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Golden Anniversary Reflections (1968-2018) on Ten Tennessee State University Olympians at

The Mexico City Games

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Golden Anniversary (1968-2018) Reflections on Ten Tennessee State University Olympians at  
the Mexico City Games

In October of 2018, Tennessee State University (TSU) included special recognition of its Olympic tradition during its annual Homecoming festivities, as the year also marked the golden anniversary/50 years since ten track and field athletes with connections to the University participated in the Mexico City Games. The “Breakfast of Champions”, an event created by TSU three-time Olympian Ralph Boston with support from the University’s Alumni Relations office and Athletics Department, since 2007 has highlighted a number of significant individuals, teams, coaches, administrators, faculty, and staff contributors to TSU athletic history. Earlier in 2018, the University hosted an advance screening of the sports documentary, “Mr. Temple and the Tigerbelle”, which aired nationally on the CBS Sports Network followed by additional screenings at venues across the nation.

The year of 1968 is forever remembered as “the year that shattered America”. Its “seismic” events included the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King on April 4 in Memphis, Tennessee and the rioting/violence across the country that followed; assassination of presidential candidate Senator Robert F. Kennedy on June 5 in Los Angeles; escalation of the Vietnam War and protests against America’s involvement in it; the violence against antiwar protestors at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on August 28; increased protests (particularly on college campuses) related to civil, human, and/or women’s rights as well as the war; and increasing militancy in the African American community under the umbrella of “Black Power” organizations and initiatives.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) were not isolated from the events of that year. A prime example was the Orangeburg Massacre at South Carolina State University on February 8. Despite the violence and casualties/deaths that resulted, it drew minimal attention from the national news media, and was soon overshadowed by the King assassination and its aftermath. In Nashville, the community surrounding the campuses of TSU and Fisk University became the epicenter of protests and some violence in the days after April 4.

The “tenor of the times” even seeped into the world of sports and athletics, as many outstanding African American athletes made decisions relative to a proposed boycott of the 1968 Olympics (with college basketball star Lew Alcindor/Kareem Abdul-Jabbar being the most notable athlete to opt out of the games). For those who chose to participate, they had to make decisions regarding their personal level of activism beyond the athletic competitions. This included consideration as to whether or not to join/support the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) along with maintaining their training regimens in order to qualify for national teams. Ten days before the Olympics, Mexican students and civilians protesting police violence were massacred by government troops in the Tlatelolco section of Mexico City, further heightening tensions related to the political/cultural climate of the city and country as it prepared to host thousands of athletes and visitors from around the world for the 1968 Games.

At this point TSU was already internationally recognized as a producer of Olympic/world-class talent and medalists in track and field, largely due to the efforts of TSU and Olympic Coach Edward S. Temple. His “Tigerbelles” had been key members of U.S. women’s teams in 1952, 1956, 1960, and 1964, with the largest previous contingent being the seven who competed at the 1960 Rome Games (including the iconic Wilma Rudolph), who collectively won six gold medals for the United States. Sprinter Wyomia Tyus was a veteran of the 1964 Tokyo

Games (where she won gold in the 100 meters and silver as part of the 4x100 meter relay team), along with high jumpers Estelle Baskerville and Eleanor Montgomery. The fame and success of the Tigerbelles enabled Temple to recruit nationally for additional talent such as middle-distance runner Madeline Manning and long jumper Martha Watson, and even attracted international athletes (sprinters Una Morris from Jamaica and Marcella Daniel from Panama) to join his program.

Former Tigerbelle and Olympic silver medalist Willye White had hopes of making her fourth consecutive Olympic team as a long jumper/sprinter, while on the men's side, Ralph Boston was attempting to make his third consecutive Olympics, after breaking and setting world/Olympic records in the long jump, winning gold in Rome (1960) and silver in Tokyo (1964). All of these athletes succeeded in making their national teams for Mexico City, with another addition to the U.S. women's team being hurdler (and future Tigerbelle) Mamie Rallins.

Tyus, Manning, and Boston won medals and made additional Olympic history. Tyus became the first athlete (male or female) to repeat as gold medalist in the 100 meters; Manning the first (and to date, only) American woman to win the gold medal in the 800 meters; and Boston completed a personal "tri-fecta" by winning bronze in the long jump. Tyus added another gold medal to her collection as anchor of the U.S. 4 x 100 meter relay team, and dedicated it to Tommie Smith and John Carlos. Their controversial "Black Power" salute on October 16 after winning gold and bronze in the 200 meters resulted in their expulsion from the rest of the 1968 Games, death threats, and years of personal harassment/hardships. Tyus' 1968 exploits enabled her to match Rudolph in winning three gold medals over the course of her Olympic career. In comparison to today's sports champions, they all "flew under the radar" and remain largely unsung despite their singular achievements.

