

Now at Ottawa, Beard Plots the 'Fall of Ball'

By Al Palmeri

It pounds in his brain as he chugs up stairs at Ottawa Hills High School.

It prods him, softly, when he does distance work. It doesn't stop during intervals, wind sprints or stretching exercises.

It motivates Elza Beard time and time again as the Ottawa Hills senior trains to become the fastest sprinter in the history of Grand Rapids track and field.

"Mike Ball will fall," says the voice in Beard's brain. "Mike Ball will fall."

Beard has never seen Mike Ball, a former sprinter for Wyoming Park and football player for Central Michigan University. He does not know Ball. But he does know that Ball will fall.

Ball, you see, holds the area records in Beard's beloved events — the 100-yard dash and 220-yard dash. The former Viking flash clocked 9.5 in the 100 and 21.5 in the 220 in 1976.

In two spectacular seasons at Creston, Beard pursued those times. He won the City League, John Bos Relays and Class A regional titles in both dashes as a sophomore. He duplicated those feats as a junior.

He placed third in both events at the Class A state meet two years ago. He was on his way again last year before his hamstring popped in the semifinals of the longer dash.

His fastest times in that span have been 9.8 in the 100 and 21.7 in the 220. Based on that, it would seem like Ball's 100 time is secure, while the 220 time may be in jeopardy.

But Beard, who moved into the Ottawa school district after finishing the first semester this year at Creston, isn't satisfied with breaking one mark. He wants all of Ball to fall.

"I'm going to put my name on that (all-area track) list a couple of times," Beard said. "I'm going to try to take the 220 by the end of the season, and in the state meet try to get the 100."

If that happens, credit will largely go to a catchy little phrase which hounded him thousands of times.

Beard recalled one of his first workouts this season at Ottawa. The sprinters were running up and down the stairs at the high school. Beard, dog tired, started looking for an elevator. When he couldn't find one, he decided to take a break halfway up the stairs.

Then he remembered Mike Ball. The guy who will fall. Like a wing-footed Rocky Balboa, Beard ran those stairs.

"I kept on repeating it to myself," Beard recalled. "It's got a nice little rhythm to it, so you can work to it."

"When I work, I think about it a lot. I understand he was a real good runner. But I never saw him run."

Opponents accustomed to Beard blazing in a Creston blue uniform will now be seeing him in Ottawa orange. He has been at Ottawa since the semester began in February and hopes to graduate from there in June.

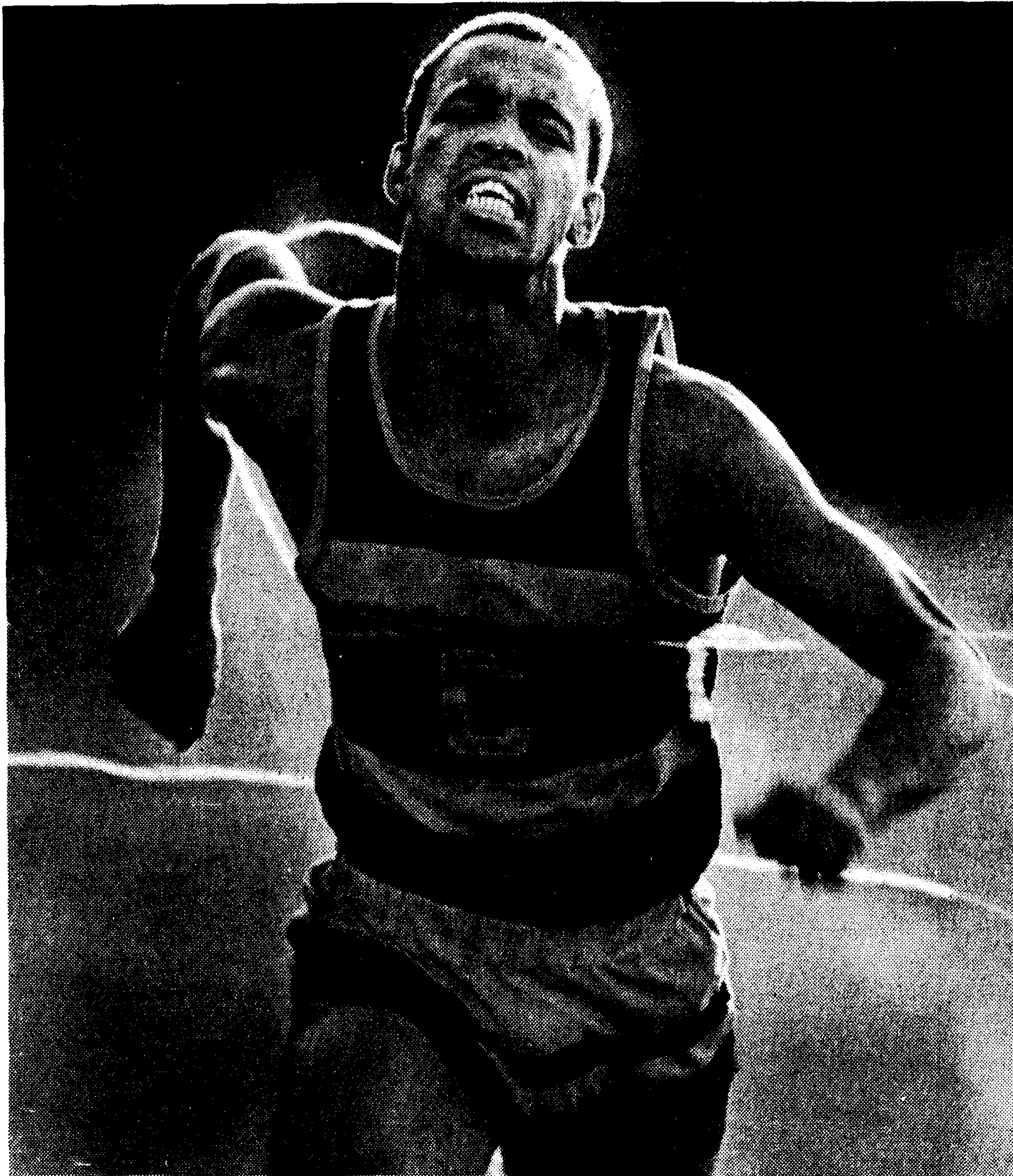
He had been living with his mother in the Creston district. But when he learned about a business law course offered at Ottawa, he inquired about a switch. Since an equivalent course was not offered at Creston, school officials authorized the move.

