

Win Whipple of Arkadelphia 1915-1937

By Larry Don Frost, Ed.D.
Professor of English

*Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay
And early though the laurel grows
It withers quicker than the rose.*

(from A.E. Houseman's "To an Athlete Dying Young")

One of the finest high school athletes Arkansas ever produced set a record in the long jump that lasted fifty-one years. Had he not died when he did, he might have altered the history of "Hitler's Olympics."

Winfield Whipple was born in Crowley, Louisiana, September 10, 1915; but his parents moved to Arkadelphia when he was a baby. He grew up on Hardin Street with three older sisters, one older brother, and one younger brother. The sisters were intelligent, studious, and musical. The boys were polite, athletic, and fun-loving.

Few of his friends knew that he was named Winfield. Most called him Win or Skinny. The boys in the "Hardin Street gang," calling for him on his block, cried "Hey, Skin-nay! Skin-nay!" (Bledsoe) A quiet, soft-spoken boy, Win would walk outside his house to the shady, oak-lined street that led to the banks of the Ouachita River, which lay only a few hundred yards away. He would join his friends for a swim in the river, a game of baseball, or a race from one corner to the next. Sometimes they would hold a rope between two boys and the others would take turns leaping over it. They "scissored" the rope; to "roll" it would be cheating. At other times, they would place the rope onto the ground to form a jumping line. Each boy would run until he got up his speed. When he reached the rope, he would leap as high and as far as he could. The competitive boys placed scraps of paper where each landed, although for the longest time no one ever thought to actually measure the lengths of the jumps. One fact was obvious, though. Win Whipple's scrap of paper was always three to five feet farther away from the rope than the markers of the other boys, even those of older boys, such as his brother Maxwell. By the time he was thirteen years old, his friends were measuring his best jumps at an incredible twenty feet nine inches. At fourteen he hit twenty-two feet.

Win was a child in the 1920's, and Arkadelphia was a prosperous, growing town. His father had steady work, the public schools provided a good grounding in the fundamentals of learning, and the Presbyterian Church answered all questions concerning the state of one's soul. Win received a ribbon for not missing Sunday school in four years (Whipple family scrapbook). Theft was uncommon and murder almost unheard of. The streets saw a few cars, but these were so noisy that baseball players could hear one coming three blocks away and could pick up home

plate and carry it to the curb until the car had clattered by. Seconds later, the game resumed.

Then the great depression hit, and Win entered high school. The school work was harder, and money was even scarcer than murder. But the Whipples got by, and Win was on the verge of becoming a celebrity, although he didn't know this.

Skinny Whipple's speed and jumping ability caught the attention of Arkadelphia coach H. W. Macmillan, who also was the boy's Sunday school teacher. Macmillan soon had the boy working hard to develop his talents. In his eleventh-grade year was the district meet at Camden, where the boy was high point man with 17 ½ points. He won the 100 and 200 meter dashes and the broad jump and ran on two winning relay teams. He was happy to see his brother Max win the low hurdles.

The incident that, years later, still meant the most to Coach Macmillan occurred that same day. Camden had beaten Arkadelphia in a dual meet one week earlier, and the two teams were tied going into the final event of the district meet. Only the mile relay remained. Each of the four boys had to run for one lap, or one-quarter mile. The relay team consisted of Fred Suits, Charles "Doc" Johnson, Nolan "Brownie" Crawford, and Skinny Whipple.

Macmillan (in a letter to Skinny's mother, dated February 8, 1937) recalls, "I walked down to the track with Fred and Doc and Brownie and Skinny. Doc took the baton out of my hand and said, 'Well, I'll bring it in first for my lap,' and each one of them told me the same thing. After they had won the race, Skinny walked back across the field, looking for me, and handed me the baton and said, 'Here it is.' There was a smile on his face and seemingly, it had been no effort at all; but I knew that he and the other three had put everything they had into that race for me. He lived his whole life that way, putting everything that he had into life and never once thinking of himself (Whipple family scrapbook)."

And then came the state meet at Conway. His team finished fourth there, but Whipple sprang 23 feet 3 ¼ inches, and set a new state record. Everyone marveled at his feat, but few realized that Win Whipple's name would stand in the record books for fifty-one years.

But that is not remembered in Arkansas sports history as The Jump, which came the next year on May 5, 1933, at Clarksville, on the track of the College of the Ozarks, at the annual state high school meet.

Over half a century later, Wilson Falls of Russellville remembered the great jump as if it happened last month.

"He was the greatest high school jumper I ever watched," Fall said. "To the best of my recollections, he was lean, lanky and speedy. He went off the board like a balloon, about head high, maybe five feet six inches, and soared like a bird. The key, of course, was distance caused by height and speed and desire. He had extreme confidence. He knew he was good" (Falls telephone interview).

