

'LIVING WITNESS'

Green shows that small town kids can achieve big dreams

BY ABBY HOOVEN

Eminence will always hold a special place in Jim Green's heart.

The well-renowned track star has traveled all over through his athletic endeavors, met influential figures, accomplished feats only a select group can put on their résumé, but his journey is rooted in his hometown experience.

"I'm very proud of my hometown. I never forget where I come from," said Green.

Born to the late Dennis and Evelyn Green, Jim grew up in Eminence during a tumultuous period in American history. Living through the Civil Rights movement, Green noted that he couldn't go into certain restaurants to eat or had to go through a separate entrance in the back to get food.

Compared to the climate in other areas of the country, Green said he thinks it was a little bit better for African Americans in Eminence because people got along.

"I mean, you didn't see any people fighting and calling each other names unless it got real bad or something," said Green. "I think it was pretty good. I would never knock my hometown."

Since then, Eminence, and all of America, has undergone major social, political and technological changes. For instance, Green said his home as a kid did not have air conditioning or running water like homes do today.

"Things have really changed ... and it's changed for the better because I think it's a fantastic town, fantastic people," said Green.

Green's athletic career in Eminence started around the eighth grade. Throughout high school, he played football, basketball, baseball and ran track. Yet, it wasn't until his freshman year that someone noticed he might have a gift for running.

"We were on the football field, and I think then, coach (Jackie) Purvis was the football coach, and he saw that I maybe had a special skill and pretty fast in running," said Green. "So, we decided to try track and field a little bit, but I continued to play all the other sports also as well as running track."

There was just one problem: Eminence didn't have a track.

Instead, Green and his teammates trained along the railroad track bed in town every day after school.

Being a straight stretch of terrain, Green never went on an oval track until he ran a race in Louisville. Despite the lack of training with turns, Green said it was not a hard adjustment.

"It just kind of went with the flow. I mean, it was a little bit easier running on the tartan track than running on the cinders that we ran on every day," said Green.

Just as the world has transformed since Green's childhood, track equipment has evolved, including running shoes.

"We didn't have, when I was in high school, the Nikes and the Pumas...we had some kind of other off brand shoe that we wore," said Green.

The quality and makeup of shoes has also changed over the years.

"The shoes we had were a little bit heavier and you have a totally different material on the top of the shoes nowadays. Back in the day when I was running track, the material I had on our shoes was a bit hot, was a little bit heavier and the rubber on the bit on the bottom was a little bit heavier also," said Green. "With all this technology that they have today, the soles on the shoes today are a little bit thinner."

The location and type of training Green experienced, and the type of running shoes

