

**INTERVIEW WITH JOHN C. WILLIAMS
CONDUCTED BY TOM SCOTT
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TELEPHONE INTERVIEW**

TS: John, why don't you start out talking about yourself and how you got to the University of Tennessee? I guess you came in the fall of 1966, and the spring of 1967 was your freshman year in track at the University of Tennessee, if I remember correctly. I think you were a walk-on to the track team weren't you? Why don't you talk about yourself and what you had done in high school and what brought you to the University of Tennessee?

JW: Okay. I had run just two years in high school and had set four school records at East High, a small school in Memphis—nothing of any great note or anything, just records for that school. My senior year, though, I was not eligible. So I did not run track at all my senior year in high school. But I wanted to run track, so when I went to Tennessee, the spring before my freshman year, I went by the campus on a weekend when they had juniors come in and so forth, and ran down Coach Rohe, and asked him if I could go out for the track team. He was great as always and positive in everything and gave me this incredible workout sheet which blew me away, but I took it.

Anyway, I showed up that fall. I was a quarter-miler, and I ran those two years: the fall of 1966 and spring of 1967 and '67-'68. Then after that, I got elected president of Morrill Hall, the first co-ed dorm in the South. They had 800 students [in the dormitory], half of which were women, and then the next year I got involved in Big Brothers of Knoxville, starting a Big Brothers chapter while I was a student. But the impact that Coach Rohe had on me was fantastic! It was just incredible!

TS: You say you ran the quarter mile in high school? What was your best time in high school?

JW: In high school my best time was 51 flat as a junior. Not particularly fast.

TS: Well, that was all right. But you loved track and wanted to run at Tennessee. We had some great middle distance runners and quarter-milers at that time. Who were some of the guys that you ran with?

JW: Of course, Hardee McAlhaney was the main guy. We were both freshmen together. Then in the spring of my freshman year [1967], I was walking through the dorm one day, and Coach Rohe stopped me and said, "John, you're from Memphis aren't you?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "I want you to

show this guy around the campus. His name is Audry Hardy.” Audry was a year behind me, but he was coming up to U.T. in the the spring , so I showed Audry around the campus. He became a freshman that next year.

TS: Of course, Audry, along with James Craig, were the first two Black athletes on the track team. But, for that matter, there weren’t too many Blacks in the student body at Tennessee in general at that time, were there?

JW: No, not many.

TS: Did you have any trouble showing him around the campus? Where did you all go? Did you just show him the buildings or take him to dinner or what?

JW: I remember Coach Rohe, when he gave you something to do, he always had instructions with it. He said, “Now, John, take him up to Ayres Hall. Take him up The Hill. Audry, you \be sure to ask lots of questions, ask lots of questions.”

TS: So you showed him the campus then?

JW: I did. A real nice fellow, Audry was, and, of course, Coach Rohe has got just an infectious personality.

TS: One of the things we’re interested in on the website is memories about Coach Rohe and impressions of Coach Rohe and what kind of impact he had on the guys that were on the track team. If you want to elaborate about your relationship with Coach Rohe, I would appreciate that.

JW: Coach Rohe was just a special person. I’m sure you’ve heard that from everybody. I tried to figure out what in particular—you meet him, and you see that he has got a great attitude, but lots of people can have a great attitude, and they can have it for a while, and then it’s not there. The thing that I think that makes Coach Rohe distinctive for me is integrity. He’s just got a consistency of character. He had a great attitude all of the time. What helped me so much was that he was able to maintain a positive mental attitude through all kinds of junk, because we had problems all the time, but he always would take it and turn it around. In other words, he would make lemonade out of lemons, so to speak. He was very consistent about that how he could do that. It was great just being around somebody like that, because you would learn so much. He taught me to work through problems. “Don’t stop until you’re finished.” “Attack the problem.” I guess that’s one of the things I think about with Coach Rohe was, “Attack the problem. Don’t let the problem overcome you. Just attack it, and go after it.”

For instance, he would yell at us, but he would yell positive and encouraging things. That's unusual for a coach. Because of that, you couldn't let him down. Whatever it took, you'd do what it took, because you didn't want to let him down. Aside from when we were out there running on the track, though, just about every time I was around him that I can remember, he would always ask me, "What can I do for you?" In other words, what could he do for me? I thought that was so unusual, because I knew how busy he was. I knew how many things he had—irons in the fire and so forth—but yet he was never too busy to ask what he could do for me.

