Lewis says Olympic racial problem not as bad as we're made to believe

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LEWIS SAYS OLYMPIC RACIAL PROBLEM
NOT AS BAD AS WE'RE MADE TO BELIEVE

MISSOULA—

"I think the press has built a mountain out of a molehill regarding so-called problems with our Negro Olympic athletes."

University of Montana track coach Harley Lewis made this remark after returning to Missoula recently following a 12-week coaching stint at South Lake Tahoe, Calif., site of the U.S. Olympic Track and Field training camp.

"I had the opportunity to work and talk with many of our Negro athletes at the camp, and I was tremendously impressed with their general attitude, their loyalty, their desire to succeed and their desire to compete for the United States," Lewis commented.

The UM coach went on to say that he thinks many of the Negro athletes have been "unnecessarily exploited" by media people interested in keeping a good news source going.

"If people would just let this thing rest, I think any problems that do exist would die out," he said. "I think the Negro athletes want to forget about this business as much as anybody else. Some people are simply working to create a problem where one doesn't really exist."

As chief weight coach for the training program, which ended with the final selection of the U.S. team which will compete at Mexico City this fall, Lewis worked mainly with those competing in the shot put, discus throw, javelin throw and hammer throw.

"Our main objective was to find the top three performers in the nation in each event who are capable of best adjusting to the extra stress brought about by higher altitude," Lewis said.

Altitude is expected to be a factor at the Mexico City Olympics. The track there rests

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at 7,350 feet above sea level, while the one used for training at South Lake Tahoe is at 7,377 feet. Higher altitude brings thinner air, and creates some conditioning problems for athletes accustomed to training at altitudes closer to sea level.

"There is a certain amount of depression which shows up in athletes at high altitude after about one week to nine days," he said. "The athletes, and everybody else for that matter, begin to feel sluggish."

He said that the first reaction at the camp was to leave the weight men out of the program, but those coaches that had worked at special high altitude testing facilities in 1967, including Lewis, recommended that these people stay, and they won out.

"Weight people were definitely affected by the change in altitude, just like the runners," Lewis said. "They weren't able to perform the same amounts of work, and at first they had to rest from 30 to 45 minutes longer than usual between workouts. With time, they adjusted to the change."

Lewis said this was the first national training camp for a United States team. Other countries have been doing this for many years. The camp began with the top 10 athletes in each event competing.

"This type of camp can't help but be to our advantage," Lewis said. "We found that even those that didn't make the final squad showed at least some improvement there."

Lewis called the experience "tremendously educational." He said the opportunity to work with athletes like Randy Matson and Jay Silvester brought experience that couldn't be gleaned from many, many years of coaching.

"By working with some of the world's best athletes, a coach can learn many small, but important, things that can only help him at his own school," Lewis said. Apparently, the athletes themselves came away from the site knowing that the benefits were great.

"Most of them said they would like to meet each year for from one to two weeks to discuss any problems they might have in their respective events," Lewis said. "They want the chance to work with different coaches of their choice each year."

Lewis said the whole affair was a unique experience. The facilities and setting at South Lake Tahoe, plus the attitude of the athletes, set the stage for the success of the entire program, he said.

"This was by far the most dedicated group of athletes I've ever been associated with," Lewis said. "It was amazing just how much work they could do."