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Ralph Boston

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Ralph Boston

1939–

Track and field athlete, sportscaster, business executive

Ralph Boston rose from a large family in small-town Mississippi during the era of segregation to become a world record holder and winner of Olympic gold, silver, and bronze medals in track and field. His talents and accomplishments extended beyond athletics into academic and corporate settings and led to continued success in these and other endeavors many years after the high points of his athletic career.

Ralph Harold Boston was born on May 9, 1939, in Laurel, Mississippi, the youngest of ten children born to Peter and Eulalia Boston. Peter Boston had worked as a railroad fireman on the Gulf, Mobile, and Ohio rail line, until losing his right eye in a hunting accident. As a result, he became a farmer, hauled junk, and did other odd jobs, while his wife was the homemaker and caregiver of their own large family and needy neighbors and strangers passing through their community.

One of Ralph's earliest memories was of riding with his father on a mule-drawn wagon from the Negro community to the section of Laurel where white people lived, and noticing the contrast in the quality of streets, housing, parks, and other facilities. Despite the segregated environment, Boston grew up in a warm and loving family and community. He learned the value of hard work as a young child, getting up early to go to the fields with his father before attending school, and considered his parents, brothers, and sisters as his first heroes and role models. Boston's older brother Peter was talented in several sports, which heightened Ralph's interest in athletics. Young Ralph learned to swim in a creek outside Laurel, and when the city provided the Oak Pool (for Negroes), he became a lifeguard at the facility.

Ralph Boston attended Oak Park High School in Laurel, where he began to develop his athletic talents in football, track, and other sports. He gave credit in later interviews to the dedicated teachers at his school, who also provided him with a solid academic foundation despite the separate and unequal educational resources and facilities.

Although Boston was a talented quarterback who led his team to the Negro state football championship, his high school track coach, Joseph Frye, realized early on that he had even greater potential in that sport. In both his junior and senior years, Boston was virtually a one-man track team, winning or placing in hurdling, throwing, sprinting, and jumping events as Oak Park continued its run of Negro high school track championships. He was also recognized beyond Mississippi when he set a national high school record in the 180-yard low hurdles event in 1956.

When he graduated from high school in 1957, Boston wanted the opportunity to compete with and against the best athletes, but the major institutions in his home state were closed to African

Americans as students and athletes. Coach Frye recommended a historically black college/university (HBCU), Tennessee A&I State College (now Tennessee State University) in Nashville. Jackson State College, Alcorn State College, and other HBCUs in Mississippi did not have strong track programs, while Tennessee State was well-established, particularly in women's track where several female athletes had competed and won medals in national, international, and Olympic competition. Coach Frye knew some people at the school and also was aware that several people from Laurel were in Nashville who could provide Boston with some hometown connections.

As a result, Frye contacted Ray Kemp, the men's track coach, who accepted Boston without ever seeing him practice or compete. Boston arrived in Nashville during the fall of 1957, and after a short bout of homesickness, he settled into the life of a college student-athlete. By 1959 Boston was competing for Tennessee State with great success in the Midwestern Athletic Association, which included many of the larger southern HBCUs.

Breaks World and Olympic Long Jump Records

Boston made the adjustment from small-town Mississippi to college life in a fairly large southern city, and his horizons continued to expand along with his talent. In the summer of 1959, he was invited to compete in a major track meet at Madison Square Garden in [New York](#) City, and he flew in an airplane for the first time. He also realized his dream of competing against the best athletes in his sport, regardless of race. By this time, Boston was focused on his best event, the long jump, and he continued to improve his technique, distance, and ability to compete under pressure. He came in second in [New York](#) when one of his competitors set a new indoor world record. Boston was still approached about traveling to compete in the [Middle East](#) and in the summer of 1960 made the first of many international trips.

The 1960 Olympic Games were scheduled for Rome, Italy, and Boston was prepared to do well, provided he qualified for the [United States](#) Olympic team. He succeeded in doing so at the Olympic Trials in [Palo Alto](#), California, then during a pre-Olympic competition in Pomona, California, Boston broke the world record in the long jump by leaping a distance of 26 feet, 11 and one quarter inches.

His effort eclipsed the long-standing record of African American and Olympic track legend [Jesse Owens](#), set in 1935. As a result, Boston became a national celebrity literally overnight and the favorite to win the gold medal for the [United States](#) in Rome. He won the competition with a jump of 26 feet, seven and three-fourth inches, breaking the 1936 Olympic record of Owens. Boston dedicated his gold medal to his mother and the memory of his father, who had died on January 1, 1960.

