

## MILT CAMPBELL, 78, PASSES AWAY

### First African-American Champion

Milt Campbell, at age 78 the oldest living Olympic decathlon champion, passed away at his home in Gainesville, GA. His death is being mourned by the worldwide decathlon community. The first African-American to win the Olympic decathlon title, Campbell was an active participant in both of the event's recent 100<sup>th</sup> year celebrations, in Eugene, Oregon and Marburg, Germany. He was an active, even eager contributor to the VISA "Gold Medal" decathlon program of the 1990s and his motivational talks (and poems) became legendary.

Not only did Campbell earn the title as "world's greatest athlete" by setting an Olympic decathlon record at the 1956 Melbourne Games, he was an All-American high school swimmer, spent six seasons in the National Football and Canadian Football Leagues as a running back, set a world record of 13.4 seconds (in 1957) at the 120 yard hurdles, and became a world class Judo competitor. Few athletes in history have been able to compete in the range of sports, both team and individual, as Campbell who was successful at both Olympic and professional levels.

He went on to become a motivational speaker. Linda Rusch, Campbell's partner of 13 years, said Campbell died Friday (Nov. 2) at his home in Gainesville, about 55 miles northwest of Atlanta. He had been fighting prostate cancer for a decade.



**Milt Campbell**  
**Born: Dec. 7, 1933**  
**Died: Nov. 2, 2012**

A native of Plainfield, New Jersey, Campbell was a rising high school senior track star when he won the silver medal in the decathlon at age 18 at the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki, finishing second to Bob Mathias. The Americans swept the decathlon that year with Floyd Simmons earning the bronze. Ironically, in the past few years, all three have passed away.

Four years later, Campbell won gold at the Olympic Games in Melbourne, Australia turning back world record holder and teammate Rafer Johnson.

At 6-3, 215 pounds, Campbell was an imposing athletic figure. I knew Milt well and recall watching him play tennis at age 60. I never saw anyone serve a tennis ball that hard.



**Campbell was already a world class hurdler as a Plainfield (NJ) high school athlete in 1953.**

As a prep athlete his feats ranged (according to one obituary) from thoroughly documented to borderline mythical. Former Plainfield track coach Ron Upperman said. "I've heard stories about him setting a state record in swimming and being called on (later in the day) to wrestle a heavyweight state champ and he pins the guy. These are crazy stories about a superman. He was a man among boys."

Campbell attended Indiana University and competed for the US Navy. He was drafted in 1957 by the Cleveland Browns of the National Football League, where he played one season in the same backfield as Jim Brown. Campbell then played for various teams in the Canadian Football League before ending his football career in 1964. He was one intense competitor. As a former Navy athlete he was once invited to give a pep-rally speech to the brigade of Midshipmen at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis before a football game. He reminded the Mids that, in athletics, like life, one attacks, attacks and attacks. "When you got'em by the b\_\_\_s, their hearts and minds will soon follow," he exhorted.

Campbell was inducted into the National Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1999. In 2000, the New Jersey Sportswriters Association named Campbell its New Jersey Athlete of the Century. He was universally

hailed as the state's greatest athlete. New Jersey track historian Ed Grant, who has been covering sports in the Garden State for more than 60 years, says only Renaldo Nehemiah — a Scotch Plains native who set a world record in the high hurdles and earned a Super Bowl ring with the 1984 San Francisco 49ers — was in Campbell's class as an all-around athlete.

For those statistically inclined, Milt's decathlon event PRs included: 100m- 10.5; long jump-7.33m(24-1/4); shot put- 14.76m (48-5); high jump- 1.90m(6-3); 400m- 48.8; 110m hurdles- 13.4; discus- 44.98m (147-7); pole vault- 3.66m(12-0); javelin- 57.08m(187-3); 1500m- 4:50.6.

Rusch said Campbell maintained a positive outlook despite the loss of a son to cancer as he himself fought both cancer and diabetes. In addition to Rusch, he is survived by three grown children.

Milt Campbell was both a world class character and world class athlete who was outspoken and candid on race, fame and the



**Campbell (center) races Floyd Simons (right) at the 1952 Helsinki Games decathlon.**

state of sports. At the past summer's 100<sup>th</sup> year decathlon celebrations at the US Trials in Eugene and at the Thorpe Cup in Marburg, Germany, Campbell was a crowd favorite. Appreciative of being remembered for his role in the sport, he'd tell us, "I love you all." Well, we loved you too Milt, and we'll miss you.

*Frank Zarnowski  
Hanover, NH  
Nov 4, 2012*