

## *Ray Lewis*

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### *The story of a Hamilton born and raised sport hero*

Raymond “Ray” Gray Lewis was born October 8, 1910, as the youngest son to Cornelius Lewis and Emma Green.<sup>1</sup> He entered this world as a man of colour, a grandson to a slave, and an individual with an unforeseeable future. No one could expect this young boy from downtown Hamilton to one day defeat the odds and overcome indescribable difficulties in order to become the first Canadian born black athlete to win an Olympic medal. Ray Lewis was a hard working driven man who was never shy of taking on his opposition or fighting for the vindication of his rights.

Ray began to show his tremendous talent early in life and it soon became apparent that the way he ran would set him apart from the rest of his peers. His talent was portrayed ever more clearly as he entered the realm of high-school track-and-field and dominated as an all-star athlete. Ray’s superiority in the sprinting world led him to compete in the 400meter trials for the 1928 Olympics. It was there he posted the fourth-fastest time, qualifying him for Canada’s relay team, however he was rejected from the team in favour of a white runner.<sup>1</sup> Despite this disappointment Ray’s drive for success pushed him to pursue higher education at Milwaukee’s Marquette University in Wisconsin during which time he was able to be part of the Central Relay Team that won the United States National Schoolboy Championships in both 1928 and 1929. In addition to these accomplishments Ray was also able to secure the title of National Track and Field Champion in the same year at his second championship. Even with these

accomplishments and a seemingly promising athletic career Ray was compelled to go back to Canada where he would join up with the Canadian Pacific Railway as a porter.<sup>3</sup>

Even though Ray had seemingly left the world of sport and competition in order to work on the railroad and make a living for himself he never stopped training in the sport that he loved. Ray was often spotted dashing down the train tracks across North America chasing his own shadow and pushing himself to his limits.<sup>2</sup> Ray was so driven to prove his worth that when the chance came for him to try out for the 1932 Olympics he once again tested his odds despite the consequence of forfeiting a month's wages just to qualify, and even then there was always the chance that he would be turned down for a white runner once again. With a mere two weeks of intensive training governed by his own training regiment, Ray was able to qualify, amidst a hot bed of track athletes, many of whom had cushy jobs and full time coaches.<sup>3</sup> He continued his training at the Olympic training camp where once again he was faced with blatant racism by the track coach, Nick Bawalf. Ray would not stand for this and at once tracked down the team manager Bobby Kerr and told him, "Bobby, I don't need to go to California and if this guy doesn't get off my back, I'm not going".<sup>3</sup> Kerr took this very seriously and spoke to Bawalf about the situation leading Bawalf to never to talk to Ray again not even after the competition was over. It was this racism that pushed Ray to a new level of competition as he privately longed to wave a medallion in the faces of the men who had tried to humiliate him. Although prevalent in his mindset this was not Ray's true reason for pursuing his athletic career as we are able to see through the words he shares with his good friend Eddie Dore when asked about the relay team's chances, "It would be nice to win the gold but I just want to compete. And if we compete well, maybe we'll get a medal".<sup>3</sup> Ray truly was one of the world's great competitors

who simply wanted the opportunity to perform at his fullest potential and would do so even if others tried to stop him.

A week after leaving for Los Angeles on the Olympic Special Ray Lewis stepped onto the blocks, of the 400meter sprint, at the Olympic Stadium with upwards of 100,000 people staring at him as he balanced on his forefingers and thumbs, nerves taut, and muscles relaxed. He bolted from the gate with the sound of the gun at such a pace that he was left sucking deeply for air at the end but his second round time of 49.1sec would be just shy of putting him into the finals. With this behind him Ray recognized that he still had one last chance for Olympic glory, the 4x400meter relay. The stadium once again roared with anticipation of an American win as the Canadian team, including Phil Edwards, Alex Wilson, Jimmy Ball, and Ray Lewis took their places on the track. The Canadian team finished with a time of 3:12.8, behind the winning Americans, who set a new world record at 3:08.2, and the British silver medallists. Ray proudly stood on the Olympic podium as the official hung the medal around his neck. He had struggled through a system that was tilted heavily against him and he had won. For a few days he could enjoy his star status.

