

**INTERVIEW WITH KARL KREMSER
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TELEPHONE INTERVIEW**



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TS: We're talking to Karl Kremser for the Rohe Track Era website. Karl, why don't we begin with how you heard about the University of Tennessee and how you got to Tennessee? It looks like your first year to compete in track would be the spring of 1967. I guess you started maybe in the fall of 1966.

KK: That's correct. I graduated from high school in 1964 and went to West Point for two years. That did not work out real well, so, when we parted ways in the spring of 1966, I looked for a university to which I could transfer. I played soccer and ran track in high school and was recruited by West Point for track. My grades were good but not extraordinary. I was able to get an appointment with the help of the track coach. That was the main reason I was able to be admitted to the Academy—through track. It was a lot different than I had ever imagined, and it was not a good fit for me as I was probably, if not the worst, one of the worst cadets that ever enrolled there.

TS: Well, I doubt that, but two years was enough it sounds like.

KK: More than enough. I then began looking where I wanted to go. In those days the difficulty in transferring was—it's different now—that in every sport, if you transferred, you had to sit out a year. Today, in men's sports this is only a requirement in basketball, football and ice hockey. In all other sports, if you meet certain criteria and if both institutions are willing to agree, you can transfer and be eligible immediately.

- TS:** I didn't know that. So you had to sit out a year?
- KK:** You had to sit out a year, and you couldn't get any financial aid through athletics. It had to all be need-based. For some particular reason—remember this was the Sixties— I had my heart set on going to California.
- TS:** That was the best place for track anywhere at that time, I guess.
- KK:** I wrote all kinds of letters and never received anything back. Coach Carlton Crowell [Army coach from 1951 to 1975 and also the UT track coach 1948-1950] knew the track coach at Missouri. He was willing to take a chance on me. So that was, basically, the only interest I really received. I did not really have anything. Then, one day, I picked up a *Sports Illustrated*, and there on the cover was Richmond Flowers.
- TS:** So that issue must have been spring of 1966, I guess.
- KK:** Yes, and that was the beginning and end of my recruiting process. I was probably the first non-recruited dual sports athlete at the University of Tennessee.
- TS:** Well, I know that you didn't come in to play football, and that's an interesting story I want to ask you about too. But that cover of *Sports Illustrated* is what did it, I guess. What did you do? Did you then write to Chuck Rohe? How did it work?
- KK:** The *Sports Illustrated* article was about Richmond and the track meets in which he was participating, and that was the one thing I really wanted to do. I wanted to compete, and so I said that this sounds really good. I wrote Coach Rohe and he wrote me back. Of all the letters that I wrote, he was the only one who responded. We made arrangements to meet. The AAU meet was at Randall's Island that year, and I drove up there from my home in Levittown, Pennsylvania.
- TS:** You grew up in a Levittown then? How about that? Those are pretty famous for post-World War II suburban housing.
- KK:** This was the first home my parents owned. My father assumed the former owner's GI mortgage, and he enjoyed relating the story of how as a German soldier he benefitted from the GI Bill.
- TS:** Okay, so you drove to the meet, and you met Coach Rohe there. And what happened?

