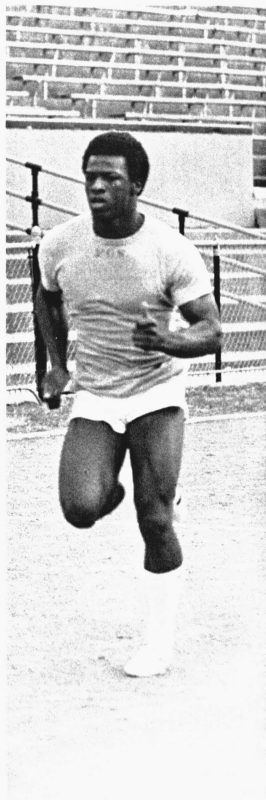


# The Fastest Tiger



Track Coach Tom Botts goes over practice times with premier sprinter Mel Gray.



## By Doug Grow

There's a worn white plywood sign that hangs over the dirt track at Brewer Field House. It's been hanging there about as long as the Field House has existed. It shows its age.

The sign, once painted white is chipped and a little crooked, but it still serves its purpose — to show Missouri Tiger track records. Most of the names on that sign are old and forgotten and those names, lettered in black paint, are beginning to chip too. Except one name that appears again and again in fresh paint and more frequently than any other name on the sign — Mel Gray.

Missouri Track Records: Mel Gray, :06.0, 60-yard dash. Mel Gray, 24-5 3/4, indoor long jump. Mel Gray, :09.2, 100-yard dash (:9.1 wind-aided). Mel Gray, :20.8, 220-yard dash. Late last month he became only the third man in history to complete a Texas-Kansas-Drake grand slam in the 100 by winning the event at all three relays.

And that's only part of the Mel Gray story. Pick up the football record book. It looks like Gray's biography. Most yards received in a season, Mel Gray, 705. Most yards received in one game, Mel Gray, 171. Most passes caught in one game, Mel Gray, 6. Most touchdowns in one game, Mel Gray, 3. Most touchdown passes caught in one season, Mel Gray, 9. Longest touchdown reception, Mel Gray, 75 yards. And he's going to be back next season.

Little has been written about Mel. And you get the feeling that's the way he'd like to keep it. Sitting in the Student Commons with him, Mel preferred listening to the juke box over answering questions. "Who's that, Sam Cook?"

"No, the Fifth Dimension," his fiancée Brenda Lyle informed him.

Mel smiled easily. He's smiled a lot since coming to the Columbia campus. And that's quite a switch from the first impression the Tiger sprinter had of the Midwest.

Mel was born and raised in California. He probably would have stayed there had a football coach from Fort Scott Junior College not heard of him. Charles Cowdrey, now an assistant at Missouri, kept hearing reports about Mel's football exploits. He went to Los Angeles to see if they were true. They were.

"I guess he was impressed," Mel said. "I didn't even talk to him after the game. He talked to my mother, then to me. He wanted me to go back with

him right away. I didn't, but my mother and I decided it would be best if I gave it a try."

So a few weeks later Mel was on a plane bound for Kansas City. The coach was waiting. "We just sat in the airport waiting for some other dudes he'd recruited. When they got there we all went to Fort Scott. I didn't even look at the place that night. We were all tired.

"The next morning the coach was waiting for us to get up. Then, he took us around town — it was a place about as big as the Union (Memorial Student Union). It didn't take five-minutes to drive past the stadium and see the whole town. I didn't like it, but I didn't have enough money to get home. I called my mother, but she told me to stick it out a year."

But fortunately for Missouri athletics, Mel decided to give the Midwest a second chance. Under the urging of football coach Dan Devine, he entered the University at Columbia. And with him came a new era in Tiger football and track history.

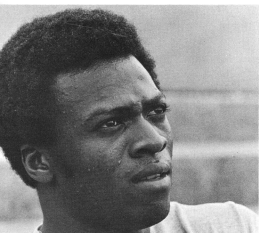
"I came here to play football. If I would have wanted just track, I would have gone to San Jose or someplace like that." But when Devine offered Gray a scholarship it was with the understanding the new recruit could participate in track, instead of spring football.

"Man, spring is track season. Football's a fall sport," Gray says with a laugh. So while his football teammates work out on the bleak practice fields across Route K from Memorial Stadium, Graysprints on the Stadium's red cinder track. He did drop over now and then to field a few punts and snare some passes, however.

