

# 'My friends said I was crazy to come here'

By Carol Morton  
Of the Emerald

Last Saturday at Hayward Field, one sprinter in white tights seemed somewhat shy. He was the only one of the victorious 400-meter relay team not flashing the "number-one" sign as they jogged around the track, soaking up the crowd's applause. That's because the victory lap was a career first.



Walcott barely missed out on qualifying for the 1980 Olympic team.

Photos by Bob Baker

It's not that George Walcott hasn't won his share of races. He's stopped the clock at 20.83 in the 200 meters and has a best of 10.40 in the 100 meters, both at Central Arizona Community College where he transferred from this year.

The native Jamaican ran in the 1979 Pan-Am Games relay team with 1976 200-meter Olympic champion, countryman and hero, Don Quarrie. After seven races in two days at the Junior College Nationals, Walcott returned home to try for the Jamaican Olympic Team. Exhausted, he placed fifth in both the 100 and 200.

But a victory lap was new to him. "Dennis (Whitby, Oregon's sprint and hurdler coach) and the other guys told me that the victory lap was a tradition. At first I was kind of scared, but it's really a lot of fun. You're giving the crowd something back, because their cheering gets you going. They give you extra drive, extra force," Walcott says.

After the successful relay against Washington State, Walcott went on to capture the 100-meters in 10.79. In the 200-meters, however, his leg tightened up, forcing him to ease back. For the past few weeks Walcott says his training has been geared to the 100, but workouts and race times should begin to reflect Walcott's goal of peaking for the 200-meter race at the NCAA championships the first week of June.

Walcott sees himself as a 200-meter man. The junior majoring in business began at Central Arizona as a 100-meter sprinter and ended his freshman season by winning the 200-meters at the Junior College Nationals.

Oregon's cold, rainy weather is a nemesis to sprinters. "My friends at Arizona laughed at me and said I was crazy to come here," Walcott says. "They said I couldn't run."

The gusty cold rain on Walcott's first venture north last spring to see the Ducks outscore Auburn 121-33 was probably the worst weather a coach would want to show

a hopeful recruit, he says. "I was cold. My toes were numb. My fingers were numb. And I signed the letter of intent on Monday." Walcott laughs at the apparent absurdity.

"I wanted to be somewhere that needed me. Oregon has an advanced program, even though it has cold weather." Walcott also was impressed with the business school.

Then there was the crowd at Hayward Field. "I wasn't running in the meet against Auburn, but I felt like I was out there. My adrenalin was flowing."

Walcott can be just as unrelenting as the persistent rain. "My success depends on how I approach the weather. I am going to be a better man, I'm going to be a tougher man."

There was a time earlier this year when the weather won, but his roommate and close friend, hurdler Don Ward, helped him feel like his depression wasn't the end of the world.

Also, Walcott knew he was in Oregon with God's blessing. "God plays an important role. Without God I wouldn't be running." A line in Psalms 91 that he quotes says God's angels will protect him always. "I definitely feel that now. I told myself, 'Hey, George, why are you down? You know you have the extra force behind you that will never fail you.'"