- KK:** I met Coach Rohe there and also met George Moschis at the same time. He was throwing the javelin. Coach Rohe explained what he was able to do for me. He would get me involved with the Knoxville Track Club. I could get my meals on the training table, I would be in the dorms, and I would have work-study. He would give me the books. That sounded like a pretty good deal. I never saw Tennessee. I enrolled sight unseen.
- TS:** How about that? So you are saying that even that year when you were ineligible that you were living in the dorm and you basically had a partial scholarship?
- KK:** It was work-study because he couldn't give me anything. I think he was able to give me a loan of books, and I was working on the training table for my meals.
- TS:** Oh, I see. So you were paying your way, but he arranged it through work-study.
- KK:** Yes. I competed for the Knoxville Track Club, but did not have much of anything to do since I was ineligible. The meets were far and few between. I started kicking a football around that time. They did not have a soccer team at the University of Tennessee. I don't know if your memory is that long, but do remember the Gogolak brothers [Pete and Charlie], the first soccer-style kickers in the Ivy Leagues [at Cornell and Princeton, respectively]?
- TS:** No, but I remember it was about that time it was coming in. Everybody was just kicking straight on before that time.
- KK:** I was reading about them in the paper and watching them a few times when I saw them on TV. I said, "I wonder if I could do that." Since I had a lot of spare time I obtained some footballs to practice. If you remember in those days, the football practice field used to be located at the end of Gibbs Hall where the football complex is now. So, I would go out there and just kick around a little bit. Some of the members of the football team saw me, and I guess word got around. George Cafego snuck up there on the stairwell one day and watched me a little bit. I was encouraged to try out for spring football and received a scholarship because I did well in spring football. I started off not kicking very far. I had never been involved in a weight program, and I think I weighed about 140 pounds at that time. I started getting into it and pushing it, and I started getting stronger and a little heavier, and my distances started increasing. In the spring of 1967 as a result of the Orange and White game, I earned a scholarship.
- TS:** Okay. So, from that time on you're on a full football scholarship, I guess.

- KK:** Life could not have been any better.
- TS:** I guess not. I'm surprised that none of those [track] coaches responded, because you were a pretty good high jumper long before you got to Tennessee, if I remember correctly.
- KK:** Yes, at that time I think the best I had jumped was 6'9", almost 6'10". It gave me a great deal of satisfaction in 1968 in California in the NCAA meet that I beat all the California jumpers.
- TS:** That's great. Okay, so you were playing varsity football before you could jump for the varsity track team, I guess.
- KK:** Yes, and you know, I talked to Roger Neiswender [at the mini-reunion in August 2013] about those days. I had forgotten about all this. He related that he had finished that year, and he stayed there over the summer to work. He and I were lifting partners and Coach Rohe got all mad at him because he said, "My goodness, what have you done to my high jumper? Look how big he's gotten?" Roger told me, "I thought he was going to kill me." However after he watched me jump Coach calmed down because I was jumping very well.
- TS:** The weights obviously helped your distance in football. Do you think it helped you in track?
- KK:** I believe so because I felt stronger and more explosive. If I look back on it now, I probably would not have worked as much as I did on developing my upper body. I probably carried too much weight up top for jumping, even though the best I ever jumped was 7'1" and I think I weighed 190 pounds at the time.
- TS:** Wow! So you had gained 50 pounds by that point?
- KK:** Right, I had put on a good 40 or 50 pounds and was pushing pretty heavy weights that year.
- TS:** And you continued to improve. That's great! So, you had two years of varsity track, it looks like, at Tennessee, spring of 1968 and spring of 1969. Does that sound right?
- KK:** Yes.
- TS:** You got up to 7'1" and then, after that, I guess you were in the NFL for a while weren't you?
- KK:** Right, 1969 and 1970.

TS: Why don't you talk about your experiences or your memories of Coach Rohe and the track program at Tennessee during the time that you were there?

KK: Coach Rohe enabled me to enroll at Tennessee, and I am forever grateful and appreciative to him for this. Coach Rohe's enthusiasm and infectious attitude created a wonderful atmosphere which made it enjoyable to go to practice. Richmond Flowers not only sparked my interest in Tennessee, but he was also responsible for enabling me to compete in the top meets in the country. The meet promoters all wanted Richmond, of which, I am sure Coach Rohe was well aware. He was able to enter more UT track members in these meets because of the leverage he had with Richmond Flowers. I am grateful to Richmond to this day for being so gracious about it. I went to the Millrose Games. I went to the Compton Relays. If there was a big meet somewhere, the University of Tennessee was represented. We repaid his faith in us, though, because we did well wherever we went. I do not believe that many times we would have been invited if it had not been for how good Richmond was and how much they wanted him. You only get better if you face better competition. I think that was one of the ways in which all of us really became a lot better and became more consistent because week in and week out we were able to go to these big meets and compete against the absolute best in the country. I believe this competition helped us in our domination of the SEC.

TS: How did you do in the NCAA meet? Did you go both years to the NCAA meet?

