

# High Point runner shared in win, then watched as Hitler's rage mounted

July 18, 96

Three days after the 1936 Berlin Olympics opened, Harry Williamson dug a mound of cinder from which he would start the medal run in the 800 meters.

He had run the last two days, winning his preliminary and semifinal races, for the right to be at the starting line as one of the world's nine fastest 800-meter runners. But the day was chilly, and Williamson hadn't trained to run races on three consecutive days.

The gun: The runners quickly bunched up. After the first of two laps, Williamson was among the leaders, but with 60 yards to go, he faded, and finished sixth.

"None of us warmed up properly," said Williamson, 83, who has lived in Charlotte since 1980. "I don't feel I trained properly for that extra strength needed to run three days straight. I didn't have finishing strength."

Sixty years have passed, and Williamson has thought about that race hundreds of times, finding solace that he made it to the medal race and ran against the best.

He was a seventh-grader in High Point the first time he realized he might possess uncommon speed. In the city's May Day races, young Harry won a blue ribbon in the 60-yard dash.

He wanted to play baseball at High Point High School, but track coach Charlie Spencer persuaded him to run track and twice he broke the state record in the mile run.

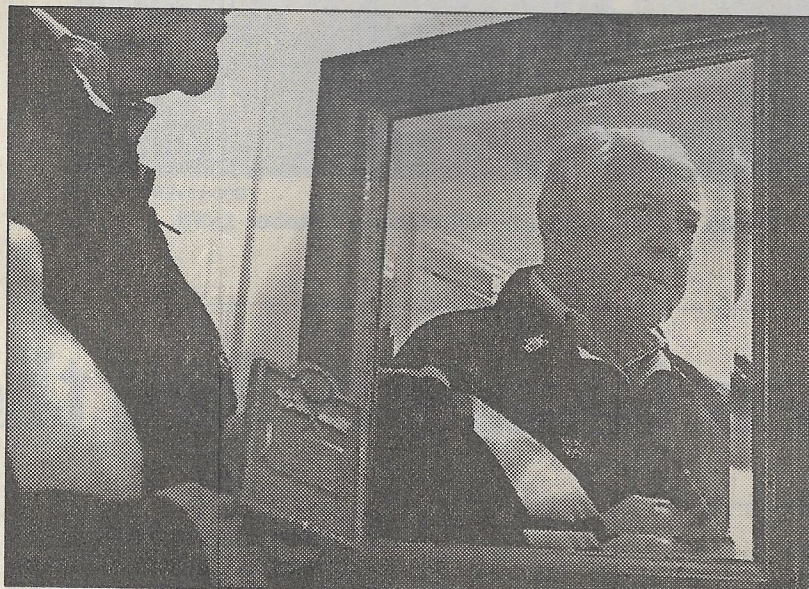
At UNC Chapel Hill, his career began slowly. But in 1935, he finished second in the NCAA mile run. The next year he completed his degree and ran indoor races that would prepare him for the Olympic trials.

Months later, he easily won his preliminary race. Against the East's best runners in the quarterfinals, he came in third, behind John Woodruff from the University of Pittsburgh and Chuck Hornbostel of Indiana University.

In the semifinals, on Williamson's 23rd birthday, July 11, the result was the same. And against the country's nine best 800-meter runners a day later in the finals,



Harry Williamson (No. 3) hands off the baton in London.



Harry Williamson, 83, of Charlotte holds the trophy he won during the 1936 British Empire Games in London.

HEATHER L. ROHAN/Staff

again it was Woodruff, Hornbostel and Williamson.

All three were Olympians, Williamson the first native North Carolinian to compete in an individual Olympic event. But the country was in the Depression and the team had to wait for days to learn whether it could go.

Word came the night before they boarded the SS Manhattan for Hamburg on July 15. They jogged

on board during the week's crossing.

In Berlin, Germans mobbed the Americans for autographs, especially Jesse Owens, the black track-and-field star who would win four gold medals and enrage Adolf Hitler.

The start of the 800-meter event came the day after opening ceremonies. Williamson, Hornbostel and Woodruff won their prelimi-

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ON THE 1936 BERLIN OLYMPICS

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His event over early, Williamson had time to be spectator, and kept an eye on Hitler's reactions to the successes of Owens and other black or Jewish athletes.

He's never forgotten the day Owens long-jumped against Lu Long of Germany. Long had just broken the world record, and Hitler beamed. But before Owens made his final jump, Long called him over.

"He lays his arm on Jesse's shoulder and points out he was taking off far too soon on the runway," Williamson said. "Hitler is standing up, livid. Owens goes back to the runway, charges down and makes a perfect takeoff and broke Long's record."

The stadium of 110,000 stood and cheered. Hitler, enraged, left.

Days after the closing ceremonies of the Berlin Olympics, Williamson, Woodruff, Hornbostel and Robert Young, a runner from UCLA, set the world record in the two-mile relay before 90,000 in the British Empire Games in London.

It was Williamson's last race. "The most important thing in the Olympic Games was not to win but to take part," Williamson said. "That is the Olympic creed. Just as in life, the important thing is not the victory, but the struggle."



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