TRACK AND FIELD

Stevens, Onyali basking in NCAA limelight

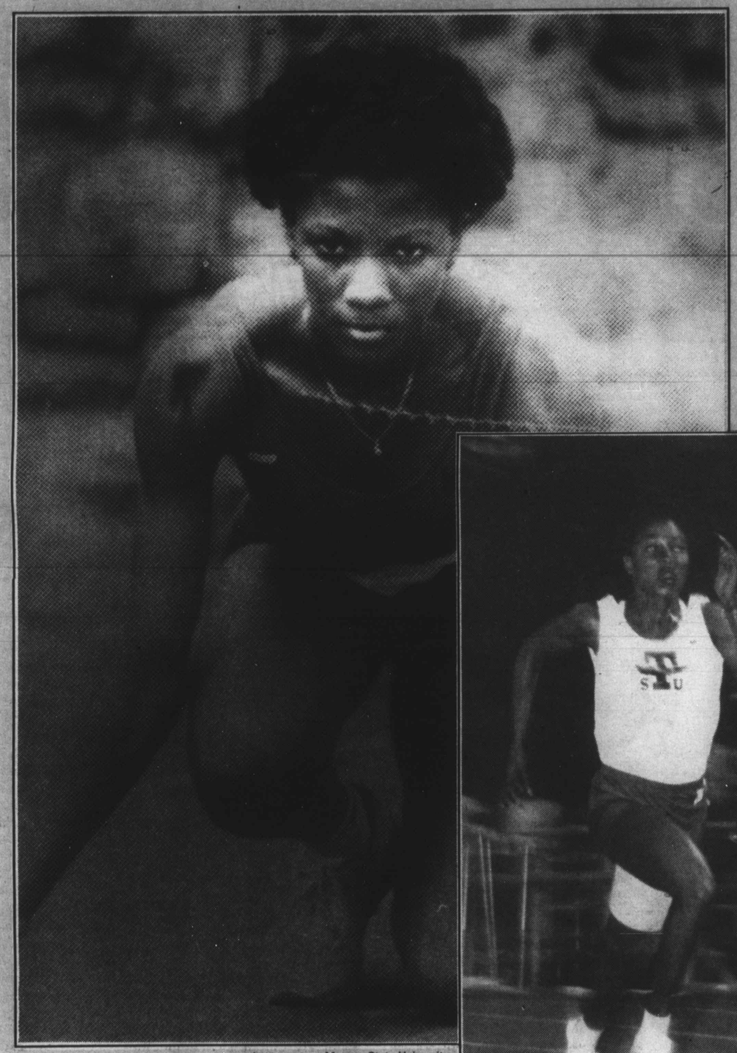

photo courtesy Morgan State University

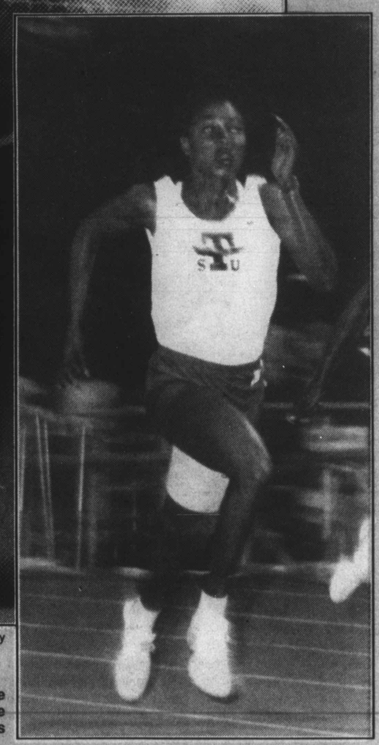

photo by Victor Jackson

The Queens Of Sprint

Two black college women demonstrated their supremacy at the Division I track championships in Eugene, Ore. Rochelle "Gazelle" Stevens of Morgan State triumphed in the 400. Texas Southern's Mary Onyali (right) won the 200.

