

**INTERVIEW WITH WILBUR F. HAWKINS  
CONDUCTED BY TOM SCOTT  
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**TS:** Wilbur, why don't you begin by talking about your background? We went to some of the same schools. Could you talk about how you got involved in track and how you ended up getting recruited to the University of Tennessee?

**WH:** Well, those are loaded questions, Tom. I was actually born in Cleveland, Ohio, and spent my first few years there. I had chronic pneumonia. My parents decided since Knoxville was home for my mother that I would be better off living with my grandparents for a while. We moved here, and I grew up in the New Hope community over off Cecil Avenue. I went to New Hope Elementary School for a year. It was a two-room, twelve-grade schoolhouse. Just to progress, I went to Eastport, then to Whittle Springs [Junior High School] in the fall of 1964. Of course, from there I went to Fulton [High School]. At Fulton I played in the band. I played ice hockey, oddly enough, for three years on the city league for the [Fulton] Falcons, was decent, and got an All-City Sportsmanship trophy. I actually experienced an accident, had a board check, and I ended up with paralysis in my right leg with a pinched nerve.

When I was able to return to school, I went out for the track team, and Dickie Sharp was the coach. The first day he said, "If you ever quit a race, you'll never letter." I was like, "Okay." I wasn't the best athlete in the world, and I just ran. I always tell people that I lost every race I ever entered before my senior year in high school. The highest I ever finished was third, and that was because there were only three people in the race.

**TS:** That's hard to believe.

**WH:** Well, it's true. Then I tried AAU and the Knoxville Track Club, and thanks to people like Hal Canfield and the folks that were supporting the Knoxville Track Club—there was a couple out of Tullahoma, Dick and Jane Puckett, that used to come up and help with track meets and take us everywhere including the National Junior Olympics. I think exposure was one thing that helped me because I was always out and trying to run. I carried two routes of newspapers in North Hills, and you know they're winding hills. All of that was conditioning me. My junior year the kids that qualified for the state track meet went to Memphis. I always had an affinity for

Memphis, but I didn't get a chance to go. Coach Sharp came back and said, "Hawkins, I was sitting in the stands, and I realized that you possibly could go to the state in something. I don't know what, but you could go to the state." So I took that as a word of encouragement, not defeat.

So one day he told me to run to Sharp's Ridge. It's the highest point in Knoxville, and I ran from Fulton to Sharp's Ridge and came back. "Well, we're going to run a mile." I ran a mile. Afterwards, he said, "One day I'm going to have my dad take a look at you." His father was Coach B. E. Sharp down at Webb School. So we drove down to Webb one day, and Coach Sharp, the dean of all track coaches in Knoxville at the time, said, "Dickie, I'm not sure what he can run. You might want to just condition him to be a half-miler, and he might do okay in the half." So Coach [Dickie] Sharp said, "Okay." Well, he told me to give up playing ice hockey. I played for Fulton Falcons on the City Recreation League, and I broke my left thumb. The bone popped out, and I had a cast up to midway in my arm. I skipped his math class.

There's a point to this story, Tom. Coach Sharp saw me in the hallway. I stuck my arm in a locker, and he just leaned on me. He said, "You know, it's springtime, and the first meet is coming up, and we're running Central. And here you are with a cast on your arm. What good are you going to do?" I said, "I'll run." He said, "You bet you will!" We were at Central. Coach Sharp said, "Run the half." He didn't want me running the quarter with the cast, and he didn't want me running the mile. It was too long. He said, "Run the half." So the gun goes off, the race was over, and Coach Sharp just comes over yelling, "Hawkins!" I thought I had done something wrong. He grabbed me, lifted me up, and he said, "Do you know you ran a 1:58?" And I said, "What does that mean?" He said, "You are the first person I've ever had to run under 2:00 minutes." I said, "Wow! Is that good?" And he said, "Yeah, that's real good!" So throughout the year from that point on all I ran exclusively was the half and the mile relay. I went undefeated, Tom. I went straight through the regions, and of course we had the kids at Kingsport Dobyns-Bennett [High School] that were dominating everything. In West Tennessee there was South Side [High School Memphis], and they had half-milers galore. They even had quarter-milers that were running the half. When we got to the state meet in Nashville, I still had my undefeated record. The gun went off, it was raining, it was a cinder track, and all I remember is if I won I was going to Regas Cafeteria for dinner (laughs). I won, and it was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

But that's one of the things, as we segue into the Coach Rohe era, that I came to understand is that it's important that you have good talent. I wasn't the best athlete in the world. I am still 5'11" and 150 pounds—155 pounds today—the same as I was in 1969. That's a blessing to have that

weight control. But the fact that Coach Sharp believed enough to say I could win something—he set off the chain of possibility thinking. When it came time for me to look at colleges, I had no idea that I had made a 28 on the ACT score when I was a sophomore [with 36 a perfect score and 18 the initial composite mean when the test was created in 1959].

