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Leon Patterson: An Athlete Dying Young

Vigorous vulnerability in the Central Valley

The starter called, “Come to your marks!” and with seven other boys I knelt at the blocks for the finals of the Class C seventy-five-yard dash at the 1952 Kern Relays. I was a ninth-grader about to run the biggest race of my life when from another part of the field the crowd exploded into cheers and applause. “Come up!” called the official, aborting the start, and as we stood, I turned to the boy in the next lane and asked, “What happened?”

He said simply, “Patterson, I bet.”

Leon Patterson of Taft Union High School, who seemed to us to be a force of nature, not a mere athlete, had just become the first high school boy to put the 12-pound shot over 60 feet, shattering the national record. He was then engaged in one of the

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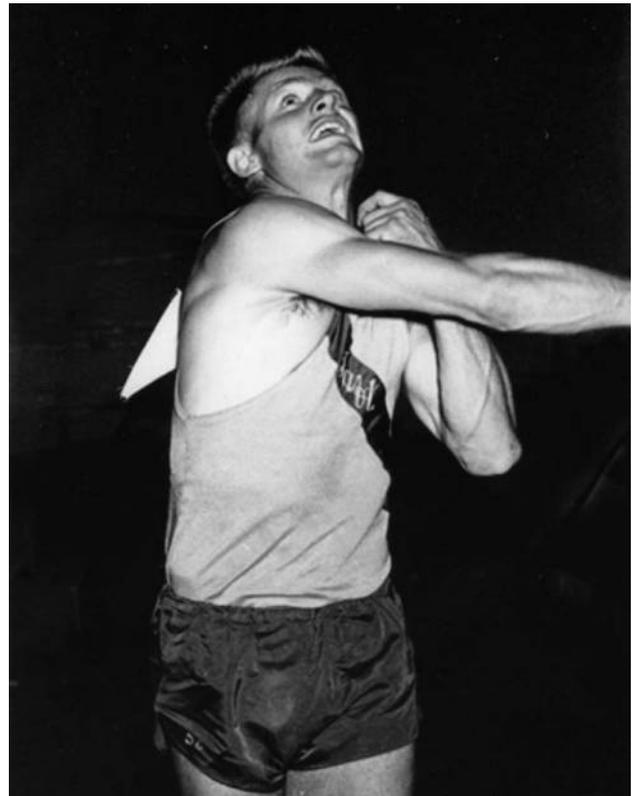
Leon Patterson runs in a track meet at Taft High School. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

legendary competitions in prep track and field history, although most of us didn't understand that.

Throughout the spring of 1952, Leon Patterson and Bill Nieder of Lawrence [Kansas] High School had been battling to become the first high school athlete to break the 60-foot barrier in competition. On that April 9 in Bakersfield, Patterson—relatively small at 5 feet 11 inches and 185 pounds—had burst across the ring and sent the metal ball 60 feet $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Two weeks later, he extended the national record to 60 feet $6\frac{1}{2}$ inches at Fresno's West Coast Relays.

Nieder, 6 feet 3 inches and 225 pounds, didn't concede. A future Olympic champion and fierce competitor, he exceeded the Californian's record when he thrust the shot 60 feet $9\frac{1}{4}$ inches on May 16 at the Kansas State Championship meet. Patterson, from the small oilfield town 40 miles southwest of Bakersfield, then reclaimed the national record on May 24 by putting the shot 60 feet $9\frac{1}{2}$ inches at the California State Championships.

By season's end, Patterson also led the nation in the discus throw with a 177 feet 5 inches heave, an astounding 10 feet ahead of the runner-up and just short of a second national record. What fans and fellow competitors didn't



Leon Patterson in 1952 at Taft High School.

COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

know—though Leon Patterson and his coaches did—is that the new record-holder was terminally ill when he accomplished those feats.