Morgan State's Rochelle Stevens and Texas Southern's Mary Onyali shared center stage at the NCAA Division I Track and Field Championships in Eugene, Ore.

The two women sprinters each won an individual national title and were the only black college athletes to gain championship status at the NCAA's grandest track event. Stevens won the 400-meter dash and Onyali proved to be supreme in the 200.

Stevens' victory made her collegiate career complete. In the '87 nationals, she came very close to winning it all, finishing second behind Olympian Lillie Leatherwood. That memory stayed with her throughout this track season. She was determined to capture the first place medal that eluded her last year.

Coming into the finals, Stevens was one of the favorites, but she had some formidable opposition who wanted to own a national title. Jearl Miles, the Division II champion from Alabama A & M had been especially impressive in the nationals. Without really being pushed, she reeled off a 51.39, which at the time, was the swiftest of any woman quarter-miler at all NCAA divisions. Maciel Malone of Arizona State, ruled the PAC-10 and recorded the second fastest collegiate time of the year (51.61). Stevens' best time up until then was in the same range - - 51.62.

The stage was set for what would be a very challenging race.

Stevens' start wasn't what it usually is. She covered the first 200 in a slow (for her) 24 seconds. She normally takes the first half in 23. It was clear that the slow start kept Stevens from breaking the 51 seconds barrier.

While Stevens eased through the first half, Malone started to make up the stagger. For a while, it seemed like she had a chance to take the lead. But Stevens held firm and finished in 51.23, the same clocking she had in last year's championships. Malone was second in 51.32 and Miles finished third in 51.58.

Rochelle is intent on becoming a U.S. Olympian. She has been particularly selective in the 400s she's run this year - three to be exact. Coach Leonard Braxton planned it that way on purpose. With fresh legs, she should be in good shape to peak against the nation's best at the Olympic Trials this month.

Onyali geared herself for a strong run at capturing the 100 and 200. That's quite an undertaking when you consider the grand level of competition in the short sprints. The fleet Nigerian earned a split for her efforts, winning the 200 and finishing fourth in the 100. In both cases, she had looked forward to tight races and she got them.

It appeared that Alabama's Pauline Davis would reign supreme in the 200. Davis came to the nationals with a collegiate best of 22.76. Morgan State's Wendy Vereen and Carlette Guidry of Texas had also been superlative at the distance during the season. And of course there was Stevens, who is also excellent in the half-lap race.

In the end, though, Onyali had the last say, blasting down the stretch in 22.70 to defeat Davis (22.81). Stevens showed that she's reputable at that distance, finishing third in 22.91.

The 100 was dominated by UCLA's Gail Devers, who came through the tape in 10.86. However, the three runners behind her were all within .5 seconds of each other -- Davis (11.14), Esther Jones, LSU (11.18), and Onyali (11.19).

Morgan State's contingent was elated with Stevens' 400 victory. They believed they would have further cause for celebration in the 4 x 400 relay. All season long, the Lady Bears had established themselves as one of the elite quartets in college track.

At the Penn Relays in April, Morgan State and Arizona State put on a show as ASU barely nudged Morgan's foursome with a time of 3:31.60. The Lady Bears were only a little over a stride off the pace clocking 3:31.81. These two teams came to the nationals ranked as the top two collegiate mile relay teams. A showdown in the finals could well have been worth the price of admission.

Cold weather plus an error in judgement by Stevens combined to thwart MSU's opportunity for victory. During the preliminary heats, Oregon showcased its duck weather, complete with chilly winds and steady rains. For half-an-hour before MSU's prelims, Stevens stayed warm by sitting on a hydraulic heating pad. By race time, Stevens was paying a painful price for warmth. After taking her warm-ups off, the big variation in temperature caused Stevens' legs to cramp severely as she started to run her split. She fought through the pain to finish, but in a very slow 54 which wasn't good enough for her team to make the finals. After the first two legs, it appeared that Morgan was completely out of contention. But Vereen's 51.5 leg, put her team back in the hunt. They were only down by five meters when Stevens got the baton.