Collectively, the 1968 TSU Olympians have been inducted into numerous international, national, and/or state halls of fame related to sports/athletics, track and field, education, community service, and other fields of endeavor. On December 1, 2018 the TSU Olympians who were on the U.S. team were among those honored by USA Track and Field during a gala celebration in Columbus, Ohio. Boston, Tyus, Manning-Mims, and Watson were among those asked to make statements and share memories/reflections for that occasion, which was broadcast nationally on the NBC Sports Network (NBCSN).

Following are a few other interesting “tidbits” related to the 1968 TSU Olympians:

**Boston** was actually instrumental as an unofficial coach to 1968 teammate/competitor Bob Beamon, helping Beamon achieve an amazing long jump that broke existing world/U.S./Olympic records by nearly two feet and stood for over 20 years until broken by Michael Powell in 1991. He was one of the first African American administrators at the University of Tennessee, and went on to work as a sports commentator, corporate executive, and part-owner of a television station in Knoxville, TN before retiring in the Atlanta, Georgia area. The annual Ralph Boston Golf Tournament began in 1993, while the Ralph Boston Hall of Fame Room and Ralph Boston Wellness Center on the TSU campus were dedicated on October 18, 1996 and November 2, 2007, respectively.

**Manning (Mims)** would go on to win a silver medal as part of the 4 x 400 relay team at the 1972 Munich Olympics. She also became a minister, motivational speaker, and singer based in Tulsa, Oklahoma; earn a doctorate; author her life story, “Running for Jesus”; continue with the Olympics as an official chaplain to athletes; and serve as a founder of the U.S. Council for Sports Chaplaincy (USCSC) in 2003. The 2018 Breakfast of Champions event on October 19 was 50 years to the day since Manning won her gold medal in Mexico City.

**Tyus** relocated to California and enjoyed a diverse career path including work at UCLA, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and various health/fitness organizations and agencies including the Women's Sports Foundation. In 1999, the Wyomia Tyus Park was dedicated in her hometown of Griffin, GA, and she also celebrated 2018 with the release of her memoir, "Tigerbelle: The Wyomia Tyus Story". She is currently conducting book tours and speaking engagements to promote her publication.

**Estelle Baskerville (Diehl)** went on to earn a graduate degree and eventually return to her hometown of Columbus, OH. She continued involvement in community work, including reconnecting with the Ohio Track Club (where she gained her initial training and first success as a teenager). In 2016, she was the keynote speaker for the 90th birthday celebration of her first track coach, Jim Lorimer.

**Marcella Daniel** was a queen on and off the track, as she was elected Miss Tennessee State University for 1967-1968. After her Olympic career she lived and worked in Los Angeles, California and helped Tyus get established when she also relocated to the West Coast.

**Eleanor Montgomery** (1946-2013) set an American high jump record in 1969. After retiring from competition, she worked for the Cleveland (OH) Municipal School District; athletics organizer/official for the Interchurch Youth Activities Program and Special Olympics; and as executive director, National Football League Players' Association (NFLPA) Youth Camp. She died at age 67 in Cleveland, which was also her birthplace/hometown.

**Una Morris (Chong)** completed undergraduate and graduate/medical school studies in California, continued her training, and made her third and final Olympics in 1972. Dr. Morris is

also a successful radiologist as well as owner/operator of the Kingston Café, a Jamaican restaurant in Pasadena, CA.

**Mamie Rallins** (1941-2016) enjoyed great success as the founding women's track coach and assistant athletic director at the Ohio State University when her Olympic career ended after the 1972 Munich Games. She also was head coach of the U.S. Indoor World Championship team in 1987, assistant Olympic women's track coach at the 1996 Atlanta Games, and head manager at the 2000 Games in Sydney, Australia. Sadly, she died tragically in an automobile accident near her Ohio home several years after her retirement from coaching.

**Martha Watson** became a four-time Olympian, co-holder of the world record (60 meters), and American record holder in the long jump before retiring from track in the early 1980s. After coaching She took advantage of career development opportunities provided to former Olympic athletes, and for many years worked as a professional blackjack dealer in Las Vegas.

**Willye White** (1939 – 2007) continued her life/work in Chicago as a practical nurse, public health administrator, creator of the Willye White Foundation for children, and director of recreation services for the Chicago Park District after her track career as a five-time Olympian and 1956 silver medalist in the long jump. Upon her death in 2007, a Chicago post office building was named/dedicated in her memory, and in 2008 a city park/community center was renamed Willye White Park to honor her life and achievements.

Exhibits/memorabilia related to TSU Olympians are displayed in the National Museum of African American History and Culture/Washington D.C. and the Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame in Nashville, while some of the University's collections are presently on loan to the Muhammad Ali Museum/Louisville, KY.

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