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Staying on Track

Willie Williams - Illinois Track

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As a youngster growing up in Gary, Ind., Willie Williams idolized the accomplishments of Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals in front of Adolf Hitler during the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany. One of those gold was a world record time of 10.2 in the 100.

"I never actually met him firsthand," says Williams, 77, who is now retired and living in Urbana, Ill. "But one day our coach at Roosevelt High School brought him in to meet us. That really changed things for me. I was overwhelmed and went home and told my mother that some day I was going to do something like he had done."

Little did Williams realize at the time, but 20 years later he would be walking into the same stadium in West Berlin and staring at a plaque honoring his boyhood hero. He was about to step on the same track Owens had dominated.

But to get to that moment, Williams had to rise out of the Delaney Projects, across the street from Roosevelt.

His first test on the track would result in a hurdles victory during a grade school meet hosted by the Gary Post-Tribune. From there, his star rose quickly. As a football player at Roosevelt, he was honorable mention all-state. On the track, he was second in the state in the 200-yard low hurdles as a junior and came back to win both the hurdles and 100 as a senior.

"I really enjoyed my days playing football," he says. "We weren't allowed to play any white schools until I was a senior. I remember we had to take one trip to East St. Louis (Ill.) and we won the game when I ran back a kickoff 80 yards for a touchdown. Those people were really upset and tried to turn our bus over when we were leaving."

Williams came to the University of Illinois just when the Fighting Illini began their four-year dynasty on the wooden oval and the cinders. Although freshmen were not allowed to compete in the varsity lineup at the time, Illinois won all four indoor and outdoor titles between 1951 and Williams' graduation in 1954.

Williams made a quick impact when he joined the varsity. He wound up claiming Big Ten indoor titles in the 60-yard dash (1953-54) and 70-yard hurdles (1952-53). Outdoors, he won all three titles in the 220 and two in the 100 (1953-54). A three-time All-American, the Illini sprint standout won national titles in the 100 in both 1953 and '54.

But his love for football nearly wiped out his 1953 season.

"The coaches back then all had to teach classes," Williams says. "One of the football assistants, Ralph Fletcher, was my physical education instructor in the spring of '52. For the last two weeks of class, they put us in pads and we scrimmaged. I was only 154 pounds at the time, but I ran for four touchdowns and they told me to come out for the team.

"Ten days before the season opener, we were scrimmaging and I ducked everyone and then cut around the end where Pete Palmer hit me and broke my leg. My track coach, Leo Johnson, was also on the football staff and he told me there would be no more football for me."

Williams spent the next six weeks in a cast. And when the cast was removed, he began his own unique strengthening program.

"I just started jumping on my leg 150 times a day to make it stronger," he says.

His time at Illinois didn't come without racial indifference. On a trip to an invitational in Indiana, the team stopped at a restaurant and the black athletes were refused service. Johnson ordered the team back on the bus and headed back to Champaign.

When the team was invited to an invitational in New Orleans, meet officials made it known the meet was only open to white athletes. Johnson decided to split the squad and send the black athletes to participate in a meet in Prairie View, Texas, where Williams won the 100.

"Even in Champaign, there were certain barber shops we couldn't go into for a haircut," Williams says.

Williams' determination was never more evident than at the Drake Relays in 1953. During a workout for the 4x200 relay, the incoming runner came in too tight on Williams and his spikes ripped through one of his calves.

"That cut was right down to the ligament," he says. "The doctor told me there was no way I was going to compete. But I finally convinced them to



Illinois' Willie Williams has spent a lifetime contributing on the track.

wrap it up, let me try the 100 and then see how it looked for the relay.

"I won the 100 and probably split some of the stitches, but they let me run on the relay and we took second. We came back the following year and won that relay."

Williams made two attempts, 1952 and 1956, at trying out for the U.S. Olympic team.

"I wasn't aware that the '52 Games were in Helsinki until the night before the finals," he says. "I was scared to go to Helsinki. Even though I had beat all those guys before, I didn't put forth my best effort and finished something like fourth or fifth."

The 1956 tryout in Los Angeles was a different story. Williams had joined the Army after receiving his bachelor's degree in physical education and had been working in special services so he could continue his training in track.

"I knew the Army wanted me to make the Olympic team, but I didn't have a track to train on," he says. "I had to work out on my own three times a day without a coach."

Williams ran the lead leg on the 400-meter relay team that set a record at the Pan-American Games in Mexico in 1955. He also broke the Pan American record with a time of 10.3 in the 100-meter semifinals. But when he reported to Los Angeles, his lack of training caused problems.

"My legs were cramping up and I was constantly icing them down," he says. "I won my heat and the semifinal, but in the finals, I was leading until the final 20 meters, when my calves gave out."

Despite the setback, the Army continued to send Williams to meets overseas. One of those meets was the International Military Track Meet in West Berlin in August of 1956. Not only was it the same track where Owens had made his claim to fame, but Williams would also be facing Ira Murchison, who had qualified for the Olympic team.

Although fighting stomach problems most of the week, Williams was clocked in 10.1 in his heat, eclipsing Owens' 20-year world record by one-tenth of a second. Murchison matched that mark in the semifinals, setting the stage for a big showdown in the finals, where Williams again hit 10.1 to Murchison's 10.2.

"Aug. 3, 1956, I'll never forget that day," Williams says. "That was so much fun. He (Murchison) got off to a quick start, but I got him in the final 10 meters."

Coincidentally, Owens and Williams share the same Sept. 12 birthday. Owens, who died in 1980, was born in 1913 and Williams was born in 1931.

After his discharge from the Army at the end of the year, Williams spent a year working as an athletic director at Ogden Park in Chicago through a program run by Owens. He then returned to Gary to teach elementary school while coaching football, basketball, baseball and track. He eventually became head track coach at West Side High School, where he led the team to five state titles in 11 years.

In 1982, Williams answered the call to return to the University of Illinois to coach sprints, hurdles and sprint relays.

"When I returned I told them we were going to wipe every sprint, hurdle and relay record off the books," he says. "The records were gone in two years and we won six straight titles (indoor and outdoor) from 1987 to '89."

In the summer of 1988, Williams was called down to Georgia, where the Saudi Arabia track team was training. By the time the team was ready to head to Seoul, South Korea, he was asked to accompany them as a coach.

"Although they didn't do well, it was a great experience helping those runners," he says. "They were very generous with me and they wanted me to move to Saudi Arabia. They were willing to buy my house in Urbana and build me one by a lake in Saudi Arabia. I had to turn them down."

Named associate head coach in 1997, Williams remained at Illinois until his retirement in 2000. He wound up coaching 10 All-Americans and 29 Big Ten individual champions during his 18 seasons back in Champaign.


Williams also introduced some new training methods to the Illini. Instead of working on squats in the weight room, he designed a sled on four wheels with a unique braking system for the runners to pull. Those sleds were equipped with old inner tubes carrying 25 pounds of sand.

From that point, he eventually replaced the wheels with metal bars so the sleds could be pulled on the surface of the track and grass as well. It was something that also caught on with the football team. Then Williams designed an ankle-flex strap, which essentially kept a sprinter's foot from flying too far back and eliminated ground resistance at the front of the foot.

To date, Williams has been elected to the Indiana Track and Field Hall of Fame and the Gary Track and Field Hall of Fame. He still hopes to be recognized by the National Track and Field Hall of Fame.

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