

National meets drew world's top runners to Howard Wood

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BY STU WHITNEY

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Sioux Falls hosted some of the world's finest track performers from 1959 to 1967, when Howard Wood Field was the site of the NAIA men's national track and field championships.

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Back then, black athletes were not being recruited at many NCAA Division I universities. So the NAIA meet was loaded with talents such as future Olympic gold medalists Bob Hayes (Florida A&M) and Ralph Boston (Tennessee State), as well as Roger Sayers of Omaha University.

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Hayes made headlines in 1961 by setting a world record of 9.3 seconds in the 100-yard dash preliminaries before a Howard Wood Field crowd of 5,000.

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While they thrilled local fans during the meet, many of the African-American athletes were not welcomed quite as warmly once they left the stadium.

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"There was nowhere inviting for them to go to," says Alice Vaughn, a black resident of Sioux Falls for more than 40 years who now lives in Omaha.

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Vaughn, along with her late husband, George, would host final-day cookouts for the NAIA track athletes at their home on Euclid Avenue, about a block from Augustana College.

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"My husband would take the station wagon, go get them and bring them out to our home," says Vaughn, 84, who worked in investment banking downtown.

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"Our backyard was on a large lot, and we had a deck back there where we would serve hamburgers and hot dogs and potato chips.

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"There was no other social option for them, and we loved the fact that they could come and feel real free. We just opened it up to having a good time."

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It's interesting to picture the surreal scene of world-class sprinters (and future NFL wide receivers) Hayes and Homer Jones, standing alongside long jump champion Ralph Boston in the Vaughns' spacious backyard, munching on hot dogs.

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Track and tennis standout Wilma Rudolph even made an appearance one year, according to Vaughn.

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Another local black family, the Dysarts, also opened its doors to the NAIA athletes during the meet. Marie Williams (Dysart) recalls meeting several of the tracksters at her house on North Spring Avenue.

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"As a female in Sioux Falls, you didn't get to see many black males other than your brothers or cousins, so it was exciting to get to meet those guys," Williams says. "We didn't have much space, but there was always room for more. They got treated well with us."

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