TS: So you're talking about things beyond track, like personal problems or things that have to do with your classes and things like that?

JW: Right, and things outside of track that affected me time-wise. He got me in Gibbs Hall. I started off the year without a room in Gibbs Hall, but he said, "Don't worry about it. I'll get you in." As a freshman, they put me in Hess because they didn't have any more room in Gibbs, but within a month of the start of the year, he had me in Gibbs. I thought, "With all the things he had to worry about, why would he be concerned about me?" But he did.

TS: So you were able to move in the middle of the quarter over there?

JW: Yes, in the middle of the quarter I was able to move as a freshman.

TS: Now I understand that you were on the third floor to begin with in Gibbs Hall, not with the track team, but with the golfers and swimmers and such as that?

JW: Yes.

TS: Did you stay there the whole time or did you move up to the fourth floor along the way?

JW: I stayed there the whole year of my freshman year, and then my sophomore year, he [Rohe] said he had a group of athletes—he didn't have enough room—I forget it was either four or eight freshmen that he couldn't get in that year, and he wanted to know if I would room with them over in Reese Hall in two suites. A suite would be four people in a suite. I think it was two suites that we had in Reese Hall. He asked me if I would stay with them and help them get to practice and just basic, simple stuff.

TS: It sounds to me that you became a mentor for other athletes very quickly.

JW: I don't know how good I was at that, but that's what he asked me to do. I was happy to do it. It worked out great for me too. I was in Reese Hall the second year with those other guys, and we stayed there the whole year.

TS: Was 1967 the last year to have a freshmen team or were freshmen eligible to run on the varsity the whole time that you were there?

JW: The spring of 1967 was the last year of the law—the NCAA rule—that you weren't eligible, unless—they allowed that one year that [freshmen could run on the varsity] but you would lose a year of eligibility if you did. It was the last year that freshmen couldn't compete, basically, on the varsity. The fall of 1967 was the first that freshmen were eligible.

TS: We had some freshmen meets that last year, didn't we?

JW: We had some freshmen meets and we also had KTC—Knoxville Track Club. He had us running constantly. You wouldn't know any difference because we worked out with the varsity. It was altogether. It was just when it came time for the meets we either competed as UT freshmen or as the Knoxville Track Club. Whether it was indoor or outdoor, that was the way it was. We did have an indoor meet that we competed as a freshmen team.

TS: Did your time improve at UT with all those hard workouts?

JW: It did. Just the way it worked out, I ran a lot of 880 relays where you run 220 a person. That's what I ended up running a lot—the 220.

TS: What was your best 220 time?

JW: I don't know. I never ran the open 220. It was always in an 880 relay.

TS: What about the 440? What did your time go down to?

JW: It was 49.

TS: You broke 50 at any rate.

JW: Yes.

TS: Well, that's good. I understand that you beat Richmond Flowers in a race sometime or other along the way.

JW: I did. I tell the story—my nephew—we were watching TV one day up at my brother-in-law's at Newport, Tennessee, and Richmond's name came up. My nephew asked, "Did you know Richmond?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Did you ever run against him?" I said, "Yeah, I ran against him." He said,

“How did you do?” I said, “Well, I beat him.” He said, “You beat him?” I said, “Yeah, I beat him.” He said, “How many times did you run against him?” I said, “I ran against him six times.” He said, “How many times did you beat him?” I said, “Six times.” He said, “You beat Richmond Flowers six times?” I said, “Yeah.”

By this time, my brother-in-law and his cousin and other relatives started taking interest in my story. I said, “Yes, We were running on an indoor track in the brand new Stokely Athletic Center. We had just been run out during the day by Coach [Ray] Mears [men’s head basketball coach] who didn’t want the track team practicing the same time he was doing his basketball practice. I figured I was through practice for the day and thought, “This is great!” But you know Coach Rohe. He always has an answer for problems. So he said, “No, no, everybody come back here at 7:00 o’clock tonight. We’re going to practice tonight.” So we came back at 7:00 o’clock that night and had our practice. I was going around the outside of the track, warming up. Coach Rohe looked at me, and he is the only person I know who can grin and smile at the same time. He smiled at me, and if you have been around him for very long and have known him a while you know that is not necessarily a good thing. But he said, “Come over here. I need you.”