What happened after THE JUMP has caused much discussion ever since.

"He jumped over, or out of, the pit about two or three times," Falls said. "His best jump was at least 24'6". The jump officials ruled it (or them) illegal. The top judge was called, and he said to give him the length of the pit, 24'0". In that time there were few rules and no overriding association. It was the top judge's decision to make (Falls telephone interview)."

The arguments began at once. According to Falls, Wallace Bailey, coach at Russellville, wanted Whipple to be credited for actual distance jumped. Earl Quigley, coach of Little Rock's team, agreed. The Arkadelphia coach did not contest the measurement; and Long John Thompson, Fort Smith's coach, said that "it was none of his business" (Falls telephone interview).

A photograph on the first page of the sports section of the May 7, 1933, *Arkansas Gazette*, shows Whipple just leaving the ground on a jump that was to measure 23'10" and win the finals of the state meet. His record was actually set the day before in the preliminaries. The photo shows a slender, short-haired young man with both arms raised above his head, his right knee raised to waist level, and his left foot, off which he jumped, beginning to rise as well. Four young men line the pit to his left. The one on the extreme end of the pit holds a spade (Whipple family scrapbook).

One of the young men in the picture is Rube Boyce, who became assistant athletic director at Auberndale High School in Memphis. A star sprinter himself at the time (He won the 100 and the 220-yard dashes in the state meet the following year), Boyce had just been ruled ineligible to compete for the Russellville Crimson Cyclone because he lived out of the Russellville school district. Reduced to spectator status, he watched and helped out.

"He jumped out of the pit at least twice," Boyce said. "So we dug the ground to make the pit longer. It was a sand pit, but where he was landing was still hard clods. He jumped past the pit about eighteen inches. He jumped about 24'6" I would say. When he hit the ground he was stunned. I put one hand under his arm another on his elbow and helped him up. I said, 'Good jump, Winfield' and he said, 'Thanks'" (Boyce interview).

Boyce has a theory about **The Jump**. "I think that he got scared," he said. "He was having a good day, and his adrenaline got to flowing. He didn't jump that far the next day. He was no longer scared, or his legs were sore or something" (Boyce interview).

His legs may well have been sore. His heel was likely to have been hurting after landing outside the pit. That was the beginning of foot and leg trouble that stayed with him for the rest of his life.

"His foot hit the starting board on the third or fourth jump," Boyce recalled. "That might have been when he hurt his foot. We didn't use rubber strips for starting boards then; we just put an old rough board on the ground" (Boyce interview).

To Boyce and others the jump seemed incredible, extraordinary. What few at the meet

knew, though, was that Whipple had surpassed that distance many times in practice and that he had actually leaped 24' 10" one month earlier, on April 10, 1933, in a quadrangular meet at Texarkana.

The national high school record at the time was 24' 2 5/8" and was held by Eddie Hamm of Loneoak, Arkansas. Hamm had gone on to win the gold medal in the long jump at the 1928 Olympics. Naturally, Skinny Whipple was beginning to look ahead to the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin.

But first he had to compete on the national level and to start to college. His first goal was to win his event in the national scholastic meet in Chicago. A major problem stood in his way, though, a problem known as the Great Depression.

"Our family certainly didn't have the money to send him to Chicago," said his sister, Mae Whipple, who retired in Arkadelphia after a long career as a music professor at Henderson State University. "But the people of the community staged a benefit at the Royal Theater and raised the money" (Whipple interview).

Cecil Cupp, manager of the theater, allowed school-age children to attend the regular feature for ten cents a ticket, proceeds going to the travel fund. Donations were solicited through newspaper columns (Whipple interview).

Finally, enough money was raised to finance the trip. Skinny and two friends caught a ride to Memphis, where they were met by former Henderson-Brown coach, Jimmy Haygood (HSU's Haygood Stadium was named for him), who drove them to Chicago (Whipple interview).

A short notice in the June 29, 1933, issue of Clark County's *Southern Standard* reads:

Trio Back From Chicago

The arrival in town from Chicago at various times during the last week of Skinny Whipple, Eggs Iglehart and Doc Johnson was welcomed by their many associates here. These three illustrious gentlemen seem to have managed their transportation without cost, and from the worn out appearances managed part of the trip without meals. They report an enjoyable trip, having seen most of the Fair, including the national collegiate and scholastic meet. (Whipple family scrapbook)

Otherwise, the *Southern Standard* did not report upon the results of Whipple's efforts in the broad jump.

