

Leipsic Man Raced Against Track Legend Jesse Owens

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There are only a few Leipsic residents around that may remember the year a black track star named Jesse Owens competed in the Summer Olympic Games held in Berlin and won four gold medals.

Many people have heard of the accomplishments of Jesse Owens through Olympic coverage, but one Leipsic resident, Winslow Heg, learned about Mr. Owens first hand – by competing against him.

Mr. Heg told The Leipsic Messenger that he started running track in high school in 1928. After graduation he attended Dartmouth College where he only played freshmen football. His sophomore year he transferred to Northwestern College. Mr. Heg said that back then rules for college athletes were different than they are to day and due to transferring to the college he lost a year of eligibility to run. It was in his junior year that he started to run track at Northwestern. The quarter mile was his primary race and the 200 meter, his secondary.

In 1935, he competed in the national inter-collegiate competition against Jesse Owens who ran for Ohio State University. “He won every race he ran in. I ran against Jesse Owens six times in my career in the 200 meter, my secondary race. Every time I came in second. I won’t say I was close to him at the finish, but I came in second.”

The next year was the big year, Mr. Heg said. The trials for the Olympics were taking place and Mr. Heg was a shoe-in. At the time he was rated the second best runner in the United States, behind Jesse Owens.

“I knew Jesse personally and ran against him for two years. He was a terrific athlete; he could have done great in anything.”

Before the finals, the Olympic trials, Mr. Heg pulled a muscle in his leg and was forced out of competition. “That was the year Jesse won four gold medals in the Olympics. Adolph Hitler had a fit; he was so mad he left.”

Mr. Heg recalled traveling to the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco, the first hotel to ever let a black stay in it that he knew of. “When the teams were traveling around for various competitions the schools would have a hard time finding a place for black athletes to stay and would have to find separate accommodations.”

During his track career, Mr. Heg traveled to all the Big Ten colleges and won various medals in competitions in college and high school. He recalled running in the Boston Gardens where the tracks were all wood.

While he was in college, the first Heisman Trophy winner was chosen. “I knew the first three recipients of the trophy personally. The first one who was chosen was the best, Jay Prwanger.” Mr. Heg said that Mr. Prwanger is still alive and has a business in Chicago.

Mr. Heg developed polio after college and only ran for recreation.

After living in Santa Monica, California, for a few years, Mr. Heg came to Leipsic where he worked for his father-in-law who owned Perry’s Hardware in Leipsic.

Mr. Heg bought the store from him and owned it for 30 years before retiring. In his years in Leipsic, he served as a councilman for 25 years and was a school board member for four years.