

Rafer Johnson, once the “World’s Greatest Athlete,” dies at age 86

Alan Gilman

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Rafer Johnson, the winner of the 1960 Olympic decathlon gold medal, died on December 2, 2020 in Los Angeles, California. Johnson was the African-American son of Texas farmworkers who rose to become the “World’s Greatest Athlete,” the unofficial title bestowed on the winner of the Olympic decathlon at a time when track and field stars received the adulation that today is bestowed on the professional football and basketball superstars.

The decathlon is a grueling two-day, 10-event sport that tests versatility, strength, speed and endurance that includes sprints, high hurdles, pole-vaulting, the high jump and broad jump, the javelin and discus throws, and the 1,500-meter run.

Rafer Johnson was born during the Depression, on August 18, 1934, in Hillsboro, Texas, the second of six children born to Lewis Johnson, a cotton picker and farm handyman, and Alma Gibson Johnson. After a brief move to Oklahoma, the family returned to Texas when Johnson was 3 and settled in a Dallas home with no electricity or indoor plumbing.

When he was 9, Johnson’s parents, in search of a fresh start and better opportunities for their children, moved to the California San Joaquin Valley town of Kingsburg, where most of the residents were of Swedish descent. The Johnsons were the only black family.

Johnson and his siblings would join his parents picking cotton after school, on weekends, holidays and all summer. Johnson believed the hard work not only made him strong, but gave him discipline that would later help make him a successful athlete. He wrote in his 1998 autobiography, “Thinking about picking cotton brings tears to my eyes to this day, just from remembering how hard my parents had to toil to earn a meager living.”

Johnson was a four-sport star in high school, lettering in football, baseball, basketball and his favorite, track and field. “There was something pure and innocent about the sport: You ran, you jumped, you threw things, just as young men had done since the dawn of civilization,” he wrote in his autobiography.

Johnson received numerous college athletic scholarships and chose UCLA, in part because its alumni included Jackie Robinson, who broke the racial barrier in Major League Baseball, and Ralph Bunche, the first black American to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At UCLA, Johnson played basketball for legendary coach John Wooden, but excelled in track and field in the decathlon. He was also elected student body president, a position that brought him “a pile of hate mail,” he recalled, with one letter asking, “Who do you think you are, black boy?”

Johnson’s fast ascendancy as a decathlete drew national attention. He won the Pan American Games in 1955, earning a spot on “The Ed Sullivan Show.” He then broke the world record for the decathlon, establishing himself as the favorite for the 1956 Olympics. But a knee injury and torn stomach muscle hampered Johnson and he finished second at the Games in Melbourne, Australia, a bitter disappointment.

In 1958, with Cold War tensions at their height, much of the world’s attention was drawn to the first US-USSR track meet, to be held in Moscow. In the spotlight was the battle to be the World’s Greatest Athlete between Johnson and Vasili Kuznetsov, who held the world record then.

This competition was promoted in the US as a battle between communism and the free world, a role that made Johnson uncomfortable. “I was fully aware of the irony that a black man was an emissary of a nation where discrimination raged and racists got away with

lynchings,” he said. “I found myself affected by the political overtones despite my efforts to ignore them.”

In the end, Johnson turned in his best decathlon yet, beating Kuznetsov and again breaking the world record. When it was all done, the Soviet crowd rushed the field, and Johnson thought they were going to attack him. Instead, they raised him on their shoulders and shouted his name.

It was this cold war background that galvanized the public’s attention on the 1960 Rome Olympics. This was the first Olympics to be televised in the United States and Johnson was to be prominently featured as one of the world’s great athletes and the favorite to win the gold medal in the decathlon.

David Maraniss, who wrote *Rome 1960: The Olympics That Changed the World*, described how Johnson was used not simply as an athlete but unwittingly to a degree as a valuable propaganda tool against the Soviets. “His performance in New York, along with his stature as the gold medal favorite in the decathlon, convinced the officials that Johnson should be the U.S. captain in Rome and the first black athlete to carry the U.S. flag at an Olympic opening ceremonies. There could be no more valuable figure in the propaganda war with the Soviet Union, which wasted no opportunity to denounce the racial inequities of the United States.”

Johnson went on to win the decathlon in dramatic fashion by narrowly beating his UCLA teammate, C.K. Yang, who was representing Taiwan.

The 1960 Rome Olympics also served as a platform for the emergence of a number of other African-American athletes on a national and world stage. These included gold medals won by Muhammad Ali, then known as Cassius Clay, in boxing, Wilma Rudolph, who won three golds in track and field, and Oscar Robertson in basketball, among others. The media and the US government promoted these athletes and their gold medal accomplishments in an attempt to demonstrate that racial discrimination was an issue of the past.

Within six years, however, Muhammad Ali was being prosecuted for refusing the draft and denied the right to box for almost four years. Johnson, however, retired from athletics and subsequently embarked on a film and television career as well as a sportscaster.

At an awards dinner in 1961, Johnson met Robert Kennedy, then the US attorney general. Johnson thereafter began a close political and personal relationship with the Kennedy family and became an active supporter of the Democratic Party.

When Robert Kennedy announced his run for president in 1968, Johnson joined his campaign, addressing rallies, speaking at news conferences and meeting with voters. He would often accompany Kennedy at many of his campaign events and was with Kennedy in Los Angeles on the night of June 5, 1968, when Kennedy was shot to death after giving a victory speech for winning the California primary. Johnson managed to grab the gun from the gunman preventing others from being shot.

Kennedy’s assassination left Johnson traumatized and depressed. He later redirected his efforts by helping launch the California Special Olympics, the athletics event for disabled children that was begun by the Kennedy family. It was a cause he remained involved in the rest of his life. From 1983-92, he was president of the Special Olympics Southern California. He also had a long career at Continental Telephone, serving as vice president of personnel.

In 1984, Johnson was given the prestigious honor of lighting the Olympic Flame during the opening ceremonies of the summer Olympics in Los Angeles. In 1998, he was named one of ESPN’s 100 Greatest North American Athletes of the 20th Century and in 2006, the NCAA named him one of the 100 Most Influential Student Athletes of the past 100 years.



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