

1974 Girls Track Team

Columbia High School's 1974 girls 440 and 880 relay teams, Margo Diggs, Sharion Higgins, Earlene Williams and Willene Williams, set the national high school record in both events that year at the state track meet in Austin, winning the 440 relay in a time of 47.1 and the 880 relay in a time of 1:39.6.

Diggs headlined the 1974 state championship relay team honorees. To this day, Diggs still ranks second all-time in gold medals at the state track meet with eight wins.

“It’s great to be recognized, and that the school and everybody involved would look back at what everybody did,” Diggs said. “I never expected anything like this.”

Diggs was a member of the 440 relay teams that won the state title from 1972 through 1975, the 880 relay teams that won 1973 through 1975 and won the 100 dash in 1972.

Sharion Higgins won five golds with the 440 and 880 relay team in 1974 and ’75 and in the triple jump in 1976.

Earlene and Willene Williams are twin sisters who graduated from Columbia High School in 1975.

Earlene Williams finished in second place in the 60 yard dash at both the regional and state track meets in 1975. Earlene came in fourth place in the broad jump at the regional track meet in 1975.

Willene Williams won gold with 440 and 880 relay teams in 1973 and ’74.

Earlene Williams won six golds as a member of the 440 and 880 relay teams 1973-75.

Lady 'Necks remembered for awesome feat

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By Joel Luna | 0 comments

WEST COLUMBIA — Long before the Lady 'Necks softball team claimed a state title in 2006, there was another jeweled champion at Columbia.

They were the 1972 girls track team that consisted of sisters Darlene and Joanne Thomas, Margo Diggs and the late Donna Lynn Campbell. These Lady 'Necks astounded the state field with a

sterling performance, capturing the University Interscholastic League Girls State Track and Field Class A team title at Memorial Stadium in Austin.

“They were such a hard-working bunch, and I just think it kind of clicked for us that year,” Columbia coach Lois Knipling Peel said. “The Thomas girls were, ‘wow,’ but as a group they were fast.”

Senior Darlene Thomas-Sanders was the leader of the group, and alone scored 35 of the team’s 60 points. She was recognized for being the high scorer at the state meet. On that day, Columbia held off Robinson High School by two points for the team championship.

Thomas-Sanders’ performance took her to the top of the platform in the 60-yard dash (7 seconds), 80-yard hurdles (10.7), and long jump (18-31½), which was 31½ inches shy of the national record. With a gold medal as part of the 440 relay team, she claimed four gold medals.

Though scholarship offers rolled in, she instead attended Wharton Junior College for two years, not wanting to leave the area. After that, she headed to Prairie View A&M University, and again to the track.

“I was such a momma’s girl that I just wanted to stay close to home,” Thomas-Sanders said. “After I arrived at Prairie View, I didn’t want to do it anymore, so I just didn’t pursue it.”

In the region meet in Victoria, Thomas-Sanders had first-place finishes in the 60-yard dash (6.9), 80 hurdles (10.7), long jump (17-10) along with a second-place finish in the triple jump (35-5). At the district meet in Port Lavaca, she had five first-place finishes with a 7.4 in the 60-yard dash; 10.9 in the 80 hurdles; 17-11½ in the long jump; 35-41½ in the triple jump and as part of the 440 relay team.

Today, Thomas-Sanders is a teacher in the Columbia-Brazoria ISD.

Diggs, just a freshman was the only other Lady ’Neck to capture a gold in an individual event at state. She did it in fast form with an 11.3 in the 100-yard dash. For Diggs, this certainly was a change after coming in second in both the district and region meets.

“I tended to be the type of runner who was a slow starter, but won with a strong finish,” Diggs said. “In that run I leaned, and because I have long arms and the second-place runner kind of pulled up, I took it, but it was still a photo finish.”

In the region meet, Diggs ran the same time to finish second (11.3) in Victoria. For the next three years at Columbia, Diggs continued to prosper in track and field and headed back to state each year. In her junior year, the Lady ’Necks fell short by a single point to Conroe for the state team title at Memorial Stadium.

After graduation, Diggs attended the University of Texas and finished with a degree in advertising. She did not compete after high school, but is flying even today as a flight attendant for Continental Airlines for 21 years.

“I enjoyed group sports a whole lot more, and I didn’t miss not competing in track when I went to UT,” Diggs said.

Combine the foursome together and the 440 relay team of Diggs, Campbell, Thomas and Thomas-Sanders were one of the fastest in the nation that year. In the state final, they blew away the competition with a 48.1 run, just .3 seconds off the national high mark.

“There was no jealousy as to who was the best or the fastest, we just wanted to win,” Joanne said. “We all looked up to Darlene because she was the senior. Donna was a clown, she always kept us laughing.”

Campbell was the lead leg in the relay, followed by Diggs, Thomas and Thomas-Sanders anchoring.

“As a group we had no competition and from start to finish of the season, we dominated in that event,” Diggs said.

At region, the relay team finished first with a 49.7, and in district ran almost an identical race to again take first with a 49.8.

Campbell was a freshman when the Lady Necks claimed the state title, she passed away two years ago from cancer. Joanne Thomas Scott was a junior at the time and for the last 26 years has been employed at Dow Chemical.

Knipling Peel coached track and basketball at Columbia from 1958 to 1980 and finally retired from teaching in 1991. Nowadays Peel spends her days working on her handicap at Columbia Lakes.

The whereabouts of the trophy they brought home that year has been misplaced. But these four runners know their accomplishments not only rest in scrapbooks and medals, but in their hearts.