KK: The first year that I was eligible [1968] I took second to [Dick] Fosbury—jumped 7'1" [to Fosbury's meet record of 7'2 ¼"].

TS: Oh, my goodness. The Fosbury flop.

KK: Do you remember in those days there was the big dispute between the AAU and the United States Track & Field Federation? The USTFF meet in Houston and then followed up with the NCAA out in Berkeley. Coach Rohe deposited us in Houston for the USTFF meet, and I always wondered why, but knowing now that he had so many duties with recruiting football, track, and all the rest of it, he let us stay there for a little bit. Out in California for the NCAA meet we were in a hotel in Berkeley, and we didn't see him for a while. My training that year for the NCAA meet was that we would get up in the morning, take the train across the bay to San Francisco, walk around in the Haight-Ashbury district and go around there all day, come back in the evening, training a little bit, and then go to Shakey's Pizza in the evening and have a little pizza and beer.

TS: Haight-Ashbury had a reputation in those days, so that probably didn't help your jumping too much, I wouldn't think.

KK: No, it was fantastic, because I think I was probably more relaxed than I had ever been. We went over there, we were sightseeing in San Francisco, came back in the evening, training a little bit, and went to Shakey's Pizza & Beer, and that was basically how I trained for that weekend, and that week I jumped 7'1".

TS: Oh, I see. So you were more relaxed than ever for that meet. That does sound like a good strategy. Sometimes we got so nervous about our coming races that it hurts us instead of helping us. That's great! Did you use the Fosbury flop? When did that come in?

KK: It was just coming in at that particular time. It made an awful lot of sense because from the physics of it all, it's easier to do it. Your center of gravity is a little bit lower. But if you are used to doing something for so long you are hesitant to try to change your jumping style so late in the game. I only had a year left. Fosbury was just a real sensation. People had never seen anything like it.

TS: So you stuck with the old ways?

KK: That's correct, the old roll.

TS: Well, you did pretty good with the old roll. It would be interesting to know what you could have done with the Fosbury flop.

KK: That's true, but I was pretty happy with what I was able to accomplish there. For all of us there during the Rohe years, too, we were there at a really good time, because not only was the track team good, but we were there when everybody was good. The basketball team was good under Ray Mears. Ray Buzzard was there in the swimming team—the football team with Coach [Doug] Dickey. We were all housed in Gibbs Hall and as a result all of the athletes knew one another and supported each team. We couldn't have been at Tennessee at a better time. I will never forget those years that I was there. When you think back on it now, you realize how fortunate you were to have been there at that time.

TS: It was a great era. There's no doubt about it, and I think Chuck Rohe had a big part in making it such an extraordinary era at UT. So you came in second in 1968. What happened in 1969 in the NCAA? I guess you won the SEC both years, didn't you?

KK: I think I was second one year. The NCAA [meet] in 1969 was at Tennessee. It was unfortunate that it rained during my qualifying flight in the high jump

competition. It made for slippery conditions, and I was not able to qualify to get into the final round. I had a couple of jumps there, but it was just a little treacherous at that time for me to really plant my heel real quick. I was a little hesitant, and did not get into the finals.

TS: That's too bad. I was there for that meet. I think I was one of the officials doing something or other. That was big to get the NCAA championships to Knoxville.

KK: Yes, it was.

TS: Pretty much a measure that the track universe was shifting in a southern direction, instead of West Coast, maybe.

KK: Yes. Tom, I was not real knowledgeable about what was going on. I have only recently become more of a historian about Coach Rohe. When you look back at those early pictures when he only had five or six guys on the track team, when they say that he is the Father of Track and Field in the South, that's not an understatement. What he did—he forced everyone else to become better. If you look, the SEC became one of the powers nationally as far as track was concerned. Most of it had to do with what Coach Rohe did, because he essentially embarrassed the rest of the SEC and forced them to develop their track programs.

TS: He did indeed. I was actually at the University of Tennessee a year before he came, and so I know how awful it was in the old regime. When he came in, we learned what work was, I think, that first year. We thought we knew before then, but it wasn't anything like the workouts we were doing after he arrived.

