

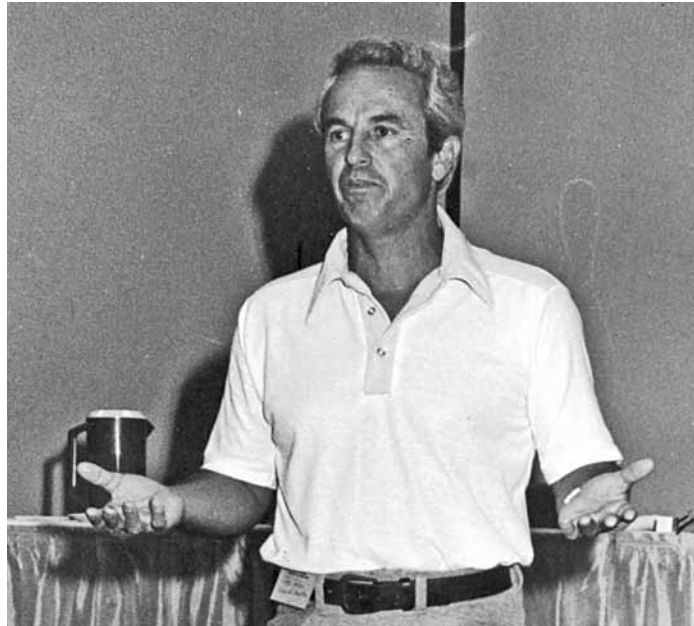
# That You May Win: Tom Tellez Teaches UH Athletes to Go for the Gold

By Ernesto Valdés

Trying to instill an appreciation of sports in some people is akin to instilling an appreciation of opera in others. Yet athletes and artists often wander into each other's sphere with abandon. Two of the famous Three Tenors dreamed of being professional soccer players: the late Luciano Pavarotti and Placido Domingo. Moreover, the 1990 World Cup Playoffs in Rome featured the trio's celebrated performance viewed by a television audience estimated at 800 million. Another little known performance mixing sports and culture took place January 30, 2009, with the Super Bowl Gospel Celebration sung by the NFL Players' All-Star Choir that included more than thirty-two active and retired football players with inspirational messages from the likes of John Elway, Tony Dungy, Jerry Rice, Chris Carter, Kurt Warner, and Dion Sanders.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, on closer inspection, sports and the performing arts share striking similarities: dedication to the discipline and development of innate talent, stamina to practice and endure repetitious routines, and an irrepressible desire to achieve perfection. The legendary choreographer George Balanchine, noted, "I don't want people who want to dance, I want people who *have* to dance."<sup>2</sup> Thus, in both endeavors, talent constitutes only one dimension of greatness; it must be molded long before the encores or the medals are won. Rarely do athletes stand in the winner's circle alone – somewhere in the wings stands the coach who saw a diamond in the raw stone. This story concerns one of those coaches, Tom Tellez of the University of Houston.

In many other countries, fans closely follow track and field, but in the United States, high school and collegiate track meets draw only half-filled stadiums. But every four years, American track and field athletes join those of other countries in the Olympic Games, which thousands of spectators watch on site, and millions more around the world view on television. During his tenure at the University of Houston, Tom Tellez coached several Cougar athletes in national and international competitions. Many reached the Olympic Games where they left their marks on the record books. Names such as Kirk Batiste, Joe DeLoach, and LeRoy Burrell are still remembered for their



*Tom Tellez explaining track and field fundamentals at the International Track and Field Symposium at the Hilton University of Houston Hotel and Conference Center.*

All photos courtesy of UH Athletics, unless otherwise noted.

accomplishments performed in national and international venues. Without listing conference and preliminary competitions during the interim of the Olympic Games, Tellez's athletes achieved an impressive array of victories. Batiste took the silver medal in the 200 meters in 1984; Joe DeLoach ran in the 1988 Summer Olympics and took the gold medal in the 200 meters; LeRoy Burrell held the world's record twice for the 100-meter dash, with one of the records coming in his gold medal performance in the 1992 Olympics. By far, though, Carl Lewis stands as Tellez's best known athlete. He won four gold medals in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, a feat that equaled Jesse Owens' record set in 1936 for the highest number of gold medals won by

a track and field athlete in a single Olympics. In his career, Lewis won nine gold medals and one silver while competing in four Olympic Games: Los Angeles, Seoul, Barcelona, and Atlanta.<sup>3</sup>

