

Black History Month 2024

The Lewis Family of Willingboro

New Jersey has long been a home to outstanding athletic families. And without a doubt, one of the finest of all sibling combinations passed through Willingboro in the 1970s, when brothers Mackie, Cleveland and Carl and sister Carol Lewis all embarked upon historic athletic careers while growing up in town.

The Lewis kids were the offspring of parents Bill and Evelyn, who met as young track stars in Alabama and moved to Willingboro in the early 1960s.

During the years when the siblings were growing up, there was one - and then two - high schools in town. John F. Kennedy was the original high school, before increasing enrollment created Willingboro High. Years later, Kennedy closed and Willingboro became the sole high school in the Burlington community.

Mom and dad not only taught and coached at both schools, they were founders of the Willingboro Track Club, which has served as a feeder program for Willingboro athletes since 1969. It was rooted in a desire by Evelyn to start a track program for girls when nothing of the sort existed in that pre-Title IX period.

Mackie Lewis was the oldest of the Lewis crew, graduating from Kennedy in 1972 as a record-setting sprinter.

Cleveland Lewis was an outstanding soccer player at Kennedy, where he graduated in 1973.

Cleveland Lewis scored more than 100 goals in high school, and moved on to Brandeis College in Massachusetts, where he was an All-American and led the team to the NCAA Division 3 championship as a senior in the fall of 1976. He was named tournament MVP after scoring both goals, including the clincher, in the second overtime of the final.



Cleveland Lewis

He ended his career with a school-record 58 goals, and in 1993, was a charter inductee into the Brandeis Athletic Hall of Fame.

Cleveland made history in 1978, when the New York Cosmos made him their first-round selection in the North American Soccer League draft. In doing so, he became the first African-American drafted by the NASL.

Although he didn't play for the Cosmos, he did compete in the NASL for the Memphis Rogues.

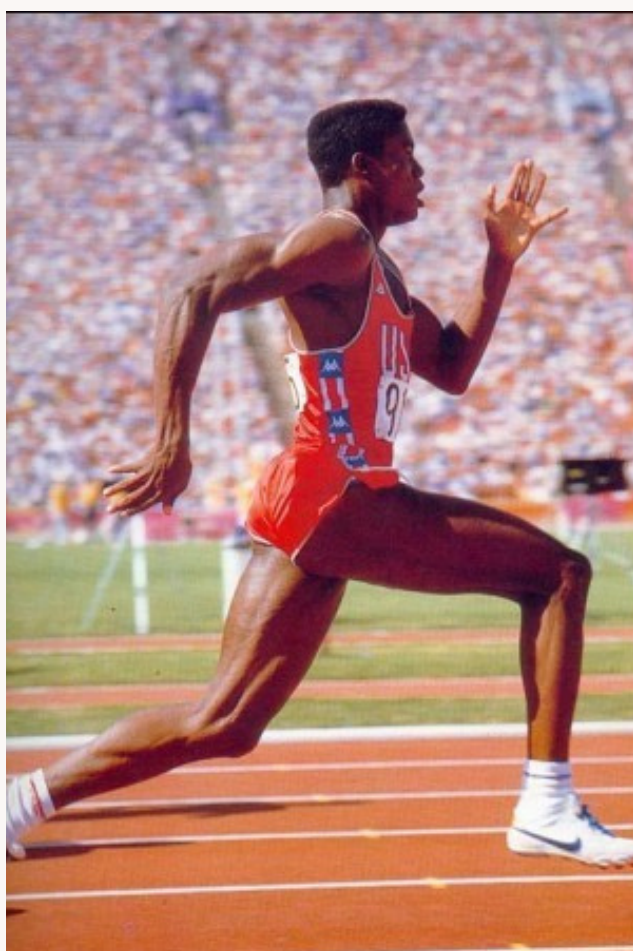


Cleveland Lewis with the Memphis Rogues, after being the first African-American drafted by a NASL team

Carl Lewis graduated from Willingboro High School in 1979, after a record-setting career as a sprinter, long jumper and high jumper. Among his many accomplishments that year was a first-place long jump finish at the outdoor NJSIAA Meet of Champions (jumping 23-6 1/2). That year, he also jumped 26-9 1/4 at the Pan American Championships, which stands as the New Jersey boys record. He also set a still-standing state boys indoor long jump record that year (25-5 1/2) at the Easterns. He was actually ranked fifth in the world that year.

After winning NCAA titles at the University of Houston, he went on to become one of the greatest track athletes of all-time, winning nine Olympic gold medals and one silver through 1996, an astounding number that could have been higher if the United States had not boycotted the games in 1980.

He also won 10 World Championship medals, including eight gold. At the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, he made history by winning four gold medals - in the 100 meters, 200 meters, 4x100 relay and long jump.



Carl Lewis



Carl Lewis with his four gold medals from the 1984 Olympics

For more than a decade, Carl Lewis also dominated world rankings in sprints and in relays. He set a world indoor long jump record in 1984, and was the Olympic gold medalist in the long jump three additional times, in 1988, '92 and '96, becoming the third Olympian in any sport to win the same event four times. At the 1991 World Championships, he set a world record in the 100 meters (9.86) and personal record in the long jump (29-1 1/4), which was one of the greatest leaps ever recorded.

In 1999, he was named "Sportsman of the Century" by the International Olympic Committee and also named World Athlete of the Century by International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), the world governing body of track and field.

In addition to many honors closer to home, he is a member of the NJSIAA Hall of Fame, and the athletic facility at Willingboro High is named Carl Lewis Stadium.

The Lewis family success did not end with the three brothers.

Carol Lewis graduated from Willingboro in 1981, and competed on teams that won multiple NJSIAA championships and were coached by Evelyn Lewis (at the same time, Bob Lewis happened to be the coach across town at Kennedy).

Like her brother, Carol was a champion long jumper. In fact, when Carl won the boys Meet of Champions in the event in 1979, Carol was the girls winner. She would also win the event as a junior and senior, among several other MOC wins during her career. She was an American junior record holder and ranked fourth in the country, all while in high school. Like her brother, she was denied a chance to compete at the Olympics in 1980 due to the political boycott. She had made the team, though, while still in high school.

Like Carl, she attended Houston and won two NCAA long jump championships while there. She was the United States long jump champion in 1982, '83, '85 and '86 and the national indoor long jump champ in '83, '84, '85 and '91.

Carol competed in a variety of other sports growing up, and later became a competitor in the two-woman bobsled. Although she came up short in qualifying for the 2002 Olympic team, she did compete that year at 2002 bobsled World Cup.



Carol Lewis was four-time United States long jump champion



Carol Lewis