

Skinny Whipple, Track Star

In the early 1930s, an Arkadelphia High School student began a journey that many believed would culminate with competition the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin. Successful in many running events, Winfield “Skinny” Whipple established a high school state record in the long jump that stood for decades and attended Louisiana State University on a track scholarship. However, an Olympic appearance was not meant to be. Tragedy struck, and Whipple never made it to Berlin.

James Winfield Whipple was born in Louisiana, but soon after his birth, Fredrick and Pearl Whipple moved their large family to Arkadelphia, where Fredrick opened a restaurant. Win attended Arkadelphia schools, and in high school, his 5’9” height combined with a weight of about 150, earned him the nickname of “Skinny.” The moniker was used so much that most people did not even know his real name.

Whipple was athletic, and was a member of the football, basketball, and track teams. In the first track meet of the 1933 season, Skinny won the high jump, broad jump (now called long jump), 440-yard dash, 100-yard dash, and the 220-yard dash. In another meet, Whipple jumped a whopping 24’ 10” in the broad jump. The *Siftings Herald* commented: “That Arkadelphia may have a world champion in her midst becomes more apparent every time young Winfield Whipple makes one of his famous running broad jumps . . . Repeatedly this spring he has jumped more than 24 feet.” The article noted that his jump was longer than that of the national broad jump record. Unfortunately, Skinny’s record was not officially recognized because the jump was not performed at a national meet. At the end of the season, at the Arkansas state track meet, his championship jump was measured at an even 24 feet, the length of the pit. Officials would not acknowledge his true distance, which was beyond the end of the pit. Some even wanted to rule the jump illegal!

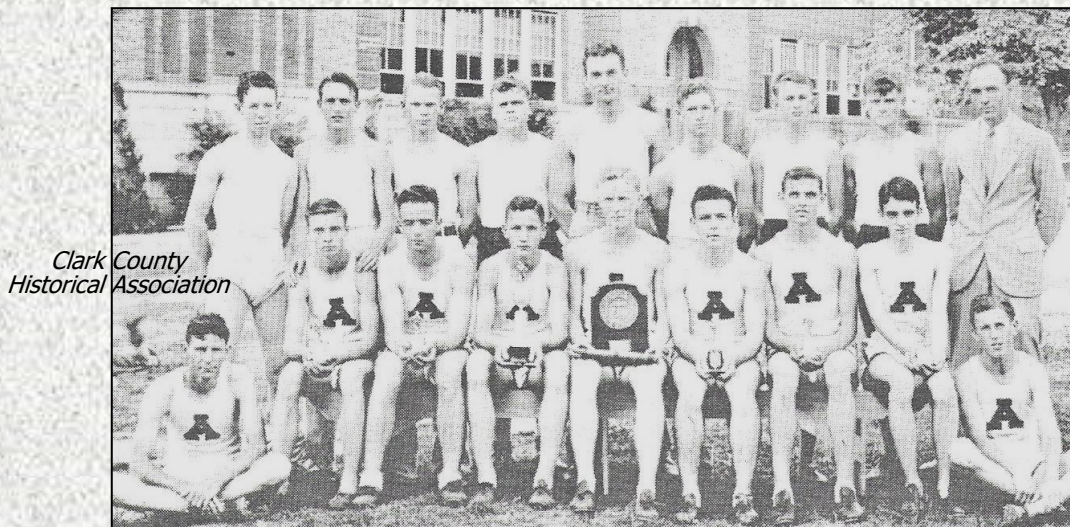
Skinny Whipple had improved his distance in the long jump by approximately one foot per year from 1929 to 1933 and was expected to continue in that pattern. A school friend once recalled Win’s uncanny ability to precisely duplicate the placement of his feet in the run-up to the jumping-off point and attributed his great success to that talent.

In the spring of 1934 at LSU, he became the South’s college broad jump champion, leaping 24’ 6 5/8”. Skinny began training for the Olympic trials, since he had already surpassed the qualifying mark by more than a foot. Indeed, he stood a good chance to make it to Berlin in 1936.

Early in 1935, however, Whipple began to experience pain from what doctors initially diagnosed as “stone bruises.” The pain continued to plague him and eventually a diagnosis of cancer was made. Skinny’s left leg was amputated above the knee in February of 1936. A few months afterward, his condition deteriorated, and it became apparent the surgery had come too late. The cancer had spread to other parts of his body. Winfield Whipple died in February of 1937. While one can only speculate, it is clear that had Skinny continued to improve the length of his jumps, he would have been leaping about 27 feet by the time of the 1936 Olympics, more than enough to exceed the world record Jesse Owens established there.

In 1994, OBU student Greg Schanfish recorded Mae Whipple’s recollections about her brother, and the story appeared that same year in the *Clark County Historical Journal*, published by the Clark County Historical Association.

1932 Arkadelphia High School Track Team



Clark County
Historical Association

Front row, left to right: Douglas Terrell, Charles Johnson, Dolly Winburn, Skinny Whipple, Nolan Crawford, Fred Suits, Hendrix Spraggins, Sam Doane, Max Whipple. Back row: J.W. Bethea, Wallace Herbert, Harry Hall, William Huie, Johnny Hollis, Royal Deaton, Floyd Sturgis, Owen Matlock, Coach H.W. McMillan. Not pictured, Holloway and Stoker.