

SPORTING LEGENDS: FLORENCE GRIFFITH-JOYNER

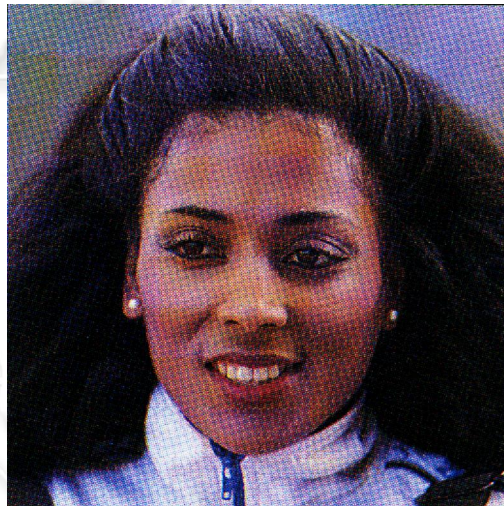
SPORT: ATHLETICS

COMPETITIVE ERA: 1983 - 1990

Delorez Florence Griffith-Joyner a.k.a. Flo-Jo (December 21, 1959 - September 21, 1998) was an American athlete, still holder of the World Records in the 100m and 200m as of 2009.

She was the wife of track star Al Joyner and the sister-in-law of Jackie Joyner-Kersey.

Already fast at an early age, Los Angeles-born Florence Griffith finished fourth in the 200 m at the inaugural World Championships in 1983.



The following year, she gained much more attention, though mostly because of her extremely long and colourful fingernails rather than her silver medal in the Los Angeles Olympics 200 m.

After these Olympics, Griffith spent less time running and married 1984 Olympic triple jump champion Al Joyner. Returning at the 1987 World Championships, she finished second in the 200 m again.

She stunned the world when - known as a 200 m runner - she ran a new 100 m World Record of 10.49 in the quarter-finals of the US Olympic Trials. Many later suggested the wind metre in the stadium malfunctioned during the race, but the record is still recognised.

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Griffith-Joyner's 100m & 200m World Records have not been beaten in over 20 years!

Now known as "Flo-Jo", Griffith-Joyner was the big favourite for the titles in the sprint events at the 1988 Summer Olympics.

In the 100 m, she ran a (wind-assisted) 10.54 in the final, beating her nearest rival Evelyn Ashford by 3 tenths of a second. In the 200 m, she set a new world record of 21.34, winning by 4 tenths.

Griffith-Joyner was also a runner in both the 4 x 100 m and 4 x 400 m relay teams. She won a gold medal in the former event, and a silver in the latter, her first international 4 x 400 m relay.

Throughout her career, Griffith-Joyner was dogged by rumours of drug use. Some of her track competitors insisted that her times could only be the result of using steroids or other performance-enhancing drugs, mainly because her performance improved dramatically over a short period of time (and when she was rather old for a sprinter), but also because some claimed she sported a tiny moustache; her sudden death only fuelled these rumours.

In 1989, another sprinter, Darrell Robinson, claimed that Griffith-Joyner had paid him to obtain human growth hormone. She denied this, calling him a "compulsive, crazy, lying lunatic." In and out of competition, Griffith-Joyner never failed a drug test. She retired the next season.

In 1998, she died in her sleep of cavernous angioma in Mission Viejo, California. The autopsy established that performance-enhancing drugs did not kill her, although it did not establish whether she took such drugs in the past.

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Scott Burton's Final Thought

The story of Florence Griffith-Joyner is certainly an interesting one. It consists of incredible athletic talent, incredible controversy and of course, incredible tragedy.

The fastest women ever to walk the earth, Joyner surprised the entire world with her performances at Seoul 88. It's just a shame that the integrity of those brilliant performances has been called into question on numerous occasions since.

I watched those Seoul Olympics on TV back in 1988, and from a young 12 year-old's perspective, to see a woman run 100m in 10.54 secs was unbelievable. She was like a blur of red and white storming down the track, leaving all her opponents way behind. Having also watched Ben Johnson's 9.79 secs just a few moments earlier in the men's 100m, final - it was an absolute treat! Fantasy stuff, indeed.

However, the controversy over those performances has never really gone away, which is a shame. Whilst Ben Johnson was immediately chastised for his blatant steroid use, Joyner was also tested and registered as 100% clean. Nothing wrong with that.

Critics questioned the apparent muscularity she possessed compared to her peers, whilst also consistently pointing to the fact that she had a faint moustache. The bottom line is that, she was tested as 'clean' on all tests and that's all an athlete can ever do.

Do I think that she was on the gear? Possibly, but there's no solid proof to ever point to that conclusion. I believe that she's the fastest woman in human history, and that's the legacy I remember from her achievements. To possess World Records in 2 events for over 20 years is something truly legendary. Her sudden passing in 1998 was extremely sad, and unfortunately only served to re-launch all the controversy surrounding her career. Nonetheless, Joyner is a true sporting legend - as far as I am concerned.



Griffith-Joyner's 4 medals from Seoul 88 made her the 'golden-girl' of US Track & Field.