**TS:** Wow! You didn't know?

**WH:** Nobody told me. NOBODY told me.

**TS:** That's good.

**WH:** Yes, that's more than good. John West, who was the coach at Furman [University], called up and asked me if I wanted to meet with him. He came over to Fulton and offered me a scholarship. I asked him, "Where is Furman?" He said, "It's in Greenville, South Carolina." I said, "Well, my grandmother is from Spartanburg. I know where that is."

**TS:** Not far [about 30 miles northeast of Greenville].

**WH:** Not far. He said, "Would you like to come?" Well, I got to looking. Because I had won the state, the University of Memphis, Memphis State [at the time] offered me a ride, and so did Furman. Oddly enough, one Sunday morning—I was involved in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes—we got a knock on the front door. My dad being a Baptist preacher, I thought that somebody was coming to get a ride to church, and they were. Lo and behold, it was Sam Wyche, the quarterback of the Cincinnati Bengals, Bubba Wyche's brother, knocking on the door, asking, "Is this the Hawkins residence." [Editor's note: Bubba Wyche was a star quarterback at the University of Tennessee from 1966 to 1968. His older brother Sam was the quarterback at Furman from 1963 to 1965]. He said, "My name is Sam Wyche. I would just like to go to church with you guys."

**TS:** How about that?

**WH:** How about that! Then I later found out that he was a Furman alum, and that was the purpose of his visit. He talked us into going on a recruiting trip. My mother and father went. My dad had a construction accident, and those things played heavily on me, being the eldest son. Long story made shorter, Tom, when it came down to the recruitment process, I had two schools. I got a call from a guy who said, "This is Chuck Rohe, and quite frankly you need to be a Volunteer!" I was like, "What the heck is this?" I realized midway through the conversation it was Coach Rohe across town at the University of Tennessee. I said to myself, "Am I good enough to go there?" He was just giving a rundown of all of these things. I said, "Coach, before I go to the National AAU Junior Olympics, I want to have the school

selected.” He said, “Well, just come to the University of Tennessee. Would you like to come for a visit? We’re hosting the NCAA Championship.”

**TS:** Oh, yes, 1969.

**WH:** Okay, I’ll come over. I met this guy named Tony Wilson [SEC high jump record holder in 1971 at 7’1 1/2”, who died unexpectedly of meningitis in the University Hospital on March 5, 1973 at age 21]. He was from Columbus, Ohio, a high jumper. We hit it off. His birthday was October 17. Mine was October 22nd. I was born in Cleveland. He lived in Columbus, was born there.

**TS:** He had a famous sister too [the Grammy Award-winning singer Nancy Wilson].

**WH:** He did. I’ll tell you about that later. So we decided that we were coming to the University of Tennessee. We didn’t see each other over the summer, and then we hooked up. We were roommates our freshman year. As naïve as I was about his sister—17-year-old, what do you expect? I’m from Knoxville. There’s a larger world out there. So he’s checking in, and Mr. and Mrs. [Olin] Wilson and Tony’s younger sister had brought him down from Columbus. They checked in. We were at Gibbs Hall. We decided to go down to the dining room for dinner for a meal before they got back on the road. So the rumblings were, you know, he’s Nancy Wilson’s brother. Right innocently, I said, “Tony, everybody says that you are Nancy Wilson’s brother. Did she go to school here or something?” He said, “Something like that.” He never, and the parents didn’t say anything.

**TS:** Well, you had been listening to gospel music.

**WH:** Most of the time I was.

**TS:** So you didn’t hear all this . . .

**WH:** Secular music. Most of the time I didn’t. I did not know. But it was very interesting, Tom, because not only did I have the opportunity to talk to Nancy on the telephone, but also I had a chance to meet her several times when we went to run at UCLA in Los Angeles. Then I had the unfortunate circumstance of March of 1973, our senior year, I went to take a 7:50 final [on Monday, March 5]. Actually, the day before, that Sunday [March 4] Tony and his girlfriend were at church. We sat on the same pew, a few people apart. The message was on friendship. Afterwards, I said, “Tony, do you and Elaine need a ride back to the dorm?” He said, “No, we think we’re going to take a bite to eat. But later on this evening Oral Roberts is playing in the NCAA basketball championship. Why don’t you come over and watch the ballgame?” I said, “I’ve got finals tomorrow. I’ll pass on it.”

He took two aspirin. I said, “Man, you’ve got to do something about those headaches.” Little did I know that those headaches were indications of spinal meningitis. Then the next morning after my exam, I was coming from the Student Center back to the Presidential Complex, and Ralph Boston was in the Student Affairs Office that he had there. He knocked on the window and summoned me to the office. When I went up there, Ralph told me that Tony had passed. You talk about the brevity of life when you are that young, and you see your roommate just taken out. It’s unbelievable.