The Tellez coaching philosophy that guided these gifted athletes began when he came to understand the esoteric world of "biomechanics," a philosophy that emerged in the 1960's and 1970's. According to Tellez, that philosophy taps into the knowledge of the human body and incorporates the works of



*Joe DeLoach, Coach Tellez, and Carl Lewis at the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. DeLoach won the gold medal in the 200 meters, and Lewis won silver in the 200 meters and gold in the 100 meters and long jump.*

Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. Applying their ideas to the established knowledge of human anatomy constitutes “biomechanics,” a technique developed to optimize performance based on physics of motion, gravity, and structure.<sup>4</sup> According to Tellez:

*There has to be a biomedical reason why you do everything — I had to give a reason to athletes as to why I wanted them to do things in the way I was telling them to do it. When you do that the kids get better faster and they don't develop any psychological problems. You don't invent a great athlete, great athletes are geniuses. They achieve greatness because they are geniuses and a coach teaches them how to use the body correctly. There are not ten different ways to run fast, there is only one way, and the coach has to teach the athlete what that way is.*<sup>5</sup>

To appreciate how biomechanics became central to Tellez's coaching philosophy, one must first know something of the man, his education, training, and development as an individual and as a coach. Coach Tellez nurtures great respect for his philosophy, which he firmly delivers with a Zen-like approach that mind, body, and soul are one and that each is an aspect of the other; it teaches the athlete how to “turn the eye inward.”

Tellez was born in Los Angeles, California, on October 17, 1933. His mother, born in Chihuahua, Mexico, came to Los Angeles in the early 1900's when her family fled the violence of the Mexican Revolution. His father was born in El Paso, Texas, and moved to Los Angeles seeking better employment. Eventually, the family settled in Montebello, where Tellez and his siblings attended the public schools and where he was introduced to organized sports. As a youngster, his favorite pastime was going to western movies. In that era, Hollywood studios released all manner of westerns and Saturday matinees starring Gene Autry, Hoot Gibson, Red Ryder, Hopalong Cassidy, Lash LaRue, Lone Ranger, Cisco Kid, and memorable sidekicks like Andy Devine, Sons of the Pioneers, Gabby Hayes, Pancho, Little Beaver, and Tonto.<sup>6</sup>

In high school, Tellez began playing team sports. In an era before the “platoon system” or “specialists,” he played halfback on offense and defense during football season; and in spring, during track season, he ran hurdles and the quarter mile. He lettered in both sports, but points out, “I was a better football player than I was a track athlete at the time . . . but I wasn't very big so the question of going to college and playing football was borderline.” As it turned out, he attended Fullerton Junior College where he made the football team and played for two years. Whittier College then offered him a partial scholarship, but his motive for going there was to play under “Chief Newman,” a very popular coach at that time. Unfortunately, Chief Newman opted to retire just before Tellez arrived. However, the new coach, George Allen, was no greenhorn. He took the team to its first conference championship, an accomplishment he would replicate in the future with some of the greatest professional teams in National Football League history: the Los Angeles Rams, Chicago Bears, and Washington Redskins. Ultimately,

the NFL inducted Allen into the Hall of Fame on August 3, 2002.<sup>7</sup>

Although Tellez had a good athletic career in college, his initial goal did not include pursuing a career in athletics. His love of animals coupled with a love for biology caused him to flirt with the idea of becoming a veterinarian. Aware of his limitations as well as his strengths, Tellez had made up his mind about his future by the end of his senior year:

*I wanted to be a coach. There was no doubt in my mind. I had a pretty good athletic career but . . . My main goal was to get a degree and start coaching. . . . I had to study very hard to make the grades. I didn't take tests very well, a lot of minority kids can't take tests well — I'd just get emotionally uptight and I just couldn't take them, but I got my degree in biology and physical education. Once I graduated, I signed a letter, a teaching contract to coach in high school.*<sup>8</sup>

At Whittier Tellez met and eventually married Kay H. Brownsberger, who became a music teacher at Bonita High School. She brought a balance to his life that he did not have before, and she opened cultural doors that he would otherwise have never known. Tellez described Kay:

*She was very smart. Her mother was a teacher and her father became superintendent of the schools. I had never been exposed to such academic things. She read more books in grammar school than I read in my whole life. Everyone in her family were teachers — going into that family*

*was a totally different background than I was used to but it was very good. She brought a lot into my life.*<sup>9</sup>

