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Breakthrough Victory

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Breakthrough Victory

The 1961 Southern Conference indoor track and field meet in Lexington, Va., came down to the final event.

Upstart Furman and Virginia Military Institute, the three-time defending champion, battled for the championship throughout the late February weekend, even with the FU Roadrunners, as the student newspaper, *The Hornet*, called them, suffering through various misfortunes. Injuries hampered the performance of one of the team's top scorers, the Furman runners in the 440 were thrown off rhythm by two false starts and wound up back in the pack, and other stalwarts of the squad were off form.

Still, their teammates picked up the slack, and as the meet wound down Furman was in solid position to win. VMI led by one point with two events remaining. But up next was the mile relay, in which Furman had an excellent foursome. A victory would ensure the title, and Furman had a 15-yard lead entering the last leg — until more bad luck, in the form of a dropped baton, snuffed the opportunity.

"When I saw that baton fall on the ground, for a moment it looked like everything had gone out the window," Coach Chuck Rohe said after the meet.

The miscue meant that everything would be decided in the pole vault. Furman's hopes rested with Bill Keel '63, who needed to tie or win if the team was to take the championship.

The March 4 issue of *The Hornet* provided this breathless account of what happened from the perspective of a team member, who wrote anonymously:

"Dramatically, a hush settled over the field house. Keel nervously rubbed his hands as he stood in the center of the pole-vault run-up with the pole resting on his right shoulder. He came smartly

to attention, tested the flexibility of the pole, and began his run.

"The patter of spikes in the cinders echoed throughout the field house as rain would on an iron roof. Suddenly the rain stopped and Keel sailed majestically through the air and over the bar to bring Furman its first Conference Championship ever.

"A cloud of grey sweat-suits descended on Keel as back-slapping Furman track men went wild with joy."

By clearing 13 feet, 10 inches — a conference indoor record — Keel had given Furman the win by 1.5 points.

His title-clinching performance earned him a spot on the all-conference team with

Dave Segal '63, who won the 60-yard run and 70-yard low hurdles; versatile Thad Talley '62, 800-yard champ; and Tony Etnyre '62, high jump winner and second-place finisher in the broad jump and hop, step and jump.

Since that night 50 years ago, Furman has added 175 regular-season and tournament championships in all sports, the most of any school in the league. Furman teams have participated in 93 NCAA or AIAW (Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women) tournaments. Two teams, women's golf in 1976 and football in 1988, have captured national championships.

But as Rohe says today, "The first championship is always the best. What an exciting event that was, when our guys battled through a lot of adversity to win the first conference championship in any sport for Furman. All the hard work and dedication by those athletes finally paid off, and today they can be justifiably proud of the program they established."

And of the tradition they started.

— JULIE PRINCE PARÉ

The author, a 1996 graduate, is a sports information assistant at Furman.

Chuck Rohe maintains an active lifestyle at his Florida home. Called by some "the father of track and field in the South," he will be inducted into the Furman Athletic Hall of Fame October 8. Photo by Andrew Hunter.