Ray was honoured by those at the Olympics with athletes coming to talk to him and even celebrities asking for his autograph. One day during his training a handsome, well dressed gentleman approached him, needing no introduction as Ray knew this man as the big screen star Douglas Fairbanks, posing a question that would take Ray aback. "Could I have your autograph?"<sup>3</sup> Fairbanks asked as he pulled a notepad from his jacket pocket. "Sure, but only if I can have yours." <sup>3</sup> Ray replied with surprising ease. It seemed as though the three minutes on

the track would change the way the world would look at Ray for life but unfortunately this would not prove true. When Ray got off the train in Hamilton after leaving the 1928 Olympics a bronze medalist there was no one waiting to greet him, no parade, and no key to the city. A few days later he would be back on the other side of train travel, shining shoes and blunting the barbs of passengers.

Many athletes would be greatly discouraged by the lack of admiration from their supporting community but this did not keep Ray from participating in the sport that he loved. Even though several weeks after his return he told Dore that, “an Olympic medal doesn’t buy much respect”<sup>2</sup> as he was still being refused service in restaurants and being kept out of hotels, Ray pushed on and continued his athletic career. In 1934 Ray illustrated this drive by becoming the anchor runner for the Canadian relay team at the British Empire Games where they would bring home the silver medal. When receiving this medal the British official spoke to Ray saying, “Laddie, I thought for sure you were going to catch him.” To which Ray responded, “Your Lordship, I did my best”<sup>3</sup> Through these few words you can catch a mere glimpse of Ray’s personality. Unfortunately this respectful form of competition would soon come to an end as in 1936 painful shin splints, the result of work and not enough training, brought his running career to an end. He would continue to push on and try out for the 1936 Olympics but this time would finish fifth amongst the 400meter men preventing him from competition. The failure to qualify, although signalling the end of Ray Lewis’ impressive athletic career, was just the beginning of his life achievements.

One day as Ray was walking down the street with a friend he noticed a beautiful young lady approaching them on the other side of the road. When he asked his friend about this lady he was informed that she was indeed Vivienne Jones. Within the week they would meet again, this time at a dance where Ray, as the gentleman he was, would ask Vivienne to dance and so began their story together. Vivienne and Ray were married in 1941, making a fine-looking couple who would soon settle in Hamilton once again. Within a few years Ray and Vivienne would adopt two black children named Larry and Tony. These children would bless them with much joy as they grew and developed through the years. By 1952 Ray was given the opportunity to stop portering for the railway and start his own cleaning company thus providing him with better finances. Life seemed to be going well for the Lewis' until one day when they were informed that their son Tony had drowned in the bay. Nine-year-old Tony, a non-swimmer dove into the waves and simply didn't come back up again. This incident would leave the Lewis' forever with an empty place in their lives.

Ray and Vivienne did push on through this hardship as they always had and lived a full and long life. It was in these later years that Ray began to be recognized nationwide for his outstanding achievement as a sprinter. On July 1, 2000, Ray was given the honour of lighting the torch during the opening ceremonies at the International Children's Games in Hamilton. This was followed shortly after by one of Canada's top honours. In early March Ray and his wife were ushered into Rideau Hall in Ottawa where the Governor General Adrienne Clarkson would present Ray with the Order of Canada. When she had placed the medal around his neck she acknowledged the delay of recognition as she said, "This should have happened a long time ago".<sup>2</sup> Ray was distinguished with many other awards and honours in his later life including that

of the Ray Lewis Athlete Community Service Award presented in his name every year to a local athlete dedicated to their sport and gives back to the city of Hamilton. A local grade school was also set up in his name in February 2006 as part of the Canadian Olympic School program where there is a display of Ray highlighting his career as a world class sprinter.