Because Beard is 18, he can retain his athletic eligibility if he moves away from his mother and into a residence in Ottawa's district. He fulfilled that requirement and enrolled at Ottawa.

Beard said three sisters and one brother attended Ottawa. He went to Creston because of redistricting which put the family home inside Creston's boundaries.

"If I would have stayed at Creston," he said, "I would be the only one in my family to graduate from there."

Dispelling allegations that Beard changed schools because of track, Ottawa principal Jim Steeby said Beard



Press Photo by FRED BARNES

Elza Beard, the undisputed area sprint king over the last two years while at Creston High, has dedicated himself to breaking Mike Ball's eight-year-old records in the 100- and 220-yard dashes.

was committed to Ottawa before school officials could check on his athletic eligibility.

"I'm not going to kid you," Steebe said. "I think he hoped he would be eligible. But that's a fact."

"I'm on record with our coaches — we're not going to recruit. But whenever you get a kid like this in school, eyebrows will be raised. As far as I'm concerned, it was all above the board."

Creston officials agreed.

"I was a little surprised, but when my principal called me up and told me the circumstances, I totally agreed with him," said athletic director Ted Nicolette. "Our main responsibility is that of the youngster academically. If this course at Ottawa is going to benefit him, I'm all for it."

By moving, Beard turned an already strong Ottawa sprint corps into one of the finest in the state. He joins Gene Sims, City League runner-up in the 100 and 220, and versatile speedster Chuck Ruffin, who is bound for Western Michigan University on a football scholarship.

"It makes things a little easier when you're putting together your sprint groups," joked Damont Johnson, Ottawa's sprinters coach.

"I think we can contend for state," Beard said. "Not too many relay teams from around here have done anything for awhile. This is definitely a year when we might

do something. We might make a name for this side of the state."

Sims and Ruffin seem adjusted to the fact that they are no longer the fastest men on the team. They and the rest of the Indians have laid down the welcome mat for Beard.

"They make me feel like I've been there the three years I've been running," Beard said. "(And) they're real good coaches. They've got me on the weights — something I've never done before in a program."

"They (the athletes) show they want to win by the way they work. The attitude's a lot different than a lot of the athletes over at Creston. We used to have a big problem with the younger runners. But these guys want to learn. They listen."

Assistant Coach Johnson said Beard's injured hamstring is "over 90 percent" healthy, thanks in part to a weightlifting program. Beard expressed confidence that the leg would be set when Ottawa opens its City League season next Thursday against Christian.

"It's real strong, a lot stronger than it was," he said. "I found out what my problem was. I had a muscle development problem. I overdeveloped my quads (quadriceps), and my hamstring popped. Not it's a more even development of muscles."

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