**TS:** That was sudden!

**WH:** Yes, it was sudden. There’s more to the story in terms of having had headaches and . . .

**TS:** Not having it diagnosed properly.

**WH:** Yes. He went to UT Hospital the night before, Sunday night, because he had some issues. They said he had the flu and sent him back. The next morning he couldn’t be awakened. The most important circumstance of my life was Darwin Bond and I rode—I drove—from Knoxville to Columbus for Tony’s service. It was a solemn, quiet occasion, and every October 17 I still remember Tony.

So I ended up at the University of Tennessee.

**TS:** What was your fastest time in high school?

**WH:** The fast time legitimately in high school was 1:55.3, which still stands as the school record at Fulton. However, I ran a 1:53.5 at the AAU Junior Olympics that year.

**TS:** That’s incredible—1:53.5!

**WH:** Yes, before I came to UT. That’s pretty good. I was amazed.

**TS:** I was just curious. Do you know whose record you broke at Fulton?

**WH:** Was it yours?

**TS:** I don’t know. I had the record at one time [1961] at 1:58.9. It’s possible that somebody else broke it between 1961 and 1969. But if it was you, you smashed the record!

**WH:** Yeah, I probably ran that in my second meet (laughs).

**TS:** I imagine.

**WH:** If you look at, here we are having this conversation and talking about track at [the University of] Tennessee and track in East Tennessee. The interesting thing that I would say, I think when I look at my tenure at the University of Tennessee, it was a time—and you and I very well know—that the University of Tennessee Athletic Department integrated in 1967.

**TS:** Yes, I was thinking that you were the third year [of integration].

**WH:** I was the third year. There were two African American athletes per sport per year, so we could be roommates for each other. That was the original plan. In 1967 for football there was Lester McClain. Then there was a guy named Albert Davis out of Alcoa, but he didn't qualify. He ended up going to Tennessee State. Then Audry Hardy and James Craig, Audry being from Memphis, and James Craig being from Birmingham, both half milers . . .

**TS:** Well, now, Gerry Eddlemon roomed with Audry at one point.

**WH:** Yes, he did, and in his freshman year.

**TS:** So they actually didn't put [Audry and James] together?

**WH:** They started off, but all people are different, so Audry and James weren't roommates for long.

**TS:** That's good though [that a white and black athlete roomed together].

**WH:** It's really good. Tony and I roomed, and when Doug Brown came on, Doug and I were roommates for a short period. But that was the original plan. I was in the third class. Of course, transfers and dropouts and those kinds of things changed [the plan]. Then when you find that the historical plan was Coach Rohe being a pioneer. It was Coach Rohe's suggestion that it was about time for the university to integrate athletics. The academic program had been integrated since [1952 for the graduate school and 1961 for undergraduate programs]. I look at that in comparison to Title IX [of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended in 1972]. When it came to parity in women's sports, it was tantamount to bringing African Americans into the SEC.

As we progressed, I never felt a lot of racism at the University of Tennessee. What I felt was a sense of isolation. And that isolation wasn't in a lot of ways born out of race or ethnicity. What it was born out of was just being a Knoxville kid at the huge University of Tennessee with almost thirty thousand students, just trying to learn the ropes. I have to say this that Coach Rohe, being the pioneer that he was, instilled a spirit of not only

coping and tolerance but of discipline that helped accept the regimen of I always felt that I had enlisted in the army (laughs). My lottery number, I think, was 34. I was thinking, "Boy, would it have been any tougher if I had ended up going into the Service?"

**TS:** I guess with your hip and your former paralysis, you might not have been eligible for the military service anyway.

**WH:** No, no, I was classified 2-S. I went over there on Central Avenue and took my physical. One thing that they said was that I had a degree of color blindness that they would have a problem with. But they didn't rule it out. Of course, that was during the Vietnam heyday. I had a friend in high school. We were born the same year, same day, but he was a year behind me in high school. He got his induction orders before he graduated. He went in. But those were different times. The year before I graduated, on April 4, 1968, Martin Luther King was assassinated in Memphis. In some measure that affected my decision not to go to the University of Memphis. I always had an affinity for Memphis, but still there was a little bit of unrest in Memphis. Besides, I wanted my parents to see me run. There was something about my parents and grandparents and siblings in Knoxville to be able to see me run. Being a hometown kid, it helped. I could always go home and get some loving from my grandmother and food from my mom and all that kind of stuff. My first track meet at the University of Tennessee under Big Orange competitively was December 7, 1969, Pearl Harbor Day, at the Liberty Bowl in Memphis. This is a tribute to how [high] the quality of track was at that time. At the Liberty Bowl meet there was Kansas, Villanova, the University of Memphis, and the University of Tennessee. All of those were powerhouses in some respect in relays, etc. I ran the two-mile relay, and we finished third.