KK: The more I read about the stories the distance runners share the more I thank my lucky stars that the longest I had to run was ten steps to jump rather than all those things that those guys had to go through running wise. I don't have any stories to relate to you. I was never one of these guys trying to hide under the covers when he was pounding on the door early mornings.

TS: Yes, I understand.

KK: I think I had it really easy comparatively. When I read what some of these guys went through, I have even more admiration for them now.

TS: You were on the ground floor in some revolutionary changes in athletics, because soccer style kicking in football was just coming in and the Fosbury flop for high jumping was just coming in. And in the interview

with Coach Rohe, weight training for track athletes was just coming in at that time as well.

KK: I was on my own there lifting wise. We did not have a strength coach, and I utilized the only equipment we had which was an old Universal machine. You look at the weight room they have now at the University of Tennessee or any of these big programs, you are just amazed. All the coaches they have and all the expertise. We only had that one machine and some free weights.

TS: I remember Section X [in Neyland Stadium], and I guess by the time you got there it was probably Stokely wasn't it?

KK: Yes, but there wasn't much there. It was very little, and I don't think the coaches really believed in it very much in those days. There wasn't a whole lot of thought given to it. It was just that I was probably on the slim side of 140, and I just wanted to do something. I saw that Universal there, and we had that training table. I just started eating as much as I could and just working really hard. One of the nice things too was that Coach Dickey was really, really understanding and very, how should I say, open-minded about my role with the football team. Many times I would ask him, "Coach, are we going to be kicking today?" If he said no, I said, "Do you mind if I would go ahead and go in the weight room?" He let me go. So, I lived in that weight room because I was just determined that I was going to become a little bit bigger than what I was, because I felt self-conscious about how thin I was.

TS: Well, if somebody runs a kickoff back far enough, you were going to have to go out there and try to tackle them too. So, it would probably be better to weigh a little more than 140.

KK: Yes, I had a chance to do that one time, and I just kind of flailed at the guy from UCLA. He ran right by me.

TS: Okay. All right! After you graduated from Tennessee, did you go immediately into coaching after that?

KK: No. I was drafted by the Miami Dolphins, and that's how I found myself in Miami. I do not think I would ever have moved there otherwise. It would never have occurred to me. More than likely I would have gone back to where I grew up in Pennsylvania. I was drafted there [in 1969] and kicked the first year. The second year, we had a change in coaches. George Wilson [Dolphins coach, 1966-1969] had done a very good job there and laid the groundwork. Most of the team was already in place when they brought in a new coaching staff [in 1970] with Don Shula [Dolphins head coach, 1970-1995]. I was kicking at that time, living there, and then Garo Yepremian came down. Shula kept both of us, and we were in Houston for

a game. The day before the game we were practicing in the Astrodome on the turf, and the sole on my shoe gave way on my planting foot. I was a little apprehensive and not consistent in the warm-ups, and Coach Shula decided to go with Garo Yepremian that day. He performed very well, and as a result they kept him and released me later that year. That was how that went.

TS: So, you didn't try to get on with anybody else after that?

KK: I did. I started teaching physical education at Palm Springs Junior High School. I continued to practice in preparation for pre-season camps. One year I signed with Green Bay and had made that team in a Spring mini-camp. The day before I left to go to pre-season camp, I was practicing and doing very well. I was kicking as well as I ever had and was probably stronger than I had ever been. I was ready to go home when I said, "Let me just kick a couple more." On the last kick I really hurt my quad. That stayed with me for quite some time, and that was the end of my football days. I continued teaching and began coaching soccer. I started at Palm Springs Junior High School. I found I really enjoyed teaching and coaching. The school system had a soccer competition for the junior high schools, and I organized teams for the tournament and found I really enjoyed it. I went on to Miami Killian High School where I taught German and coached soccer. We won a state championship in 1977.

TS: Were you born in Germany?

KK: Yes.

TS: You were born in 1945, if I saw correctly. Does that sound about right?

KK: That's correct.