There were no national champions from black colleges in the men's competition. Nevertheless, there were some noticeable performances and a surprise here and there.

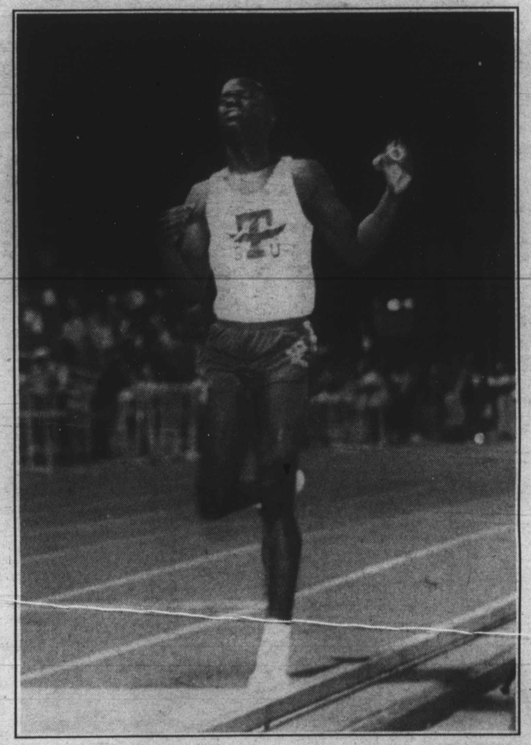

photo by Roosevelt Miles

Maude Ado may have had the most surprising performance at the nationals, placing second in the men's 800.

Maude Ado, a half-miler from Texas Southern, finished second in the 800 with a time of 1:47.05. Virginia's Paul Ereng won in 1:46.76. Ado's showing in Eugene could be viewed as a surprise. He didn't win the SWAC title and he didn't have the best 800 time for TSU this season. Oslen Barr of Jackson State had run 1:45.99 at the conference meet, which was the best collegiate time of the year. Ado's teammate, Geryl House had run 1:46.61 at the same meet. Ado's previous best was 1:47.51. But when the gun went up for the 800 finals, only Ado remained.

Vernon George, another TSU athlete, didn't fare as well as many had expected. During last year's nationals, he fell a quarter of an inch short of winning the long jump (27-0 1/2). Teammate Paul Emordi eked out the victory with a jump of 27-0 3/4. This year, George couldn't find his rhythm and placed sixth (26-6 1/2). Ironically, George came to the nationals with the sixth best jump of the collegiate track season at 26-8 1/4. Incidentally, George was also sixth in the high hurdles (13.98).

It's always good to see the little guy hold his own among the big boys. Praire View A & M made their statement on the oval with a very credible performance in the 4 x 400 relay, finishing third with a 3:06.00. The Panthers held up well against some extremely swift company as UCLA blazed the lanes, setting a new NCAA record of 2:59.91. Florida showed their gears as the runner-up, clocking 3:00.68.

Prairie View was hardly an unknown commodity before the championships started. In late April, they finished third at the prestigious Drake Relays, running 3:04.35. Charles Bruce, Felton Nails, Anthony Christie and Eric Pogue combine to make Prairie View a very effective relay unit. All have run in the 45s for the 400, but never in the same relay race. Their aim was to run around 3:01- 3:02. However, coach Hoover Wright wasn't dissatisfied with his troops showing.

What makes the Panthers even more interesting is that the school has a dual NCAA membership. In football and basketball, they are Division I, but in track and field they are NAIA.

Speaking of NAIA, Prairie View had a successful run in those championships, finishing second overall in the team standings and winning both relays.

Wright has some pleasant days to look forward to with the talent he has to work with. The relay team loses only one member in Pogue. Everyone else has at least one more year of eligibility. The team figures to be more mature and stronger by next track season. And if Wright can find a capable replacement for Pogue, the Panthers could mount a serious challenge in the 4 x 400 at the '89 nationals.

-- BCSR Staff