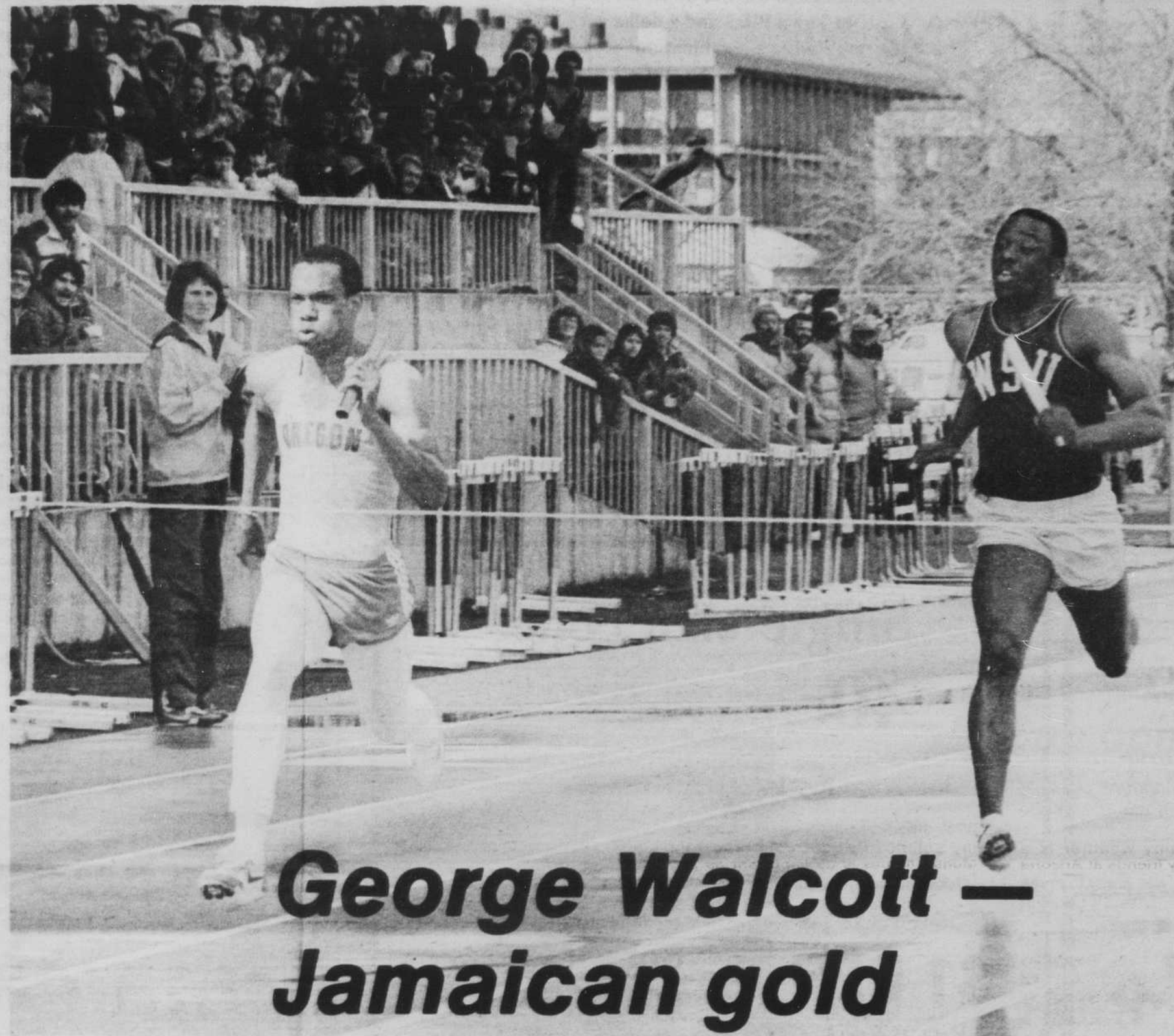
"You don't have to be religious (to have faith), you just have to have common sense. I get more benefit from believing in God than believing in something else."

Saturday mornings before meets, Walcott reads the Bible and prays. "I assist me in running to the best of my ability and keep me free from injury. It helps me keep my composure, get calm and relaxed. Mental fitness is as important as physical fitness. Some guys get too nervous to run."

"Real" Jamaicans speak patois (pronounced patwa), a mixture of plantation owner English and slave African. If Walcott relaxes into comfortable conversation, a "mi-a-go-si-de-kooch" might slip in for "I'm going to see the coach." Ward offers to translate for a visitor, but Walcott watches his English carefully.

A Jamaican reggae song beats to these words: "You can get it if you really want it, but you must try. You'll succeed at last."

Walcott contentedly says, "There's so many things I've really wanted — to run and a good education. That song falls into place wherever I've been."



## George Walcott — Jamaican gold

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