

**INTERVIEW WITH BILL SKINNER
CONDUCTED BY TOM SCOTT
SATURDAY, AUGUST 17, 2013
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE**



The Rohe Era Track and XC Association holds legal title and literary property rights, including copyright, to this oral history. It is not to be reproduced without permission of Charles H. Rohe and the co-chairs of the Rohe Era Track and XC Association.

TS: Bill, why don't you just identify yourself?

BS: I'm Bill Skinner, javelin thrower from the Tennessee track team from 1968 up until 1971.

TS: Bill, why don't we just start by talking about how you got to Tennessee in the first place? How did you ever hear about Tennessee and want to come to Tennessee to throw the javelin?

BS: I came down to Knoxville for the Dogwood Relays in 1966, I think it was. [Actually, 1967] I won [with a throw of 251-8], and it was a nice track meet, and I was impressed with the campus and everybody I met. Then, I ran into George Moschis, a javelin thrower at that time. Then, I ran into George again up at the Quantico Relays the following year. I think Tennessee was playing in the Orange Bowl, and they were playing Oklahoma [January 1, 1968]. They were having an Orange Bowl track meet. I contacted the

organizers down in the Orange Bowl track meet, and they said that they did have a javelin throw, and would I be interested in coming down? They would like to have me down there. I said, "Why, sure! I would like to throw and keep in shape and everything." I was working as a welder and sheet metal worker at that time and training in my off hours, late at night with an old water pipe up there in Delaware. I was throwing a water pipe because the ground was frozen, and I couldn't break up a javelin. I didn't have many javelins. I only had two at that time.

Anyway, I went to Miami to train for the 1968 Olympics. This was in November of 1967. I went down there to live with my aunt, and I moved my wife and child at that time down there. I was getting ready for that track team and came to find out that it wasn't a javelin throw, but a discus throw. They didn't know the difference between a discus and a javelin at that point down there in Miami. So, lo and behold, I didn't get to compete there. I did get some training in, and I came back through Knoxville. Chuck had invited me to stop by and see the track team—look it over. Of course, I was familiar with it, having won the Dogwood Relays. It was a nice facility; and, like I said, the people were pretty nice to me. My wife, my daughter, and myself stopped on our way back to Delaware. This was in the end of January or February of 1968. Chuck had offered me a scholarship at that time. I was ranked, like, number 5 in the nation, and I was in the top 25 in the world as far as throwing ability and distances. So, I stopped again and looked at the University of Tennessee. My wife and I talked it over, and then we went on back to Delaware, and I worked back there as a welder again to feed my family and everything.

I had just bought a new house there. At that point, I had to make a decision. Was I going to go to college or was I not? I got to looking at my dad. He was also a sheet metal worker and welder. He was climbing around on scaffolds and such at 55 years of age. I didn't want to be doing that at 55. If I didn't go to college, I would probably still be doing something like that. I didn't know whether I was going to make it through college or not, since I had dropped out of high school in my senior year. I was just bored with it. I wasn't stupid. I just didn't like education that much. So, I decided that I had better give it a shot, because I didn't want to be 55 and up on that scaffold and saying I should have done it—I should have, could have, would have. So, anyway, I elected to come to the University of Tennessee.

Chuck Rohe, the coach, and I ironed out our little particulars on the scholarship. Like I said, I had just purchased a new house, and I turned that over to a realtor to rent for me. I was going to maintain it in case I got down here to the University of Tennessee and fell flat on my face, education-wise. I didn't have any doubt with my ability with the javelin, but it was my education. I didn't know whether I would be able to handle it or

not. I had to have a place to come back to. So, I wanted to keep my house. So, I put it with a realtor and had it leased out for a year with a couple. I packed my family up and moved down to Knoxville.

TS: Of course, you were a non-traditional student by this time, I guess, in your late 20s, somewhere, maybe?

BS: I was almost 29.

TS: You know, we didn't have that many non-traditional students back then.

