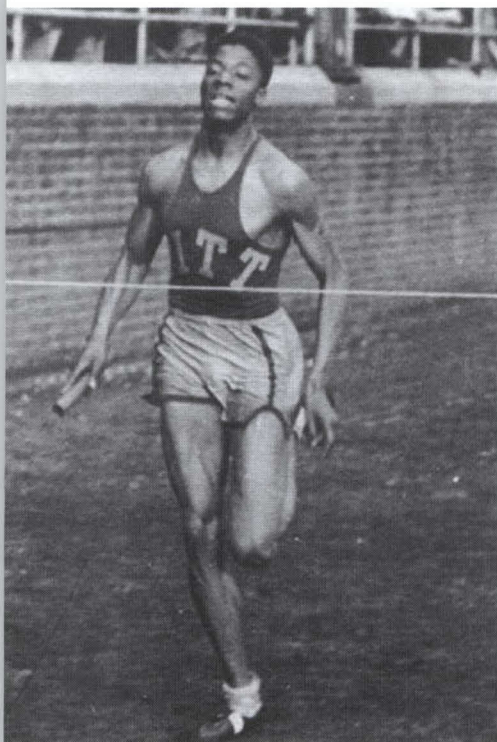


In His Own Words

1936 Olympic Gold Medalist

John Woodruff

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Courtesy of the University of Pittsburgh

John Woodruff
crosses the finish line,
University of
Pittsburgh, 1936.

Right: Woodruff at
the 1936 Olympics
medals ceremony,
Berlin, 1936.



HSMP Archives

The hundreds of artifacts comprising the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum are significant not in and of themselves, but because of the compelling, deeply-human stories that lay behind them. Oral history, the voice of the past, provides the definitive aural record of these stories – stories that collectively make the Pittsburgh region one of the most prominent sporting places in the nation. Sometimes, oral history is used to document recent events of sports history. More importantly, it captures games long past, stadiums long gone, and athletes up in age before they become lost to history. Egalitarian by its very nature, oral history also provides the rare opportunity to chronicle the lives not only of the famous, but of the unknown. Indeed, the true value of oral history is that it helps historians to document people who are not the subject of biographies or television documentaries, who largely remained out of the national media spotlight, and whose life stories, in absence of extant written records, would otherwise be lost or forgotten.

Olympic Gold medalist John Woodruff affords a case in point. Hailing from the small, Western Pennsylvania community of Connellsville, Woodruff excelled in track at Connellsville High School and, upon gradu-

ation, went to the University of Pittsburgh on an athletic scholarship. Following a stellar freshman year, Woodruff qualified for the 1936 Olympic Team and sailed for Berlin to test his athletic prowess against the world. There, Woodruff won a hotly-contested gold medal in the 800 meters, unknowingly challenging the theory of Aryan supremacy advocated by Adolf Hitler, who had predicted overwhelming victories by his nation's athletes. Though earning gold in a highly competitive field, Woodruff's story has for many years been overshadowed by that of one of his teammates – the great Jesse Owens. In Berlin, Owens won four gold medals in track and field events, shattering existing records and garnering international celebrity status. As an African American athlete, Owens, like Woodruff, also helped destroy the master race ideology of the Nazi party.

One of many individuals interviewed for the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum, Woodruff endured a politically-charged athletic climate to bring Western Pennsylvania one of its most memorable Olympic gold medals. Based on an in-depth oral history interview conducted in 2002, the following is John Woodruff's often-overlooked experiences in the 1936 Olympics – in his own words.

I earned the nickname “Long John” Woodruff from my days at Connellsville High School because I was tall and skinny. I was tall for a runner. Some members of my team, like the high jumpers, they were tall like me, but they were not runners. I had a nine foot stride. I was 6 feet 3 inches. Not any more. I’m just barely 6 feet now. I shrunk with age.

