle."

### **One chance**

King was right. He earned his finance degree from ASU and moved to Los Angeles in 1982 to work for First Interstate Bank. By then a groin injury and the wear of competing in four events had compromised his career and he didn't have the financial backing of contemporaries like Carl Lewis.

Marshall went to the University of Washington, setting the school record in the 100 in 1981. He redshirted in 1982 to continue construction work and support his wife and young son. As a senior in 1983, he was part of a 4x100-meter relay team that still holds the school record.

But by 1984 his marriage was on the rocks and he had largely stopped sprinting and lost sponsors. The university paid for the final year of classes he needed for his degree and he remained in Seattle, working in shipping and handling, coaching high school track and offering speed training.

A scholarship mix-up ended Tim's ASU career before it began. He ran two years at Glendale Community College but by the time the 1984 Olympic buildup rolled around, he was a father, working and semi-retired from track.

Tim stayed in the OTS and works for a local asphalt company. He helped his mother, Maddie's, efforts to place a park in the east side of town.

### **Three Stars, Eight Years**

Maddie Williams said Surprise's only park at that time was Gaines on Nash Street. She and other parents believed it was too far and too dangerous to walk to for their kids.

In the mid-1980s, Surprise worked with the California railroad to get a commission for two 4-foot by 8-foot signs proclaiming "Surprise, the home of three star athletes," and listed their names. One sign went up on Grand Avenue and Greenway Road but had to come down fairly quickly after spray painters tagged it.

The city never put the other sign up, instead deciding to name three streets in the Original Town Site after the boys.

Surprise did not have money to build the park and meetings stopped by 1985. But Minnie Williams did not.

"About eight years later, I said 'I'm not going to stop this time. We're going to work until we get it in,'" Minnie Williams said. "LaMonte's mom (Undean Byrd) and Cricket's mom and dad (Norris Marshall and Shirley Marshall Wyatt) met with us as did some people in the community. We didn't stop until we got the money raised to put the park in. The city came up with a little money, APS donated the lights."

Then-councilman John Rosales was a driving force in establishing the park. Resident Alphonso Cisneros poured the cement for the basketball court and donors provided the merry-go-round and other park equipment.

The Sun City Soroptimist, Lions and Rotary clubs pitched in to raise funds, as did several local businesses. The boys' families and friends in the town site raised money through dances, volleyball and softball tournaments and car washes.

In 1987, longtime Dysart district superintendent Al Northern donated the land on the corner of Jerry Street and Marshall Drive. It was a former Luke barracks and the site of a segregated Dysart school, which Minnie Williams briefly attended before integration.

Surprise officials dedicated Three Star Park in November 1989.

### **Their roots**

Crickett Marshall still has a share of the Arizona high school 100-meter dash

record at 10.33 seconds and owns numerous Class 3A records outright. Lamont King's long jump of 25 feet 9 3/4 inches was the state record until 2009 and is still in the top five. Tim Williams surpassed that mark just after he finished at Dysart.

Williams said it's amazing to see he and his cousins' names in the state record books, given how many more people live in Arizona now and how advanced track equipment has become through the years.

On the flip side, there were no cellphones or video games growing up in Surprise in the '70s. Sports in the area was strictly do it yourself. Marshall remembers racing younger and older cousins in the over driveway of his father's wrecking yard or on the dirt of El Mirage Road.

Empty tires were hurdles, leftover flour made lanes. Sticks and a mattress made a high jump.

For King and Marshall, track was a way out of the old Surprise. After his banking career, King went into ministry and is now senior pastor at Friendship Baptist Church in South Central Los Angeles and professor at two Bible colleges. He said none of it would have happened without his athletic scholarship.

"My dad died when I was in fifth grade. My mom raised seven boys and one girl as a single parent, working in nursing homes in Sun City," King said.

Marshall remarried, worked and raised his family in metro Seattle. He got over the disappointment of 1980 through coaching young sprinters. Like King, track opened doors for him.

A work injury forced him to collect disability and he now walks with a cane. Marshall said he'd like to set up a double-wide as a vacation home in the old neighborhood and give back to his family and the park. King said he intends to retire in the Valley and give back.

"It's a nice park and if there's new things or a good attraction maybe more kids play there and get their start," Marshall said. "I'd like to spend time with the aunts and uncles that helped with money to send us all those places."

Surprise Community and Recreation Services Director Mark Coronado said there have been no recent discussions to refurbish or upgrade the park.

The Williams' said they're not pushing for major improvements to the park just up the street, because 26 years later, it's still frequently used by neighborhood kids and families.

"Everybody uses it – black, white and Hispanic. It's cool. They're always doing something there," Tim Williams said.

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