TS: So, right about the end of World War II.

KK: That's right. My parents were what they call *Reichsdeutsche* since my grandfather was still a German citizen, living outside Germany. My parents were both born in Latvia. My father was drafted into the German army and fought on the Russian front. As the war was winding down, my father, in the army, and my mother, as a refugee, managed to stay one step ahead of the Russians on the way back to Germany.

TS: So you were refugees?

KK: Yes, both in Germany and in the USA. We immigrated in 1952 and came to Seabrook Farms, New Jersey, a truck farming area. They were one of the pioneers of frozen vegetables. They would give people jobs in the factories

and help them immigrate. In return you would agree to work for them for a year. After that, you could go wherever you wanted to go.

TS: Then you all got to Levittown.

KK: We went from Seabrook Farms, New Jersey, to Levittown because my dad found a different job. He worked in a plant nursery there.

TS: So you grew up speaking German at home as well as English, I guess?

KK: Correct.

TS: So now you are teaching German in Killian High School and doing some soccer coaching as well?

KK: Correct.

TS: How long did you do that?

KK: I did that probably three years. In 1977, we won a state championship, and I had an opportunity to go to Davidson College [in Davidson, North Carolina]. I coached soccer and track there.

TS: How long did you coach at Davidson?

KK: From 1977 to 1980. I then had an opportunity to go back to Miami with Florida International University. Coach Bill Nuttall had left there to go with the Fort Lauderdale Strikers [in the North American Soccer League as an assistant coach from 1979 until the team dissolved in 1983]. I was hired there and stayed there from 1980 to my last year of coaching in 2007.

TS: So 27 years you coached soccer at Florida International?

KK: That's correct.

TS: You all won some national championships in that time, if I recall.

KK: We won two national championships in NCAA Division II and were runners-up twice, and we were second in Division I one year.

TS: Let me just ask you, you were saying a little earlier that Coach Rohe had some influence on your coaching career, or at least you came to appreciate what he was doing more after you had had to do it yourself. Could you just talk about that a little bit?

KK: The one thing that impressed me was that of all those letters that I wrote, his was the only response. I realized when I was coaching that I would try to read every letter, and would answer as many as I possibly could to let the writer know that I received their inquiry and thank them for their interest. I was able to attend UT because of Coach Rohe's attentiveness, and I endeavored to do the same. I found a few very good players in this manner. It's not that everyone who writes you and tells you how good he is turns out to be that good, but it is certainly worth looking into, which is what I did. Especially in the minor sports, where your budget is significantly smaller, it pays to do so. The manner in which Coach Rohe conducted himself also had a profound influence in how I prepared for practices. I always strived to bring enthusiasm and energy to my practice sessions. If I was able to create this atmosphere, it made even the most difficult and strenuous sessions enjoyable and worthwhile.

TS: Any last thoughts that you would like to add on your experiences at UT or your memories of Coach Rohe or football or track from those years?

KK: As the years have gone by, you appreciate even more how fortunate you were to have been surrounded by the caliber of coaches that we had there and the character of the coaches we had there. People like Coach Rohe, coaches Dickey and Jimmy Dunn [on the football team] and in my case with George Cafego—the kind of people that were there that made those experiences so special. Beyond that, we were just blessed with such good teams. We were not only winning the SEC in those sports, but we were competing on a national level, competing for a national championship in football, competing against the absolute best in track. That was one of the things I've always wanted to do and one of the things that I carried from there into my coaching at FIU. I probably could have scheduled a lot better in getting wins and losses. My thing has always been that you want to compete against the very best. At FIU one of the things that I was really proud of was the fact that we were able to compete against, and defeat, the best programs in the country even though we had maybe a small semblance of the kind of budget that they had. I just appreciate the people that were leading those programs and had such a great influence on our lives and what a wonderful experience that was. I think those were probably the best years of my life there at Tennessee.

TS: Well, great! I've enjoyed talking to you today and getting some of your stories down.

KK: I appreciate you doing all this, Tom. I know it's a lot of work on your part, but probably a labor of love on your part too.

TS: It is indeed.