

KUUMBA KORNER

by Dorothy Word



100 years of Black Olympic struggle and progress

The 100 year-old Olympics and its 26th Olympiad has come a long way in its embrace of African American athletes.

In 1904, sprinter George Poage was the first and only African American to compete in the games. He won an Olympic medal. In 1996, many African American Olympic athletes — male and female — enjoy great popularity and are very marketable as athletic icons. Something unheard of in earlier years.

In 1968, at the Olympic Summer Games in Mexico City, Mexico, the media and many of the fans felt and expressed their outrage at a number of African American athletes who used the victory stand as a place to display their civil rights protests. These athletes wanted to show solidarity with the African Americans on the “front lines” of the Civil Rights Movement engaging in freedom rides, sit-ins, etc.

The protest demonstration began with Tommie Smith and John Carlos, who raised their gloved fists during the playing of the U.S. National Anthem, after receiving their Olympic medals. Less publicity was given to Lee Evans, Larry James and Ron Freeman who wore black berets on the victory platform. Bob Beamon wore black socks to show his support of Smith and Carlos. But much more attention was paid to Beamon's record-breaking long jump of 29 feet and 2-1/2 inches—than to his socks!!

These Olympic athletes of 1968 wanted Americans and the world to no longer take African American athletes for granted. Did they succeed....or what ??