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5/11/18

History

The Story of Leon Bailey

There are many people who consider certain African Americans as ground breaking or have broken a barrier. In this paper I will write about a forgotten one, that many don't talk and or know about.

In today's world if you ask a random person to name a ground-breaking person, or a person that have paved the way for many people. Most would say names like Jackie Robinson who was the first African American in the MLB. Kenny Washington, who was the first African American in the NFL. Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, who was one of the first African American in the NBA. Lastly John Baxter Taylor, who was the first African American to win the gold medal in the Olympics. Many or no people at all will name the person that I will further go in depth on. That person's name is Leon Bailey, the first negro to integrate a navy wrestling team, at Quonset point Naval Air Station. Quonset Point, Rhode Island in 1963.

Leon Bailey was Born on May 17,1943 in Baltimore, Maryland. He Grew up in east Baltimore and was raised by just his mother, Father left him at a young age. Growing up in a single parent home caused him to mature much faster than his friends, and peers. "therewere no black role models to look up to, so I had to mature quicker than most kids". He was dealt with, and faced adversity at a young age. Around the time he was born segregation was still happening, not to say that it still might not occur in

today's world. As many may know Baltimore can be a very dangerous place sometimes, so imagine growing up in the city, like Leon Bailey and my self. Its already tough enough to live in Baltimore but having to also face racism makes it even tougher.

Knowing how easy it is to be around and be involved in gangs, drugs, and violence. Leon Bailey's mother wanted him to find a way to spend his time, rather than spending it in the streets. That's when he was introduced to wrestling at the McKim community center in 1955 at the age of 12 years old. The desire to wrestle started in a room in the community center, where blacks were only allowed on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Many may be wondering if he was only allowed in the room to wrestle on Tuesdays and Thursday's, then what did he do on the other days. Leon Bailey took wrestling serious even at a young age, and on the days where he couldn't wrestle he would work out by himself, and try to stay in tiptop shape. He explains how he spent a lot of his time running and jogging around the city of Baltimore, and lifting weights.

Leon Bailey attended Carver Vocational-Technical High School, which is located in the inner city of Baltimore. While attending Carver he continued to wrestle and around this time he started to travel around Maryland for wrestling tournaments. As many know that with success, comes the negativity of others. Stated earlier in the paper Bailey did face a lot of difficult, and racist situation even as a young teen, hearing statements such as "no n*****", "no n***** allowed". Can't imagine how hard it was for a young teen to have to deal with racism, when just trying to have fun and compete. He knew that even at a young age, if he would have taken action against those who made the racist remarks that consequences would follow. When asked how he dealt with those situations, he stated that he just tried to block it out, and just focus on wrestling.

After High School Bailey went on and joined the United States Navy. After spending two years in the navy, he was offered the opportunity to wrestle on the team. Bronze medalist of the 1952 Olympics, Josiah Henson, coached him and was the one that wanted him on the team. Coach Henson wanted to create a wrestling team, and didn't look at my color, but at my talent and skill". Bailey claims to have never wrestled against a black opponent, within the time span of 1963-1965 in the New England AAU wrestling tournaments. He may have even thought that he was the only African American wrestling at that time.

During his time wrestling in the navy, he became a champion in 1964. In 1964 Bailey won the New England state AAU wrestling championship, was the first African American to do that. At that time of him winning the championship, he didn't know that he was the first African American to do so. It wasn't until 50 years later that it became a big thing, and he noticed what he done. Which will be talked about more, further into the paper.

Success didn't stop there for Mr. Bailey; in 1964 he was invited to the Olympic trials. He had an outstanding record of five and zero, during the New England state AAU wrestling championship. Even with that outstanding record, he wasn't able to make the Olympic trials. Many may assume that Bailey didn't make the team, because of his skin color, but that is false. With in one of his matches he actually busted one of his knees and wasn't able to make it for that reason. Even with the injuries, he still decided to go on and wrestle, and beat his opponents.

Even with all of that success people still found ways to be negative and try to drag him down. There were times in his career that was extremely hard on him, and he

thought about giving up. The hate was just sometimes too strong and effective, he dealt with the same things that he dealt with as a young teen. As we got further into the interview, he began to share his opinion on the racism he faced, when he reflected on his wrestling career. “it wasn’t easy when people didn’t want you in certain places”, “we were niggers, black, weren’t wanted, there were doors in the back that said we couldn’t go through.”

Stated earlier in the paper, we were going to talk more about how he discovered that he might have been the first African American to win the New England State AAU wrestling championship, it wasn’t until years later when coach Josiah Henson’s son, Josh Henson researched on the New England AAU wrestling championship records. Josh Henson reached out to Mr. Bailey upon email, telling him how he thought Mr. Bailey may have been the first African American to win the New England state AAU wrestling championship. Research is still being done till this day, just to be 100% sure that the people were correct. There is always different opinions and thoughts that people provide, that may make them want to recheck their thoughts, and do further research on the topic.

After all of that happened, Mr. Bailey started to receive recognition for his actions. He started to receive awards left and right. In 2017 he was inducted into the National wrestling Hall of Fame, in Stillwater, Oklahoma, as the Outstanding American award. Bailey also wrote a book in 2014 called “The Dream”, it is a fairly short book reflecting on his life. Which has received many good reviews.

As of now Mr. Bailey is using his story, to be a motivational speaker to the youth. He is also very religious and stated, "It's not my story, its God's story, and I'm just telling his story, the story was written before I even came out of my mother's womb". Mr. Bailey has several videos on YouTube, of him speaking to kids, motivating them to pursue their dreams. He travels throughout Baltimore and talks to many different schools. He is widely respected throughout the community of Baltimore. As of now Mr. Bailey is 75 years of age, and just wants to continue to have a positive impact on the community. May 5, 2018 Mr. Bailey was name as one of Baltimore's African Americans Sports Legends, to find out more about Mr. Bailey you can visit his website at "leonbaileynavywrestling.org".