After finishing my freshman year, my coach at the University of Pittsburgh asked me to try out for the 1936 Olympic team. I was not even interested in the Olympics. In fact, I had never even heard of the Olympics. All I was interested in was going home and taking it easy for the summer – the summer of 1936. So I said, “OK. I will try out.” I tried out and I qualified at the preliminary races, the semifinals at Harvard, and the finals at Randall’s Island, New York. I qualified for the half mile, or the 800 meters, and sailed on the S.S. Manhattan to Germany.

When I was running in high school, I heard all about Jesse Owens. I also heard a lot about Ralph Metcalf from Marquette University. Owens was from Ohio State. But I really and truly did not have any idols. I finally met Jesse Owens when I ran up in West Virginia at an indoor meet. And then at the Olympic trials we got a chance to meet each other again. Of course, the team was like one big family. We got to know each other well. He was a wonderful fellow.

When leaving for Germany, we heard a lot about what Adolf Hitler was doing against the Jews, because at that time he had written a book called *Mein Kampf*. I did not read that book since I was not that concerned about politics. I was not even concerned about the Olympics until my coach brought it to my attention. We saw some telling things while we were over there. We saw the troops marching, but we did not pay any attention to that. We were only over there to do the best we could as athletes, to win as many medals as we could possibly win and come home. That was our interest, nothing else. We did not get involved in any kind of politics.

We befriended a young German athlete. He came from the village where the American athletes were lodged. We did ask him about Hitler, because we had heard so much publicity about him. Of course, they thought that he was a great guy, because he had opened up the industries over there and made it possible for the Germans to get work building up armaments. This young boy, he was very sincere, and I am guessing he was telling the truth because those things were happening for the better. They were in pretty bad shape, economically speaking.

I ran three races in Berlin. I ran the preliminary, the semifinals, and, of course, the finals. The final race was the most difficult

race. In the first two races I got right out in front. I stayed out in front and that is how I won. In the final race, I decided that I would run in second position and preserve my kick for the final drive. Well, Philip Edwards, from Canada, a black man, set the pace. He set a very slow pace for the first 400 meters. It was only 57 seconds. All the times that I ran that race, I ran at least 51 seconds. I thought I was going to use some strategy by running in second position. I did not want to take a chance on getting out in front. So, that is what I did.

We ran that first 400 meters and we hit the first turn starting the second 400 meters, or the last lap. All of the runners crowded right around me. Because I have a long stride, I could not break through. If I broke through I would foul somebody, and I would be disqualified. So what did I do? I stopped. Stopped. I let all the runners precede me. Then I came out into the third lane, and I ran all around them and won the race. They said never in the history of the Olympics have they seen a race won the way I won that one.

It was a girl who gave me the gold medal. The medals were not on the ribbons like they are today, where they put them around their neck. My medal was in a little case and they just handed it to me. And then they gave us a wreath that you put on your head. You will see some of the old pictures of me on the stand wearing the wreath. I brought that home but it dried out and just disintegrated. Well, I was not quite sure how to accept the prize, as they did not give us any instructions on how we were to do that. I was not quite sure whether to give the military salute or the American salute, but I got it together. I gave the right salute.

They also gave all the Olympic runners an oak tree, a German oak about 18 inches tall. I brought mine home. Some of the gold medalists threw them in the ocean. That tree is now in Connellsville. The high school botany teacher worked with the tree, and brought it back to where it was living. They planted it in the Carnegie Library lawn in Connellsville. That tree today is over 60 feet tall. There was a fellow from Illinois who picked up a lot of acorns from the tree and has distributed them to different places. Saplings are now growing in different places in the country. All are from the tree that I brought back.

The Olympics seem like they just happened yesterday. It really impressed me, particularly as a young athlete. The things that I saw walking in with my team in the parade and the camaraderie that I developed with my team members – I will not forget them. No you really do not forget. And although I am 86 years old, it is like it just happened yesterday. ☀