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First black Olympian honored at Crown Hill

Provided by Marty Davis

Crown Hill Honors First African-American Olympic Gold Medalist 1936 Olympian John Y. Woodruff honored with a memorial bench

Crown Hill Funeral Home and Cemetery has honored John Y. Woodruff, the first African-American Olympic Gold Medalist, with the placement of a granite memorial bench on his grave lot today. The inscription reads: "1936 Berlin Olympics -- John Y. Woodruff -- 800 Meter Gold Medalist." Crown Hill Funeral Home and Cemetery President, Keith O. Norwalk, stated, "We are proud to recognize the outstanding achievements of John Woodruff; this memorial will help us to preserve his legacy for future generations."

On August 4, 1936, Woodruff ran, and won, the 800-meter race in a stunning fashion: finding himself boxed in, he actually stopped on the track, allowed the other runners to go by and then started again and passed everyone to win the race. A description of the race is quoted here from the "Pitt," the University of Pittsburg's Newspaper and Woodruff's alma mater:

Just as Woodruff had overcome poverty and racial discrimination to reach Berlin in the first place, his 800-meter win was a come-from-behind affair. A lanky 21-year-old who lacked international running experience, Woodruff got boxed in by veteran runners after the race's first 300 meters. Woodruff knew he would be disqualified if he fouled another runner in breaking free. Rather than risk that--or resigning himself to less than a gold medal--he coolly did the unthinkable. He stopped running.

"I knew I had to do something drastic if I was to have any chance of winning the race," Woodruff said in an interview with the Pitt Chronicle last year. "So, I stopped and moved over onto the third lane of the track. I let my opponents pass me by, and then I started the race all over again."

At 6 feet 3.25 inches, Woodruff was unusually tall for a middle-distance runner. His remarkably long stride--nine feet in length--had earned him the nickname Long John. On Aug. 4, 1936, his long, powerful legs would carry Woodruff to track immortality. From a dead stop in the back of the pack, Woodruff took off, his stride lengthening as he passed one rival after another. He gained the lead, relinquished it briefly, then retook it and sprinted for the finish line. Holding off a final charge by European champion Mario Lanzi of Italy, Woodruff broke the tape at 1:52.9. For the first time in 24 years, the United States had won an Olympic gold medal in the 800 meters.

The New York Herald Tribune called Woodruff's stop-and-restart maneuver the "most daring move seen on a track." http://www.chronicle.pitt.edu/?p=987

Woodruff's remarkable track career didn't end with the Olympics; he went on to win

multiple national championships and to set world records. Woodruff died Oct. 30, 2007 in Fountain Hills, Ariz. He was 92. He was interred at Crown Hill Cemetery on Nov. 14, 2007 with his wife's family on Lot 86, Sec. 46. The public is invited to come to Crown Hill and pay their respects to Woodruff, honoring this great American.

Crown Hill Cemetery is the third largest cemetery in the country and is the burial site of such famous people as President Benjamin Harrison, poet James Whitcomb Riley, Colonel Eli Lilly, 14 U.S. senators, 11 Indiana governors, three U.S. Vice Presidents and 25 Indiana mayors.

For more information, the public may call the Crown Hill Heritage Foundation's Special Events Line at (317) 920-2726 or visit us on the web at www.crownhill.org