**TS:** Third?

**WH:** Well, you know, Kansas and Villanova were in front of us. Villanova had [Marty] Liquori and a bunch of folks. I think Jim Ryun had finished at Kansas at that point [last year of eligibility in the spring of 1969]. I ran into Jim in his last Olympics qualifying in 1972, but that's another story. I ran the two-mile relay. We did good, but didn't do that well. Then, oddly enough, Audry Hardy, the Rabbit, as we called him, Audry ran the 600. He was at home in Memphis. That was his hometown. He wanted to set a Liberty Bowl record in the 600, and he did. He took the field. But to my advantage, he couldn't run the mile relay. Coach Rohe comes up and says, "Hawkins, Wilbur, you're going to run the mile relay. You're going to run the leadoff leg." I was like, "Okay, fine." I know Hardee McAlhaney and some other guys were in that. I said, "I cannot be embarrassed." I took off like a shotgun, and fortunately my exchange was solid. Coach Rohe was impressed. Freshman [had not been] eligible; the first year of freshman

eligibility was the spring of 1970. So the key to it then was that we were eligible everywhere as freshmen except at the Penn Relays. I couldn't go to the Penn Relays my freshman year. We went to some other meet.

I was happy that not only was I a competitive runner. I was able to fit in with the likes of Audry Hardy and James Craig and the milers such as Owen Self and the guys that were just hustlers as runners. I just thought I could bring up the rear, but that freshman year set the tone. No doubt about it, when you had an opportunity to go to Washington to the Catholic Youth Organization Annual Track Meet the first of January, we got a chance to tour the White House. Later I went back to the White House a couple of times not only as the executive director of a federal commission on the Mississippi Delta, but also as an appointee to the Clinton Administration—I was at the Department of Commerce and served as part of the National Disaster Task Force and worked on base closure and reuse activities for my venue. As a result I got a chance to go into the Oval Office and other places several more times. Of course, Christmas parties at the White House are just nice.

**TS:** I guess so. What was the fastest you ran in college?

**WH:** The fastest I ran was a 45 second quarter. That was actually my senior year [1973] at the nationals at LSU. Darwin [Bond], myself, Rick Bowers, and Trevor James were the [four members of the mile relay team]. The whole goal there was that Rick had had knee surgery, and we wanted to make sure that we got All American status for Rick. [Editor's note: Tennessee finished 4<sup>th</sup> in 3:07.3 behind UCLA, the University of Texas, and Arizona State]. I had missed the SEC meet because of overwork or some health issues. They were afraid that I might have contracted the meningitis, so I was at UT hospital and missed the SEC meet. Then I ran at the nationals a couple of weeks later. So I was there. My best half mile, 800 meters, was 1:47.1.

**TS:** Wow! That's wonderful.

**WH:** There was a coach at one of the other Knoxville high schools, and I always asked him, "Coach, can I come out for your track team?" He was actually one of the elementary coaches, or middle school coaches at the time. He said, "Nah, you're too skinny to make any of my teams." I said, "Okay." It was Coach Ross. He was later the coach at Austin-East [High School in Knoxville], and he was part of the timing crew at Tennessee for the Knoxville Track Club. Every time I would run, I would win, and I would come back at Coach Ross, and I would say, "Coach, can I make your team now?" He would say, "Maybe, maybe. I'm still thinking about it." The day that I ran my Olympic qualifying time, I went over to Coach Ross, and I



said, “Now look, there are three watches on me. Do you think I can make it this time?” And he said, “I think you ‘bout made it.”

**TS:** I would think so!

**WH:** Yes, so I was very blessed, Tom, to be able to go to the 1972 Olympic trials. Of course the [Summer Olympics] were in Munich. There were four athletes that year from Tennessee—Bill High, Doug Brown, Willie Thomas, and myself. Of course, Willie and I both were in the 800 meters. I made it to the second round [quarter finals]. Willie made it through the first round, but he didn’t make it. Of course, Doug went on to represent the United States in the steeplechase. That was Bill’s last event. He later went on to medical school and dental school. So there were four of us out of that group. [Editor’s note: Wilbur finished 5<sup>th</sup> in quarter-final heat 3 in a time of 1:49.9. Willie finished 7<sup>th</sup> in heat 4 in a time of 1:52.9. The first 4 qualified for the semi-finals. Bill finished 5<sup>th</sup> in heat 4 of the 110-meter hurdles in 14.6. The top 4 advanced to the quarter-finals. Doug came in 2<sup>nd</sup> in the 3000 meters steeplechase finals in a time of 8:31.8].

I’ll tell you something. I’m almost happy that I [didn’t make the finals] because we were in Eugene, Oregon. Now this is the finals of the United States Olympic Trials for 800 meters. Only two people go and possibly one alternate in third place. The gun goes off. There’s a world record that existed. The race is over, and Dave Wottle won in a new world record time [1:44.3]. The first six places were under the previously existing world record. Rick Wohlhuter was number 2 [in 1:45.0], and he was under the world record. [Ken Swenson was 3<sup>rd</sup> in 1:45.1, Jim Ryun 4<sup>th</sup> in 1:45.2, Ron Phillips 5<sup>th</sup> in 1:45.3, and Rick Brown 6<sup>th</sup> in 1:45.4]. I later looked at the Olympics—what was left of them after the Munich debacle [Editor’s note: Eleven Israeli team members were taken hostage in the Olympic Village and subsequently killed by members of a Palestinian terrorist organization named Black September]. And I saw people who were representing their country, who had never even beaten me during their collegiate career. So I felt that we had the best, and, of course, Dave Wottle brought home the gold that year. But those were the years.

