

THE DECATHLON ASSOCIATION

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Rafer Johnson: 1934-2020

R.I.P. RAFE

Decathlon Icon Rafer Johnson Passes

December 2, 2020. Sport icon, humanitarian, decathlon champion, gentleman, Rafer Johnson, who meant so much to so many, died today. He was 86. Michael Roth, a family friend and spokesman, confirmed the death. Rafer was ill for a long time but even knowing this day was fast approaching, the news makes it no easier to accept.

Rafer Johnson was known as the world's greatest athlete after setting three decathlon world records and winning the 1960 Rome Olympic gold in dramatic fashion...with a personal best in the 1500 meters. He won 9 of 11 career ten-eventers. One career decathlon loss came at the 1956 Olympic Games in Melbourne when teammate Milt Campbell captured the gold medal. Rafer won the silver. In typical humble fashion, he commented "I lost to a good man."

For many years Rafer was the standard by which all decathletes measured themselves. In the pantheon of decathlon greats Johnson ranked with the best. Once Daley Thompson (1980 and 1984 Olympic champion) asked me who I thought was the best decathlete of all-time. I responded "...well, its probably between you and Rafer." Caitlyn (then Bruce) Jenner, the 1976 Olympic champion, also once asked the same question. "It's probably between you and Rafer," I replied. Had other interrogations



After a long illness Rafer Johnson, the oldest living Olympic decathlon champion died today. He was 86.

come from Dan, Roman, Ashton (or even Jim Thorpe) my response would never have altered. "It's between you and Rafer."

In later years Rafer stayed close to the US decathlon scene, never missed a VISA decathlon team camp in the 1990s and was even present in 2012 the U.S. Olympic Trials at Hayward Field for Ashton Eaton's world record.

A cause of death was not given but it was well known that he had been in poor health for the past year.

Rafer Lewis Johnson was born on Aug. 18, 1934, in Hillsboro, Texas, to Lewis and Alma (Gibson) Johnson. When he was about 18 months old, his parents moved to an African-American neighborhood in Dallas,

where poverty and segregation were a way of life. The family moved to California when Rafer was a youngster and eventually settled in Kingsburg, in the farming rich San Joaquin Valley. As a prep athlete he starred in football, basketball and track.

At age 16 Johnson traveled 25 miles from his home in Kingsburg, California, to Tulare and saw Bob Mathias set a world record. Then and there Rafer concluded that he could have beaten most of the 26 contestants and decided to make the decathlon *HIS* event. It took only three years to break Mathias' world record while a freshman at UCLA.

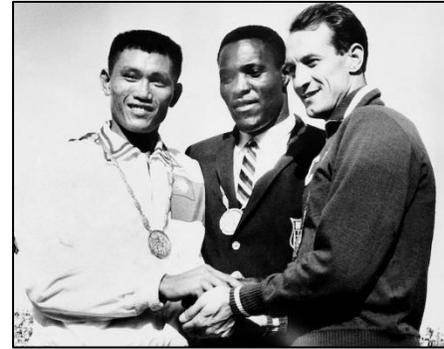


Rafer, competing at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome. Even after 60 years his personal records, especially in the throws, are world class.

He was handicapped by numerous injuries during his athletic tenure. At age 12 he caught his left foot in a cannery belt, requiring rehab and crutches. In 1959 he suffered leg trouble and a serious back injury in a head-on auto collision. Yet, after getting serious about weight-training, a year later he broke the world record at the U.S. Olympic Trials. His eye-opening 1960 results in throwing events (16.75m/54-11½, 52.50m/172-3 and 76.75m/251-9) gave credibility to weight-training. Rafer was fond of telling young decathletes that they should see any injury as an opportunity to improve weak events with alternative/creative forms of training.

Rafer enrolled at UCLA in 1954, won the 1955 Pan-American Games and the 1956 U.S. Olympic Trials. What is not well known is that he also played basketball at UCLA

1960 Rome Olympic decathlon medalists (l-r): silver-CK Yang/Formosa; gold-Johnson; bronze-Vasily Kuznetsov/USSR,



starting at guard for coach John Wooden. His classmate elected him as student body president in 1958. With UCLA training partner C.K. Yang of Taiwan (who died in 2007) and under the tutelage of Bruin coach Ducky Drake he returned the world record to America in July of that year with a win over Soviet Vasily Kuznetsov at the USA/USSR dual meet in Moscow.

Both he and Yang surpassed the world record at the 1960 AAU/Olympic Trials meet in Eugene and then rematched at the Rome Olympics where Johnson's superior strength in the throws was the margin of victory. Yang placed second with Kuznetsov third. Johnson won the 1960 Sullivan award symbolic as the top amateur athlete in the nation.

For the stat-minded, his PRs included: 10.3h 100 meters; 7.76m/25-5 ½ long jump- he made '56 Olympic team in this event also; 16.75m/54-11½ shot put; 1.89m/6-2¼ pre-flop high jump; 47.9 400 meters, 13.8h 110m hurdles at a time when only a handful of athletes ever broke 14 seconds; 52.50m/172-3 discus, 4.10m pre fiber-glass vault; 76.76m/251-9 javelin and 4:49.7 1500 meters....they all add up to 8404 points.

He became an actor and broadcaster. Beginning in 1961 he recruited volunteers for president John F. Kennedy's Peace Corps. Off the track and close to the Kennedy family, he is best remembered for his struggle to wrest the gun from the hand of Sirhan Sirhan moments after presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated at the

Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles on June 5, 1968.

For two generations Rafer Johnson was a true ambassador of sport. He served as co-founder and president of California Special Olympics. He carried the Olympic torch on its final leg during the opening ceremonies of the '84 Olympic Games. VISA National Decathlon Coach Harry Marra recently put Rafer's life into perspective. "However great his accomplishments were on the track, and they were great," said Marra, "all off that pales by comparison with what he did for others after his athletic career. What a gentleman!" Any young athlete would be well served to read his autobiography (with Philip Goldberg), *The Best That I Can Be*, New York: Doubleday, 1998, with introduction by Tom Brokaw.

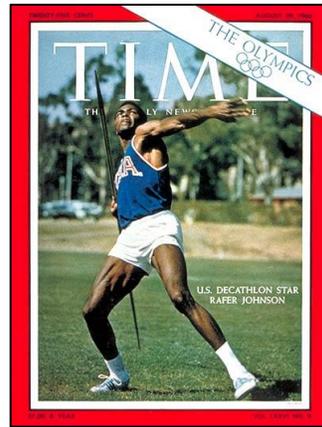
Johnson is survived by wife Elizabeth Thorsen Johnson (married in 1971) and his brother Jimmy Johnson, a former cornerback



Rafer became an Olympian again when he carried the Olympic torch on its final leg to the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1984.

For the San Francisco 49ers and a member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame; two children, Jennifer Johnson Jordan, a 2000 beach volleyball Olympian, Josh Johnson; and four grandchildren.

Frank Zarnowski
December 2, 2020



Few decathletes ever make it to the cover of Time Magazine. 1960.

Hello Again.....The USA indoor CE season, although truncated, will get underway this week and so we will begin to offer regular *DECA Newsletters* to keep you up-to-date. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting curtailment of our sport, this is our first Newsletter since June.