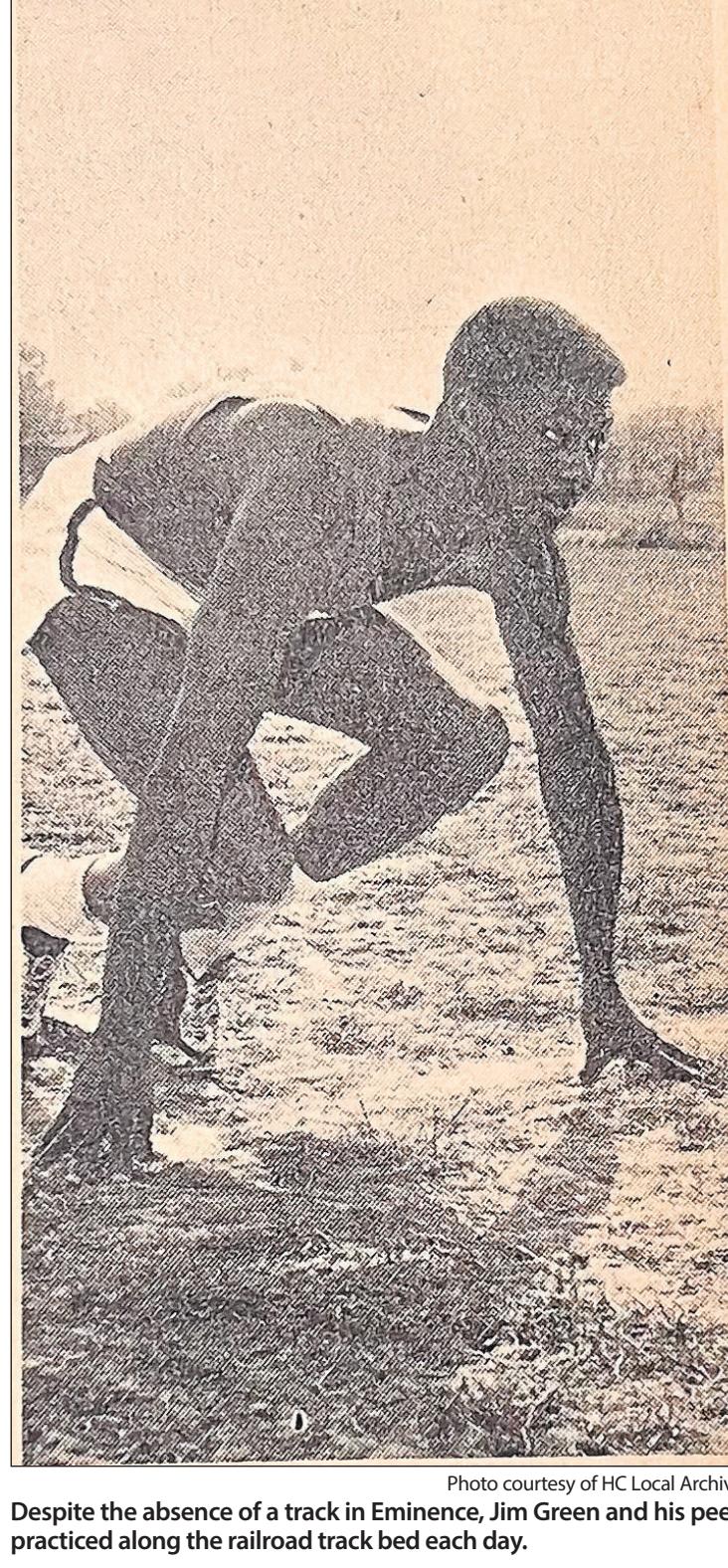


Photo courtesy of HC Local Archives
Despite the absence of a track in Eminence, Jim Green and his peers practiced along the railroad track bed each day.

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on his feet, did not hinder his performance at meets or his ability to make a name for himself in high school.

He was the state champion in the 100, 220 and 440-yard dashes and broke state records in the 70, 100, 220 and 440-yard dashes.

With some of the best times in the country, Green also earned the opportunity to travel to meets in other parts of the U.S.

According to Henry County Local archives, Green won two gold medals in 1966 at the National Junior Chamber of Commerce Track and Field Championships in Colorado.

He ran a time of 9.7 seconds to win the 100 and clocked a 21.2 in the 220 to tie the record he set the previous afternoon.

Green also traveled to the Golden West Invitational in Sacramento before he began his collegiate track career.

He finished second in the 100 with a time of 9.4 seconds and earned runner-up in the 440 by a judge's decision after Green and the winner both clocked 47.5 seconds, according to Henry County Local archives.

Track was Green's eventual sport of choice, but he also excelled in football at Eminence. Once, he recorded 10 touchdowns in a single game.

"It was a game I loved to play because of the competition. Football was a game that doesn't have it easy for anybody because of the training you have to put yourself through, which is very rigid and very rugged, but it gives you a sense of satisfaction that you can play this game and you can be pretty good at it," said Green.

He also enjoyed football because of the teammates around him, who became some of his closest friends at Eminence.

"I still think about the

guys I played with like Larry Roberts, Richard Lawson, Mike Moore, Danny Gunnell," said Green. "But those guys were just fantastic guys I played with those four years in high school and we just had a common bond. We stuck together."

Along with football, Green played with the same teammates in basketball.

"I will always cherish for the rest of my life that I would have the opportunity to play with those guys," Green said.

For his skills, Green was heavily recruited, and at times persuaded to pursue football or basketball, but eventually decided to further his track career at the University of Kentucky.

"I knew track was my favorite sport and I knew that I could probably excel in track more than I could any other sport," said Green. "I think I could have excelled in football if I decided to play football, but I wanted track to be my main sport."

Transitioning from a small town to a large college campus brought some changes as well. Green said it wasn't a bad adjustment leaving home, but he always made sure to remember Eminence.

"Over time, you meet new people and you make those adjustments in life to go ahead and further your career and doing something else," said Green. "But you never forget where you come from and the people who lift you along the way, you never forget that."

The shift from high school to college was also easier due to his relationship with UK track coach Press Whelan.

"Coach Whelan and I had a relationship as an athlete and a coach and a personal relationship for 54 years because we talked almost every month on the phone," Green said.

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Photo courtesy of HC Local Archives
Jim Green celebrates near the end of a race during his decorated track career. Green won numerous SEC and NCAA titles before running for five years in the professional circuit.

