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6-2020

Martha Hudson Pennyman

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Martha Hudson Pennyman

The daughter of a truck driver and a homemaker, both with limited education, Martha Hudson Pennyman was born in Eastman, Georgia, on March 21, 1939, the oldest of three children. The Hudson family moved several times between Georgia and South Carolina while her father sought employment, but eventually settled in McCrae, Georgia, where Pennyman attended Twin City Elementary and High schools. At less than five feet tall, Pennyman earned the nickname “Pee Wee” for athletic accomplishments. By the time she was 14, she had won the district championship in the 50-, 75-, and 100-meter dashes held in Fort Valley, Georgia. She played basketball (her favorite sport) for the Twin City High School team, as a guard and later, team captain. However, Robert Jackson Sr., a physical education teacher, noticed Martha’s natural running ability and encouraged her to concentrate on track. By the end of Pennyman’s freshman year, she had competed in the Tuskegee Relays where she finished third in the 100-meter. It was there she caught the attention of Edward Temple, the acclaimed track coach of the Tennessee State University Tigerbelles, and he invited her to participate in summer training clinics on campus, which she did from 1955 until 1957, as part of the first group of high schoolers to join the program. Later that summer, she set a new record in the 75-yard dash at the Pan American Games and regularly beat the running times of another incoming TSU recruit.

1 (Salisbury 2009) (Plowden 1996)
2 (Salisbury 2009) (Martha Hudson Pennyman Induction 2006)
3 (Salisbury 2009) (Martha Hudson Pennyman Induction 2006)
4 (Davis 1996)
5 (Martha Hudson Pennyman Induction 2006)
6 (Salisbury 2009)
7 (Plowden 1996)
Lucinda Williams. By attending the TSU track clinics, Pennyman gained essential skills and discipline that would make her an Amateur Athletic Union All-American, setting the girls’ record in the 50- and 100-yard dashes and noteworthy performance records in the 50- and 75-yard runs. (Plowden, 1996, p. 86).

Pennyman graduated as salutatorian of her senior class in 1957, leaving an impressive academic and athletic legacy. Her efforts resulted in a work-aid scholarship to TSU, and she began a degree in elementary education that fall. It was her teammate Mae Faggs who dubbed Pennyman “Pee Wee.” Pennyman later recalled, “My big ambition, was to beat Mae just once, but I never did.” Through the 1957 and 1958 seasons, Pennyman was a consistent performer for the Tigerbelles, and was a member of the first United States track team to compete in Russia's Goodwill Games in 1958.

Yet despite the Tigerbelles’ collective successes, there was contemporary stigma attached to female athletes. Teammate Willye White noted how participating in sports was often discouraged in girls and women. Pennyman said:

‘I’ve heard the talk, but it didn’t bother me.’ She explained that her TSU coach and teammates provided a layer of protection: ‘We were just so prepared for a lot of things – criticism – our coach would talk to us. Things that a lot people worried about, we didn’t. We would discuss it, we would talk about it, but it didn’t bother us.’

The teammates’ camaraderie and support paid off momentously when the Tigerbelles became members of the U.S. Olympic team and competed in the 4x100 meter relay during the 1960
games in Rome, Italy. Pennyman, Barbara Jones, Wilma Rudolph, and Lucinda Williams set a new record time of 44.3 seconds and brought home gold medals. And while Pennyman herself didn’t qualify individually in the women’s 100 meters, the she and the Tigerbelles made history for Black women, Tennessee State University, and the United States. The four-foot, ten-inch-tall Pennyman joked about her involvement to the gold-medal winning relay team that “never had so much depended on so little.”

Pennyman graduated with a bachelor’s degree in elementary education in 1962 and returned to Georgia to teach and coach girl’s track and basketball in Thomaston, marry and raise a family. She retired from the Thomaston Upson Board of Education in 2001 with 37 years of teaching experience. Pennyman has been recognized for her award-winning efforts by being inducted into the Tennessee State University Hall of Fame (1983), Georgia Sports Hall of Fame (1986), and the Thomaston Upson Sports Hall of Fame (2005). On July 12, 1996, Pennyman’s hometown of Thomaston was honored as one of the cities to host a torch relay event for the Summer Olympics held in Atlanta. When the ceremony began at 10 p.m. that night, thousands lined the relay path. Pennyman was a featured speaker who provided the crowd with words of inspiration:

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14 (Davis 1996)
15 (Martha Hudson Pennyman n.d.) (Davis 1996) (Martha Hudson Pennyman Induction 2006)
16 (Martha Hudson Pennyman Induction 2006)
17 (Martha Hudson Pennyman Induction 2006)
I remember when I was very young, I dreamed of going to the Olympics and winning a gold medal, so I worked hard to do that. You, too, can work hard to achieve the best you can … Remember that a quitter never wins and a winner never quits … May I leave this with you: May we always remember the power and glory of this moment and the light it brought into our lives.\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Timeline from the Georgia Sports Hall of Fame:}

Martha Hudson Pennyman

March 21, 1939 –

From: Eastman, Georgia

Year Inducted: 1986

Track

- In the '60 Olympic Games in Rome, won the gold medal in the 400m relay
- Won specialities in State meets every season through high school
- Qualified for the Olympic Games in '60 in the 100m and relay with record setting relay in the '60 National AAU meet
- AAU All American '59
- In ’58 qualified and competed in track tour of Moscow, Warsaw, Greece, Hungary, and London
- Member of the Tennessee Hall of Fame '83

\textsuperscript{18} (1996 Olympic Torch Comes to Thomaston n.d.)
Bibliography

1996 Olympic Torch Comes to Thomaston. n.d.