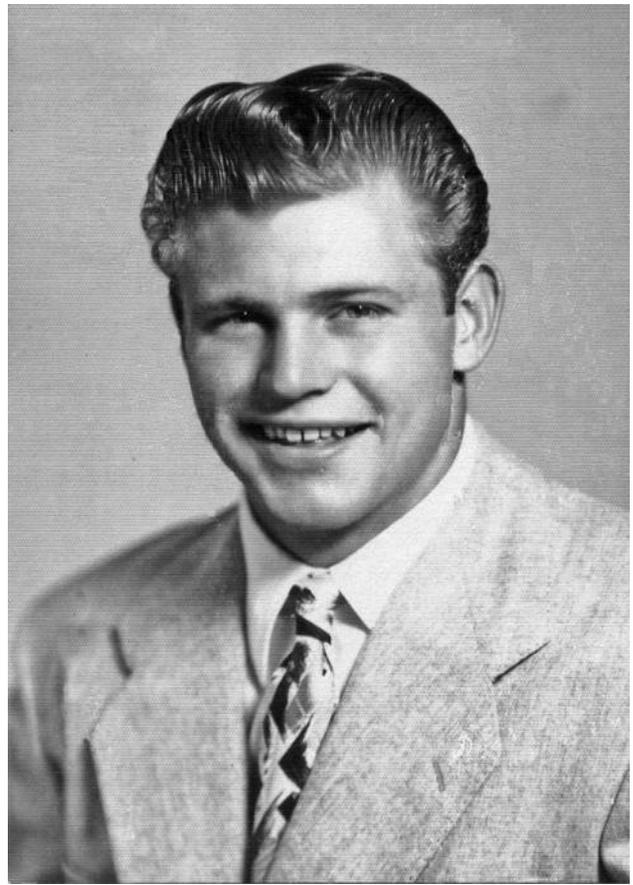
The prior summer he'd had a physical examination for a vacation job in the oil fields, and was discovered to have what was then an incurable kidney disorder called Bright's Disease. No one could believe it, least of all Leon. He told journalist Melvin Durslag in 1953, "The funny thing is that physically I had never felt better in my life. That's what made it all seem so completely unreal."

Patterson's brother George recalled, "If you met him, no one could conceive of this kid dying of a disease. He was too strong, too healthy . . . he looked like he could bend crow-bars." One of his coaches, Monty Reedy, drove the shaken young man to be examined by a specialist in the Bay Area, who confirmed the diagnosis and advised that if Leon gave up sports he might live ten years. The youngster dropped football—for which fifteen major college programs, including USC, UCLA and Notre Dame, were recruiting him—but remained on the track team.

Those were innocent, hopeful years and Patterson's other brother, Calvin, probably spoke for nearly everyone who was aware of the illness when he said, "It was something he would overcome, I felt, right up until he went into the hospital that last time." In Leon's case, appearances were indeed deceiving.

A handsome blond, Leon Patterson looked like a picture of the California dream; more than a few of us yearned to be him. He was, however, the product of the California reality: poverty, toil, and grit. His family had struggled west from Arkansas searching for opportunities in the shadow of the Great Depression. The Pattersons were part of the larger, second wave of "Okies, Arkies, and Texies" who migrated during the 1940s. The Great Central Valley, at 15,000,000 acres about the size of Egypt, held the promise of at least seasonal work, even for unskilled laborers—especially at its larger southern end, called the San Joaquin Valley by locals. By World War II, the Valley had become one of the state's economic engines, sustained by agribusiness, oil, and abundant cheap labor.

George Patterson recalled, "We were just one family out of thousands, struggling to raise ourselves up to middle class." They never quite made it. Leon "had never had a steak, a lobster, or a salad in his life," his high-school



Leon Patterson's high school graduation photo.

COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

sweetheart and future wife, Dixie Kenney, revealed. "I don't know if he'd ever had Christmas gifts and he'd never had a Christmas tree."

Leon and his older brothers had been doing men's work since they were little boys. In fact, hard work—everything from swamping seed potatoes to picking cotton—had been his equivalent of weight training. He physically matured early and, as journalist Earl Gustkey pointed out, "At 14, he had the body of a powerfully built man." The demanding regimen of childhood labor had produced an exceptional physique, not only strong, but swift.

But that remarkable body was vulnerable. He was born with only one kidney, and at twelve had suffered strep throat, which went untreated. His parents, Marvin and

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Leon Patterson in 1951. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

Lillie, not only couldn't afford a physician, but "didn't believe in doctors," according to Leon's son, Leon Patterson, Jr.

The older Pattersons were from a different time and place and never did understand California or their son's accomplishments here. "Not once did his parents come to any of his track meets," Dixie Patterson recalled, "not even when he won the state championship." They were tied to the values of rural Arkansas, and neither sports nor academics impressed them. Their athletic son, meanwhile, struggled to become a good student in high school, but the cycle of migrant farm labor hadn't allowed him to settle in at a school, so his basic skills were thin. "Most of our dates were spent doing homework," Dixie said. "Leon was a smart

kid, but by the time he got to Taft High, with his parents moving from one crop-picking job to another, he'd been to forty-two grammar schools. He was never caught up in his schooling, so I helped him a lot."

Like other fabled young athletes, stories of Leon's prowess sprang up in Taft and thereabouts. Sportswriter Jim Murray, for instance, wrote that one day Leon, then a ninth-grader, was crossing the track in his baseball uniform and the school's high jumper invited him to try to clear a crossbar set at 5 feet 10 inches. "He cleared it easily," Murray reported, adding that moreover, Leon could sprint 100 yards in 10.1 seconds, vault 11-1/2 feet with a stiff bamboo pole, even threw the javelin almost 200 feet the first time he tried it.

