

Michael Carter
Olympic Silver Medalist
3-Time Super Bowl Champion
40-Year Retrospective



Michael Carter with daughter Michelle Carter

By Bob Burns

The grown-up accomplishments of Michael Carter's stellar two-sport career – an Olympic silver medal and three Super Bowl titles with the San Francisco 49ers – were years off when the baby-faced Texan stepped into the ring for his last shot at immortality.

The date was June 16, 1979, the time 7:07 p.m., give or take a minute. Many of the 5,000 track fans gathered for the Golden West Invitational at Sacramento State were bundled up on the windy, unseasonably cool Saturday evening.

The meet announcer, Bob Jarvis, had been keeping close tabs on Carter, the meet's star

attraction, but at that very moment a stirring battle was taking place in the 880-yard run, on the northwest turn of Hornet Stadium. Attention was diverted from the shot-put ring to the half-milers sprinting past Carter into the homestretch.

Annoyed by the commotion, Carter asked an official if he could step out of the circle and started his pre-throw routine over again once the excitement died down.

It would be the final throw of his life with the 12-pound prep shot, and the 6-foot-2, 255-pound senior from Thomas Jefferson High School in Dallas didn't want to blow his last chance to do something really special. The official granted Carter's request.

"I used the delay to get really mad at the shot," Carter recalled 40 years later.

Already that spring, Carter had taken the national record into never-never land. The standard when he started his senior year was 72 feet, 3¼ inches, set in 1968 by Sam Walker, an earlier prodigy from the Dallas area. Carter broke Walker's mark on March 10 and extended his own record four more times before throwing 77-0 in Abilene on May 5. That same day, he raised the record with the 16-pound shot, the weight used in collegiate and international competitions, to 66-4.

"I had meets in Atlanta and Chicago, and they didn't have a clue how far I could throw," Carter said. "In Atlanta, there was chain-link fence at 70 feet, and my warm-up throws were hitting halfway up the fence. It was actually kind of funny."

The morning of the Golden West Invitational, Carter spoke to his girlfriend and eventual wife of 35 years, Sandra, on the phone. "Throw 80 feet for me," Sandra said.

"Like a little boy who was in love, I had a new goal," Carter said.

Sacramento organizers had placed a small American flag in the landing area at 77 feet as a target for their main attraction. Having won the GWI discus earlier in the day with a throw of 201-2, Carter best shots in the first five rounds included two 75-footers and a fifth-round toss of 76-4¼. Each throw obliterated the previous meet record of 71-9¾ set by Jesse Stuart in 1970.

With the crowd quieted down following the excitement of the 880 finish, Carter re-entered the ring for his final throw.

He nestled the iron ball in his right palm beneath his chin. He squatted low before driving with his right leg across the seven-foot ring. Like an archer pulling the bow to the point of snapping, Carter kept the shot as far back as possible as his hips whipped into action. It took remarkable agility to block the momentum with his left leg and avoid stepping over the toe board.

The shot flew not only past the flag but beyond what anyone had thought possible, past 80 feet. The shot landed with a thud at 81-3½.

Forty years later, the distance seems as incomprehensible as it did in 1979.

“I had good torque and was very explosive,” Carter said. “I watched it as it flew because I wanted to see where it landed. I broke the record by four feet. I was very happy.”

Grainy video of the throw on YouTube doesn’t quite do justice to the speed, power and balance Carter conjured up on his 81-footer. When Walker, Carter’s predecessor as the prep record-holder, first heard about it, his response could have spoken for an entire sport.

“I’ll be seven feet under when anyone throws 81 feet again,” Walker said in a Sports Illustrated article from July 1979 titled, “A Shot Heard Round The World.”

Today, six feet over and living happily at age 68 in Texas, Walker, sticks by his original prediction.

“I’m not sure Michael will be around when it’s broken, either,” Walker said.

Even after announcing the official distance following a second measurement with a steel tape, Jarvis had trouble comprehending what he’d just seen.

“We all wondered, did we really just see that?” Jarvis said. “There were a lot of negative thoughts. Was it mis-measured? Was the landing area sloped? It was just an astonishing improvement ... no one does that.”

