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Profiles of African Americans in Tennessee

Coach Edward S. Temple (1927-2016)

With a career spanning from 1950 to his retirement in 1994, the argument can be made that Edward Stanley “Ed” Temple was the greatest track and field coach of all time. He produced 40 Olympians at TSU between 1952 and 1984 (35 represented the United States, with five others competing for native countries including Panama, Jamaica, Bermuda, and Trinidad); all of them became college graduates, along with hundreds of other “TSU Tigerbelles” affiliated with his track program. They collectively won 23 Olympic medals for the U.S. (including 13 gold; 6 silver; and 4 bronze). Temple made more history as the U.S. women’s track team coach for two consecutive Olympiads (Rome 1960 and Tokyo 1964) and assistant coach (1980).

Temple was born the only child of Christopher and Ruth (Ficklin) Temple on September 20, 1927, and spent his formative years in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania where he became an all-state athlete in football, basketball and track at John Harris High School. His destiny was established when he and a rival competitor, Leroy Craig, were both recruited by coach Tom Harris for the men's track team at Tennessee A&I State College in 1946, where he pledged Omega Psi Phi and met future wife Miss Charlie B. Law of Hartsville, Tennessee.

Shortly after graduating in 1950 with a bachelor’s degree in health and physical education, Temple was offered a coaching position with the women’s track program, the opportunity to teach and pursue graduate study in sociology (eventually becoming an associate professor), and work in the college post office by TSU President Walter S. Davis. He also married his college sweetheart that year, who assisted him in the post office as well as with the track program and together they had two children (Lloyd Bernard and Edwina).

By 1951 Temple had been promoted to head women’s track coach, and in 1952 he received his master’s degree in sociology. Despite meager funding and facilities in the segregated South, Temple's first successes were at black college competitions such as the Tuskegee Relays, and he recruited Olympic gold medalist Mae Faggs to join his program as “Mother of the Tigerbelles”. In 1955 the Tigerbelles won the university’s first national championship in integrated sports competition, going on to win 34 over the course of Temple’s career. Six Tigerbelles (including Faggs and Clarksville, TN high-schooler Wilma Rudolph) made the U.S. team for the 1956 Olympics in Melbourne, Australia, with Faggs, Rudolph, Lucinda Williams, and Isabelle Daniels winning a relay bronze medal. Temple and the Tigerbelles broke national as well as cultural barriers in 1958 by journeying behind the “Iron Curtain” as part of U.S. vs. Soviet Union track competitions.

The Rome 1960 Olympics is considered Temple’s greatest coaching success, as seven Tigerbelles made the U.S. team; Wilma Rudolph became a global icon after becoming the first American woman to win three track and field gold medals in a single Olympiad. The entire U.S. gold-medal-winning 4x100 relay consisted of TSU Tigerbelles Rudolph, Williams, Barbara Jones, and Martha Hudson. Coming a close second are Temple’s “Gold Dust Twins” of the 1964 Tokyo Games, as Wyomia Tyus and Edith McGuire made Olympic
history by being the first from the same school (as well as country) to finish first/gold (Tyus) and second/silver (McGuire) in the 100 meter race. McGuire won gold in the 200 meters and she and Tyus were half of the silver medal-winning U.S. 4x100 relay team.

Temple's coaching and training made for still more Olympic history during the 1968 Mexico City Games, when Tyus became the first athlete (male or female) to win the 100 meter gold medal in two successive Olympics while another Tigerbelle, Madeline Manning, became the first American woman to win the 800 meter gold medal. Kathy McMillian won silver in the long jump during the 1976 Montreal Games, but the possibility of more Tigerbelle Olympians and Olympic medals in 1980 (as well as Temple's third time coaching) was precluded by the U.S. boycott.

Temple's last Olympian, Chandra Cheeseborough, was directly affected by the boycott, which ironically coincided with the publication of his autobiography, Only the Pure In Heart Survive. Cheeseborough continued her training, made the U.S. team for the 1984 Games in Los Angeles, and won two gold medals as part of relay teams plus a silver medal in the 100 meters. She was personally recruited by Temple, Wilma Rudolph, and others to succeed him as coach of the Tigerbelles upon his retirement in 1994. Despite the death of Wilma Rudolph that same year, and of his wife Charlie B. in 2008, Temple enjoyed a long and productive retirement. He remained involved in his church (Clark Memorial United Methodist); served on the Nashville Sports Authority/Council; provided scholarships for New Hope Academy in Franklin, TN; and served on the U.S. Olympic Council and the International Women's Track and Field Committee. Among his voluminous honors and accolades are the Edward S. Temple Track, Seminar Series on Society and Sports, and honorary doctorate (TSU); Ed Temple Boulevard (Metropolitan Nashville/Davidson County); Edward S. Temple Award (NCAA Track and Field Coaches Association); induction into eleven sports halls of fame, including the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame (the first African American coach and first track coach), as well as the National Track and Field Hall of Fame; U.S. Track Coaches Association; Black Athletes; National Black College Alumni; Pennsylvania; and Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame, among others.

Coach Temple was present for the unveiling and dedication of his statue at First Tennessee Park in Nashville on August 28, 2015. His personal artifacts and memorabilia are in the TSU archives, Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C. Coach Temple passed away on September 22, 2016 in Nashville.

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