

Bill Watson – Saginaw 1935



(photo courtesy of the University of Michigan's Bentley Library)

The Olympics were cancelled in 1940 because of World War II—and Bill Watson lost his shot at the decathlon gold that everyone agreed would be his.

“Big Bill” Watson was discovered by the track world in 1933 in a PE class at Saginaw High School. With the bar set at 3-feet, the entire class had to jump. Remembered Chet Stackhouse, the teacher and track coach: “When Watson’s turn came he bounced over it with feet to spare. When I went home at noon I told my wife I had just seen an Olympic champion.”

Watson, who also played football and basketball for Saginaw, won 5 state track titles. As a junior it was the shot (48-10.25) and high jump (5-11). As a senior, he led the Trojans to the team trophy with wins in the shot (53-10 3/8, a state record by over a foot), long jump (22-4) and high jump (6-1.25).

At the University of Michigan, the 6-foot, 200lb Watson became the first African-American captain of any sport. In all, he won 12 Big 10 titles in events including the shot, long jump and discus, and won acclaim for his relay legs as well. At the NCAA level, he was runner-up in the long jump in 1938, runner-up in the shot and discus the next year. Altogether he was a 7-time All-American.

No athlete in the world had the range that Watson did. In 1939 he led the world in the long jump with his 25-5.5. He was second in in the shot at 54-6.5 and No. 13 in the discus at 163-6.

In the decathlon, his unique combination of strength and speed really shined. In his first-ever, he nearly broke the World Record after having the best first day in history. His score of 7523 on the tables of the time was the No. 4 score ever and led the world list by nearly 600 points.

He had been expected to break the World Record at the Olympics in Helsinki, but the Trials and Games were both cancelled because of World War II.

Wrote decathlon expert Frank Zarnowski, “Today there is no debate as to whether he would have, at age 23, been the Olympic decathlon favorite in 1940 in Helsinki. Likely, Bill Watson would have won easily. What track authorities do debate is whether he would have repeated the win in 1944.”

Watson later served as a Detroit police officer for 25 years, winning 8 meritorious service commendations. He retired at age 49. Seven years later, his life came to a horrifying and mystifying end. A week after a confrontation with police caused them to take away a gun of his,

he drove by police officers who were ticketing a motorist and demanded they stop. He then threatened them before opening fire. The officers, one white and one black, both returned fire. Watson, hit several times, died at the scene. He was 73. The articles at the time did not address whether he perhaps was suffering from mental illness or any other issues.



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