

BLACK HISTORY: OLYMPIANS

Debi Thomas

- Born March 25, 1967, in Poughkeepsie, N.Y.
- 1988 Bronze Medal, figure skating (singles)

The first Winter Olympic Games at which an African American or other person of African descent has won a medal was in 1988 at Calgary, Alberta, Canada. The winner of the bronze medal in figure skating was Californian Debi Thomas. The record reveals a fascinating and dedicated young woman.

Thomas is bright, self-confident, and determined to make her mark upon the world. She is successful both academically and athletically. Thomas attended San Mateo High School and practiced skating at Redwood City Ice Lodge. Her mother drove her 150 miles a day for four years to accomplish this. Thomas trained with transplanted Scot Alex McGowan, for 10 years. Academically she excelled and was accepted for admission to Harvard, Princeton, and Stanford universities. She chose Stanford. Asked on the application to the university to describe herself, she wrote "invincible." In winning the U.S. Championships in 1987, Debi upset two-time world champion Katarina Witt of East Germany, in addition to



Thomas

bursting into first place at the U.S. National Championships. In the latter she performed a dazzling display of jumps. However, Witt came back in 1987, while Thomas struggled with tendinitis-inflamed ankles. Living under pressure and on the edge has endowed

Debi with unusual inner strength. When conditions got tough she once considered quitting. But her mother told her, "You can quit skating...That's easy...But you can never quit life."

Thomas is the first to win a senior national championship in figure skating and the first black to win a medal in the Winter Olympics. Perhaps the most physically powerful performer ever seen in figure skating, Thomas makes spectacular vertical leaps and speed-of-light midair spins. Then, with the grace and elan of a ballerina, she lands effortlessly and completes the meld of artistry and athleticism demanded by the sport.

Thomas said, "I want to be an orthopedic surgeon, specializing in sports medicine...I want to have a training center, a huge complex with an ice rink, it will have a ballet room, a weight room and a sports medicine clinic."

Thomas designs her own routines, cuts and mixes her own music, designs and sews her own costumes, and puts together her own aerobics. Now that the Calgary Winter Olympics are a distant memory, she can now, with certainty, attain her self-professed goal of "getting on with my life."

Source: *Black Olympic Medalists, 1992*

Bob Beamon: A leap for ages

Robert Beamon

- Born August 29, 1946, in Jamaica, N.Y.
- 1968 Gold Medal: Long Jump (29ft. 2.5 inches, Olympic record)

Robert Beamon's long jump of 29 feet, 2.5 inches was the shortest field event competition in history. This long jump stunned the world. Beamon's record was considered untouchable and regarded as the greatest achievement in some 3,000 years of track.

Beamon set a national high school triple jump record in 1965 and in 1967 won the AAU long jump. He won both the AAU and NCAA indoor long jump, all in 1968. Beamon longjumped 25 feet, 2.5 inches in 1965 and set a national high school record of 50 feet, 3.75 inches in the triple jump. The next year, at 19, he improved to 25 feet, 8 inches and placed fourth and ninth in

the AAU. In 1967, he won the outdoor long jump at 26 feet, 11.5 inches. Outdoors he was third in the AAU and second in the Pan Am Games, with 26 feet, 5.75 inches. In 1968, indoors, Bob Beamon became the longest jumper in history. He won the NAIA Championships with a world indoor record of 27 feet, 1 inch. He won in the AAU at 26 feet. Outdoors, Bob jumped 27 feet, 4 inches with wind, won in the AAU at 27 feet, 4 inches, and leaped 27 feet, 6.5 inches, with a 7.1 mile per hour wind, in the final trials. Beamon moved from a neighborhood with negative peer pressure to winning an Olympic gold medal, to earning a degree in sociology and physical education from the University of Texas at El Paso, to completing a master's in psychology and counseling at San Diego State University, to becoming a track coach at two universities.

Source: *Black Olympic*



Robert Beamon's leap of 29 feet, 2.5 inches in the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City established a record that many considered unbreakable. The mark stood for 25 years.

Source: *Black Olympic Medalists, 1992*

Carl Lewis: Speed to burn



Lewis

Frederick Carlton Lewis

- Born July 1, 1961, in Birmingham, Ala.
- 1984 gold medal: 100-Meter run (9.99 seconds)
- 1984 gold medal: 200-meter run (19.8/Olympic Record)
- 1984 gold medal: long jump (28ft. 5 inches)
- 1984 gold medal: 4x100-meter relay (37.83 seconds/Olympic record/world record)
- 1988 gold medal: 100-meter run (9.92 seconds)

1988 gold medal: long jump (28ft. 7 inches)
1988 silver medal: 200-meter run (19.79 seconds/Olympic record)
1992 gold medal: 4x100-meter relay (37.40 seconds/world record)
1992 gold medal: Long Jump (28.5 feet)

Carl Lewis attended the University of Houston, where he was coached by Tom Tellez. He is a member of the Santa Monica Track Club.

Lewis was the first winner of four gold medals in a single Olympics since Jesse Owens. These four wins were all world-class performances. In addition, he has set many other records and won numerous other honors. He was named Athlete of the Year by Track & Field News in 1982, 1983, and 1984 and was first in the world in 1987 in the 200 meters (he finished behind Ben Johnson in the 100 in 1987). At the 1987 World Championships he equalled the previous world record of Calvin Smith (9.93) but was outrun by Johnson, who won with 9.83. Johnson defeated Lewis three times in 1987.

Lewis' parents were sports-oriented high school teachers. Both his father, Bill, a track coach and his mother, Evelyn, an international hurdler, encouraged their children in sports. Carl Lewis' sister,

Carol, is one of the world's leading women long jumpers, and their eldest son is a soccer coach. Carl Lewis' only coach in the long jump before college had been his mother, and still he was jumping 26 feet, 8 inches his senior year. The long jump has been his first love. Lewis actually met Jesse Owens at a school awards ceremony, and Owens gave him the same advice he himself had received, "Dedication will bring its rewards."

Lewis had two ambitions: To equal Owens' four gold medals and to become the first man to break the 30-foot barrier in the long jump. In 1988 Lewis won the 100 meters at the Olympic trials, running a wind-aided 9.78, which was the fastest 100 ever recorded. He also won the long jump with a leap of 28 feet, 9 inches. The dominant long jumper in the world over the past few years, Lewis broke the 28-foot barrier 17 times in 1987.

During the 1988 Olympics, Lewis ran an American record in the 100 of 9.92. Carl Lewis is considered to have star personality. He is loved by some fans and envied by many fellow athletes. He has great self-confidence and dedication, and is considered self-important. However, his four gold medals in 1984 and other achievements cannot be underrated. At top speed, he seems to have a gear that no one else equals.

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