**TS:** Did you keep running after you graduated?

**WH:** I did. There was a guy by the name of [W.J. Michael] Mike Cody, the law partner at Burch, Porter & Johnson, and later [appointed by President Jimmy Carter to the post of] U.S. Attorney [for the Western District of Tennessee; he also served a four-year term in the late 1980s as Attorney General for the State of Tennessee]. Mike ran at Southwestern [renamed Rhodes College in 1984] in his undergraduate days, went to UVA, the University of Virginia [School of Law], and then kept running. When I went to Memphis, Mike was still a runner, and we ran mornings. Consistently,

we would do a seven to ten-mile stretch on the parkways there in Memphis. We got to be good friends.

I kept running. I worked for TVA for a number of years. I went to Kentucky, and I still was running. I was training two high schoolers. They were going to the state meet, one in the mile, and one in the half-mile. We were running—I never will forget the workout—twenty 220s. This was Coach Rohe’s murder workout—twenty 220s in 25 seconds with a 110 interval. We were doing that, and I had a cap on. The cap fell off my head. Back around, coming on the backside of that next 220, I hyperextended to miss the cap. I did a dislocation on my left knee, and I was in a hip-to-ankle cast for about nine months before they actually repaired it. I had dislocated it in an awesome way, and the kids—the two guys—I made them hold me down and pull it. I wasn’t going to the hospital in Hopkinsville. I was very familiar with Campbell Clinic in Memphis, and I drove back. Dr. T. David Sisk was the orthopaedist. As he drained and talked, we talked about options. Ultimately, he ended up doing the surgery. Sam Bowie, the basketball player from [the University of] Kentucky [and ten years in the NBA]—Sam Bowie went under the knife back-to-back by the same surgeon. A lot of history there.

**TS:** But that was the end of your running career?

**WH:** Actually, it ended just running. I get out and try to walk. The knee is fine, but it was psychologically I just got out of the momentum. That was one of the things that I do believe—I’m a caregiver for my 91-year-old dad—and I always say, “A body in motion tends to stay in motion.” As you age, it’s very important that you stay mobile. I took up roller-blading at the age of 45 and kept it up until I was about 55 or 56. I played golf and just stayed active. But I have scoliosis, and it’s a very, very painful form of arthritis and spinal curvature. My physicians told me I actually had scoliosis when I was about 13 or 14 years old. They were amazed that I could do some things such as run. It becomes painful, and one of the things that you always want to do is to work through pain. My physician tells me that pain management is not anything that I have to take a course in.

**TS:** You know from experience.

**WH:** Yes. That’s part of running the mile, the cold weather, the rain, the endurance work, and it’s conditioning not only for the body, but for the mind. When you begin to look at the game of life and you look at the sport of track and field, you can play football and basketball, but the individualism that is required in track is one thing. To be part of a relay team or winning team, that team camaraderie is there, and championships last a lifetime. You can’t argue about the fact that being a Volunteer in the 1960s and 1970s on the track team was an ideal position. When you pack

seven thousand people into a track stadium in the South—East Tennessee—you're doing something. When Tennessee ran Villanova here, everybody turned out.

TS: So you were part of that meet?

WH: Yes. The largest crowd that I had run into before I came to Tennessee was in San Diego at Balboa Stadium for the National Junior Olympics. They had forty thousand people in the stands. The gun went off, the race was over, and they were bringing me over to third place. I had gotten boxed in. I just went with the flow. But the crowd was deafening. That was the West Coast, but we had the Penn Relays, and the opportunity to run there and win. The crowds are just tremendous when they are behind you.

TS: Tell me a little about your career. You said you worked for TVA. What were you doing for them?

WH: A little bit of everything. Actually, in 1974 I went to Memphis, and I got involved in politics. That was my first love. As a student, I was involved in student government here, part of the university student government restructure and all of that—SGA—and actually served on the chancellor selection committee for Jack Reese [UT chancellor, 1973-1989].

TS: Is that right?

WH: Yes. I had fun doing that.

TS: Were you SGA president?

WH: No, no, actually, I was president of the Black Students Association. A good friend of mine, Karl Schledwitz, [was SGA president]. I went over to Memphis to work in the first [congressional] campaign for Harold Ford [member of the Tennessee House of Representatives, 1971-1975, and of the U.S. House of Representatives, 1975-1997]. He just stuck me in a position, and said, "You're my election-day coordinator. Figure it out." We were all young. He was in his 30s [born in 1945], and I was in my 20s. I ran a dry run during the primary. We didn't have computers or anything, but we did have butcher paper. I took all of the election machines, and put the numbers up, and just cascaded them across the wall. I gave all of the workers dimes to use the pay phone—that's how antiquated it was—and told them what time to call in with the general numbers that they read on the ballot boxes. From there an analysis showed what percentages were turning out.

