

1968 U.S. Olympic track team, Echo Summit training site continue to make history



Athletes from the 1968 U.S. Olympic track team stand on part of the track they trained on at Echo Summit.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

1968 was not all about free love and feeling groovy. Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated within two months of each other. Vietnam was raging. The country was polarized.

Even though the Civil Rights Act was signed 50 years ago this summer, it did not mean equality was immediate – and certainly not four years later.

Echo Summit played a role in that tumultuous summer.



John Carlos and Tommie Smith remember training at Echo Summit with fondness.

Laurence Crabtree, Eldorado National Forest supervisor, said it was human rights history that began at Echo Summit in the summer of 1968. This is where the U.S. Track and Field trained for the Mexico City Olympics. The elevation of the two locations is about the same – with Echo Summit being 28 feet higher at 7,377 feet.

Tommie Smith won gold in the 200 meters and John Carlos bronze. While on the podium listening to the national anthem they bowed their heads and raised a fist with a black glove – a salute to black power and a stand against racial inequality.

Smith and Carlos, along with nine other members of that historic team, returned to Echo Summit on June 27 to be honored as well as acknowledge the site is now a California Historical Landmark.

“This track and field team is regarded as the best in history. And they have never gotten their due,” Jill Geer with USA Track & Field said. “They were heroic in so many ways – on and off the field.”



The Olympic flag flies proudly June 27 at Echo Summit.

They brought home 20 medals, including 12 gold. Smith's world record of 19.83 seconds stood for 11 years. They won more gold and set more records (six world) than any previous team had. Twenty of them are in the National Track and Field Hall of Fame.

"This is where the love and bonding started amongst all of the individuals," Carlos said. "I hear many people talk about how great this team was. The greatness came from this location."

Walt Little, with the city of South Lake Tahoe, recommended the location. The U.S. Olympic Committee approved it.

In addition to the men's track team, the men and women's volleyball teams and women's gymnastic teams also trained in South Lake Tahoe.

At the track and field trials on the 400-meter oval at Echo Summit, four world records were set in September 1968. The Games were a month later.



This is the state's fifth sports site landmark and first civil rights.

Hundreds of trees remained in the middle of the track. Boulders were part of the landscape. It made for some interesting perspectives.

Smith remembers watching Bob Seagren, who went on to win gold in pole vault, train. "I thought he had fallen out of a tree," Smith said as Seagren tumbled 11-plus feet after clearing the bar.

For most of the athletes, this chilly Friday morning was the first time they had been back to Tahoe.

Triple jumper Norm Tate was overheard saying, "This brings back memories of coming out here in the morning and freezing."

One of the conditions of the U.S. Forest Service allowing the track to be built was for it to have little impact on the environment and that it would be removed quickly. That track went to South Tahoe Middle School. It was in 1992 that the last high school track meet was run at that track. It had outlived its lifespan. In 2007, it was replaced.



Each athlete has a piece of the track.

But Anthony Davis, who runs community events at the STMS track, has pieces of the track. He had some cut up to give to each of the athletes. Part of lane No. 3 was front and center during the festivities. Davis told *Lake Tahoe News* one day he would like to secure the funds to have it framed and placed in a public place.

A plaque on a granite boulder commemorates the site. It is located just off Highway 50 where Adventure Mountain is located.

Athletes were also honored Friday night at Sacramento State during the USA Track & Field Championships.