Chronology

1939

Born in Laurel, Mississippi on May 9

1956

Sets national high school record in hurdles

1960

Breaks world record and wins Olympic gold medal in long jump

1964

Wins Olympic silver medal in long jump

1968

Wins Olympic bronze medal in long jump

1975

Inducted into U.S. Track and Field Hall of Fame

1977

Inducted as first black athlete in Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame

1982

Becomes corporate executive

1985

Inducted into Olympic Hall of Fame

1996

Receives special recognition at Centennial Olympic Games in Atlanta

2001

Retires as corporate executive

Boston's victory in Rome was part of the outstanding collective accomplishment of African American athletes representing the United States, including Cassius Clay (later known as Muhammad Ali) in boxing, [Oscar Robertson](#) and Walter Bellamy in basketball, and [Rafer Johnson](#) in the decathlon. Tennessee State University (TSU) established a track and field record in 1960 that may never be surpassed by a single university in a single Olympiad. In addition to Boston, classmate [Wilma Rudolph](#) won three gold medals, and classmates Martha Hudson, Barbara Jones, and [Lucinda Williams](#) joined Rudolph to win gold for the United States in the 400 meter sprint relay race. Edward S. Temple, coach of the TSU Tigerbelles women's track team, was the coach for the U.S. women's track team.

As the best long jumper in the world, Boston received numerous honors and awards, including World Athlete of the Year in 1960 and [North America](#) Athlete of the Year in 1961. During that year he broke his own world record twice, with jumps of 27 feet, one half inch, and 27 feet, two inches. While maintaining a regimen of training, travel, and competition, in 1962 he also married the former Geneva Jackson Spencer, completed his B.S. degree in biochemistry at TSU, became the father of a son, Kenneth Todd Boston on November 9 of that year, and spent time as a medical research technician at [Mount Sinai](#) Hospital in [Los Angeles](#) until 1963. During that year Boston was also inducted into the Helms Hall of Fame in [Los Angeles](#).

After returning to Nashville later that year, Boston served as an assistant track coach at TSU and prepared to return to the Olympics, which were scheduled for Tokyo, Japan in 1964. While he

remained the number one long jumper overall, again breaking his world record twice in the same year, his main rival was Igor Ter-Ovanesyan of the [Soviet Union](#). In Tokyo both Boston and Ter-Ovanesyan were outdistanced by Lynn Davies from [Great Britain](#), and Boston took home the silver medal.

Boston broke his own world record one more time, with a jump of 27 feet, four and three-quarters inches in 1965, and he remained the top long jumper in the world and Pan American Games champion through 1967. During that year he also began playing golf and over time became quite accomplished in his new sport. In 1968 he moved to Knoxville, Tennessee, to become coordinator of minority affairs and special services at the University of Tennessee (UT), combining administrative responsibilities with preparations to return to the Olympics for a third time in [Mexico City](#), Mexico.

Despite the controversies of the 1968 games, involving a boycott of the Olympics by several top African American athletes, Boston and others chose to participate. Some used the world stage of [Mexico City](#) to demonstrate solidarity with the 1960s Black Power movement, most notably the gloved "Black Power" salute by Olympic gold and bronze medalists Tommie Smith and John Carlos during the medal presentation after their event.

While their actions resulted in dismissal from the U.S. team and the Olympic Village, Boston and the other athletes refocused on the remaining competitions. In an amazing act of sportsmanship, Boston helped his chief rival in the long jump, African American teammate Bob Beamon. This set the stage for Beamon's incredible leap of 29 feet, two and one half inches, which shattered the existing world record by almost two feet.

Boston came in third and then held the unique distinction of winning the three different medals awarded (gold, silver, and bronze) in the same event in three consecutive Olympic Games. Another TSU Olympian, Wyomia Tyus, also made history in Mexico City when she won the gold medal again in the 100 meter sprint event. Four years earlier, she and Boston were teammates on the U.S. team in Tokyo, where she won her first gold. Added to [Wilma Rudolph's](#) victory in 1960, TSU set yet another record by winning the event for the United States in three successive Olympiads.

Boston decided to end his athletic career in track and field after Mexico City and return to his position at UT in Knoxville. Additional honors, awards, recognitions, travel, speaking engagements, and other public appearances continued to be part of his schedule, along with university responsibilities, including counseling students, advising the African American Student Liberation Force (AASLF) organization, and chairing the Tony Wilson Memorial Fund at UT. The fund was established after the untimely death of Wilson, a talented student-athlete and brother of singer, [Nancy Wilson](#). Boston also conducted a behavioral study of UT African American students and developed publications for recruiting students to attend the university.

Boston's sports experience and knowledge contributed to his success as a sportscaster with Marvin Sugarman Productions, based in New York City, and later with ESPN, the [cable television](#) sports channel based in Bristol, Connecticut. Boston also served on the United States Olympic Committee from 1968 to 1972, and received the honors of being named the greatest

long jumper of the century and induction into the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in 1970. His marriage ended in divorce in 1971. As a consultant to the U.S. Olympic Team for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, West Germany, Boston was in Munich when Palestinian terrorists killed eleven Israeli athletes, another event underscoring how world politics had changed the character of the Olympics since his first experience in 1960.