The night of the general election [November 4, 1974], the incumbent [Dan Kuykendall—Republican, member of the U.S House of Representatives,

1967-1975] was on television, and they conceded him victory. I went into Harold Ford's office, and I said, "Congratulations, Congressman!" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "You've won this election." He said, "But the television" . . . I said, "But the television. They don't know. The precincts that are missing are your south Memphis precincts, and I predict that you've won." So he went down to the [Shelby County] Election Commission, and the rest is history because he won by 744 votes.

TS: Wow!

WH: As election-day coordinator, he was always kind for that. He didn't need much help thereafter. Interestingly enough, I went to county government after working for him for about a year. I worked in Shelby County government and was director of the public housing authority there for about a year and a half.

TS: You were the director?

WH: Yes, at the ripe age of 25. Then I actually volunteered to be the national meet competition director for the AAU Junior Olympics. I got a year on loan to the AAU to stage the meet. The national meet was held in Memphis. [1976]. Two ladies were organizing, and I attended the meeting. The county and city and everybody were trying to pitch in. They were clueless, but they had good hearts. They were gymnastic moms. So they convinced the county mayor to loan me to the program for a year. We had 26 venues, [2300] participants, and we were on the *Wide World of Sports*. Chevrolet was the national sponsor.

Then in 1978 I joined TVA. Somebody called and said there was a position over in West Tennessee that was being created. It was in the Office of Tributary Area Development. Part of the responsibility was communicating TVA's message to West Tennessee and interfacing with their largest customer, which happened to be Memphis Light, Gas, and Water. I actually had only planned to stay with TVA a year, and, Tom, I was with them, off and on, for fifteen years. I was transferred to Kentucky from Memphis; then I came back. I covered at one time—this was the economic development and other non-power activities as well as representing the agency in a number of arenas—from Whitley City in eastern Kentucky to Paducah [in western Kentucky], and then from Paducah to Meridian, Mississippi at one point. So I had a wide swath over the years. I ended up being selected as one of seven district administrators for TVA, and I was assigned to the Kentucky district. I had liaison responsibilities to the board and the general manager. That was an interesting tenure.

I came back to Memphis to work on some regional development. Ultimately, Congressman Mike Espy from Mississippi and Senator Dale

Bumpers from Arkansas decided they wanted to sponsor a regional economic development study on the Mississippi River and the counties [along the Mississippi]. Of course, as we know, the Mississippi Delta was parallel to Appalachia at the time TVA was formed. In the Roosevelt era in 1933 was when TVA was formed. When it came to the 1960s, [President] Kennedy formed the Appalachian Regional Commission to help bring that region in. Ultimately, it was the Mississippi Delta's time. Congress passed a piece of legislation, which was the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Act [October 1, 1988]. There were three governors—Governor Buddy Romer of Louisiana, Ray Mabus of Mississippi, and Bill Clinton of Arkansas—who appointed themselves to the commission. There was John Ashcroft of Missouri, who later was [U.S.] Attorney General [2001-2005]. Ray Mabus is Secretary of the Navy at present here in 2014. Of course, Bill Clinton went on to be a two-term president. Then there were representatives from Kentucky and Tennessee. All seven states, 219 counties and parishes on both sides of the Mississippi, were represented.

Bill Clinton was the chairman. By the time I got selected as the executive director, we were basically six or eight months behind the congressional-mandated time table, because it was a sunset piece of legislation [to be terminated in 1990]. I headed that organization. The staff did the design studies. We did the public hearings and published the interim and final reports, made the presentations to Congress, both the House and the Senate, and to the White House. Then I went back to TVA in late 1991, early 1992. In 1992 Bill Clinton was the elected president. I got a call to attend the economic summit of the president and vice-president elect in Little Rock. Olan Mills, the photographer out of Chattanooga; Fred Smith [the founder, chairman, president, and CEO of] FedEx; and myself were the only Tennesseans invited. So I was really honored to do that.

I actually came back wanting to continue my work in the Mississippi Delta, but I got a call from the director of White House personnel to go to Commerce. I had the dubious distinction of being the principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic Development at [the] Commerce [Department]. I had the Economic Development Administration, the U.S. Travel and Tourism Administration, and the Minority Business Development Agency as part of my jurisdictional areas. [I had] six regional offices and all the fifty states and territories. So it was a pretty good position. I stayed from 1993 until 1998. Then I decided that I really wanted to go into business for myself and did some other things. But it was a very good experience. I wouldn't trade anything for the opportunities that I've been given. I was a young man from Knoxville who went [to Washington], and now I'm back home.

TS: What did you major in?

