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# Hansen's Hundred, No. 17: Michael Bates ran in Olympics, played in Pro Bowls

**GREG HANSEN** Arizona Daily Star Aug 13, 2021 Updated Aug 21, 2021



Michael Bates, center, gives a grin to former UA football teammate James Bullock at the finish line when both were competing in the 1993 Willie Williams Classic.

Linda Seeger, Arizona Daily Star, 1993

## **Bates an Olympian, Pro Bowler**

On college football letter- of-intent day in 1989, I wasn't much different than most Tucsonans. I was eager to find out what team Amphitheater High School running back Michael Bates had chosen.

Bates was, to this day, the most highly ranked high school football player in Tucson history. He was also the fastest high school sprinter in America. He narrowed his choices to UCLA, USC, Arizona and ASU and given his quiet nature, he leaked the news to no one outside his family.

Arizona coach Dick Tomey was so unsettled that he said he took a sleeping pill that night, even though his defensive line coach, Arnold Jeter, had an 8 a.m. appointment to meet Michael and his mother, Linda, at their home near Amphi.

I arrived at the Star newsroom before 8, and all five light buttons on the old landline were lit when I sat at my desk.

One of the calls was from Senator John McCain.

'Did Michael Bates choose Arizona?' he asked.

Bates did choose the Wildcats. The Arizona Gatorade Player of the Year, a first-team Parade All-American, had gained 3,803 yards rushing in his Amphi career, despite often sitting out much of the second half when Vern Friedli's powerhouse clubs crushed one opponent after another.

Yet Bates, No. 17 on our list of Tucson's Top 100 Sports Figures of the last 100 years, did not prosper as a Wildcat football player. In one of the few head-shaking moves of Tomey's remarkable career, he turned Bates into a receiver and kick returner. Bates only carried the ball 79 times in two seasons before choosing to concentrate on the 1992 Olympics.

It was probably the best decision of Bates' athletic career.

He won a bronze medal in the 200 meters at Barcelona, finishing ahead of the legendary Carl Lewis. Bates became a two-time Pac-10 champion in the 100 meters, 200 meters and 4x100 relay, and put football on pause.

I went to one of Bates' workouts in the fall of 1991 — a track workout at Drachman Stadium with UA coach Fred Harvey — and he explained that he didn't leave Arizona's football team out of bitterness, but because he believed his track potential was untapped.

'Not being all banged up and bruised during football season helps a lot,' he said. 'I lost a lot of speed by never having a fall training season.'

Bates probably would've been a favorite to be a world champion 200-meter runner had he chosen to train for the 1996 Atlanta Olympics, but instead made himself eligible for the 1992 NFL draft. The Seattle Seahawks selected him in the sixth round.

Tomey endorsed Bates' football credentials by saying: 'Michael is the toughest fast guy I've ever coached.'

By the time Bates' 12-year NFL career ended, he played in five Pro Bowls and was selected to the NFL's 1990s All-Decade team. He became one of the leading kickoff returners in NFL history, returning five kicks for touchdowns. More than that, he was a feared special teams defensive player.

In one season, Bates made 21 solo tackles on kickoffs, a league high. He played for Dallas, Cleveland, Carolina, Seattle and the New York Jets before retiring in 2004.

Bates returned to Tucson when his NFL career ended, and still has strong interest in UA football. He showed up for one of Jedd Fisch's spring practices this year. When Rich Rodriguez was hired in 2012, Bates attended the press conference at McKale Center.

I saw Bates on both occasions. Given his reserved nature, he remained in the crowd and did not introduce himself to either Fisch or Rich Rod.

The son of a single mother and her four children — Linda Bates supported her three football- playing sons, Marion, Michael and Mario — by working at Sears, as a dispatcher for a construction company. Marion, who signed with USC, ultimately did not play college football. Mario, an all-Pac-10 tailback at ASU, gained 3,048 yards as an NFL running back over seven seasons.

While at Amphi where he set the state record in the 100 and 200 meters, Michael Bates impressed his coach, Raul Nido, with much more than speed and athleticism.

'Michael is charismatic,' Nido told the Star. 'He's considerate, unselfish and sensitive to other's feelings. He's the kind of young man I describe as having 'it.'"



Michael Bates played 12 years in the NFL, serving as a special teams ace.

George Widman, Associated Press 2001

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USA's Michael Bates of Dallas, Texas, left, places second in his heat of the men's 200-meter semi-finals in 20.39 seconds at the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona. Great Britain's Marcus Adam, right, finished fourth with a time of 20.63.

**DENIS PAQUIN, ASSOCIATED PRESS**