BS: No, not at that time. Most of them were in Vietnam or different places.

TS: We don't hear of too many welders that pick up the javelin and start throwing it. How did you ever get into javelin throwing?

BS: Well, I was a weightlifting instructor and boxing instructor at the local YMCA in Wilmington, Delaware. I was riding this guy [Bill Reader] about trying to push him a little bit more into the weights and encouraging him to put more weight on the bench press and stuff like that. He took it the wrong way. He thought that I was trying to jerk him around a little bit. He challenged me to come out and throw the javelin in a track meet against him. I figured I can do that. "Anybody can throw a stick," I told him. I wound up going out. It was on a Thursday night. They had the Delaware State Championships. I finished second to him. I think I threw like 179 feet or something, and he threw like 181 feet. He didn't beat me by much. That was on a Thursday night. He called me back up on Friday and said, "Listen, I'm going up to Philadelphia for the Middle Atlantic Championships. Would you like to go?" I said, "Yes, I would like to go up there. I need another shot at you. I don't like losing to you and having to live with that for the rest of my life." So, we went up to Philadelphia on Saturday morning, and they let us into the track meet. They didn't know who I was, and I didn't know anything about them. But, lo and behold, I won the Middle Atlantic Championships. I threw [208 feet, 10 inches].

TS: A big improvement!

BS: Oh, yes, a big improvement just in two days. Anyway, I enjoyed it, had a good time doing it. There was another track meet in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, the following week. So, I went up to that and won that one. It was a Harrisburg Invitational. One thing led to another.

TS: So, you were a natural!

BS: I had a natural arm on me. I could throw with my arm. That was one of the problems. If you just depend on your arm all the time, you're only going to

reach so far. I was good enough to win in a local level, but I wanted to be better than that. I wanted to be up in the world rankings. I figured I had better go get some training. George Moschis, the javelin thrower at Tennessee at that time, was very technical in knowledge and knowledgeable. I figured if I was going to learn, I could learn from the best. I figured he was the best technique thrower in the nation at that time. He worked very hard with me, and he improved me up quite a bit.

TS: I want to make sure we get the Bill Battle story on tape. I read the newspaper and magazine accounts from the time, and Chuck Rohe's stories nowadays are slightly different than those stories.

BS: Well, sure.

TS: I wonder if I can get your perspective on it. You had just come back from beating the top Russian javelin thrower.

BS: Janis Lulis [1968 Olympic champion], yes.

TS: So, tell that story.

BS: I had gone over as the captain of the national track and field team [in 1970]. I had a big red, handlebar moustache, sort of like Ben Davidson [a defensive end for the Oakland Raiders] professional football team. As a matter of fact, little kids used to run up to me in airports and say, "Mr. Davidson, can we have your autograph?" And I would sign, Ben Davidson, Oakland Raiders. I probably signed his name as many times as he did. They didn't know who he was. I was as big as he was, being 6'7", 6'8", in that range, and had a handlebar moustache. That kind of clued it right in.

TS: Did you grow the moustache while you over in Moscow?

BS: It wasn't in Moscow. It was over in Russia and Poland. It was over in Europe—the whole gamut. We had about ten different meets. It was the United States versus all these different countries—Germany and Poland and France and so on.

TS: Was the meet against Lulis in Moscow or Leningrad?

BS: It was in Leningrad, which is St. Petersburg. They changed that name every once in a while.

TS: So, you had been on a tour through Europe with the U.S. team. So, you had a summer to grow a moustache?

BS: Yes. I can grow a heck of a moustache. I can't grow sideburns worth a durn, but I can grow a moustache.

TS: So you come back in the fall of 1970 and start another year at UT. And what happens?

BS: Well, they told me I had to shave. I said, "My moustache has nothing to do with my ability to throw the javelin. As far as I'm concerned, my grandfather had a moustache, my father had a moustache, and I'll have a moustache. That's the way it's going to be." They said, "No, you've got to shave. No UT athlete has a moustache."