**WH:** My background was in political science and philosophy. I actually wanted to major in economics. The workload was so heavy running track, and so that was what I did. The one thing that I've often thought about, Tom, is if I hadn't run track, what would I have done? Should-a, could-a, would-a never became my best friends because track opened up so many opportunities for me—the fact that it gave me a mindset, it gave me a foundation, and it gave me a perspective. Running, you get a time to consider a lot of things. The beauty of that was travelling throughout my career, and throughout the country, and even overseas, I was able to put in perspective my experiences. One of the things I have to say is if I were to list the top ten people in my book, I'd have to start with Coach Sharp being the sphere of influence in track, my father and grandfather, who were both Baptist preachers, then on that list of the top ten, Coach Rohe has got to be right there in the mix.

The years that I was under Coach Rohe, it was short, but it was the most influential period of time that I could have had because I was young. He was a no-nonsense kind of guy, but he was always full of enthusiasm. I don't know if you can tell, but my voice is always going to be enthusiastic. That's just what I learned, "Be enthusiastic." You can be down about anything, but everything is going to be a great day! And quite frankly, "you've got to want it." I still hear that in the morning. Those are things that you have as part of your life. Having been able to work directly with Bill Clinton was an experience I wouldn't pass up. No one to this day has ever asked me what my political party was before hiring me for a job.

The other side of it is I had the pleasure of working for a gentleman named Ron Brown. He was the Commerce secretary [1993-1996]. Then on April 3, 1996, I'll just tell you a little life story. On April 2, I was at the Washington Cancer Institute. I was sitting there in the evening hearing a hematologist say, "You have leukemia, lymphoma, or lupus. I don't know which one of those three you have, but we'll find out." And your mind goes blank when you get those kinds of diagnoses."

**TS:** None of them sound like a good option.

**WH:** None of them, and I was just like, "What?" My doctor had sent me through a series of tests several times because he didn't like what he was reading. The next morning I decided I was going to go play golf and relax my mind. I wanted to get to my office early enough to leave a note for my secretary. Long story made short, I had about three hundred people working for me and had a very nice immediate staff, but we were on flextime. So I was going down the hallway, and one of the clerical people said, "Mr. Secretary, I have a message for you." This was about 6:30 in the morning. We opened the offices at 6:00 just because of time zones and other work. I said, "What's the message, Betty?" And she said, "This is a direct quote

from Gus. He said, ‘Give the boss the quote.’” I said, “What is it?” She said, “Tell the boss, I’m okay.” I said, “Get him on the phone. I need to talk to him.” Gus was on of my special assistants.

I had allowed two of my special assistants to go on a mission with the Secretary to Bosnia. On that particular day thirty-[five] people were killed [including Secretary Ron Brown, when their airplane crashed over Croatia], and nine of those were personal friends of mine. They were co-workers. One of the guys, Bill Morton, I had just visited his office. That was his last trip. I kidded Bill because he had outgrown his little Mazda, and he had gotten another one. It was his last trip. So all things considered, you find the brevity of life and the length of eternity in life. One of the things that we have to do—I fight it losing Tony, and I fight it losing Ron Brown, and the third and fourth most significant deaths that I’ve experienced were my mother and my grandmother. I lost my mother in 2012 after caring for her for a number of years. I think that when you are at this stage of our lives—we aren’t old by any stretch of one’s imagination—my dad is not old at 91—at 62 I’m not. But I think that what you learn is that life is a race, and the race not often goes to the stronger or swifter man, but to the one who endures to the end.

When we think about the tortoise and the hare, I was accused a couple of times of being the hare. Coach Huntsman used to tell me I was “the rabbit, slow down a little bit in your extra-curricular activities.” But Coach Rohe always wanted us to be hares. He wanted us to be as fast as we could be and as good as we could be and as strong as we could be. I have to say my hat is off to him, and also to the Tennessee Athletics Department. It is one of the best there is in the country as far as sports management. Over the years, working with the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness and Health, we had the Tennessee SportsFest here on numerous occasions at the University of Tennessee. It was always a fantastically managed event, so I would say it’s good to be a Vol for life. I just wish that my daughter—I have one daughter who was a runner—had come to the University of Tennessee, but she didn’t want to run in college.

**TS:** Well, this is great!

**WH:** Thank you.

**TS:** I really appreciate it.

**WH:** I don’t know how long you were intending, but when you interview Wilbur, have some tape.

**TS:** I didn’t have a time limit in mind. This is wonderful.

**WH:** Well, this is interesting. I haven't had an opportunity to reflect about the Tennessee years. When you see your name on the bulletin board, on the marquee, when you see your name in print in the record book, it's another. We used to go through Stokely [Athletic Center] and see our picture on the wall. That was amazing. Over the years I've lost my rings. I didn't have a national championship ring—that came in 1974, the year after I finished—but the SEC and the other championships and to know that we were able to be competitive. We lost the two-mile relay at the NCAAs by a hair on a lane [Editor's note: At the 1973 NCAA Indoor Championships, Fordham won in a time of 7:31.5. A Tennessee team of Bill Anderson, Thom Garrison, Wilbur Hawkins, and Willie Thomas was second in 7:31.6]. But Willie Thomas and I still trade our comments about that. We trade our comments about having won the Penn Relays two-mile relay because we came from last place into first place on a day that we thought it was going to be difficult. But we put challenges to one another. If you bring it in this position, I'll bring it to the next one.