The measurement was correct, the landing area suitably level. Astonished track experts immediately labeled Carter’s throw “Beamon-esque,” At the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Bob Beamon with one leap took the world record in the long jump from 27-4¾ to 29-2½, a 6.6-percent improvement.

Carter’s 81-3½ represented a 5.6 percent improvement on his record of 77-0 – but a 12.5 percent margin on the next-best performer (Walker at 72-3½).

In the four decades since, the closest anyone has come to Carter’s mark is Ryan Crouser, who threw 77-2¾ in 2011. Crouser went on to win a gold medal in 2016 with an Olympic-record throw in Rio de Janeiro.

Ryan’s father and coach is Mitch Crouser, a contemporary of Carter’s who finished fourth in the discus at the 1984 U.S. Olympic Trials.

“Seventy feet is the gold standard for high school putters,” Mitch Crouser said. “To get

to 80 feet, it's like you're competing in a completely different event. Michael caught the perfect throw. I think it's the greatest high school athletic performance in history."

In 2004, USA Track & Field conducted an online poll to determine the top 25 performances in American track history. Carter's 81-3½ was ranked 16th, the only high school performance so honored.

"Usually, when you set a record, it gets broken a few years later," said Carter, now retired and living in the Dallas area. "I knew mine would last awhile, but 40 years?"

Carter will be in Sacramento this weekend in conjunction with Saturday's 60th running of the Golden West Invitational. He'll be joined at a Friday night banquet in El Dorado Hills by several other Olympic throwers, including his daughter, Michelle, whom he has coached since she was a seventh-grader.

Michelle Carter's third Olympic appearance in 2016 resulted in a gold-medal performance – one spot higher than her father finished in the same event at the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles.

"To have someone close to you help you reach your goals, it's really special," Michelle Carter said. "I have so much respect for my dad."

When she got to high school, Michelle first became familiar with her father's shot exploits, including the 81-footer. She resents those who question its legitimacy, or say it's impossible for anyone to have thrown that far without taking steroids.

"I know my dad and know he was a clean athlete," Michelle said. "People don't think you can throw that far clean, but they don't know how much work he put into it. "

As a shot putter, Michelle's father may have been at his absolute peak on June 16, 1979, even though he was only 18 years old and was relatively weak in the upper body for a shot put, with a bench-press of 335 pounds. Carter filled and got stronger as he went on to win seven NCAA indoor and outdoor championships at Southern Methodist University. He also excelled on SMU's powerhouse football teams of the early 1980s.

Carter's quest to go a perfect 8-for-8 in the shot put ended at the 1984 NCAA outdoor championships in Eugene, where he had the longest throw of his life with the 16-pound shot. Carter reached 71-4 but lost to John Brenner of UCLA, who set a collegiate record of 71-11.

Five years earlier, when Carter threw more than 81 feet with the 12-pound shot at the 1979 Golden West Invitational, Brenner threw 64-5½, nearly 17 feet behind in second place.

“There was a luncheon before the Golden West, and Mike was a celebrity,” said Brenner, who owns a company that sells construction equipment in Southern California. “Everyone wanted to sit next to him, hear from him, ask him questions. He was world class in high school, and that was true even prior to his 81-footer.

“Typically, if you take 10 feet off your 12-pound best, that’s what you can throw with the 16-pounder,” Brenner said. “There were very few people throwing 71 feet when Michael threw 81-3½. He was a man amongst boys. None of deserved to be in the same meet with him.”

After finishing second to Brenner at the 1984 NCAA meet, Carter turned the tables on his rival, placing third at the U.S. Olympic Trials, one spot ahead of Brenner. The 49ers had selected Carter in the fifth round of the draft, but he made it clear that he wouldn’t sign until after the Olympics.

As he did at the 1979 GWI, Carter exited stage left with a flourish, winning the silver medal at the 1984 Olympics at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. He then reported directly to the 49ers, winning the first of three Super Bowl championships in his rookie season.

The game took its toll on his body, leading to two knee replacements and one hip replacement. The shoulders aren’t working too well, either.

“It comes with the territory,” Carter. “Being a nose tackle, you’re going to get beat up. I have no complaints.”

He doesn’t hesitate when asked to rank the 81-footer among his many athletic accomplishments. In fact, he laughs when asked the question.

“No doubt, it’s at the top of the list,” Carter said.

Alone at the top of the list, 40 years and counting.