



'Rabbit' is greeted by former teammates at the 1990 Hall of Fame dinner.

James 'Rabbit' Ward: Sprinted his way to athletic prominence

By John Hartsock

Growing up in the Fifth Ward section of Altoona in the 1920s, James Ward picked up the nickname "Rabbit" because of the speed that enabled him to win neighborhood foot races.

But as time passed and Ward became a track star at Altoona High and West Chester University, "Rabbit" evolved into a premonition as well as a nickname.

"I was usually the fastest among the neighborhood kids in my age group," recalled Ward, who now resides in West

Chester. "I carried the nickname all the way through school."

Ward was a three-sport standout at Altoona High in the mid 1930s, participating in football, basketball and track.

He set school records in the 100-yard dash, the 220-yard dash, and the broad jump, which is now known as the long jump.

"I believe that I ran the 100 in 9.7 seconds, the 220 in 21.5, and that I broad jumped 21 feet, 11 inches," said Ward.

"In high school, I progressed from being a nobody to being a record-holder. I enjoyed being coached by the late Dick Bartholomew, who taught me quite a bit, and there was good fellowship among all the guys on the team."

"Rabbit was the best sprinter that Altoona ever had," Bartholomew once said.

With no pun intended, Ward's track record certainly indicated such. He represented Altoona in the 100, 220 and broad jump events at the PIAA state tournament in each of his three seasons in high school.

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"The states were held at State College back then," said Ward. "I didn't win any championships, but I remember finishing second to Barney Ewell in the 100-yard dash. Ewell went on to participate in the 1940 Olympics."

Ward himself tried out for the 1936 Olympics team, but was disqualified in the Princeton, N.J. trials.

"They say I jumped the gun," he said. "I was a freshman at West Chester, and many of the townspeople had put up money to sponsor my trip to Princeton. It was kinda disappointing to go back and tell them I didn't make it."

Athletic disappointments were few in number for Ward, who participated in football and basketball state championship games at Altoona High, before posting the fourth finest collegiate time in the nation in the 220.

"When I was a senior, our football team, coached by Snaps Emanuel, played Bethlehem for the state championship at Allentown," said Ward. "We ended up in a 13-13 tie, so we were co-state champions that year."

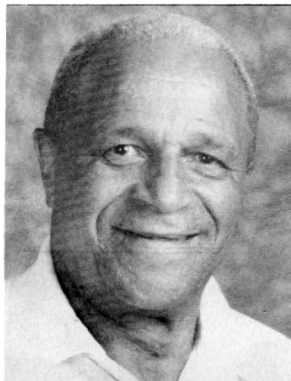
"I was a first-string player on the basketball team when we lost the state championship game to Lower Merion High School of Philadelphia."

Growing up was tough for a young black man in the 1930s, during the Great Depression. And so it was for Ward, who prides himself on being able to "swing with the punches."

Segregation was rampant during Ward's high school days, his college career, and even in his stint as a commander in the United States Army in the early 1940s. But Ward got by, with a little help from his friends.

"The track team went over to Pittsburgh when I was in high school, and the largest hotel in Pittsburgh refused to house me because I was a black person," said Ward. "I was the only black person on the

JAMES "RABBIT" WARD



Age: 78

Sport: Football, track

High School: Altoona Area.

College: West Chester.

Hall of Fame Achievement:
Fourth fastest 220 in the nation in 1938; still holds Altoona High record in 100-year dash (9.8).

Current Occupation: Retired as Executive Director of West Chester Housing Authority.

Current Residence: West Chester, PA.

when I was in school," said Ward, who did hold a job at West Chester that helped him finance his college education. "I am really grateful to my family for that."

Ward has done a lot with his life in and out of sports arenas. After graduating from college, he stayed in West Chester to hold a job as a recreation director at a community center. Following his military tenure, Ward went into private business for 20 years until 1966, when he was named Executive Director of the Housing Authority in West Chester.

Retired since 1978, Ward does volunteer work as an advocate for that area's impoverished. Though times have changed, Ward's commitment to excellence remains unaltered.

"We ran under different conditions than the high school people do today," said Ward, a widower who returns to Altoona annually to visit brothers and sisters who have maintained roots here. "Our tracks were cinder (rather than concrete). Even Shippensburg (now the site of the PIAA state championships) had a terrible track."

"But participating in high schools sports motivated me to get passing grades so that I could continue to participate in college. Anybody who has any pride would try to excel."

team, and I thought it was real nice when the team withdrew all the reservations that it had made at the hotel.

"In college, I had to stay off-campus with a black doctor friend," said Ward, who participated in football and soccer as well as track in college. "I wasn't allowed to stay on campus because I was black. But I've gotten over all of this now, and I don't hold any grievances toward anybody."

Athletics offered Ward a chance to better himself, and with the help of his family, he took advantage of it.

"I came from a large family of ten brothers and sisters. The Depression was coming on, but I was never expected to work in order to help support the family