

OLYMPIC DECATHLON CHAMPION, SPECIAL OLYMPICS FOUNDER AND UCLA LEGEND RAFER JOHNSON PASSES AWAY AT 86

Dec. 2, 2020 (SHERMAN OAKS, CA) – Rafer Johnson, 1960 Olympic Decathlon champion, passed away today at his home in Sherman Oaks, CA surrounded by his family. He was 86.

Johnson's record-setting performance to narrowly defeat Taiwan's C.K. Yang remains one of the most memorable Olympic Decathlon competitions of all time. His gold medal performance 40 years ago at the Summer Olympics in Rome was a follow-up to his winning the Olympic Decathlon Silver Medal in 1956.

Born Rafer Lewis Johnson on Aug. 18, 1934 in Hillsboro, TX, Johnson's legendary Olympic career was also highlighted by two seminal events -- being chosen by his teammates to be Team USA's flag bearer at the 1960 games, and being selected to run the final leg of the 1984 Summer Olympics Torch Relay and light the Olympic Flame and Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum's Cauldron to highlight the Opening Ceremonies of the XXIII Olympiad.

Johnson moved to California in 1945 with his parents, Lewis and Alma, brothers, Ed and future NFL Hall of Fame inductee, Jim, and sisters, Erma and Delores, where the family ultimately settled in Kingsburg. A standout student and four-sport athlete (baseball, basketball, football, track & field) at Kingsburg Joint Union High School, Johnson won numerous regional and state titles. In 1952, just prior to his junior year, after attending a track meet and watching Bob Mathias, a fellow San Joaquin Valley resident and reigning Olympic Decathlon Champion break his own world record, Johnson was encouraged by his high school track coach (who brought him to the meet) to hone his skills and enter future decathlon competitions.

Having received both academic and athletic scholarships to UCLA, Johnson chose to attend the University, which also happened to be the alma mater of two of his all-time heroes, Ralph Bunche and Jackie Robinson. At UCLA, he was a member of the Men's Basketball Team coached by John Wooden and was selected for the starting five during the 1958-59 season. He also competed on the Track and Field team for Elvin "Ducky" Drake, who Johnson credits as the most influential coach of his athletic career.

While at UCLA, Johnson participated in numerous activities and organizations including the Air Force ROTC, the community-focused Yeomans club, the spirit-oriented Kelps and became the first African American to pledge a national fraternity at the University (and potentially the first west of the Mississippi) when he joined Pi Lambda Phi.

During his four-years on campus, he often addressed various social and political issues facing his fellow students, and in 1958 was elected Student Body President, the third African American to hold the office since the school was founded in 1919.

Johnson remained an active Bruin alum, serving on many University committees and Boards. He was part of the inaugural group of inductees into the UCLA Athletic Hall of Fame in 1984, and in 2016, received the UCLA Medal, the school's highest recognition for extraordinary accomplishments. Most recently, Johnson was honored along with his wife Betsy, when the University named its on-campus track, the "Betsy & Rafer Johnson Track."

Throughout his life, Johnson was widely recognized for his humanitarian efforts. He served on the organizing committee for the first Special Olympics competition in Chicago in 1968, which was founded by Eunice Kennedy Shriver, and maintained a decades-long friendship with the Kennedy family. Johnson went on to found California Special Olympics in 1969, serving on its Board of Directors for more than two decades before joining the organization's Board of Governors.

Along with the Special Olympics, Johnson also worked for the Peace Corps, traveling on behalf of the volunteer program run by the United States Government, providing international social and economic development assistance to millions around the world and for the People to People International Foundation. He was a Fellow with the Coro Foundation, a member of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and served on the Board of Directors of the Close-up Foundation and numerous other organizations including the March of Dimes, the Muscular Dystrophy Association and American Red Cross and sports-related organizations such as the National Amateur Sports Development Foundation, the National Recreation and Park Association, the United States Athletic Foundation and the Athletic Advisory Panel of the U.S. State Department along with community groups such as the San Fernando Valley Fair

Housing Council and the Voter Registration Program. Johnson was also active for many years as a spokesperson for Hershey's Track & Field Games.