During his time at UK, Green earned All-America honors six times and won two NCAA titles in the indoor 60-yard dash in 1968 and 1971. Additionally, Green won eight Southeastern Conference individual events: the indoor 60-yard dash in 1968 and 1971, the outdoor 100-yard dash in 1968, 1970 and 1971, and the outdoor 220-yard dash in 1968, 1970 and 1971.

In 1971, Green became the first African-American student-athlete to graduate from UK. That year, he was also named the world's fastest man.

Making history came with hostility, though. As he attended meets in the Deep South, Green was not welcomed with open arms and faced hateful comments.

"I got called a lot of names and a lot of people told me that you don't belong here and go home," said Green. "The thing is you just kind of keep it cool and keep going."

It also helped that Green let his running speak for itself.

"My philosophy is that you can call me any name that you want to, as long as you don't put your hands on me, and I always said my philosophy was, I called it the finish line," said Green. "When I got to the finish line, all I have to do is turn around and look at you and you know you were defeated. I don't have to say anything to you."

After graduating from UK, Green competed in the professional circuit for five years. In his half decade in the pros, Green tied the world record in the 60-yard, 100-yard and 100-meter dashes, broke the world record in the 300-yard dash with a time of 30.6 seconds and competed in several

foreign countries.

He also took down OJ Simpson and Caitlyn Jenner, who competed in the race as Bruce Jenner, in a 60-yard race televised by ABC.

Running against big names didn't affect Green, though.

"It didn't make any difference because I feel like I was better than they were. I'm not bragging, but the thing is I never lost a race to OJ Simpson. I never lost a race to my good friend John Carlos who is on the Olympic stand with the black glove in 1968," said Green. "I was just as good as those guys coming from California... I'm not bragging but it's just the way I feel."

Green nearly had the opportunity to participate in the historic 1968 Mexico City Olympics, but suffered a hamstring injury and was unable to compete. He also missed the chance to join the U.S. team in the 1972 Munich Olympics due to an injury.

Yet, Green has no regrets about missing out on the Olympics. In fact, he said that he still went on to beat some Olympic runners in future races.

"The thing is that God has something better for me to do," said Green. "I look at it like this. It wasn't only me that didn't make the Olympic team that had great times."

After five years in the pros, Green stepped away from his track career.

"The mind says yes, but the body says no," said Green. "You get a little older and you can't do the things you used to do."

Green went on to have a successful career with a pharmaceutical company. Now, he is highly involved with the Theta Omega Chapter of the Omega Psi Psi Fraternity.

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According to the fraternity website, "Omega Psi Psi Fraternity, Inc. is the first international fraternal organization founded on the camps of a historically black college."

Green said his chapter of men aim to assist the Louisville community and connect with Jefferson County Public Schools to mentor and aid students in a variety of ways.

"I always try to do something to help somebody. I always try to do something in my fraternity to make sure that we always help somebody. If we could have a program where we could go out and serve, a program and go out and make money to help other folks have a successful career and a successful life," Green said. "It doesn't make any difference if the person's white, black, we all got to help one another."

His generosity and selfless nature come from his upbringing in Eminence. Green said neighbors were quick to lend a helping hand when needed, even if it was just sharing a couple eggs or sugar.

Humility was also instilled in Green throughout his childhood and has lasted throughout his decorated career.

"My mother always told me to be humble. She said, 'You know what? I know you're a great track sprinter. You can soar like an eagle but you gotta come down and get a drink of water,'" said Green.

Growing up, Green also had several positive influences that helped set him up for success, just as he has the chance to do now with his fraternity.

He mentioned Purvis, Martha Terry, Bill Smith and all the African-American teachers and men in the community as influential people in his life that showed him, and his peers, the right way to do things and encouraged them to follow their dreams.

"God works in mysterious ways, and I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me in my lifetime, but it has, and I think you can accomplish a lot when you work hard... and I think that I've worked very, very hard to accomplish what I have"

— Jim Green

not only that for me, this is good for my hometown too. Because I look at it, my name may be on the building but Eminence, Kentucky helped me put it there and if it wasn't for the support I got from the people in my hometown, maybe I wouldn't have all these accomplishments."

Just as Green's mentors poured into him as a kid, he shared his own words of wisdom to today's youth to follow their dreams despite doubt or opinions from others.

"This is a great big world. Anything you want out here, you go get it, go get it for yourself," said Green. "Don't let somebody tell you you can't do something just because you come from a small town. I am a living witness that you can come from a small town and your dreams can come true."

"The African-American teachers that we had were instrumental in my lives and making sure that we got good quality education, and they would always tell us, never fear anybody and never tell anybody that you can't do something because God don't make no joke," said Green.

For his accomplishments during his track career, Green has been named to the Eminence High School Hall of Fame, the University of Kentucky Athletic Hall of Fame and several others.

