

Run Through Time

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Anniversary Carries Charlottean Back To Olympics Of Almost 50 Years Ago

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Today is Harry Williamson's birthday. At 71, he still gets fired up for the event, and this year, he is feeling especially nostalgic.

For almost half a century, Williamson's birthday also has marked the anniversary of his qualifying for the 1936 U.S. Olympic team in the 800-meter race. Today marks the 48th anniversary of that occasion, and with so much attention focused on the Summer Games later this month in Los Angeles, Williamson has been rekindling memories and renewing his Olympic spirit.

"These Games really steam me up," said Williamson, a High Point native now living in retirement in Charlotte.

Williamson will focus his television-viewing, naturally, on track and field. He has remained a fan since finishing sixth in the 800 at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, and he still feels a bond with to-



day's runners. The 800 in Los Angeles will feature Earl Jones, who won the U.S. Olympic trials last month, and an international group that could include Great Britain's Sebastian Coe.

Of course, in the 800 and all track events, the times have been a-changin'. When Williamson qualified at the 1936 Olympic trials at Randalls Island Stadium in New York, his time was 1:51.3. This year, Jones won the trials in a U.S.-record 1:43.74. The Olympic record, set in 1976 in Montreal by Cuba's Alberto Juantorena, is 1:43.50.

"We'd be finishing 50 or 60

yards back of the leaders today," said Williamson, who competed for North Carolina. "But we didn't have the same conditions they have today."

Williamson and fellow U.S. team members had plenty of persistence and determination. To reach Berlin, they had to endure a six-day, cross-Atlantic voyage on the USS Manhattan. Then they had to compete in the politically hostile environment of prewar Germany.

Williamson remembers sitting several rows behind Adolf Hitler when Jesse Owens won the last of his four gold medals, then was snubbed by Hitler, who refused to congratulate him. He remembers the German demonstrations of military strength. But he also remembers surprisingly attractive accommodations.

"It was typical German efficiency," he said. "The Olympic

Olympian Remembers

Continued From Page 1B

village was outside the city, with nations grouped by cottages. There were only two to a room. There was a lake and sauna, and the dining was great."

After the Olympics, Williamson ran the third leg on a U.S. 2-mile relay team that set a world record (7:35.8) at the British Empire Games. That was his track finale, ending a career that included a national indoor record of 2:13.5 in a 1,000-yard race at the Milrose Games in New York.

He settled in Long Island and worked in sales of women's clothing. Whenever possible, Williamson attended major track meets in New York's Madison Square Garden. After retiring, he and wife Mildred moved to Myrtle Beach, then to Charlotte.

Through the years, Williamson has tried off and on to keep in touch with a few members of the 1936 U.S. Olympic team, which never has had a formal reunion. He'd like to have one, perhaps for the 50th anniversary.

On days like today's birthday/anniversary, reunions seem like a good idea.



World Record: Harry Williamson (second from right) after passing the baton to U.S. teammate John Woodruff of Pittsburgh dur-

ing world record-setting 2-mile relay at the 1936 British Empire Games. This photograph is a Williamson memento of his track days.