Married and with a coaching job in the offing at Buena Vista High School, Tellez prepared to start his life. Unfortunately, Uncle Sam had other plans for him, and the U.S. Army drafted him in 1956. He completed basic training at Ft. Ord, California, and then received further training as a medic before being assigned to the 85<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division stationed in Bremerhaven, Germany. During the Cold War, saber-rattling became the norm between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. Tellez's unit participated in military maneuvers, war games, alerts, and mock face-offs against the Soviets along the East and West German border. The military organized activities in every sport; Tellez joined in, and this eventually led to his coaching track.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the fact that the Army preferred that spouses remain back home, Kay joined Tellez in Germany—the one bright spot in his military service. Instead of living in military barracks, they lived off post in a small apartment. Tellez said, “A lot of the GI's at that time did the same thing. We borrowed some money and bought a VW and traveled all over Europe.” At that time, the cost of living in Europe was low; and as skimpy as his GI pay was, they were able to tour and enjoy the Continent with another couple. Tellez described how his Army experience impacted his future career:

*The army ended up being a good experience and I was especially glad to get a little bit more experience coaching*

*“You don't invent a great athlete, great athletes are geniuses.”*



*because I wasn't very old and . . . I had matured a little bit in the service which really helped. So when I came back I thought I was better prepared to coach and teach.<sup>11</sup>*

The job offer as an assistant coach that he received before his induction was still waiting for him at Buena Vista High School. In retrospect, Tellez's post-military career consisted of a series of what some may label "lucky breaks" with regard to his mentors and the venues where he developed his coaching style. It verified what the erudite Tiki Barber, a former All-Pro running back for the New York Giants, said in a television interview, "Luck is where preparation meets opportunity." In 1961, Tellez became head coach at Fullerton when his predecessor took a position at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Eight years later, he offered Tellez the job of assistant coach, which Tellez accepted and held for nine years from 1968 to 1976. In the last year, he assisted another legendary head coach, Dick Vermeil. That year was particularly memorable because UCLA went to the Rose Bowl and beat the highly-favored Ohio State Buckeyes—a team that had come through the season undefeated—by a score of 23-10. It also expanded Tellez's experience to be working under Vermeil, who became one of the NFL's most respected and outstanding coaches.<sup>12</sup>

Soon thereafter, Tellez dreamed of becoming a head coach because he wanted to apply his own philosophies to athletic training. The idea of "biomechanical" techniques had emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, and Tellez became a disciple, eager to incorporate it into his coaching style. This interactive technique requires that the athlete, schooled in the traditional mechanics of sports, becomes a knowledgeable part of its application. Tellez detailed the importance of his technique:

*There has to be biomechanical reasons why you do everything [in sports]....you don't just put the kids into blocks and tell them 'go'.... I had to give a reason to those athletes...why I wanted them to do things [in the manner I was telling them to do it]. . . If you explain that to kids, they learn quicker and they get better faster. They understand why and that is what you practice and that is what you do at the meet. . . . To me that's the big challenge – practice this way because it's correct, now go to the meet and do the same thing.*

*Gravity works on all bodies in the same way but we try to overcome gravity in different ways in different events. In the throwing events like the javelin, the shot put, and even throwing a baseball, all share a surprisingly similar biomechanics. It is the same thing in running — there are not ten ways to sprint, there is only one way to run fast.<sup>13</sup>*

As laymen most of us imagine that sprinters line up in front of some wooden blocks pre-positioned along a white line; then at the sound of the starter gun, they run as fast as they can toward the tape (the finish line) 100 meters away, and the first one to the tape wins. That captures, to be sure, the essence of the event, but biomechanical techniques elevate the sprinter's

natural ability by allowing him or her to run at peak efficiency. Working on his master's degree at Chapman College, Tellez meticulously studied the movements of an athlete as he or she performed his or her respective event. The point was to isolate each significant motion from the moment the sprinter pushed off the blocks until he or she crossed the finish line. To do so, Tellez set up three cameras—back, side, and top—and simultaneously filmed an athlete throwing the hammer. He then did a segmental analysis of the film that had recorded the movements at the rate of sixty-four frames per second. This scrupulous study allowed him to note the interplay of the athlete's velocities of movements, the angles of release, and rotational movements.