Three items in the Whipple family scrapbook tell the story. One is medal consisting of a purple ribbon from which suspends a bronze disk stamped "29th Interscholastic Meet 1933 University of Chicago" on the front, and on the back, "fifth prize broad jump." The second item is a small snapshot of Skinny and his friend "Egg" Iglehart leaning against a rail in Grant Park Stadium at Chicago's Soldier's Field (where they slept in the bleachers). Whipple wears white

slacks, a white shirt, and a white straw hat. Egg is wearing dark slacks, a white shirt, a polka-dotted tie, and a Chicago-style cap. Both boys are sporting canes. They look like two young swells who have enjoyed the Century of Progress exhibition to the fullest. The third item, when looked at with the perspective of hindsight, is foreboding. It is a newspaper clipping which reads:

Whipple Had Injured Foot

Stone Bruises Hamper Arkadelphia Boy at Chicago

Winfield Whipple, Arkadelphia High School athlete who competed in the broadjump in the National Scholastic track and field meet at Chicago last Saturday, did not appear in the finals because of an injured foot. His jump in the preliminary gave him fifth place. Whipple, who has suffered from a stone bruise since the state meet at Conway, never could get his foot in shape and the work in the preliminaries completely incapacitated him for the finals (Whipple Family scrapbook).

The finals of the broadjump in that meet was won by a slender, young black man from East Technical High in Cleveland, Ohio. His name was Jesse Owens, and he went on to win the broad jump, the 100 meter dash, and the 200 meter dash in "Hitler's Olympics" in 1936. Win Whipple would lie in bed that summer of 1936, one of his legs missing, listening to the news of Owen's triumphs, perhaps wondering if he could have taken one of those gold medals if things had gone differently.

All the Whipple children were attending college, depression or not. Everyone was elated when the word came from Bernie H. Moore, track coach at Louisiana State University. Skinny had won a scholarship at the school that had won the national title that season in track and field and one that offered a major in forestry as well. The future indeed looked brighter.

Whipple packed his bags for Baton Rouge. Then he had to say good-bye to his high school sweetheart, Nancy Clark, who remained in Arkadelphia and enrolled at Henderson-Brown College. He gave her a small photo of himself, which she placed in a locket opposite her own image.

Win loved LSU from the first day. He instantly became very popular with the other boys in the forestry program and with his professors. He attended Sunday school regularly at the First Presbyterian Church and joined the Student Association there. His track coach issued him a handbook prepared by the Athletic Council entitled "Training Rules and Hints," which contained on the first page these cardinal rules:

1. NO SMOKING WILL BE ALLOWED DURING THE SEASON.
2. THE USE OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES OF EVERY KIND IS PROHIBITED.
3. LATE HOURS ARE FORBIDDEN—except when permission is granted.
4. BEHAVE YOURSELF AS A GENTLEMAN SHOULD AT ALL TIMES.
5. YOU ARE ON YOUR HONOR—and a real man never breaks his word of honor.

The "tips" included these:

- Milk is a food, NOT A LIQUID. Drink it slowly. Don't gulp it down. There will be no condiments or spices used during the season.
- The active Athlete should not lack appetite. Nor should he be constipated. If you do, or are, reach for the "Pink Pills."
- Of course there will be days of sunshine and days of darkness. They are your "ups and downs." We all have them. Think of the bright side of life—Tomorrow the sun will be shining again (Whipple family scrapbook).

The promising young track star from Arkadelphia took these rules seriously, and he trained rigorously.

Freshmen did not compete against upperclassmen in the Southeastern Conference, so Whipple's big day his first season came at the Twenty-Seventh Annual Track and field championships of the Southern Amateur Athletic Union at LSU Stadium on May 25 and 26, 1934. The Sunday edition of the New Orleans Times-Picayune carried a photograph of Whipple setting a new broadjump record of 24" 6 5/8". In the photo, his legs are thrust out before him, his feet parallel to one another. He bends forward at the waist so far that his chin is almost between his knees. His arms and hands, palms up, trail behind him. He appears to be coming in for a perfectly balanced landing. A close examination of the photo also shows that the back of his left foot is heavily taped (Whipple family scrapbook).

The year 1935 was an important one for prospective Olympians, and Whipple had already passed the distance (twenty-four feet) that qualified him for the trials. The student newspaper at LSU, in an article entitled "Seniors and Sophomores to Form biggest Part of 1935 Track Team" said, "In the broad jump is a sophomore who promises to be by far better than any man L.S.U. has ever had in that event, James Whipple, who in his only try for real distance last year cleared 24 feet seven inches, which is better than Ralph Newell's all-time mark of 24 feet" (Whipple family scrapbook).

By the first month of 1935, however, it was becoming more apparent that Win Whipple had to overcome problems with a nagging "stone bruise" in his left leg if he were going to reach his full potential. The usual treatments of the LSU trainers didn't help. He essentially lost his sophomore track season but retained hope that he could eventually be back at full speed.