Ray Lewis truly was an amazing man with incredible talent. It was once said that, “A blind man could tell Ray Lewis was fast. You could hear it. Ray’s feet touched down so softly and at such a temp, they produced a light chit-chit sound. There was scarcely an accelerated heartbeat between footfalls”. Ray was able to overcome unbearable odds, breaking racial barriers and proving to the world that a black man deserved just as much respect as his white counterparts. In his later years Ray would often speak to school groups about racism and discrimination as to teach the lessons of history.<sup>4</sup> He was hopeful of a better future as he says, “I think of a day, maybe in 100 years, when our society has become so integrated that no one is judged by colour or features”. It is not only Ray’s athletics that make him a Hamilton hero and Olympian but it is his testament, his hope for a future, and the depth of his will that set him apart.

\*\*\*Attached is an interview with Vivienne Lewis, wife and confidante of the late Ray Lewis.

## Bibliography

<sup>1</sup> Coates, Corey. "Rapid Ray: The Story of Ray Lewis." Canadian Ethnic Studies Journal (2003): 4.

<sup>2</sup> Cooper, John. Rapid Ray: The Story of Ray Lewis. Tundra Books, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Kernaghan, John. "Racing to Freedom." 2004. www.thespec.com.

<sup>4</sup> Michalko, Eric. Canadian Olympic School Program Inspires Hamilton Students To Be Smarter, Better, Stronger. 1 February 2006. <[www.olympic.ca](http://www.olympic.ca)>.

## *Interview with Vivienne Vivian Lewis, wife of Ray:*

**1. So tell me Vivienne Lewis, how did the two of you meet?**

*Well I was walking with my sister on one side of the street and we met up with Ray who was walking with my brother on the other. He said to my brother, "Who is that?" and my brother told him I was his sister. It was before the night of a dance. We met together at the dance with some other people. I don't remember who the others were anymore. But I met up with him there and we danced together all night. We ended marrying shortly after, and had a good life together.*

**2. What did you and Ray like to do together, what were some of his hobbies?**

*After his running career? Well we were always together and we travelled a lot. Ray loved travelling.*

**3. Do you remember Ray having any heroes or people he looked up to whether coach or friend?**

*Well Ray had lots of friends that helped him along the way. His first mentor was Sergeant-Major Andrew McIntosh who was a teacher at Wentworth Street School. He was a white man who saw past Ray's color and inspired him to run.*

**4. What were Ray Lewis' religious views?**

*Well Ray and I both went to a church just down the road. He was a good man, a leader, a listener, a fair person. We were just, well, regular people.*

**5. Was Ray recognized for his achievements in the city of Hamilton?**

*Well I think so; Ray was a very popular guy. He was always out doing things. We were both really busy with work.*

**6. Do you remember when Ray Lewis was given the Order of Canada in 2001?**

*Oh yes. It's hard to forget that. That was a grand ceremony. The amount of people that came from this area to see him was just great.*

**7. Why did Ray Lewis have to end his career?**

*Well his legs started to really bother him. He had shin splints. He missed the cuts for the 1936 Olympics because of it actually.*

**8. Was sprinting Ray's only profession/career?**

*Oh No. Ray couldn't just run for a living. He worked for 22 years on the railroad polishing shoes. See in those days, black people had to have jobs like that. Other jobs were for different people. Not us. Then he got older and he just couldn't do it anymore. He was pretty old by then.*

**9. I've heard that Ray Lewis was a man who loved to teach children and help them with their education. Is this true?**

*Oh Yes. Ray Lewis actually started up a school up the mountain and he spent all his time there. He was always at the school, with the kids. I've been there too, many times. It's a wonderful school to go to. Every chance I had I would go there with them. Before he passed, I went there more, but it was a very nice place. I miss him very much. He was a wonderful man.*