

Echo Summit Receives the World Athletics Heritage Award Plaque

In two categories: Competition and Landmark. Other categories are City, Legend and Culture.



By Bob Burns, author of [The Track in the Forest](#)

Fifty-six years after popping up out of nowhere in the sport's consciousness, Echo Summit received the World Athletics Heritage Award Plaque in recognition of the Sierra Nevada pass's unique place in track and field history.

Echo Summit served as the high-altitude training center and site of the U.S. Olympic Men's Track and Field Trials in the summer of 1968. Four world records were shattered during the Olympic Trials – another was broken in a pre-trials meet – on the 400-meter track carved out of the Eldorado National Forest high above Lake Tahoe.

The U.S. Forest Service, in cooperation with Adventure Mountain and Visit Lake Tahoe, celebrated the Heritage Plaque honor under crystal-clear skies at an Oct. 2 ceremony at the Adventure Mountain Lodge on Echo Summit.

Four members of the legendary 1968 Olympic men's track team attended the ceremony: John Carlos, Bill Toomey, Norm Tate and Ron Whitney.

"Echo Summit is very near and dear to our hearts," Carlos told the gathering,

Toomey, the Olympic decathlon champion who lives in Incline Village, Nev., said. "Thank you for the opportunity to be here with friends."



RECENTLY RETIRED USATF CHIEF OF SPORT PERFORMANCE DUFFY MAHONEY (CENTER) IS FLANKED BY 1968 U.S. OLYMPIANS BILL TOOMEY, JOHN CARLOS, RON WHITNEY AND NORM TATE AT THE ECHO SUMMIT WORLD ATHLETICS HERITAGE SITE DEDICATION. PHOTO CREDIT: USDA FOREST SERVICE

World Athletics, the international governing body for track and field, initiated the Heritage Program in 2018. Echo Summit has the distinction of being the 100th recipient of the Heritage Plaque.

The Heritage Plaque is a location-based recognition, awarded for “an outstanding contribution to the worldwide history and development of track and field athletics and out of stadia athletics disciplines such as cross country, mountain, road, trail and ultra-running, and race walking.”



RON WHITNEY (AT PODIUM) SPEAKS DURING THE ECHO SUMMIT HERITAGE SITE DEDICATION. SEATED TO WHITNEY'S RIGHT ARE FELLOW 1968 OLYMPIANS JOHN CARLOS (ARMS FOLDED), NORM TATE (IN BLUE PULLOVER) AND BILL TOOMEY (WHITE SWEATSHIRT). PHOTO CREDIT: USDA FOREST SERVICE

“There has never been an athletics meeting before or since like the 1968 U.S. Trials at Echo Summit,” said World Athletics President Sebastian Coe, a two-time Olympic champion in the 1,500-meter run.

“As historic events go, the story of Echo Summit is extraordinary and compelling ... a unique competition in a landmark setting like nowhere else.”

The Echo Summit track facility was approved for construction by the USDA Forest Service to help the U.S. men acclimate to the 7,350-foot altitude of Mexico City, site of the 1968 Summer Olympics. The United States Olympic Committee selected Echo Summit because its elevation (7,382 feet) was nearly identical to Mexico City's and because the neighboring community of South Lake Tahoe was so supportive of the venture.

In agreeing to let a track be installed at Echo Summit, the Forest Service insisted that the environmental impact be minimized.

The result was a wonder.

Hundreds of pine trees rose from the infield. Runners disappeared from sight on the curves and backstretch. Javelins came flying out of the trees. There wasn't much room for spectator seating, but fans improvised, scaling the ski hill and climbing on top of granite boulders for the best view.

Vince Matthews broke the world record in the 400-meter run in a pre-trials competition on the pinkish-red Mondo track. In the trials – the final U.S. men's selection meet for Mexico City – records were broken by Carlos (19.7 seconds, 200-meters), Lee Evans (44.0, 400-meters); Geoff Vanderstock (48.8, 400-meter hurdles); and Bob Seagren (17 feet, 9 inches, pole vault).

The U.S. men won 12 gold medals and broke six more world records in Mexico City. Featuring such legends as Toomey, Evans, Seagren, Tommie Smith, Bob Beamon, Willie Davenport, Randy Matson and Al Oerter, the '68 U.S. team is considered one of the greatest Olympic track teams in history.

History also remembers the 1968 U.S. Olympic men's team for its commitment to racial equality during one of the most tumultuous years in American history. The victory-stand protest of Smith and Carlos in Mexico City is one of the most indelible images of the 1960s.

The Echo Summit track was disassembled and moved down U.S. Highway 50 to South Lake Tahoe, where it served the community for 25 years.

A "Return to the Summit" event was held in 2014 to commemorate the site's recognition as a California Historical Landmark. The Heritage Plaque serves as a fitting complement to the state landmark since it's an international award.



THE WORLD ATHLETICS HERITAGE SITE DEDICATION AS SEEN FROM INSIDE THE ADVENTURE MOUNTAIN LODGE AT ECHO SUMMIT. Photo credit: USDA Forest Service