"Track doesn't really excite me like football does. I probably don't really work as hard as I should in track." Tiger track coach Tom Botts must wonder what Gray would do if he did devote himself fully to track. Before the first meet of the indoor season, Gray worked out twice. The night of the meet he warmed up casually, then, the crack of the gun sounded the beginning of the 60-yard dash. Six and a tenth seconds later, Gray had broken the tape and a Field House record.

Later in the season, Gray was placed in long jump competition. He worked out only once on that event. Then, that's right, he broke the Missouri indoor record with a leap of 24-5 3/4.

"I guess speed is a natural thing. When I ran in junior high I never won. I transferred to an



Mel, above, shows effects of hard race. At right, he relaxes with fiancée Brenda Lyle, of Kansas City.



other school and I wasn't even going to go out, but all my friends did and I had nothing to do. So, I went out too. My sophomore year I ran ten flat (in the 100-yard dash), then I ran :09.6 as a junior, then I finally ran a :09.4 my senior year. I just got stronger and faster."

And faster. In fact, Mel was fast enough to have gone to the Olympic Games in 1968, but . . . "I would have missed the first part of football practice." He repeated, "I'm here for football."

Football has given Mel his biggest thrill in athletics. It's the same thrill many Tiger fans have — the 69-21 win over Kansas. His biggest letdown? That's similar to most Missouri fans, too. The Orange Bowl.

During the week prior to that game Penn State coach Joe Paterno and his players had a basic subject. Mel Gray. "We've never faced a player with the speed and moves he has," Paterno said repeatedly. But Gray didn't catch a pass. There was, however, one fleeting moment when Missouri fans thought Missouri and Gray would catch Penn State. Racing down the center of the field was No. 21. It was a familiar sight. Gray, three steps ahead of the closest defender. But the pass that would have been a sure touchdown and probable tie was overthrown by inches. "Another half step," Gray said after the game. He was talking to reporters, looking at the dressing room ceiling. He was the last man to leave the dressing room. The usually stoic Gray, was near tears.

Track is a lonelier sport than football. That's especially true for Gray. "There's no one to work out with." That's understandable — no one can keep up with the Tiger sprinter.

"You're supposed to do a lot of things in track I'm really not too fond of doing. Like the day of the meet, we're supposed to eat dry toast and honey. Man, I can't take that. I go out and have a steak. I just tell the coach I can't run on that kind of stuff."

Mel measures speed by the amount of tapes broken and records set. That's why he's disappointed with his race at East Lansing, Michigan that closed the indoor season. The meet was the NCAA Indoor Track and Field Championship, an event Gray had been looking forward to the entire season. It now ranks with the Orange Bowl as one of the few disappointing moments in Gray's athletic career.

"I just ran a slow race. It was the worst race I'd

run all season. I sure thought my time was faster than it was though (Gray ran a :06.2). Then when I heard that Herb Washington ran a :05.9 (tying the world record) I was sure my time must have been better. I was just a step or two behind, but there's not much you can do about it once the judge reads your time."

Two of Mel's friends, Eddie Glosson and John Brown (Missouri football players) sat in the next booth. They were shaking their heads in disbelief.

"What's the matter with you two?" Gray asked.

"You ever heard him talk so much?" Brown asked Glosson.

"No."

Brenda added unanimity to their opinions. "Believe me, I've never heard him so talkative either."

Mel leaned back, checked his Orange Bowl souvenir watch and smiled.

He has reason to relax and smile. The combination football player and sprinter will mean a small fortune following his 1971 graduation. John Carlos, Olympic gold medal winner, last played football when he was in junior high. He's asking the Philadelphia Eagles for \$1 million to sign a professional football contract.

"We were working out together in Hawaii before a meet. We were just throwing a football around; he couldn't hold on to it. I've told him, if he gets a million, I'm getting two," Mel said.

Carlos won't get \$1 million and Gray won't come close to \$2 million, but he's already received letters from the Miami Dolphins and the Dallas Cowboys. Rumors are abundant that Gray will be a high first-round draft choice.

Brenda, from Kansas City, will graduate from the University in June. She's not sure about a career in pro football for the man she'll marry in August. "What can I say? Well, yes, I want Mel to play professional football, because I know that's what he wants."

Mel looked at his watch again. His free hour of the day was nearly over. It was time for classes, then workouts, then studies. Gray had entered the University intending to major in behavioral sciences. He switched to recreation this year. "I needed the time."

Mel's always concerned with time. But he's different than most. He's worried about tenths of seconds, not minutes. That's the difference between first and last. □