

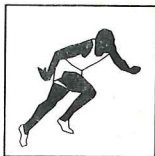
Track and Field



Rafer Johnson



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Roman Glory

It was nearing midnight and the huge crowd that had filled Rome's Stadio Olimpico was by now thinned to a few hundred people as the athletes on the track lined up for the 10th and final event of the decathlon—the grueling 1,500 m run. American Rafer Johnson was just 67 points ahead of C. K. Yang, representing Nationalist China, but also a friend and teammate of Johnson's at UCLA. In the many times they had competed against each other, Johnson rarely beat Yang in the 1,500, but Rafer knew that if he could stay close enough to Yang, he could still win an Olympic gold medal even if he didn't win the race. And Johnson dearly wanted to share in the glory that was Rome's.

The 6' 3" (1.90 m), 200-lb (91 kg) Johnson had started competing in the decathlon while still in high school in Kingsburg, Calif. In 1955, in only his fourth attempt in the event, Johnson set a world record with 7,985 points. While attending UCLA, Johnson competed in the first dual meet between U.S. and Soviet athletes, held in Moscow in 1958. Johnson's chief competitor there was Vasily Kuznyetsov,

who earlier that year had broken Johnson's world record in becoming the first decathlete ever to rake up more than 8,000 points. Spurred by the intense competition at Moscow, Johnson not only defeated his Russian foe, but shattered his record with 8,302 points. Kuznyetsov later reclaimed the world mark.

In July 1960, at Eugene, Ore., Johnson and Yang waged a lively yet friendly struggle, with the American edging his classmate, 8,683 points to 8,426, as both men surpassed Kuznyetsov's existing world record. In the Olympic Games at Rome that fall, all Yang had to do to earn a gold medal was finish 10 seconds ahead of Johnson in the 1,500 m. But Johnson hung on grittily, dogging Yang every step of the way and finishing within a few feet of him. The final result: Johnson 8,392 points; Yang, 8,334, and Kuznyetsov third with 7,809.

RAFER JOHNSON

Born Aug. 18, 1934, in Hillsboro, Tex.

AWARDS AND RECORDS

1956 OG: silver medal, decathlon

1960 OG: gold medal, decathlon

Rafer Johnson preparing to throw the shot