So I came over, and he said, “Line up in this lane, get in the blocks, and run down here 60 yards.” I said, “Okay.” He had Richmond and Steve Keltner in the other two lanes. Steve was a friend from Memphis, a year ahead of me. He was a very good hurdler. Anyway, we lined up, and took off. I was slow out of the blocks as you would imagine. They were over the first hurdle as I looked up. I thought maybe they had false started or something. Anyway, I caught Richmond about the last hurdle and ran on by him and beat him. I ran six straight times, and each time I beat him, but the last time I just barely beat him. I mean, it was just a couple of inches. I had to lean out to beat him. So my nephew said, “But, Uncle John, what if Coach had made you jump over the hurdles like Richmond? Then do you think you could have beaten him?” I said, “Well, we’ll never know. We will never know.”

TS: Okay, so Richmond was jumping the hurdles, and you were just running a flat 60?

JW: Exactly.

TS: Okay, so that was a little advantage on your part, I guess.

JW: This was the only time I ever ran against him. I never lost to him.

TS: Okay, so that's a good story! So you ran a couple of years, and then you became the president of the dormitory [Morrill Hall]? Was that the way it worked the next year, your junior year?

JW: Morrill Hall, the first co-ed dorm in the South.

TS: And did you say you had about 800 students living in there?

JW: We had 784 students.

TS: How did you get to be the president of Morrill Hall?

JW: Well, I just got elected. It was the start of my junior year.

TS: But you had been in Reese Hall your sophomore year, right?

JW: Right, I had been in Reese Hall my sophomore year, and there was not a commitment to go back to Reese Hall again that junior year. There were no plans made. So I was going to live in Morrill Hall. It had a food plan. I was going to a place where they had a food plan. When I lived in Gibbs, I wasn't on the food plan. I was not on scholarship, I went to Morrill, and I got elected president, so that's when I decided [I would give up track].

TS: Did somebody know you over there? That's pretty remarkable to get elected president. Did you have to campaign? How did that work?

JW: There was nobody [who had been there before]. It was a brand new dorm. There was no history to it. It was the very first election. Everybody was brand new, all 784 students.

TS: You obviously had something going for you if you were elected president of 800 students. Can you talk about how that came about?

JW: Really, I just ran. They asked for people who wanted to run for president. So I figured, well, I'll try it out, and got elected. There wasn't a whole lot to it. I had met a lot of people on campus by that time. I had been on campus for a couple of years. When they opened this new dorm, it was a co-ed dorm. That sounded very interesting to me. I just applied for it. Then at the start of my fourth and senior year, I got involved in Circle K, which is a spinoff of Kiwanis. We started a Big Brothers chapter. I was the president of the Miss UT pageant. Back then, in 1970, we had a Miss UT pageant. 1970 was the last year of the pageant.

TS: Now was that a Circle K project?

JW: Yes, it was our main Circle K project to raise money every year.

TS: I was in Key Club in high school and knew a lot about Circle K. That's fantastic. It sounds like you just jumped into the whole life of the campus as soon as you got there.

JW: What we did—the significance of the Miss UT pageant—was that we raised a little over \$10,000 and we were able to start a Big Brothers of Knoxville chapter. That was our goal. The pageant was a vehicle for us to raise money for the Big Brothers chapter.

TS: Was that your idea to develop a Big Brothers chapter?

JW: My self and one other fellow, a fellow named Chip Deblois. He was the actual president of Circle K. Both of us were on the board for the inaugural charter of the Big Brothers of Knoxville.

TS: So you did that, and I guess at that time you decided that you were so involved in student life that you didn't have time for track anymore? How did that work out?

JW: When I got elected president of Morrill Hall, I pretty much had to make a decision, because I couldn't do that and run track at the same time and major in engineering.

TS: I was going to say, you have a P.E. after your name, which I take to be Professional Engineer. What kind of engineering were you majoring in?

JW: I majored in Industrial Engineering.

TS: So you were getting a degree in engineering, which takes a good deal of time in itself, and you were doing a lot of campus activities, and also running track for two years. So you were a pretty busy boy in that time, I would think.

JW: Yes, I stayed pretty active. Seriously, the fact of just being around Coach Rohe made you realize you could always do more than you were doing, whatever you were doing. You just bit off more than you could chew, and then you chewed it.

