A Win for the Ages

Note: The following story was adapted from an interview conducted by Craig Mattick for the SDPB series "In Play" and is used with permission.

There are two instances in South Dakota high school history where an individual won a team state track championship all by himself. The first to do it was 'Smokey Joe' Mendel of Onida in 1926. Smokey Joe won the 100m dash, 220m dash, 440m run, and the broad jump to single-handedly beat Sioux Falls (Washington) high school. It didn't happen again until Justin Horn of Tripp-Delmont came around nearly 80-years later. The feat would be featured in the *Sports Illustrated "Faces In The Crowd" section.*

Justin Horn was no stranger when it came to accomplishing great things. He was named the Joe Robbie MVP in Tripp-Delmont's 43-13 win over Dell Rapids' St. Mary in the 2002 Class B state football championships. He also earned all-state football honors that season.

Horn loved to do all the things small town kids liked to do – especially playing football and basketball. "Ever since we were in the first grade, second grade, we were thinking about winning a state title, all of us kids. We would play football on the sidelines. I think we were one of the only schools that would actually play tackle football every single home football game as little kids. It was probably the most physical football games' I have played in my life. All of us were super into trying to be the best athletes, trying to be the best we could for each other on the field. And so, I knew it was for everything. We were good at basketball, too. And I knew that if I was a better athlete, I was going to be better for my team at football, better at basketball." That would lay the groundwork for a successful high school career.

Tripp-Delmont's 2002 football team went 9-2. Horn had some big games, rushing for 292 yards one game and 260 another. With some seniors injured, he was able to play a larger role. The season would end in a loss to Corsica in the playoffs.

His junior track season gave him a hint of what was to come as he qualified for the state meet in four events. He would place second in the

100-meter dash, third in the long jump and seventh in the triple jump. “The biggest thing that happened my junior season was I went away from regions with some really good times, going into the state. And my dad said to me, "All right, you really need to dedicate yourself. You've only been doing track practices, so you're just doing what your coach says. Let's go the extra mile and you run on your own in preparation." So, I would do track practice, and then I would go, and I'd run on a track. I'd drive to parks in South Dakota because we didn't have a track in our town.”

In preparation for his senior season, Horn would run in the mornings, then participate in an Acceleration program. He attended a number of camps as well. “So, I'd run about twice a day during the summer, all summer long. Not seven days a week, it was four days a week. But that was me preparing for the senior season.”

The hard work paid off as Tripp-Delmont beat Dell Rapids St. Mary 43-13 to win the state title and finish the year at 11-1. Horn was named the Joe Robbie MVP.

Following basketball season, his focus shifted to his final year of track and field competition. Part of his motivation was admiration for other great track and field athletes. “I was always thinking about those guys who were the best track athletes. I had idolized Justin Noteboom, idolized Oakley Haynes, and his older brother Jesse. And then, seeing people like Chad Greenway do what he did when I was a sophomore.”

Despite being a school full of talented athletes, Horn was the only Tripp-Delmont athlete to qualify for the state meet, held that year in Rapid City. He would qualify in the long and triple jumps and the 100- and 200-meter dashes. Clearly, Tripp-Delmont was not one of the favorites when the discussion of potential state meet team champs came up. “My entire high school career... I started running track in high school when I was an eighth grader, we never had won one track meet as a team, not once. So, to call us, Tripp-Delmont, a favorite to win a state title was just, nobody was thinking about that at all.” But the stars all aligned that weekend and history was in the making. He would score 38 points in those four events, and it was enough to win the state track championship. James Valley Christian was second.

Triple Jump

Horn did not come into the state meet as the favorite in his first event. He had been jumping in the 41’ and 42’ range. Colt Haynes was ranked number one in the state and was jumping in the 44’ range. Haynes was also the defending champion. “The triple jump was always my ... I would consider it my worst event. And so, I wasn’t expecting to win, but I was hoping to win.” Haynes would scratch on all three of his preliminary attempts and would not advance to the finals. That opened the door for Horn, and he would win with a jump of 41’ 11”. Ten points scored.

