

Willis Ward – Detroit Northwestern 1931



For many of our readers, it's safe to say that Willis Ward is the greatest athlete they've never heard of. In football circles, he's better known as one of the big stars of the Michigan Wolverine national championship teams in the early 1930s. In history circles, he's better remembered as a public servant and a judge.

His track & field legacy is what we are focused on here. He twice broke the national record in the high jump as an athlete at Northwestern High in Detroit, and also won state titles in the hurdles. As a freshman at Michigan in 1932, he was invited to be a guest competitor in the high jump at the NCAA finals, in order to qualify for the Olympic Trials. He ended up winning the competition, beating all of the collegians with a mark that made him No. 3 on the world list.

Ward was much more than a high jumper. He could sprint: his 9.6 PR for 100 yards made him No. 6 in the world in 1933, and he also tied the indoor dash World Record. He could hurdle: his 14.5 PR made him No. 15 in the world in 1935. And he could long jump: his PR of 25-1.5 in 1935 made him No. 8 in the world. He beat

Jesse Owens twice that season—that same one that Owens made himself a legend by setting 4 World Records in 45 minutes in Ann Arbor.

Born in 1912 in Alabama, Ward attended high school at Northwestern, where he won three state titles—and was denied a chance at more when his senior year the Detroit schools stopped participating in MHSAA events. At Michigan, he won 8 Big 10 titles and was a 3-time All-American.

Some highlights along the way:

1928 – Placed 3rd in the Class A high jump as a 9th grader.

1929 – Won the Class A high jump with a state record 6-1.75 (No. 59 in the world that year). Made the finals of the Class A hurdles but did not place in the top 4.

1930 – Won the Metropolitan Champs indoors with a national HS record of 6-4 (No. 15 in world). Won Class A state title in 120y high hurdles in 16.0, and won the 220y lows in 26.1. Placed 2nd in the high jump.

1931 – Won the Metropolitan Champs indoors with a national record of 6-6 (No. 3 in the world). With Detroit schools decided not to compete in MHSAA events, he was unable to defend his state titles. He won the PSL hurdle title in 15.1 (No. 41 in world), and the high jump at 6-1.

1932 – Tied for the 65-yard high hurdle win at the Michigan AAU Indoor. Was invited to compete in the NCAA meet as a guest competitor, part of an Olympic try-out. After 2 weeks of training, he won the event at 6-7 1/8; it made him the No. 3 performer in the world that year. At the Final Olympic Trials at Stanford on July 16, he tied for 4th at 6-5 5/8, narrowly missing the Olympic team.

1933 – Indoors at the Butler Relays, Ward tied the 60-yard World Record with his 6.2. At the Big 10 Indoor, he won the 60 dash, 70-yard hurdles and high jump. His 6-5.5 indoors ranked him No.11 in the world. Ward scored 18 of Michigan's 60.5 points in winning the Big 10 outdoor meet. He captured the 100 and high jump and was 2nd in the 120 hurdles and the broad jump. His best 100 of 9.6 ranked him No. 6 in the world; his long jump of 24-1 ranked him No. 27.

1934 – Won the Big 10 long jump at 23-2.25. He hurdled 14.7 (No. 18 in the world). He high jumped 6-5 7/8 (No. 13 in world).

1935 – Beat Jesse Owens indoors in both the 60-yard dash and 65 hurdles. Won Big 10 high jump. Hurdled 14.5 (No. 15 in world). High jumped 6-3 5/8 (No. 55). Long jumped 25-1.5 (No. 8). In his first-ever decathlon he placed 4th at the AAU

Nationals despite no-heighting the pole vault and not finishing the 1500; he scored 6539, making him No. 15 in the world. Unfortunately, he finished his senior year with a serious leg injury.

During the Olympic year, 1936, some felt that Ward, at 6-4/200lb, would have been a gold medal contender had he trained for the decathlon. Wrote track writer Maxwell Stiles at the time, “We only know what we think Ward can do, and that is become the greatest decathlon man of all time if he can learn to pole vault, to throw the discus and to hurl the javelin.”

Ward told reporters in February that his priorities had changed, “Law school isn’t like undergraduate work. It takes plenty of study, and I’m afraid the training necessary to go to the Olympics would hurt my standing for a degree. Anyway, I haven’t done a tap of training, and I don’t know about that leg.” Asked if he might change his mind, he replied, “Frankly, I don’t believe there’s a chance I’ll do that.”

After the Olympics were over, he said he regretted not going after a chance to compete. He confessed later in life that he lost his competitive drive after being kept from playing in the Michigan-Georgia Tech football game in 1934 because Georgia Tech refused to play with a black man on the field. Michigan’s coaches controversially sidelined Ward and won the game, 9-2.

Ward admitted that the experience convinced him that blacks would not be able to compete in the Nazi Olympics of 1936. “That Georgia Tech game killed me. I frankly felt they would not let black athletes compete. Having gone through the Tech experience, it seemed an easy thing for them to say, 'Well, we just won't run 'em if Hitler insists.'”

Ward graduated from the Detroit College of Law in 1939 and served in the Army in World War II. He later worked as a lawyer, a member of the Michigan Public Service Commission and a probate judge. Elected to the UM Hall of Honor in 1981, he passed away in 1983 and is buried at Detroit Memorial Park.