

Mathis takes trip down memory lane at UNR

Before taking the stage Saturday night at the Silver Legacy in Reno, Johnny Mathis stopped by UNR, the site of his record-setting high jump.

The singer and entertainer returned to campus to reminisce about his record 6-feet-5½-inch high jump set in 1956. This was 2 inches shorter than the Olympic record. At the time he was attending San Francisco State on an athletic scholarship.

A San Francisco Chronicle article that year featured he and future NBA star Bill Russell, noting them as the top two high jumpers in the city of San Francisco. Mathis and Russell, who attended the University of San Francisco, would become close friends, and often traveled to college track and field meets together.

Ty Cobb, a university alumnus and former special assistant to Ronald Reagan, witnessed the achievement which took place in the former Mackay Stadium located in what is today Hilliard Plaza, the open area in front of the Mack Social Science building. In his chronicle of the Mathis-Nevada story, Cobb wrote: "As a young high school student, I used to enjoy going up to the old Mackay Stadium at the University of Nevada to watch track and field events. I recall in 1956 catching this young, relatively short student from San Francisco State set a new high jump record for the stadium. I couldn't believe how someone so small in stature could jump that high."

Mathis' campus visit, was initiated by Cobb.

For Mathis, 1956 would prove to be a monumental year. Following his record jump, he was asked to try out for the 1956 U.S. Olympic team. At the same time Columbia Records requested Mathis – who had been singing in Bay Area clubs –

travel to New York City to begin work on his first recording.
He chose singing.