Long Jump

Unlike the triple jump, he was considered the favorite in the long jump, having jumped 21’ 5 ½”. Haynes was close behind him in the pre-

meet rankings. “I had to get something more out of myself if I wanted to win that day. I wanted to do something great. I wanted to go like 22 feet. Ended up doing my personal best, which is at 21’ 6 ½” and getting that first place.” Twenty points scored.

100-Meter Dash

The 100-meter dash would require a prelim and semi-final to get to Saturday’s final. “So, in prelims, it was early in the morning, and I had run like 11.5 in regions, which I think we were running against the wind, which for me was one of my worst times of the year. And so, I remember Matt Engen from Castlewood being a person that would always have a really good time, and I was running against him. Came out of the blocks, and he was blowing my doors off. And I remember in my head saying, "I can't let this happen. I can't lose." And I hit another gear, and I passed him, and I ran my fastest time in the 100-meter dash of the season and won my heat in prelims. And then the same thing, I kept that form in semi-finals, and I ran, I think, a little bit better time in the semi-finals, where I ran my best time of the year. I think it was hand timed to 10.91, And that got me to qualify for the 100-meter finals.” He would head into the 100 final seeded second and starting in lane 5.

The top seed in the final was Troy Wipf of James Valley Christian, who would later become Horn’s college roommate. “And so, I'm going into it, I'm thinking I'm going to win this. I know I have to do. I need to have a good start. Obviously, give everything I got. And the gun went off and Troy was just better at that time. I was with the pack the entire time, and I closed on Troy probably for the last maybe 15 meters, but it wasn't enough for me to get past him. He ran like an 11.08 and I ran like an 11.2 or something like that. So, he won, good for him, but I got second.” Twenty-eight points scored.

200-Meter Dash

The 200 would require a Friday preliminary round as well. Horn felt his odds were good as he had not lost to a Class B runner that year and had a top seed time of 22.7. He would qualify number one for the final with a time of 23.6 in the prelims. “I actually ran a really good time, and I came into the finals 200 ranked first, lane four, ready to try to win the state title the next time I run.”

Justin had made arrangements to have someone hold his blocks for the final. With only moments to go before the start, his block holder had not shown up and a bit of panic ensued. One minute before the start the block holder arrived and the rest was history. Thirty-eight points scored.

All total he would run three 100’s, two 200’s and both jumps in a two-day period. “I know I showed up on Saturday sore, really sore. And at the end of that day, I don't think I was more sore after a track meet ever. And you're sore after every single-track meet. It was quite a bit.”

With a total of 38 points was he thinking the unthinkable – a state team title? “I thought, "Okay, first day I scored 10 points in the long jump. That's great. I put Tripp-Delmont up there high on the board," because there's not many events that end on the first day. And the second day I wasn't really thinking about it at all. After the last event, I had finished and I had my total of 38, there were kids that were coming up to me saying, "I think you're going to win." And I had no idea. I had no idea the team totals because that's how little I was thinking about the team goal. And people were coming up to me, "You're going to win state." And it was just like, it was one of the happiest times in my life. I could not get a smile off my face.”

After the team awards were presented, he noticed a number of teams taking the traditional victory lap. “I remember Rapid City

Stevens, they were the dominant class AA track team, and they had like 70 people that ran around. And I watched them do it, I said, "Hey, I should probably do something like that." And I took the trophy with me, which is this pretty big thing, like 20 pounds, 15 pounds, and I was carrying that thing. And the main thing I'm thinking is, "Don't drop this because it's all you." So, I'm thinking, This is great. I get to celebrate. I wish some of my teammates were here. I wish I had more people to share it with. But I felt awesome that I was able to do it."

Horn credited his coach Don Luton for being a supportive person. "Just be yourself. Just do what you got to do." He told me, "You need to make sure you get rest so that you're prepared for the next day." Didn't really talk about too much like strategy or anything. Just go out there and do your stuff."

Many years later the feat occasionally comes up. "But I didn't talk about it at all. And my parents don't bring it up. We're just happy to be together when we're together. And I'm nobody special is the way I think about things. And so, when they heard about it, it was so nice to have people that I respect so much realize, "Wow, you did something great." And it was fun to see someone like my mother-in-law react to that. She was an athlete when she was in high school, and I think she really liked the fact that I did all this stuff."

Horn graduated from SDSU and now lives with his family in New Ulm, MN where he is an Operations Engineer for 3M.