

# Black Americans in Olympic History

Once again, the sports spotlight, indeed the international focus, turns to the Olympics, with the 1984 renewal of the celebrated quadrennial sports spectacular scheduled for Los Angeles, in July and August, marking the second time in history that the Big Games have been held on American soil.

An Olympic Year is a time for celebration, but it also is time for reflection and reassessment; a time to look back and review our progress, troubles, and triumphs of the past, and a time to contemplate on the uncharted future as we seek new triumphs and new achievements in world class competition.



Few persons are around who remember the colorful and impressive opening ceremony in Los Angeles in 1932 as the great white-robed chorus sang the stirring strains of "The Star Spangled Banner" and a dazzling stream of Olympic athletes from around the world debouched from a tunnel and spread over the green turf of the big bowl while spectators cheered themselves hoarse. Vice President Charles Curtis read the Olympic oath and cited the spirit of the Olympics and the Big Games were under way.

The Olympics in 1932 were staged in the immediate wake of the stock market crash as the nation struggled to recover from the worse economic depression in its history. It, too, was a time when disaster, labor problems, joblessness, and irrational behavior patterns among the rich and the poor dominated the news. It also was a time in United States history when segregation reigned in grand style unashamedly and, in some states, legally. It was in that atmosphere that the first Black to win an Olympic championship on American soil broke into history. He was Eddie Tolan, who captured gold medals in both Olympic sprints, the 100 and 200 meters.

Trials and triumphs have marked the remarkable and historic participation of Black men and women athletes down through Olympic history since George C. Poage won bronze medals at the 1904 Olympics in the 200 and 400 meter hurdles.

Winning a gold medal in the Olympic Games is the highest award an amateur athlete can obtain. Winning that gold medal is not easy. It climaxes years of preparation and preliminary contests prior to the one big event which comes every four years.

Hundreds of gold medals have been won in many different events. To some winners, winning the Olympics marks the start of a new career as a professional where the rewards are riches and more fame. This has happened to some Black athletes who were gold medal winners, mainly in one athletic event—boxing. Others have returned to their earlier pursuits, seeking degrees in the schools they previously attended or following a previously-sought profession, and still others, applauded by their peers for their accomplishments, found rich rewards in business.

Many Blacks have competed in events that have no future professionally, and once the Olympics end, numerous Black winners wind up with gold

medals and gold memories. They simply fade from the picture when the headlines fade.

In this article, we have tried to locate some of the Olympic champions, especially the gold medal winners; to find out how the Olympic movement helped or hurt their endeavors, and whether or not the Olympics helped them down a path of achievement and success. To some, it has been a lodestar; to others it has been a series of problems, but generally there have been gains for most in the post-Olympic period.



Jesse Owens of Ohio State and Ralph Metcalfe of Marquette U. Stellar performers at the 1932 and 1936 games.

The incomparable Jesse Owens who shocked Adolph Hitler with his astounding victories, never made the fortune less famous Olympian winners made, but posthumously he gained respect in the Alabama town in which he was born when citizens erected a monument honoring Jesse as its most prominent citizen. And even in that instance, Jesse Owens had troubles as a political battle developed over where the monument honoring him should be located. Some of the old southern-spirited citizens opposed the location of the Owens monument on city hall property in Oakville, Alabama.

This was ironic because the name of Jesse Owens is hammered deep in bronze, embedded in the stone Marathon Gate of the Berlin Stadium, and it appears there more often, even than that of Hitler. The feats of Owens were almost without parallel in Olympic history.

Certainly no individual ever so completely dominated the scene as did the great sprinter from Ohio State University. He won three individual events—100 and 200 meters and the broad jump—and ran a decisive lap on the victorious American relay team, thus taking home four first-place medals and four of the tiny potted German oak trees that the Organizing Committee had provided the winners as living memorials of their triumphs. He broke the Olympic and world record in the 100 meters, though it was disallowed because of a following wind; he set a new Olympic and world record for 200 meters around a turn; and he broad jumped over 26 feet for the first time in Olympic history—another record. And to top all that, the 400-meter relay team of which he was the anchor runner set a new Olympic and world record for the event.

Owens came home to America amid the tumult and the shouting of admirers but he never did latch on to a topflight job. He ran in exhibition races, spoke at clinics; served as salesman for sporting good outlets and helped sell Olympic coins, but the real gold—the spending kind—never got into his hands as it had for many Olympic winners.

The late Ralph Metcalfe, one of a galaxy of stars who were on the same Olympic team with Jesse Owens, twice finished second in the Olympics, behind Eddie Tolan in Los Angeles in 1932 and behind Owens in Berlin in 1936. Metcalfe, who won a gold medal as a member of the victorious relay team in 1936, became a congressman from Chicago.

One of the standout Olympic double winners who is still connected with the Olympic movement is Marvin G. (Mal) Whitfield, who since 1964 has served as a regional youth and sports officer working in Africa for the U.S. Information Agency. Last spring, Whitfield returned to the United States for a special ceremony at the Jesse Owens Track and Field Classic held at Ohio State annually. Mal was inducted into the Ohio Track and Field Hall of Fame at the ceremony.

Whitfield won two Olympic gold medals (800-meter run and 1600-meter relay) in Helsinki in 1952. A middle-distance runner on both indoor and outdoor tracks, Whitfield broke 18 world records during his racing career. A native of California, Whitfield also attended Los Angeles State College.

During his 20-year career with USIA, Whitfield has trained young athletes throughout Africa, promoted U.S.-African sports exchanges, and sought recognition of outstanding African athletes and programs—imparting at the same time a positive image of American sportsmanship and athletic prowess. Even in those countries without close ties to the United States,

## The Champion Jumpers



Jesse Owens  
1936 Olympic Gold



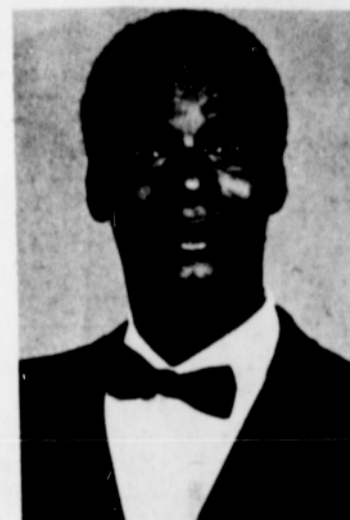
Willie Steele  
1948 Olympic Gold



Greg Bell  
1968 Olympic Gold



Ralph Boston  
1960 Olympic Gold



Bob Beamon  
1968 Olympic Gold  
World Record holder



Arnie Robinson  
1976 Olympic Gold