TS: Who are the "they"?

BS: It was Bob Woodruff, Bill Battle, and the rest of the coaching staff at the University of Tennessee.

TS: Of course, Bob Woodruff was the athletic director, and Bill Battle was the head football coach. Why should he have any say in whether a member of the track team has a moustache?

BS: That was my question of Bill Battle. Woodruff asked Bill Battle, who was standing there. He said, "What do you think, Bill?" He said, "I think he needs to shave." I said, "Well, wait a minute, coach. Do you have anything to do with the track team?" He said, "No, I'm a football coach." I said, "Well, I know that, but I want to know why you think you have some say over the track team."

TS: What did he say?

BS: He just said, "That's our policy. We have a policy here at the University of Tennessee."

TS: Any you are about the same age as Bill Battle.

BS: I was two years older than Bill Battle.

TS: That's ridiculous, isn't it.

BS: I pointed that out to him. I said, "I'm older than you are, and I'm smart enough to know that if I want to shave, I'll shave. That's the way it will be."

TS: So what happened then?

BS: Well, Chuck Rohe, the track coach—I was going on the cover of the [1971 NCAA] *Track and Field Guide*, which was a magazine that went around the

country—he said, “If you want to be on the cover, you’re going to have to shave. We’ve got to have clean-shaven athletics here at Tennessee.” So, I did shave my moustache, but I told the coach at that time, “Now, you’ve got about six months to straighten this out. Because I will have a moustache next year, just like I had in Europe. They were billing me over in Europe as Wild Bill Skinner, a cowboy. I got a lot of publicity, and Tennessee got a lot of publicity out of it too.” I always pointed out that I represented Tennessee in my athletics, and it worked pretty good.

TS: Okay, so, this incident takes places at the beginning of fall quarter [1970], and you give them six months to change their policy.

BS: Right. I said, “If this had anything to do with drugs, I’m anti-drugs of any type. I don’t take steroids. I don’t take any uppers or anything. I’ve never smoked a joint of marijuana. I’m very anti-drugs. So, to put me in that group just because I have a moustache is kind of crazy.”

TS: Yes. Coach Rohe told us the other day about some of the weight men that were taking anabolic steroids back in the 1960s here at the University of Tennessee. It wasn’t illegal at the time.

BS: Oh, yes. No, it wasn’t illegal.

TS: But they were doing it, so, I’m glad to hear that you weren’t doing any of that.

BS: No, no, if I can’t do it through my own efforts and hard work, then it’s not worth doing.

TS: Okay, so winter comes around, and it gets close to spring. Of course, you can’t throw the javelin indoors, so, you are waiting for the spring outdoor season to come around. Then, what happened?

BS: Well, I grew my moustache, and they told me I had to shave it, and I said, “I’m not going to.” They said, “Well, you won’t be on the track team.” I said, “Well, that’s the way it goes. You know, there’s no written rule in the SEC that says I can’t have a moustache. There’s nothing in the AAU [Amateur Athletic Union] records that says I can’t. As a matter of fact, there’s not even a written policy at the University of Tennessee saying I can’t have a moustache.” It was a situation where our coaches got together, and they decided what our dress code was going to be. I said, “If they got together and said that everybody will shave his head to be on one of the athletic teams, I guess we would have to shave our head.” I said, “I’m not going to do that. I didn’t break any rules. I didn’t break any NCAA rule or anything. I think you are really out of the ballpark here on trying to get me to shave, period.” It was just a hardheaded decision on my part

versus them. They had a hardhead. It was just like two bulls going at each other.

TS: So, did you get kicked off the team? You got hurt somewhere along the line.

BS: No, they threw me off the team.

TS: Now, was Coach Rohe still the track coach at that time [spring of 1971]?

BS: No, he left at the same time.

TS: Do you think there is any connection between the two?

BS: He says there wasn't, but I don't know."