A gap was opening in the Patterson family as the younger generation embraced California's opportunities.

In 1950, as a sophomore at Taft High School, Patterson switched to the track and field team and, although he was a beginner at putting the shot, he surprised everyone by qualifying for the state high-school championship. There, he studied his more experienced rivals and, on his final effort, thrust the metal ball 53 feet 11 inches for third place. He never lost again in high school competition. The next season, he won all weight events—12-pound shot put, 16-pound shot put, and discus throw—at the state championships and was already being recognized as one of the great competitors in the post-World War II era of athletic excellence in the Great Valley.

Historian James N. Gregory points out in *American Exodus* that “many of the [Dust Bowl] migrants shared a vaguely populist outlook which directed expectations toward manual occupations and away from extended schooling.” In California more than a few migrant kids became the first in their family to finish secondary school. Others moved even farther from old expectations, graduating from college. Athletic scholarships brought many young men like Leon Patterson to universities.

Those accomplishments could lead to family dissension. Missouri native John Collins, long-time track coach and educator at nearby Bakersfield College, said, “You have to wonder how many potentially great athletes never got a chance to compete back in the Southwest. And how many potentially valuable minds were lost as a result.” He more than once found himself talking hard to convince migrant parents into allowing their young-adult children to continue their educations. “I remember that one said, ‘If he can stay home to pick cotton, he can go to school too.’ That kid became a high school principal.”

It's worth noting that by no means were all athletes with Dust Bowl connections white. For every Leon Patterson, Johnny Callison, Lon Spurrier, and Frank Gifford, there was a nonwhite or mixed-race sportsman like Sim Innes, Mike Garcia, Leamon King, and the Johnson brothers, Rafer and Jimmy, who pursued the egalitarianism of athletics and the

opportunities sports offered. Some, such as Callison, Garcia, and Jimmy Johnson, became professional jocks; others, such as Innes, King, Spurrier, and Rafer Johnson, used sports as springboards into other professions. Frank Gifford did both.

After Leon Patterson had to drop football, his dedicated track coach, Tom O'Brien, was determined to help the young man become best in the throws that his body would allow. Leon was not only the defending state champion in the weight events but also a stalwart on Taft's sprint relay team. During the 1952 season, Patterson confirmed that he was still one of the nation's premier high-school athletes in his competition with the formidable Nieder. In June of that year, Taft High School's boosters' club hosted a banquet in the new national-record holder's honor. Leon's parents didn't attend.

A gap was opening in the Patterson family as the younger generation embraced California's opportunities. Their oldest son, George, left home to embark on a career in law enforcement in Southern California, and now their youngest boy was about to take advantage of the possibility of higher education; he was becoming a Californian with a Californian's sense of the possible and unintentionally distancing himself from his parents in the process.

The older Pattersons sought to take advantage of enhanced opportunities to rise socio-economically that followed World War II. More migrants had come to California during the war than had in the 1930s, thanks to better economic chances. There was internal migration, too, with erstwhile seasonal farm laborers moving to shipyards or to factories or to the military posts for steady work; their old jobs were often then filled by new migrants. By the late 1940s, those migrants increasingly made their economic presence felt because attitudes were softening, opportunities continued expanding. In fact, ambitions were being triggered that in a decade or two would shape a new California.

Meanwhile, Leon's achievements were alien to his parents, neither of whom had progressed beyond grade school.

Worse still, although he was unassuming, Leon's celebrity especially galled his father, and ugly scenes resulted. Alcohol, frustration, and domestic violence were the curses of the older Pattersons.

At the same time, some Californians aggressively resented southwestern migrants like Leon, and among young men in particular street fighting was not uncommon. Asked if her late husband had been a scrapper, Dixie replied, "Who in their right mind would pick a fight with Leon?" Leon, Jr., however, remembers that his Uncle Calvin told him that a group of guys—"five or six of them"—had once jumped Leon and roughed him up. That turned out to be a short-lived triumph because Leon returned home and found Calvin, then the two of them sought out the aggressors. With Calvin there to assure one-on-one fights, Leon "beat the piss out of every one of them." No one ever bothered him again.

Although aware of Leon's prognosis, Jess Mortenson, track coach at USC, in 1952 offered the youngster an athletic scholarship. Leon told the coach, "I hope God at least will spare me until the next Olympics." The following year, he began weight training and grew to 6 feet and 200 pounds, all the while struggling to adjust to USC's academic demands. He was nevertheless the nation's best freshman discus thrower in 1953.

His steady progress with the discus throw, the event he had chosen to specialize in, masked his health problems. Sim Innes, the 1952 Olympic gold medalist in the discus, pointed out that "As a USC soph, he was already pretty sick [but] he threw the college discus 178 feet, the farthest throw ever [for a sophomore] at that time. I held the national junior college record then—164 feet. If Leon had been in a JC, he would've broken my record by 14 feet."