*You could see exactly what the foot was doing, what the arms were doing, and what the body was doing relative to itself. . . . you have three different views so you can find*

*out very quickly how the human body works. . . . I did my own analysis using this same technique I used in my master's thesis at every event during my career at UCLA and UH building models of different events and how they should be coached; what they look like, the biomechanics of*

*each, what they feel like, and a vocabulary for each, which I used in order to properly teach them.*

*Later, a friend had an airplane camera that could shoot 600 frames per second, which we used by developing strips of film with fifteen frames and after looking slowly at these strips you can observe even more detail of how the human body works. If you don't do segmental analysis and watch films frame by frame, you are going to miss a lot.<sup>14</sup>*

What did Tellez discover in this segmental analysis that contributed to his philosophy of coaching track? In his essay, *Sprinting: a Biomechanical Approach*, he writes:

*World class male sprinters stride approximately forty-three times during a 100 meter race. If a mechanical error costs one-one thousandth of a second per stride, the total cost is .043 seconds at the finish line. How can one be an efficient sprinter; the answer lies in scientific principles. . . . Kinesiology, the study of movement, dictates how a sprinter should move. Contributing to the study of movement is the discipline of biomechanics, which refers to the engineering of the body and laws of physics governing it. While referencing laws of physics, kinesiology and biomechanics view the body as a unified system of interdependent parts, an approach necessary for proper analysis.<sup>15</sup>*

This seemingly trivial bit of knowledge appears to be of little importance; however, in a sport where hundredths of a second mean the difference between victory and defeat this represents a treasure trove of knowledge and a major contribution to the science of coaching.

In 1975, Tellez arrived at a crossroads in his coaching career when two interesting positions opened up: training coach with

the Dallas Cowboys, and head coach for the track and field team at the University of Houston. Although recruited heavily by the legendary Gil Brandt and Tom Landry of the Cowboys, Tellez wanted a head coaching position where he could apply his knowledge of biomechanics to track and field and, therefore, opted for the job at the University of Houston.

Coach Tellez arrived at UH in 1976 ready to begin his career as a head coach. (UH sport's history buffs will note that Guy



*Coach Tellez at the Barcelona Olympics in 1992 with athletes Mike Marsh, LeRoy Burrell, Frank Rutherford, Lamont Smith and Carl Lewis, (left to right).*

Lewis coached the basketball team at the time, and that same year Bill Yeoman became the football coach; Bum Phillips and “Luv Ya Blue” were just around the corner at the Astrodome – making it a heady time for Houston sports fans.) Three years later, Tellez and his coaching staff, as well as those of several other major universities, wanted to recruit a recent high school graduate from New Jersey named Carl Lewis. Tellez, to say the least, did not feel optimistic about their chances of getting Lewis:

*I told my assistant coach, ‘We can’t get that guy. There’s no sense in me recruiting him, he’s too good, he won’t come down here.’ . . . My assistant kept telling me, ‘Why don’t you just give him a call?’ He finally talked me into it so I called him and just told him about [our program] and he was interested! However, he had taken all his visits [to recruiting colleges] that the NCAA rules would allow. . . . So he said, ‘I’m going to Puerto Rico and on my way back I’ll go through Houston, and I’ll stop there.’ The rules allowed that he could stop here if he paid his own way.*

*So he visited the university and talked about track and field and then he left. . . . Then lo and behold he called me and said, “I’m coming.” I could not believe it. . . . I have no idea why he chose UH except that we had developed a good relationship during his visit. I told him I didn’t care if he sprinted or not. I wanted him for the broad jump and I told him, ‘I want you to be a long jumper. I think you can break the world record.’<sup>16</sup>*

That bit of prognostication became an understatement. Tellez and Carl Lewis reached legendary status as the latter broke several records in individual sports while piling up medals in