**TS:** So it sounds like a seamless transition from Rohe to Huntsman?

**WH:** Well, I didn't have any break in my tenure, so that part of it was seamless. I think that first of all Stan was a different style of coach than Coach Rohe. Coach Rohe had the outgoing personality. I need to reflect a little and talk about Coach Rohe's involvement with the football program because I probably, as a track athlete being from Knoxville, saw that. For a period, you may know that he was a recruiter and worked with the freshmen football team. There was a guy by the name of Rex Dockery [tackle on UT football team, 1961-1964, UT assistant coach, 1970-1971]. Rex was the freshmen football coach for a while and recruiter. I came to know Rex because of a number of things. First of all, being a hometown kid, I helped in the recruitment of athletes, football players. During those days you got to take them to the ball game and show them around Gibbs Hall. If there was an event, we had to take them, so we were basically their chaperone—a year or two older. But I got to know Rex Dockery through Coach Rohe. Later, I was coming through the airport in Nashville and saw Rex, and we had a wonderful visit. He was at the University of Memphis [as head coach, 1981-83; he was killed in a plane crash in 1983]. We traded stories about our years and those kinds of things. Then he asked me if I would go on a trip to recruit a kid to the University of Memphis. I asked, "Is he being considered by the University of Tennessee?" He said, "No, you know I wouldn't ask you if he were."

I always remember being a part of the hosting of the football players and the recruitment of some of those kids. The other side of that was that you could tell by Coach Rohe's style that he was always ahead of the situation. That's what I liked about him. I remember just hearing him on the phone once. I went to the office, and his office was always open. I went in. I can't



remember who was there. Another athlete was sitting, and Coach said, "Come on in." He was on the phone. Somebody was asking for the Volunteers to come to a meet. Without a note or piece of paper in front of him, he asked, "What are the sponsors offering?" Whatever was said, he said, "We've got an outstanding mile relay; we can bring a two-mile relay; we've got some outstanding distance runners." He ran the litany down right off the top of his head. And he said the schedule would work on these dates. Then he said, "See what you can do, and get back with me." I don't know any of the details, but just the art of making a deal. Donald Trump didn't have anything on Chuck Rohe.

**TS:** No. No.

**WH:** So when you ask if it was a seamless transition, I think the fact that we had a different style of coaching in Stan, and then I was an upper classman focused on getting out, I'm not really sure that it was anything other than business at that point—do what you've got to do. Of course, I always knew that if I wasn't working out at the time the team was because of class schedules, I knew that I could be on the track working out at night, and Stan Huntsman would probably be out there to 7:00 o'clock at night to time you and take you through the drills.

But the thing about it is that once a Vol always a Vol, and the style—I knew Bill Webb, and of course I knew Doug [Brown]. The only thing I have to say about the Tennessee track program is that somewhere somebody forgot to instill on the next generation, the teams and the kids that came behind us, the importance of wearing orange and the importance of winning. We, for a period of time went through—this may not be politically correct, but I'm going to say it—an era when it was disgraceful for Tennessee to have just one athlete at the national championships. We scored all-time lows in the SEC championships. I don't care if Arkansas and Texas A&M and any other schools would come into the SEC, they were going to get indoctrinated the Tennessee way because we were going to go down winning.

So you miss seeing those things because when you look on television—and track and field has taken a totally different approach—we didn't have eligibility to go pro until the 1976 Olympics. So you know that changed. Then we lost the momentum with the political unrest globally. What then took place was that Europe became the famous hunting ground for athletes, and of course corporate sponsorships and endorsements and appearance fees, and then the million and other dollar purses. It was no longer feasible to be a Volunteer on your track club not getting compensated. You wanted to get compensated, so kids went to the Philadelphia Pioneers or someone else and even went over seas. I look at what happened to Carl Lewis and some other people. They were world

famous, but they weren't that well known at home. We never recovered as a country. We get up for the Olympics every four years, but it's not the same.

When you look at Oregon and what Phil Knight [co-founder with Bill Bowerman and chairman of Nike, Inc.] has done, Nike didn't even exist in our day [founded 1971]. Nike was a fledgling company in 1972. I knew Steve Prefontaine through Willie Thomas because he and Steve were roomies at one of the national meets in high school—I think it was Golden West. We had an opportunity to hang out with Pre. But Oregon was building. We always ran at UCLA, and that was always a good event for us.

So memories! But I do want to say thank you for just listening to the unscripted comments of Wilbur Hawkins.

TS: Well, thank you. That's wonderful. This has been great!

WH: Thank you, Tom.

TS: Thank you, I've enjoyed it.