Locally, Eminence created the Jim Green Walking Trail in 2020 to honor the hometown star. His fraternity has a golf scramble named in his honor as well.

At his alma mater, UK renamed an annual indoor meet the "Jim Green Invitational" in 2019 and announced last year the new indoor track and field facility will be called the Jim Green Indoor Track and Field Center.

"God works in mysterious ways, and I never thought anything like this would ever happen to me in my lifetime, but it has, and I think you can accomplish a lot when you work hard... and I think that I've worked very, very hard to accomplish what I have," said Green. "But

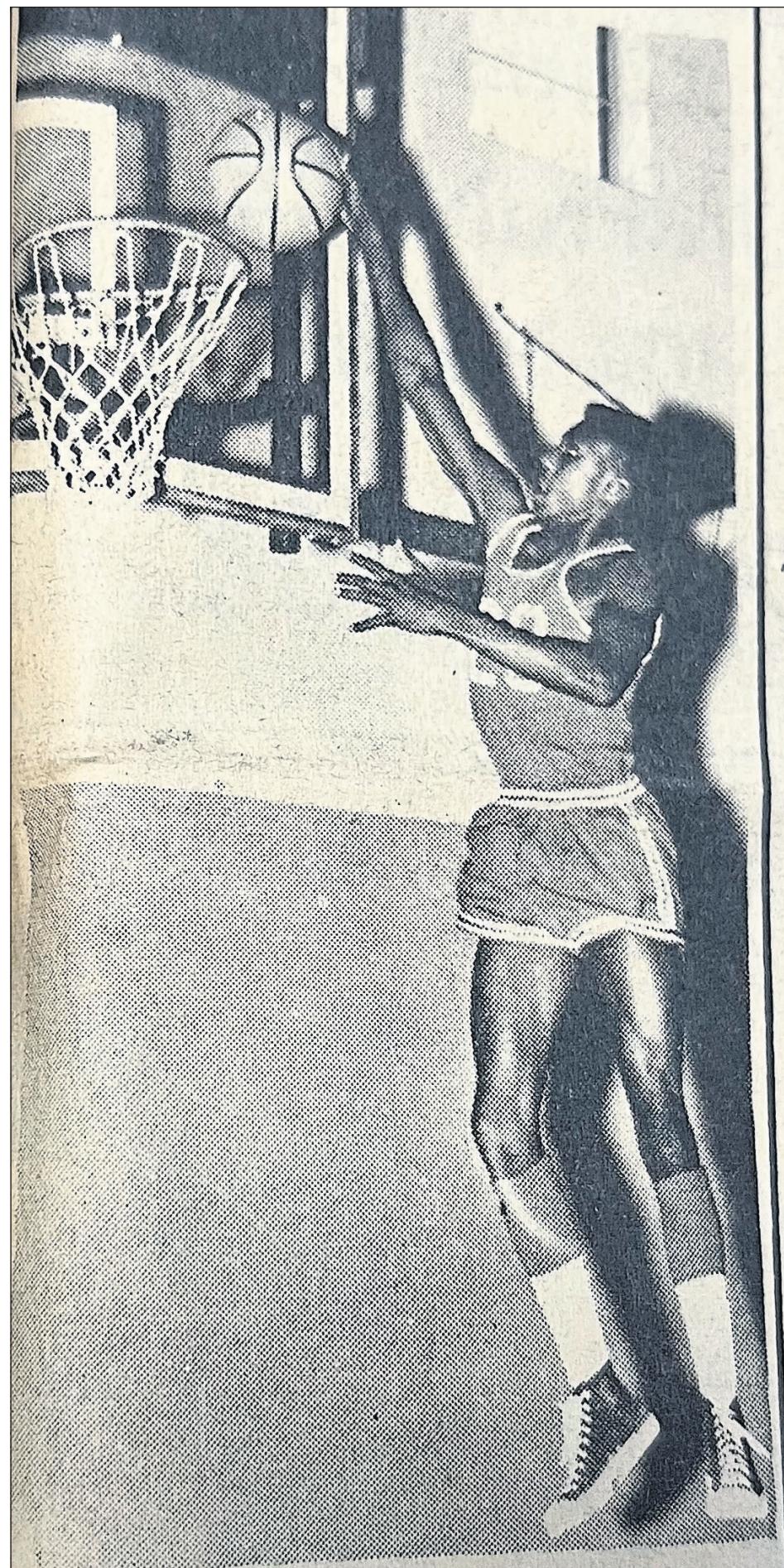


Photo courtesy of HC Local Archives

Along with track, Jim Green excelled in basketball, baseball and football at Eminence.