TS: Yes, if you could do without sleep, I guess. But you credit Coach Rohe with some of that stick-to-itiveness and philosophy of hard work and so on that allowed you to do all these things, I gather?

JW: Absolutely! His attitude—he had such a great attitude. But I get back to the point, though, that when you stop and you back off, and you look at it, it is integrity. He was so consistent, character-wise. Consistently, he was

who he was. You could depend on him. When you saw him do and take on the issues and challenges that he had—dealing with the issues and problems—you just realized, “Hey, this is the way you do things. This is the way you get things done. You take this attitude, and you get her done.”

TS: Knowing Coach Rohe, I can’t imagine him saying it’s okay to walk away from the team after two years without trying to persuade you to keep running another year or two.

JW: I was a coward in that respect. I didn’t get back with him after I got elected president of Morrill Hall. I just realized that this was what I was going to have to do, and I pressed on. I imagine I would have probably got talked in to [staying on the track team].

TS: We had some mighty good quarter milers at the time. That must have been an experience being there with all those great athletes. I had the same experience. I always felt like everybody else had more talent than I did when I was running in the early 1960s. But it was great to be around all those guys who were so good. That definitely improved my times by being pulled along with them.

JW: Basically, what I did—I wasn’t on scholarship, but I never missed a practice or meeting. My goal was to beat somebody that was on scholarship in what we were doing every day. In other words ...

TS: You outworked them.

JW: That’s my recollection that I always did that. There was somebody on scholarship that I was outperforming every day. That way I felt like I could stay on the team—I wouldn’t be kicked off the team. I didn’t know. I thought maybe they kicked people off. You know, when you go out as a walk-on in those situations, you’ve got probably 25 or 30 people that walk on that first day. Then two weeks later, two-thirds of them are hurt, sick or something. Then as the year goes by, you get more attrition. At the end of the year, there are only two or three of you that are not on scholarship that are still on the team. I was able to do that for two years. I earned a letter my second year in the spring of 1968, my goal on the track team was to get a letter. I wasn’t really looking for a scholarship. I didn’t need to have a scholarship from a financial standpoint. My goal, really, was to earn a letter.

TS: You were running a lot of 880 relays. Did you ever place in an SEC meet? What was your best performance, would you say, while you were at Tennessee? Or what were you proudest of maybe?

- JW:** I think just making the team, obviously, and getting a letter and getting through all the practices. Somebody asked me once, “Do you have hard practices?” I said, “No, I can’t ever remember a hard practice. We had brutal practices.” Even today, I hurt when I think about 20, 440s with a 60 second interval in between.
- TS:** I can understand that. That’s a pretty tough workout. There’s no doubt about it. I think 24 quarter miles was the most I ever did with that minute in between, and that just about did me in. But you were a quarter-miler. They shouldn’t have been making you run quite that much should they?
- JW:** Bill Sellmer was our assistant coach. I remember one time we were doing that, and we were getting towards the end. We probably had run about 15 of them, and we were just dying. We were grabbing. We were bent over. You’ve got that 60 second time which feels like 15 seconds. You’re standing there, and you can’t talk. Nobody is talking, but Sellmer walks up to us and says, “Okay, we’ve got to pick it up this time. Anybody that doesn’t get it under [and I’ve forgot what the time was, like 55 seconds or something] 55 seconds, everybody is going to do it over.” We’re all bent over. We can’t talk. We’re just gasping for air. Hardee McAlhaney is about 20 feet away from me, and he’s bent over, so he’s looking upside down, so to speak, because his head is down. But I could see. He looked right at me, right in the eye. Without saying a word, with his eyes, he said, “Williams, it better not be you.” I remember that today. I got it done, but I don’t know how.
- TS:** So you were running 20 quarters in under 55 seconds in a workout?
- JW:** No, we started off running—we were supposed to run them in under 60 seconds. But he didn’t want us dragging along at 60, so we were running 55 and 58 pretty consistently—the group of us—and right towards the end, he started cutting the time down by a few seconds, one after another. I don’t remember the last one, but I thought it was 55. It could have been 58. But I know it was less than 60. All of them were done under 60.
- TS:** That’s brutal. There’s no doubt about it. When I was thinking about doing 24 quarters, we were doing them like 68 seconds. That was the middle distance runners. So that’s just incredible.
- JW:** We had to get them all under 60. I remember that. You know, 60 seconds was no big deal at all. But when you only have 60 seconds in between, the first four or five you don’t even think about it. Then it starts to sink in, because the 60-second interval is what the killer is. If they gave you enough time in between, you could recover each time.
- TS:** Did you meet your wife Vicki while you were a student at Tennessee?