By February of 1936, the year of the Olympic Games in Berlin, he could walk without pain, but it still hurt to jump. What was worse, though, was that it hurt when he lay down. School officials finally advised that he visit Campbell's clinic in Memphis, probably the nations best orthopedic facility.

When Dr. Campbell examined the x-rays, he called the boy's parents and requested that they come to Memphis at once. Surgery was going to be necessary; and if the conditioned proved as serious as the doctor suspected, amputation was a possibility.

On February 14, 1936, Dr. Campbell found cancer in the bones of the twenty-five-year

old man's left calf and removed the limb above the knee.

The *Arkansas Gazette* reported that the "infection" that required the surgery was the result of a "sprained muscle suffered while jumping." But according to Win's sister Mae, Dr. Campbell said that the disease could not necessarily be linked to an athletic injury (Whipple interview).

Newspapers in Arkansas and Louisiana reported the bad news, and letters of condolence began pouring in from friends and well-wishers, and especially from his classmates, teammates, and professors at LSU, as Win recovered at the clinic. Most of those who wrote him addressed him as "Whip" or "Skinny."

Considering the tremendous disappointment that the young man felt in realizing that he would never compete again, he recovered in spirit. He kept an article, clipped from a newspaper, that someone had sent him. The article told of a young man named Jimmy Vaughn, of Detroit, who had lost a leg but who, with the aid of faith and prayer, was learning to walk well with an artificial one (Whipple family scrapbook).

Win remained in the hospital through February and into March. His spirits remained high, even as the nation's sank into the deepening depression. Also, as he listened to the news on the radio which his friends at Baton Rouge had bought him, he heard rumors of war in Europe. His friend Orin Johnson sent him a picture of himself smiling with pride and dressed in his white uniform. A letter from "Eggs" Iglehart, the other boy who had made the trip to Chicago with him in 1933, said, "Looks like the world is going to be one big battlefield before long. Italy and Germany and Japan should have their fanny kicked. The big shots of those countries are going to start plenty of trouble before long. I hate to think about it, and I hope the U.S. can stay out of it (Whipple family scrapbook)."

Win went home in March, and he seemed well and strong. Many friends visited, and he never allowed anyone to treat him as a sick person. At times someone would come by with a car and take him to a ballgame or track meet. But just as the nation was facing the prospects of another world war, Win Whipple was facing another threat from illness. The disease spread to his lungs and heart; and in the final weeks of his life, he rapidly grew worse.

He died at 6:45 P.M. on February 2, 1937, in his family home. His funeral took place in the First Presbyterian Church in Arkadelphia. The Rev. Mr. Herndon McCain preached a brief sermon. He was buried in Arkadelphia's Rose Hill Cemetery.

Life went on. Jesse Owens, who had outjumped Skinny by less than two inches when both were high school seniors, was by then one of the world's most famous men, the man who had embarrassed Hitler in the Berlin Olympics. Hitler invaded Poland. The Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Hundreds of thousands of young American men marched off to war, tens of thousands of them never to return alive. The great depression ended.

At the war's end the veterans and prosperity returned. America went about its business through the fifties, sixties, and seventies. Schoolboys in Arkansas routinely lowered the track

and field records set by the earlier generations, all the records but one. The name Win Whipple and the distance twenty-four feet seemed indelible. Most years, someone would near twenty-three feet, sometimes even edge past that mark. But twenty-four feet stood there like a barrier, like the mythical feat from a mysterious, archaic age. And the story passed into legend. Some said that the great jumper died of tetanus one month after setting his record. Some said that he was permanently injured after falling from the hood a car and never jumped again.

All records are, of course, eventually broken. Johnny Johnson of Nashville lept twenty-four feet two and one-half inches in the AA State Meet on May 10, 1983. The name Win Whipple was erased from the record books, after fifty-one years. The distance of THE JUMP itself had stood for fifty. The record has been cut. Still, the name and the great jump itself will remain in the memories and imaginations of all Arkansas track and field athletes who grew up between 1933 and 1983.

Works Cited

- Bledsoe, Bennie Gene. Personal interview. 6 June 1988.
- Boyce, Rube. Personal interview. 1 June 1988.
- Falls, Wilson. Telephone interview. 25 May 1988.
- Whipple family scrapbook. Now in possession of Ross Whipple.
- Whipple, Mae. Personal interview. 6 June 1988.

Biographical Sketch

Dr. Larry Don Frost, Professor of English, has taught American Literature and Science Fiction in the Department of English and Foreign Languages since 1970. He holds the Doctor of Education in the College Teaching of English degree from Texas A&M, Commerce. A lifelong track and field fan, he was the Arkansas Intercollegiate Conference champion in 1964 in the 880-yard run while captaining the track team for Arkansas State Teacher's College.

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.