In addition to his achievements in sports, shortly after his Olympic career, Johnson appeared in several feature films, and worked as a sports reporter, locally at KNBC-TV in Los Angeles, as well as for nationally televised sporting events.

In 1971, Johnson married Elizabeth "Betsy" Thorsen and moved to Sherman Oaks, CA where they raised their two children. That same year, he joined Continental Telephone as a Vice President, overseeing the company's community and government relations activities and its personnel departments in 42 states. He remained in this position through his retirement from the company.

Johnson will long be remembered as a man of great character, integrity and personal values who made a difference in the lives of everyone who had the privilege of meeting him, hearing him speak or reading his autobiography, aptly titled, "THE BEST THAT I CAN BE."

Nothing in his life was more important to him than his family. He was once quoted as saying, "In the 'Decathlon of Life', your family is the first event." Living by this code, he was a committed husband and father, always putting his family first, and making it a priority to attend nearly every event, competition, performance or other engagement involving his wife, children and grandchildren.

During his life, Johnson received numerous national and international awards and accolades including: the James E. Sullivan Award as the top amateur athlete in the United States in 1960, breaking that award's color barrier; Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year in 1960; Sports Illustrated's Sportsman of the Year in 1958; The Theodore Roosevelt Award in 1994 ---the highest honor the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) may confer on an individual; the Golden Plate Award of the American Academy of Achievement in 1962; elected to the first class of the World Sports Humanitarian Hall of Fame in 1994; named one of ESPN's 100 Greatest North American Athletes of the past 100 years in 1998; inducted into the California Hall of Fame in 2009; inducted into the USA Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1974; received the (San Fernando Valley's) Fernando Award for Civic Accomplishment in 2010; inducted into the Bakersfield City School District Hall of Fame in 2011; received the Foundation for Global Sports Development's Athletes in Excellence Award in recognition of his

community service efforts and work with youth in 2014 and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters (L.H.D.) degree from Whittier College in 2005.

Additionally, Johnson has had several buildings named after him, including the Rafer Johnson Junior High School in Kingsburg; the Rafer Johnson Community Day School and Rafer Johnson Children's Center, both in Bakersfield, California. The Rafer Johnson Children's Center offers a unique special needs programs for children from birth through kindergarten with disabilities. Every year, the school hosts on an annual Rafer Johnson Day, where Johnson would speaks and cheers on hundreds of special needs students as they participate in a variety of track and field events.

Johnson is survived by his wife, Betsy; his daughter, Jennifer Ann Johnson Jordan, who competed in beach volleyball at the 2000 Olympic Games, following a collegiate career at UCLA, and who currently serves as Associate Head Coach for UCLA's Beach Volleyball team; his son, Joshua Ray Johnson, who competed on UCLA's Track and Field team, was an All American in the javelin throw; his son-in-law Kevin Jordan and four grandchildren.

The Johnson family requests that their privacy be respected at this time and anyone wishing to make a donation in Rafer Johnson's honor do so through:

- **The Special Olympics Southern California Rafer Johnson Tribute Fund** c/o
1600 Forbes Way #200
Long Beach, Ca 90810
www.sosc.org/rafer or by phone to Victoria Tracey at (562) 502-1115
- **The UCLA Athletics Rafer Johnson Endowment Fund** c/o
UCLA Athletic Development Office - P.O. Box 24044
Los Angeles, CA 90024 - (310) 206-3302
**Checks payable to "UCLA Foundation" with a reference to the memory of Rafer Johnson
- The Play Equity Foundation's **Rafer Johnson Impact Fund** dedicated to providing support to organizations serving adaptive athletes and those with intellectual disabilities. Donations can be made via: <https://playequityfund.org/donate-raferjohnson/>

Recently the LA84 Foundation unveiled an exhibit, "RAFER JOHNSON, His Life, His Impact. Highlights can be seen at: <https://la84.org/exhibitions/raferjohnson/>

On behalf of the Johnson Family, For More information, Please Contact:

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