

## Black History Month 2024

# Eulace Peacock

Eulace Peacock was a great New Jersey athlete. And if not for an unfortunate injury, he could very well have been remembered as one of the most famed sports stars of the 20th Century.

Born in 1914 in Alabama, his family was part of the wave of Black families that migrated northward from Southern states where attitudes hadn't changed much since the end of the Civil War. Many of those families came to New Jersey, and the Peacocks were no different, as they settled in Union.

Eulace became a football and track star at Union High, where he graduated in 1933. In track, he set a state long jump record (24 feet, 4.25 inches) that held for an amazing 44 years until broken in 1977 by Renaldo Nehemiah of Scotch Plains-Fanwood.

In the 1930s, track and field was a sport that commanded much more national attention than it does today. And a top national sports story became a competitive but very friendly rivalry between two stars – Eulace from New Jersey and Jesse Owens from Ohio.

Their meetings began in high school. At one event in those years, Eulace set a national high school long jump record, only to have it broken by Owens just two hours later.



After his graduation from Union, Eulace moved on to Temple University, and Owens went on to run for Ohio State. The pair crossed paths frequently, and more often than not, Peacock was the winner, particularly during the buildup to the 1936 Olympics in Germany.

During the 1935 season, in fact, Peacock set three world records – in the indoor 60 yard dash, 100 meter dash and long jump. At one point that year, Peacock defeated Owens in five consecutive races, and the nation took notice. Owens, in fact, was quoted saying he wasn't sure if he'd ever beat Peacock again.

Unfortunately for Eulace, an injury only a month later dealt his career an unrecoverable blow. Running for the United States in a relay race in Milan, Italy, he suffered a severe hamstring tear while trying to make up ground during his leg in the race.

The injury all but shut down Eulace until the Penn Relays in April, 1936, where he suffered another severe hamstring tear.

As much as he tried, he simply could not recover in time for the Olympics later that year in Berlin, Germany, where Owens won four gold medals in the absence of his main rival, including the 100 meters and long jump. Doing so on the home turf Adolf Hitler and his racist Nazi government made Owens a national hero back in America, a status he maintained for the rest of his life.

Eulace recovered from his injuries, but with the breakout of World War II, the Olympics were cancelled in 1940 and 1944.

During the war, he served in the Coast Guard, where he also coached track. He became a successful businessman, and he even formed a meat packing company along with Owens.

He also served the track community by working decades as a meet official. He died at age 82 in 1996.

Even though the hamstring injuries denied him a chance at long-lasting fame, he did receive some notable recognition over the years. The most recent was his induction into the NJSIAA Hall of Fame in 2022.

Eulace's name also lives on in his hometown of Union, which each year presents the Eulace Peacock Unsung Hero Award. It recognizes those in town who "humbly, dilligently and passionately seek change and progression within the community without looking for credit or recognition."



*Eulace Peacock, running for Temple University, shakes hands with friend and rival Jesse Owens of Ohio State*