Glenn Cunningham: A Biography

Glenn Cunningham was a great runner. He overcame a tragic accident as a child to win an Olympic silver medal. Cunningham once said, “As long as you believe you can do things, they’re not impossible!” This is how he lived his life.

When Cunningham was just seven years old, he was seriously injured in a fire. One cold February morning, he and his older brother arrived early at their one-room school. In those days, schoolhouses were kept warm by a fire in a heating stove. The Cunningham boys wanted to help that morning. They lit the fire in the stove. By accident, the boys used gasoline and it exploded.

Both boys were burned badly. To get help, they ran to their home two miles away. A doctor was called to the house. He told the boys’ parents that Glenn’s legs were badly hurt. He may not be able to walk again. The news was worse for Floyd, Glenn’s older brother. Eventually, he would die from his wounds.

Glenn’s mother spent months massaging his legs. She encouraged him to work hard so he could stand once again. Success came and this made Cunningham determined to walk. As his legs became stronger, Glenn’s father began to push him to run. His father believed you should never quit trying, and soon Glenn was running races with his brothers and sisters.

Glenn Cunningham was a good runner. One day, he noticed medals hanging in a display window at the local drugstore. The medals were to be given to the best mile runners at the local farmer’s fair. This gave Glenn the motivation he needed. He entered the race and won.

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In high school, Cunningham joined the track team. His favorite event was the mile run. He was so good at it that he was invited to compete in a Chicago track meet where only the top high school milers participated. Not only did Cunningham win, but he also broke the track record. After high school, he ran for the University of Kansas. He won many college medals.

In the 1930s, times were hard for Americans. Many people lost their jobs. Farmers lost their farms to blowing dust. Americans were looking for heroes who had succeeded despite tragic events in their lives. Cunningham became the most popular American runner during this time. His success in running gave the nation something to cheer about.

One of the highlights of Cunningham’s life was winning a silver medal at the 1936 Olympics. The games took place in Berlin, Germany. The weather was cold and rainy. Weather like this bothered his legs and sometimes brought him pain. Cunningham was still considered the runner to beat. As the Olympic race began, he started off strong, but soon his legs began to hurt. He wanted to win, so he pushed hard. But near the end of the race a runner from New Zealand ran past Cunningham, beating him by less than a second.

The headline in the Washington Post newspaper read “New Zealand Trackman Withstands Challenge of Cunningham. Record Set in 1932 Broken by 5 Runners in Berlin Race.” Cunningham was one of the runners who broke the world record. He ran that race in 3 minutes and 48 seconds. The runner who beat him ran the mile in 3 minutes and 47 seconds. It was a close race.

When reporters asked him about coming in second in the race, Cunningham said, “I feel I ran a fast race. I broke the Olympic record for the mile. Only one person in the world ran faster.” This positive attitude toward life became Glenn Cunningham’s legacy. He learned to never quit and never stop believing in yourself.