TS: I understand that he was pretty put out with them.

BS: Oh, yes, he definitely was. [Ed. Note: The story is covered thoroughly in Gwilym S. Brown, "Is a Mustache Just Peanuts?" *Sports Illustrated*, 14 June 1971].

TS: I think I read that you got hurt about that time too.

BS: Yes, I got injured.

TS: So, you didn't throw that spring?

BS: No, I threw for the New York Athletic Club. I won the AAU National Championship that year too.

TS: Were you in the 1972 Olympics?

BS: I was supposed to be in the 1972 Olympics, but I was at a restaurant out here. There were a bunch of rednecks out there. They were carrying on, and I asked them to act a little more civilly. They were just acting like really rednecks, you know, just going crazy. They were on drugs or drunk or something. They started giving me a hard time. Well, the bouncers threw them outside and told them they had to leave. Well, they left [the building], and they went out there and jumped on this guy leaning against his car, a guy by the name of Mike Long. He was just a nice guy. He wouldn't say, "Boo," to anybody. These guys started pushing him around. I told the rent-a-cops, "Go out there and get that stopped. That boy is going to get hurt." They said, "Oh, we're not supposed to go out there. We're supposed to stay in here." I said, "Well, get the hell out of the way. I'll go out there." Lo and behold, I got stabbed three times. Mike had got stabbed

five times. They punctured his left kidney and everything else. They just missed his heart. It was one of those bad things. I was very disturbed by the way it was handled and treated in the courts. We went to the grand jury on the thing, and we had a police officer that was a captain on the Knoxville Police Force. He got in there and told a different story on what happened.

TS: But he wasn't there.

BS: No, he wasn't there. But, anyway, the grand jury returned not a true bill. In other words, no crime was committed. Here, one guy gets stabbed five times, and I got stabbed three times, and had my intestines cut in half—knocked me out of the Olympics. I was on the dean's list. I was a veteran, with an honorable discharge. I couldn't believe that that happened.

TS: Did you throw any more after that?

BS: I tried to get back in shape to get back to the Olympics, and I just couldn't get back in shape. It had cut my intestines in half, and all that bile spilled out through my lower intestine area, and I just couldn't do it.

TS: That was pretty much it for your career?

BS: Right, I was 31 at that time, and I didn't have the opportunity to wait a year and heal up properly.

TS: How would you sum up your career at Tennessee? It ends on a sour note?

BS: A very sour note.

TS: But you are still coming to reunions.

BS: I come to reunions. I still like the people and all. I'm not impressed with the judicial system here. The police force and stuff like that. I don't have anything, really, against Tennessee. I wish it had been different. They still shun me. I've been inducted into several halls of fame. Tennessee hasn't seen fit to put me in the hall of fame. But that's their choice.

TS: Did you graduate from the University of Tennessee?

BS: I graduated from the University of Tennessee [1971], interviewed and went to work with John Deere, and moved to Moline, Illinois, and became a sales manager for industrial equipment. I lived in the Moline, Illinois, area for a couple of years and then got transferred down to Indianapolis, Indiana, and was there for six years. Then, I got transferred to the Kentucky area, and I elected to live in Georgetown. I've been there since 1979.

TS: At least, you haven't been climbing scaffolds all these years.

BS: No, I wasn't climbing and scaffolds. My health is not the best, with arthritis and stuff like that, so it's a good thing.

TS: Is there anything you would like to add.

BS: No, I wish Tennessee the best. I'm sorry that they took the position that they took. As a matter of fact, I'm sorry that I took the position that I took. I've never liked being told what to do. I didn't like the coaches trying to tell me. All I asked for was, "You give me the opportunity to throw, the equipment, and that type of thing. I'll do the best I can."

TS: So, basically, it was George Moschis coaching you, if anybody.

BS: Right. I give all the credit to George for the fine coaching that I had at the end of my career.

TS: Great! I appreciate talking to you.

BS: I've enjoyed talking to you.