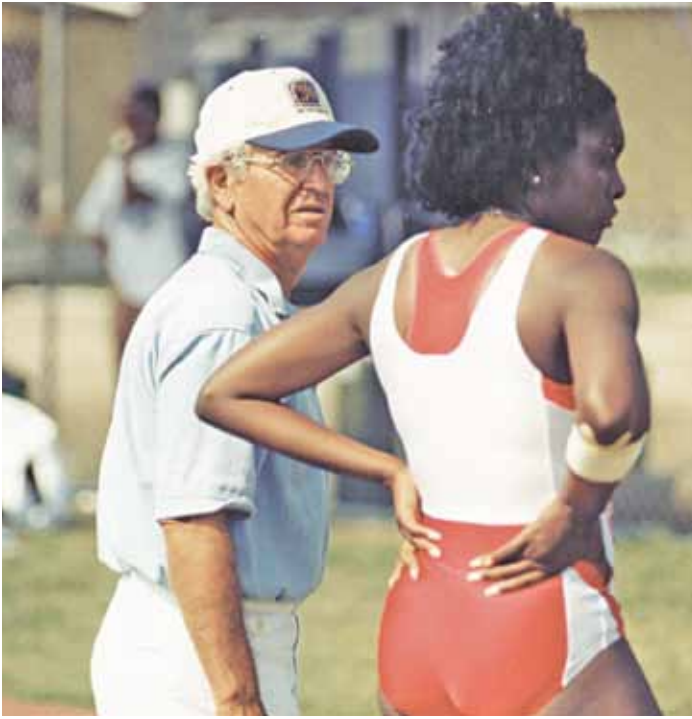
collegiate, regional, and Olympic competitions. Tellez referred to Lewis as the perfect student athlete because he was intelligent, decisive, and gifted with physical talents of a superb athlete. Lewis’ sports career remains well documented, but suffice it to say that he set a world record in the long jump and finished first in that event for sixty-five consecutive meets. In spite of the U.S. boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, Lewis amassed ten Olympic medals including nine golds, and ten World Championship medals, eight of them golds. He won accolades from writers and sports magazines from around the world. Some named him the greatest Olympian ever. Writing for Sport Web, Francesco Stefanon said of Lewis, “He defined track and field for over a decade. What about naming him the Olympian of all time?” In 1996, at age thirty-five, Lewis competed in his last Olympics in Atlanta and won a gold medal in the long jump. In the latter venue, Larry Schwartz, a contributing writer for ESPN.com, quoted Rick Reilly of *Sports Illustrated*, “Lewis beat age, gravity, history, logic and the world at a rocking Olympic Stadium in Atlanta to win the gold medal in the long jump. It was probably his most impossible moment in an impossibly brilliant career.”<sup>17</sup>

Lewis arrived on UH campus in 1979, and the work began with enough intensity that he qualified for the 1980 Olympics. “My job,” Tellez asserted, “was to coach him and that’s what I did. He got ready for every Olympic game and that was our objective, it wasn’t anything else except to get ready for the games.” Unfortunately, in light of international political conflicts, the United States boycotted the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Coach and athlete then set their goal for Carl to win four gold medals in the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics, a feat that would tie Jessie Owens’ record. For the next four years that goal became their focus. In the World Games, they tried to set their pace by winning four gold medals: 100 meters, long jump, 200 meters,



*Carl Lewis and Coach Tellez at a track meet held at the UH stadium.*





*Coach Tellez giving pointers to Patsy Walker, a national champion in the collegiate heptathlon.*

*Tom Tellez observes the competition with triple jumper Michelle Newman at a track meet.*

and the 400 x 100 meter relay. Although they failed to meet that objective, they learned an important lesson that impacted their future approach.

The Olympic rules for the long jump allow each athlete six attempts at getting his or her longest jump. That many attempts, however, tax the body's endurance and stamina. Carl took all six of his allotted jumps, but the effort left him so spent that the next day he lost the 200 meter and the chance to take home four golds in the World Games. Obviously, the strategy for the 1984 Olympics had to change. They ultimately settled upon a gutsy strategy that would take peak performance and concentration. Tellez decided that Lewis would practice the long jump so that the first attempt would be the winning jump, allowing him to forego his remaining jumps. When the 1984 Olympics arrived, Lewis won the 100 meter and then faced the long jump. As decided, Carl made only one jump in the event that day. The fans booed him, but as Tellez says, "It was my call, my decision, not Carl's. I wanted him rested for the 200 meter race the following day." As it turned out, the strategy worked, and Lewis achieved his dream of matching Jessie Owens' record.<sup>18</sup>

