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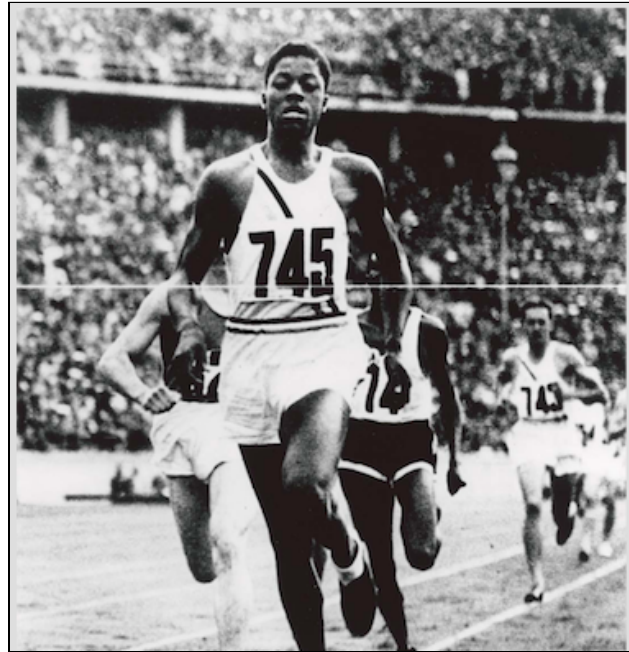
Stopping for Olympic Gold

By Angie Kay Dilmore
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John Woodruff (1915-2007) was an African American track athlete who won a gold medal in the 1936 Summer Olympics. In this informational text, Angie Kay Dilmore discusses John's life and famous race. As you read, take notes on how John achieved victory.

- [1] *The torch is lit and the summer Olympics begin. The year is 1936, Berlin, Germany. Nazi leader Adolf Hitler watches from the stands.*

John Woodruff and eight other runners crouch on the track, ready to race. Bang! The starting pistol fires and they're off. John runs behind the leader, waiting to make his move into first. But soon another runner comes up beside him. John is boxed in. If he pushes through the runners, he might be disqualified¹ on a foul. So John does what one sports reporter later calls "the most daring move seen on a track." He comes to a complete stop. After all the other runners pass him, John moves two lanes toward the outside and races from last place toward the finish line. The crowd stands and gasps. Will John win Olympic gold?



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Many young athletes dream of competing in the Olympics. They imagine being on the victory stand with a gold medallion around their necks.

But not John Woodruff. "I never thought I had that much talent to win a gold medal," he said.

John Woodruff grew up in a poor family in the small town of Connellsville, Pennsylvania. Born in 1915, this grandson of former slaves was the eleventh of twelve children.

- [5] John had a gift. He ran faster than anyone in town. And it wouldn't take him long to prove it.

In high school, John joined the football team. At the end of each practice, the team ran sprints and laps around the track. The coaches noticed that John ran consistently ahead of the others. He had potential,² but John's mother made him quit the team. Practice continued late into the evening, and John didn't have time to do his share of the work around the house. "I had to cut wood and bring in coal. So football had to go. My chores came first," said John.

1. to stop someone from being in a competition
2. **Potential (adjective):** having or showing the ability to become something in the future

For a short time, John quit school. “This was Depression³ times. There was very little money in our house,” John remembered. “When I went looking for work, nobody was hiring. So I decided to go back to school.”

It wasn’t long before the coach asked John to join the track team. This time, his mother approved. Track practice ended early, allowing plenty of time for chores.

John broke school, county, district, and state records on the track team. And as he ran, he traveled 9 feet with each step, earning him the nickname “Long John.” In 1935, John broke the high-school national mile record with a time of 4:23.4 (four minutes, twenty-three point four seconds).

- [10] After his senior year, college seemed to be out of the question. John’s family didn’t have the money. But thanks to some local businessmen, he received an athletic scholarship to the University of Pittsburgh. With twenty-five cents in his pocket, John left his small town for the big city of Pittsburgh.

In the summer after John’s freshman year of college, he tried out for the Olympic team. At the trials, John outran the best distance runners in the country.

The Olympic athletes sailed for Germany on July 15, 1936. They spent over a week crossing the Atlantic on the S.S. *Manhattan*. “I’d never been so far away from home,” John recalled.

John was a beginner compared to the rest of the Olympic runners. Yet he easily won the 800-meter race by 20 yards in the semifinals. The other athletes had anticipated they’d have to pass John to win in the finals. These more experienced athletes boxed John in with a runner in front and another by his side, blocking him from first place. But John ran faster than they knew. With strength, ability, and determination, he sprinted from last place and claimed the gold medal with a time of 1:52.9 (one minute, fifty-two point nine seconds).

Besides taking home a gold medal, each 1936 first-place winner received an oak sapling, a gift from the German government. John said he “proudly brought the tree home” and presented it to Connellsville. The town planted it beside his high-school stadium. According to John, the local newspaper placed “a plaque⁴ under the tree so the kids in the neighborhood would know what the tree represented.” Over seventy years later, the tree still towers over the track where John began his career.

- [15] John Woodruff lived to the age of ninety-two and was the last surviving gold medalist from the 1936 U.S. Olympic team. In his room, Woodruff had a photo of himself crossing the finish line—a constant reminder that he had beat the odds and accomplished an amazing feat. John remembered, “I was very proud of that achievement⁵ and I was very happy — for myself as an individual, for my race, and for my country.”

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3. referring to the Great Depression, when work was difficult to find in America
4. a piece of metal with writing on it, often used as decoration
5. **Achievement (noun):** a thing done successfully, usually with effort, courage, or skill

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. John was a talented athlete who took his competition by surprise to win the Olympics.
 - B. When John arrived at the Olympics, he was treated unfairly because of his race.
 - C. Most people wrongly underestimated John at the Olympics because of his age.
 - D. John's athletic scholarship was the result of his hard work and high school state records.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "John is boxed in. If he pushes through the runners, he might be disqualified on a foul." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "In the summer after John's freshman year of college, he tried out for the Olympic team. At the trials, John outran the best distance runners in the country." (Paragraph 11)
 - C. "But John ran faster than they knew. With strength, ability, and determination, he sprinted from last place and claimed the gold medal with a time of 1:52.9" (Paragraph 13)
 - D. "According to John, the local newspaper placed 'a plaque under the tree so the kids in the neighborhood would know what the tree represented.'" (Paragraph 14)

3. Which of the following describes the organization of the text?
 - A. The author describes the races that John competed in, and how his skills steady improved.
 - B. The author describes the obstacles that John faced growing up, and how they made him stronger.
 - C. The author describes John's famous Olympic race, and then goes into detail about how he got there.
 - D. The author compares what John expected when he competed in the Olympics with what he experienced.

4. Which of the following describes the author's purpose in the text?
 - A. to emphasize how sports can bring people together
 - B. to criticize John's parents for making him do chores
 - C. to highlight the struggles that John faced in school
 - D. to describe John's amazing accomplishments to readers

5. What is the connection between the risk that John took and his Olympic win?