In 1973 Boston was recognized as honorary speaker for the Tennessee [House of Representatives](#) and inducted into the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) Hall of Fame, followed by his 1975 induction into the U.S. Track and Field Hall of Fame. Although retired from active competition, Boston appeared on the ABC-TV "Superstars" program featuring celebrated athletes and was the winner in the senior division in 1976.

The year 1977 brought an award of great personal significance, as Boston became the first African American ever inducted into the Mississippi Sports Hall of Fame. Twenty years after graduating from all-black Oak Park High School in Laurel, he was recognized for his outstanding athletic achievements before and after the end of legal segregation in his home state. During the same year Boston also entered the business world, becoming a salesman for the Integon Insurance Company. The following year he was honored in his hometown when the City of Laurel dedicated the Ralph Boston Park, and in 1980 he was listed in *Who's Who Among Black Americans* for the first time.

Becomes Business Executive and Receives Additional Honors

In 1982 Boston became an account executive for [the South](#) Central Bell telephone company, based in their Knoxville office, thus ending his association with UT after thirteen years. During the 1982 World's Fair in the city, Boston was honored again when officials created a display, including his three Olympic medals, and the same year he was inducted into the Knoxville Sports Hall of Fame.

The following year Boston was named to the All-Time All-Star Indoor Track and Field Team, and in 1985 he received two more prestigious awards: he was inducted into the Olympic Hall of Fame and received the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Silver Anniversary Award. In 1988 Boston left South Central Bell to become a general partner at WKXT-TV, the CBS affiliate station in Knoxville. His success was tempered with the death of his mother, Eulalia Boston, at age 94 on March 14, 1991.

Boston further diversified his corporate experience when he became director of customer relations for Ericsson Inc., the telecommunications company based in Atlanta, Georgia. As a result, he moved from Knoxville to Atlanta in 1992, yet continued his relationship with WKXT until 1996. In 1993 Tennessee State University named its annual homecoming event the Ralph Boston Golf Tournament, and a spring invitational track meet was also named for Boston and his TSU teammate John Moon, who went on to become head track coach at Seton Hall University in South Orange, [New Jersey](#).

Receives Special Recognition during Atlanta Olympics

Being in Atlanta seemed fortuitous as well as convenient for Boston, as the city was the site of the 1996 Olympic Games. He participated in the Knoxville portion of the Olympic torch relay to Atlanta, and during the opening ceremonies he received the high honor of being one of the persons chosen to bring the Olympic flag into the new Olympic Stadium. Veteran NBC-TV sportscaster Dick Enberg referred to the "elegant Ralph Boston" in his commentary during the international broadcast of the Olympic Games.

Other connections to the 1960 Games were evident, as there was a tribute to Boston's fellow TSU classmate and Olympian, Wilma Rudolph, who had died in 1994. Another teammate, Muhammad Ali, was the final torch-bearer lighting the cauldron to signify the start of the Centennial Olympic Games. Overall, the Atlanta Olympic Games were successful, but they were marred by the bombing in Centennial Olympic Park. An African American woman, Alice Hawthorne, and a Turkish cameraman, Melih Uzunyol, lost their lives, and 111 others were wounded. The person responsible, Eric Rudolph, was eventually brought to justice for his actions.

Boston and other Olympic veterans could not help but reflect back on the 1972 tragedy in Munich, but they continued to hold high the Olympic ideals of sportsmanship and international brotherhood as the games concluded. The following year, Boston moved to Peachtree City, an Atlanta suburb, and left Ericsson to become president and chief executive officer of ServiceMaster Services, a company based in Stone Mountain, Georgia.

After four years with ServiceMaster, Boston opted for full retirement to enjoy the fruits of his very successful life and multiple careers. Since 2001, he has divided his time between residences and family properties in Georgia, Mississippi, and Tennessee, and participated in charitable endeavors such as the Atlanta-based Trumpet Awards, created by his friend and TSU alumna [Xernona Clayton](#) and numerous professional and celebrity golf tournaments. At reunions and other gatherings Boston has documented his family history by recording interviews on videotape and also has spent time working on his autobiography.

In retirement, Boston curtailed many of the community involvements and board affiliations he held during his working years, including the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports, healthcare and hospital systems in Georgia and Tennessee, the Boys and Girls Club, and other organizations. He continued to speak and work with young people on a volunteer basis, motivating them to achieve the same balance in mind, body, and spirit that enabled him to achieve in his life.

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Collections

The Special Collections of the Brown-Daniel Library, Tennessee State University, contain newspaper clippings, photographs, audio and videotapes, and other items related to the athletic and academic career of Ralph Boston.