JW: I did.

TS: She was a cheerleader, wasn't she?

JW: She was a cheerleader.

TS: How did you meet her?

JW: Just met her on campus, a friend of a friend type of thing. She was cheering. She was also engineering queen.

TS: Was she an engineering major?

JW: No, she wasn't an engineering major, but they would pick a queen. She was also the ROTC queen. ROTC would pick a queen every year, and the School of Engineering would pick Miss Tennessee Engineer every year. And she was in several other organizations.

TS: I thought maybe she won that Miss UT pageant that you were running.

JW: No, she didn't enter that. She wasn't in that. Like I say, she was a cheerleader at that time.

TS: Okay, so you graduated from UT with a degree in engineering. Did you start your own company right away after that? What did you do after you graduated?

JW: I went to work for Kemmons Wilson Construction Company—the founder of Holiday Inn—building a Holiday Inn down in the Virgin Islands. I got married, and Vicky and I lived down in the Virgin Islands for a year. Then I came back and worked for Metal Products Company—my father's company—for about three years. Then I put up \$2500—myself, my brothers, and my dad, we all put up \$2500 and incorporated another company called Engineered Handling Systems Inc. in 1974. Over the years, my brothers sold their interest out and after about six years it was just my dad and I. I became president in 1980. Then in 2002 I bought my dad out and dissolved that corporation and started a new company called ConveyorMan, Inc. I put that under my wife's name, so she owns the company, and I'm the president. I just work for her. But now we are minority-owned because it is a woman-owned business.

TS: Oh, that has advantages in terms of contracts and stuff, doesn't it?

JW: Correct, definitely, and that's the reason why we did it. So it's all in her name. She owns it 100 percent.

TS: I think one of the things I've been impressed with in working on this project is just how successful the people who went through the track program at Tennessee have been in their careers. I think there's got to be some kind of connection between what we learned on the track and what we did with the rest of our lives to explain how so many people have done so well.

JW: I don't think there's any question about it. Like I say, the thing that Coach Rohe brought to it was, again, his consistency of character. I keep saying his integrity. That's something you can hang your hat on. You can trust that person. It makes all the difference in the world and makes you want to emulate him and be like him. No question, I think that's had a big impact on me, that and just his general way—he attacks problems. If there's a problem, he doesn't shy away from it or forget it or whatever. He attacks and goes out and solves it. You see that happening, consistently, and you start doing it yourself.

TS: Is there anything that you would like to add to the interview?

JW: Just a couple of little things I had a note here. One of them is that Coach Rohe was very much involved—I don't know whether you were aware or not—with the Mexico Olympic Committee [1968]. They came to Knoxville to see our Tartan [Tom Black] track, and they actually patterned the Olympic track in Mexico City for 1968 behind ours. They made a Tartan track down there, and they patterned it after our track. Now, they made it larger still, because they obviously had to carry so much more room around the outside of it, but the basic track—they were there; they walked around the track. One day at practice, I remember, he [Rohe] was showing them all around. Another was that Coach was the recruiting coordinator and had a huge impact on the athletes we brought in on the football team. He was just one of these guys that had four or five different hats at the same time and doing them all well.

TS: I hadn't thought about, but you got there the first year for the Tom Black track as well.

JW: And it was also the first year for the indoor Tartan track that we ran on at Stokely.

TS: So we had a definite upgrade in facilities right at the time that you were arriving.

JW: The timing was perfect. It couldn't have been better.

TS: What did you think of the Tom Black track from an engineering perspective?

JW: It was fantastic! I had been running on cinder tracks in high school. We were real proud that we had a cinder track in high school because most of the other folks just had dirt. We actually had a cinder track. But then you go to Knoxville and we had the Tartan track and we had the Tartan basketball court and we had the Tartan football field.

TS: Right, and Tartan hallways as well in a few places, I understand.

JW: That's right.

TS: Well, John I've enjoyed talking to you.

JW: You're very kind. I appreciate your even showing an interest, one, in the project, and, two, in me obviously, and asking me. Coach Rohe has been a tremendous influence in my life and he is just a fun guy to be around.