

August 1932: Ray Lewis becomes first Canadian black athlete to win Olympic medal

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'Rapid Ray' Lewis was a Hamilton track and field athlete who made history in August 1932 when he became the first Canadian-born black athlete to win an Olympic medal. He won bronze as part of the 4x400-metre relay team at the Games in Los Angeles. At the British Empire Games two years later, he won a silver medal in the mile relay (4x440 yards). In the late 1930s, he was forced to retire because of shin splints.

Significance

"Lewis had this incredible attitude toward life. Nothing was going to hold him down. He faced racism and he stared people down on it."

John Cooper

Author of two books about Ray Lewis

Lewis was the grandson of runaway slaves. He graduated from Hamilton's Central Collegiate in the late 1920s, and won a scholarship to an American university but got homesick and returned to Hamilton where he became a railway porter — the only work he could find. But he still loved to run. He would often sprint alongside the CPR train tracks during stopovers. After the 1932 Olympics — when he arrived back in Hamilton with his medal — he received little recognition. There were no parades or celebrations. However, later in life he received many accolades including an Order of Canada in 2001. In 2005, a school in Hamilton was named after him.

Ray Lewis

(1910 — 2003)

He was born and died in Hamilton.

He raced through the streets of Hamilton as a boy to train.

He was the first Canadian-born black Olympic medallist but struggled against the racism of the era.

A sprinter, he won a bronze at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, and silver at the British Empire Games in London two years later.



Ray Lewis at the British Empire Games.



A portrait of Ray Lewis in May 2001 by Spectator photographer Scott Gardner on the beloved Hamilton athlete and businessman's 90th birthday.

