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Willye B. White

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Willye B. White



Five-time Olympic Games contender, Willie Bertha White was born on January 1, 1939, in the small town of Money, Mississippi. Raised by her maternal grandparents, White spent summers helping in the cotton fields, as her grandfather instilled in her that she did have choices in life. She recalled him saying, “Unless [you] made something of yourself, the cotton fields would be [your] future” (as cited in Haag, 2020). This became her motivation, and she began focusing on her athletic abilities. During grade school, her love of sports and competition led many to mistakenly believe she was a boy. As a result, she changed her name from “Willie” to “Willye” because it sounded more feminine with the y-spelling.

White joined the basketball team in fifth grade and showed enough talent to win a spot on the varsity team despite her young age. Remembering what her grandfather had said, White eagerly accepted the opportunity, as she realized that through sports, she could escape the fate of a Mississippi life. “Athletics was my flight to freedom... freedom from prejudice, freedom from illiteracy, freedom from bias. It was my acceptance in the world,” she explained in *Runner’s World* (as cited in Litsky, 2007).

Track and field became her competitive sport in 1950. Like with basketball, White outpaced high-school students, which earned her a spot on the varsity team at Broad Street High School in Greenwood, Mississippi. She led her high-school team to many victories by participating in the 50-yard dash, the 50-yard hurdles, the 75-yard dash, and the running broad jump. She would soon be known as the “one-girl track team.” Even a famous schoolmate, actor Morgan Freeman, stayed away from track because of White’s running skills. Freeman commented to long jump legend Ralph Boston: “If he had run track, he knew he’d have to run against Willye B. White, and he didn’t want to lose to a girl” (as cited in Cleveland, 2019).

In 1956, White attended Tennessee State University's track-and-field summer program under the direction of Coach Ed Temple, and with the Tigerbelles, she competed in the national Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) competition where she set a new American record in the girls’ broad jump at 18’6”. Such an impressive score allowed her to travel to Washington, D.C. and qualify for the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia. At age sixteen, White won a silver medal for the long jump in her first Olympic appearance, with a mark of 19 feet 11.5 inches. This would be the first medal for an American woman in the long jump and was also a new national women's record.

After a remarkable summer, White earned a spot as a Tennessee State Tigerbelle and continued to spend summers with the team competing in national competitions until she graduated high school in 1959. She qualified in her second Olympic trials and competed in the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Unfortunately, White placed sixteenth in her performance and later admitted that she was overtrained and overconfident. Frustrated and disappointed, White left Tennessee State before finishing her education and moved to Chicago. White joined the Richard J. Daley Youth Foundation to continue her track training. White traveled with the U.S. national track team to the European circuit in 1961. She placed a mark of 21 feet and 3/4 inches, becoming the first American to jump more than 21 feet. White and her teammates, including Wilma Rudolph, gold-medal Olympic athlete and former TSU track mate, also set a record for the 400-meter relay with a time of 44.3 seconds.

Upon returning from Europe, White married in 1961, but would later divorce in 1964. She started her working career as a practical nurse, while continuing to train after work and on the weekends. Despite the far from best training schedule, White set a new American record with a broad jump of 21'6" in competition with the Soviets in 1964 and qualified for her third U.S. Olympic team in Tokyo, Japan. Although she did not place in the long jump, she won a silver medal in the 4x100-meter relay. During the following year, White became the first American to win the prestigious UNESCO Pierre de Coubertin International Fair Play Trophy, one of the highest international honors awarded for sportsmanship.

White continued competing in national and international competitions and qualified for both the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, Mexico and the 1972 Games in Munich, Germany, which marked her fifth Olympic appearance. She was striving to participate in 1976 Olympic Games but was forced to abandon the effort due to an injury. Although this would end her athletic participant career, White would become a track and field representative on the U.S. Olympic Committee three years later. She also served as a coach at the 1981 World Cup Track and Field Championship Games in Brussels and Rome, and as head coach for the 1994 Olympic Sports Festival.

Following her athletic career, White earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in public health administration from Chicago State University in 1976 and continued to work as a health administrator until 1991. Understanding the power of sports among young people, she became the director of recreational services in the Chicago Park District. She established the Willye White Foundation and sponsored the Robert Taylor Girls Athletic Program, which offered free sports activities to the children of the Robert Taylor Homes, the U.S.'s largest public-housing project located on Chicago's South Side.

White dedicated the rest of her life to Chicago youth and became a hero among the younger generation of female athletes. On February 6, 2007, sixty-seven-year-old White died after a battle with pancreatic cancer. However, her legacy lives on through remembrance and recognition. Over the course of her 27 years of athleticism, White competed in 150 countries as a member of 35 international teams. She has been inducted to 11 hall of fames, including International Women's Sports, the National Track and Field, and Black Sports. *Sport's Illustrated* named her one of the 100 greatest athletics of the 20th century and in 2002, *Ebony* named her one of the ten greatest black female athletes. In 2008, the Chicago Park District

constructed a new field house in Gale School Park and renamed the entire site in her honor—
Willye B. White Park.



Further Reading

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