

Carlinsville Won Boys State Track and Field Title 25 Years Ago

by Tom Emery
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CARLINVILLE - The best coaches and athletes always want to go out on top. Some do it better than others.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of Carlinville High School's boys track state title, as the Cavaliers rolled to the championship in 1996 with some of the elite names in Carlinville sports, many of whom closed their careers at the pinnacle.

Tunde Ridley, who was brilliant not only in track but in football, captured four individual state titles, tying an Illinois record in his final appearance in a Carlinville uniform. Meanwhile, the head coach, Dave Jokisch, chose to step down, concluding a career that saw him earn a spot in the Illinois Track and Cross Country Coaches Association Hall of Fame.

Carlinville's state title of 1996 was no surprise. The Cavaliers had finished as state runners-up the previous year, missing the title by only six points. Ridley led a 1-2 finish with Steve Car in the triple jump in 1995, and was so far ahead in the long jump after Friday's preliminaries that his mark stood up as the eventual winner.

The next spring, Carlinville was loaded, and everyone knew they were capable of winning a state title. With names like John Genta, Dan Wills, Matt Link, Shane Boland, Bryan Lusk, Amit Chopra, Mitch Wagner, Kevin Sanson, Dee Roller, Luke Smith, and Robert Pollard, Carlinville boasted depth, talent, and desire, and the results followed.

The Cavaliers contended in every big meet in 1996, especially at the Rochester Invitational, where Carlinville edged three-time defending champion Rushville.

Carlinville scored an impressive 109 points at Rochester, including 58 in field events. The Cavaliers then rolled to a 109-48 win over Virden at the Macoupin County meet, where Ridley snapped meet records in the 100, 200, and triple jump, leading 1-2 Carlinville finishes in two of those events. Carlinville also claimed the sectional title for the third consecutive season.

Those triumphs, though, are overshadowed by the IHSA state meet in Charleston, where Ridley's performance remains one of the greatest in the history of Illinois high school track. With hundreds of Carlinville fans looking on, Ridley won the 100, 200, triple jump, and long jump, becoming only the second athlete in the 102-year history of the meet to win four titles.

The first time was in 1981 by Mike Conley of Luther South, who captured the gold medal in the triple jump at the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona. Ridley flew to the state record in the long jump at 24' 1.5", which still stands.

Coupled with his success at Charleston as an underclassman, Ridley became the all-time leader in state meet medals with ten, including his six state titles. He holds the career record for points at the state meet, with 82.

Incredibly, Ridley accounted for 40 of Carlinville's 46 team points in 1996, which was enough for a decisive margin over second-place Rushville, with 31. It was the first state team title for Carlinville in any sport.

Also scoring for Carlinville at the state meet were Lusk, who finished fifth in the shot put, and Chopra, who was seventh in the long jump.

"We knew with five events remaining that we were going to win," recalled Jokisch. "My oldest son and I were keeping the scores, and I had predicted that we'd finish with 47 points. As it was, we had 46."

Ridley, who routinely deflected praise, said in 2019 that "I think I have more pride in the fact that one medal I have says that we were a team state champion. That was the first time Carlinville High School ever hoisted a state championship trophy, and that resonates the best with me. My biggest accomplishment, I feel, was being a part of that team."

The 1996 title marked the end of Ridley's legendary high school career, but his success in life did not stop there. He received a full athletic scholarship to the University of Illinois, and won four letters in track. A three-time All-American, Ridley was a three-time Big Ten champion and the former conference record holder in the 60-meter indoor run. He also held school records in the indoor 60 and outdoor 200.

A participant at the U.S. Olympic Trials in both 2004 and 2012, Ridley anchored the 400 relay for Team USA at a meet in Canada in 2005. Today, he oversees the fitness programs of the United States Navy, for the 113 fitness facilities at Navy shore installations worldwide.

The state championship was also the final highlight in a sterling career for Jokisch, who chose to retire with his program on top. "I knew that a state title would ever be hard to match," said Jokisch in 2019. "I also thought it was time to give my assistant, Ken Garrison, a chance to be a head coach."

In his twenty-six years at the helm, Carlinville won twenty-one county team titles – six more than the next-highest person – as well as ten district and sectional titles. Jokisch remained as a math teacher at Carlinville for the next four years, and continued to coach cross country. In the fall of 1996, he directed the Carlinville girls to a second-place state finish.

A quarter-century later, the 1996 IHSA boys track title remains one of the foremost athletic achievements in the history of Carlinville High School.

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