

# Wilbur Miller

Compton JC

Born 29 April 1919

---

Wilbur may have been the most talented of them all. 16-year-old he won the then still existing Southern Cal championship "B" sprint events, in 10,1 and 22,2 (record). That happened in 1935 when he was in his first year at Jefferson High in central Los Angeles. Afterward he turned into a late-blooming prospect though. Regularly powerful school mate Bryant Allen spanked skinny little Will, nicknamed "Wuggy", which was also the case in the League and LA City sprints besides Jefferson dual meets.

In consequence Miller was looking for a way out. He decided to try the quarter mile to be a winner, to see if it would work out. It did. In 1936-37 he constantly came out on top of his high school competitors. He set school and meet records in the 49-50 sec range, in the green and gold colours of the school. Together, he and Bryant used to make it three strikes at the shorter distances, in any meet. That included the Southern League finals and City meets, usually Will's quarter wins being fairly easy ones.

In the 1937 State meet he was defeated by Bryant Allen at 100, 9,7 to 9,8, then winning the quarter mile. Jefferson High's richness in sprint talent was manifested by their team's 2.58,2 at 8 x 220 yds, that is a 22,3 average for each leg.

At 4 x 220 Wilbur anchored a team, led-off off by Bryant, that clocked a 1.28,7 national HS leader in 1937. Save relays he did not compete in furlongs, with some very rare exceptions.

In 1938 Miller did catch the eye of the track community. He was then 19 years of age and studying at Compton JC, being trained there by Hollywood ex-sprinter Herschel Smith. Smith believed that his new adept, who never had won a 100 at high school, mostly because of Allen, had the makings of a great sprinter and decided to train him accordingly. It did not take long until Will showed that he was right.

In early spring of that year Miller produced a string of outstanding performances, winning all his short races and dominating all of the west coast top men, like Jeffrey - who later got revenge -, Jordan, Talley and Mickey Anderson. In a February meet he surprisingly trounced Jeffrey and Allen in a 100. At the same competition both Will and Bryant were instrumental in their respective relay teams setting up new JC records, in the mile and half mile events.

He reduced his HS pb to 9,7 at 100 and negotiated the furlong in 21,0 once, and 21,1 twice.

In early May he tried to fight down Clyde Jeffrey in a burning 220 run, though losing the race by an eyelash - or two inches. Both of them were timed in 20,6 on the Riverside JC straightaway, a superb clocking. Will's second-best mark that campaign was a 21 flat (straight course). Their 20,6 time would have been worth 20,8 or so at 200m with a curve, a world leader too in that case.

In April "Wuggy" also attacked Paddock's 300 metres record, and in the same meet twice reeled off a 33,5 at 300 metres, three-tenths off the world mark, humbling Jeffrey and Erwin Miller in the process. In training runs he was said to have been whizzing through the distance faster than that. His time made him the world's third-fastest all time performer.

Shortly before that, surprisingly he turned in a class 47,1 at 440 after a cautious 22,5 opener, "loafing part of the course". Yet he was beaten four weeks later by Olympic relay medallist Hal Cagle in the Kansas Relays quarter. In May, Wilbur turned the tables on Cagle in a faster race (metric 47,0), in a west coast meet. He was hot. However, the months of April and May gone, he was no more news. Without Will knowing, both his 400/440 performances made him unofficial junior sub-20 world record holder. At the Imperial distance his mark was to be a long-standing one indeed. Moreover, his mark earned him a sixth spot on the year's world list, together with the later legendary German 400/800 m phenomenon, Rudolf Harbig.

In the 1938 season Miller was becoming a popular trackster, and the press people were not late in praising his qualities, as the following examples show:

- "Little Miller Hero" - "Miller, the sensational Compton sprinter, was the big star of the team's triumph" (He won the 100 and 220, anchored the winning mile relay foursome and placed third in the LJ!).
- "Miller, the Tartar (Compton JC) flash" - "Wilbur Miller brought the crowd to its feet in a blazing ..."
- "Miller is one of the finest sprinters in the world ..."

In February 1939 he worried his folks by collapsing when running a mile relay leg. However, only a fortnight later Compton's popular sepia arrow again displayed excellent form, turning in 9,6/21,0 and easily whipping Foy Draper and Clark Crane. Yet a week later he failed poorly in a 100 race. Something seemed to be wrong. Probably thin Miller's physique was the answer.

Reportedly the coach made him build up speed early in the season and only after that he trained for the quarter mile. There was talk about him coming back on 1938 form, yet he did not do much of note. He was even beaten into third in a not too fast furlong won by USC freshman Cliff Bourland before he was reported injured in early May, due to a muscle pull. That happened in a JC meet, Will courageously limping home as winner and spanking Riverside native Finley Culpepper at 440, despite the pain.

The first national (then much more Cal than national) Juco championship was held at end May at Sacramento. Despite the recent injury he took the 440, yet was shunted in second in the furlong, 20 year old Jim Ruffin of Pasadena JC winning both sprints. Actually, those were the only moments of glory in Ruffin's track life though he had once thrashed Allen. Usually he was underdog to his peers. Two years earlier he had had a fairly discreet presence at the State meet. While the Jefferson High boys were sweeping the sprint events, Jimmy ran a leg for the winning Muir HS team in the half mile relay.

Being out of college Miller continued to compete for a couple of seasons, mostly running 100's albeit at a slower pace. At best he was a 10-flat performer and not found at the top any more. A pity since he was on his way to be an outstanding allround sprinter, with career bests of 9,6 - 20,6 - 33,5m - 47,1. No doubt he might have developed into a Herb McKenley type of versatile dashman, had he not given up the sport after graduation. He was said to enter UCLA, yet probably nothing came of it. He passed away in 2007.

**NOTE:** Miller and Allen were not the sole point-getters for their school in the short dashes. They had first-class back-up. The Jefferson High auxiliary troops were made up by the Lankford twins, Sam and Saul, and diminutive Tom Salo. Sam was considered "a born sprinter", with a copybook style.

After the two stars graduated and left the way open to these boys, they grabbed at the chance. In 1938 Saul won the Southern League sprints - as his brother was dq'ed for fouling - and Sam the City finals (9,8/21,5), with Saul in second in both. Again the school did not have sufficient funds available to send a team to the State meet. Two years earlier Salo was placed third in both events. Other able Jefferson "Democrats" dashmen were Gilbert "Handsome" Baker and Wilson Matlock.

The Lankford duo continued to sprint, later at LA City College and during the war for Great Lakes Training Station.

Ulf Lagerstrom