Tellez also coached several women athletes in NCAA competitions who left their marks as champions: Jolanda Jones, Carol Lewis (Carl's sister), Jackie Washington, and Michelle Collins. The difference between coaching women and men was obviously not an area easily discussed or explained by Coach Tellez. Picking his words carefully and pausing frequently, he stated that coaching women is "basically" the same as coaching men but pointed out that, "They are focused, they are really focused. Women can do amazing things—they can do everything the guys can, but, you know—they are—I think—a coach has to have certain skills to really coach women." Without any elucidation or interpretation of what constitutes those "certain skills," Tellez continued, in a tone that suggested he felt he was walking on egg shells, "I coached them like I coached the guys, I just coached them—I *may* have raised my voice a little bit and *maybe* got on them a little bit like I would a guy. A guy

would never think two seconds about the way I raised my voice but a girl may. She may interpret that as being mad at her or not—or whatever." In the movie *A League of Their Own* Tom Hanks made it clear there was no crying in baseball; Tom Tellez suggested that there was no crying in track either. "Maybe," he noted ruefully, "I'm not skilled in coaching women, I'd rather coach men. I think there is a knack to doing that . . . to getting the most out of women."<sup>19</sup> With that, the issue of coaching women ended. The record, on the other hand, suggests that he did know how to coach women. According to his profile on the Official Site of The University of Houston Athletics online:

*[Tellez] began the Lady Cougar program and led them to three Top 10 finishes at the NCAA Indoor Championships and eight Top 20 finishes at the NCAA Outdoor meet. Houston also won the 1983, 1984 and 1987 SWC indoor titles and the 1984 and 1990 SWC outdoor championships under his direction.<sup>20</sup>*

Tellez's coaching skills became widely appreciated internationally, and he received invitations from several countries to hold clinics and train their athletes. Conversely, many foreign athletes traveled to Houston in order to train with him. He made it clear, however, that he did not recruit heavily among foreign athletes:

*Though we have had foreign athletes, I didn't go out and actively recruit them, first because we did not have the money, and secondly, I felt I wanted to give whatever scholarships we had to Americans. I wanted to develop American athletes in college because developing athletes is where I get my greatest satisfaction. However, foreign athletes spoil you because they are so good, they are very "coachable," they listen, and you never have to worry about their grades.<sup>21</sup>*

After twenty-two years as track and field coach at UH, Tellez felt he needed a change. Kay had passed away, and her death had a profound effect on him, as did demands for paper work



*Tom Tellez applied his techniques to help athletes that other coaches might have written off before they ever got started.*

and the advancement of technology. Ironically, new technology offers athletes instruction from Tellez on YouTube, where the viewer can access videos of some of his clinics and track meets, including the Olympics, showing many of his student-athletes competing. Tellez has received an extensive list of honors and accolades, with some writers declaring him the greatest track coach ever. Tellez, however, claims that receiving the 1990 Hispanic Heritage Award Honoree for Sports stands, in his words, as his most cherished award.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between Tellez and Lewis remains close. Tellez continues to coach individuals including athletes that Lewis, now living in New Jersey, sends to him in an effort to help them develop their talent. In addition, sports federations from different countries also send youngsters to Tellez to coach.

Tellez now directs his abiding love of animals towards a pair of Arabian horses he keeps on his acreage north of Houston. His oldest son has a Ph.D. in education and teaches Mexican-American studies at the University of California

Santa Cruz. His daughter attended the University of Texas, where she majored in chemical engineering before earning her M.B.A. at Southern Methodist University. His youngest son followed in his father's footsteps, working as associate head coach in track and field at the University of Houston under LeRoy Burrell, one of his father's Olympians.

Probably no other college or university in the nation has an on-campus sport center named after a coach and his star student. In light of Tellez's and Lewis' stunning accomplishments, the University of Houston honored the pair by naming the new athletic center after them: the Tom Tellez Track at the Carl Lewis International Complex. A glass encased room to the right just inside the foyer houses the University of Houston's Hall of Fame. One cannot escape the air of spiritual-like nostalgia where a visitor can capture the shared giddiness of victory, recalling memories of incredible athletic feats. An impressive bronze statue of Carl Lewis dominates the space, while his coach of sixteen years, Tom Tellez, stands in the wings with the insistent message of discipline and perseverance – an echo that emerges from antiquity.

Sometime between 54 and 55 A.D., the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Corinthian congregation in hopes of raising their morale to do bigger and better works. To make his point, he used the metaphor of a competitive foot race. In that letter, preserved as 1 Corinthians verse 9:24, Paul wrote: "Don't you know that those who run in a race all run but [only] one receives the prize? Run like that, that you may win."<sup>23</sup>

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*Tom Tellez was joined by his wife, Kay, and brother, Don, in Washington, DC when he received the 1990 Hispanic Heritage Award for Sports.*

Photo courtesy of Tom Tellez.