George Patterson later said of his brother, "all during his SC time he was a sick boy." Even so, while his health allowed, Leon fit well with his fellow Trojans. USC's track team was then the nation's best, loaded with world-class athletes, and world-class athletes are, to paraphrase F. Scott Fitzgerald, different from you and me. One USC teammate, former Olympian and national pole-vault champion Ron Morris, never forgot the kid from Taft: "The guy was a super athlete. . . . He was really competitive. We'd have crazy contests—who could throw a discus farthest while standing on one hand or who could walk the farthest on his hands or who could long jump farthest backwards."



Leon Patterson at Taft High School.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

After Dixie graduated from Taft High School in 1953, the young couple wed and moved to USC's married student housing, a collection of quonset huts that was high on neighborliness and low on luxuries. Still, they had a home of their own, a car, and were surrounded by other young couples in similar circumstances. With the optimism of youth, they began to build a life together. Soon Dixie was pregnant, and Leon's ambitions were fixed on making the 1956 American Olympic team.

During the summer of 1953, Dixie had a glimpse of Leon's earlier life when the couple worked as peach pickers in Mendocino County, saving money for school while living in a tent in a harvest-workers' campground. For a middle-class girl from Taft, it was eye-opening; she later wrote:

"The people in the campground were poor compared to Leon & I. We had a new car, they had old, beat up ones, we had my parents['] camping equipment, some of them cooked over open fires & had blankets on the ground for



Leon and Dixie's wedding party, 1953. PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

their beds. We had a metal camp bed with a mattress, sheets, pillows and blankets. I worried that our stuff would be stolen while we worked, but nothing ever was.”

Dixie also learned to layer her clothing so she could be warmer in the morning, cooler in the afternoon. “By afternoon, it was hot. Leon would be stripped to the waist & grinning. He’d say ‘how do you like a taste of my life.’ I’d grin back and say it was a piece of cake.”

His widow later remembered that after Leon told her that he’d never had a Christmas tree, “I bought one for \$1.80. He said I shouldn’t have spent the money & he wouldn’t let me buy ornaments, so I made popcorn & cranberry strings & ornaments & cut foil stars from gum wrappers. I caught him looking at it many times and knew he was pleased.” She

didn’t know that it would be her husband’s last Christmas. During his sophomore season of 1954, Leon and Dixie became parents when Leon, Jr., was born. Unfortunately, the new father’s disease could by then not be hidden; it left him “with blurred vision, lower back pain, swollen feet and ankles, and headaches.”

Patterson nevertheless competed in the National Collegiate Championships meet at Ann Arbor, Michigan, where, despite puffy feet that made tying his shoes impossible, he managed on his last throw to reach 169 feet 1 inch for third place in the discus. During that season of inconsistent performances due to his illness, his longest throw—178 feet 8 inches—would have been good enough for fourth place in the 1956 Olympics, had he lived that long.

Our innocence peeled away like sunburned skin.



Leon Patterson, Jr and son at gravesite.
PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PATTERSON FAMILY.

Perhaps as a result of another summer of hard labor to support his family, Leon's health rapidly deteriorated in the fall of 1954. He died on November 21 of that year, shortly after attending a USC-TCU football game that he couldn't

see because toxicity had blinded him. Following his death, writer Dick Bank remembered, "That's when the impact of that third-place throw in the NCAA meet really hit us."

It hit many others of us, too. Leon Patterson was a hero and a puzzle to his peers: How could someone so apparently invincible suffer such a fate, we asked ourselves. And if he could, so could we. Our innocence peeled away like sun-burned skin.

In retrospect, Leon Patterson is among the most memorable figures of our generation— not because he could throw the discus while balancing on one hand; not because he bounced tacklers from his thigh pads like soccer balls; and not because he thrust the shot put farther than any schoolboy ever had. No, Leon remains a hero because that unsophisticated kid from Arkansas transcended poverty and emotional privation to begin the climb to success, only to be forced to face the great gaping fact of death, and he did not fold. On his deathbed, Bank remembers, the new father was comforting visitors when he could.

Pole vault champion Ron Morris, who was also there, said, "I still wonder what he had on his mind. I mean we were 20, 21. What does a 21-year-old kid know about life? What did he think about those last days?" What, indeed.

Athletics can epitomize larger social issues. The saga of Leon Patterson—like that of King, Johnson, Gifford, Innes, and all the rest—symbolizes escape from old social assumptions and the dawn of the more egalitarian society that has characterized California since World War II. Equality of opportunity, whether on the sports pitch or in a classroom, really is the American way. And so is the pursuit of excellence, as Leon Patterson's story reminds us. **B**