

## Florence Griffith-Joyner

*"People don't pay much attention to you when you are second best. I wanted to see what it felt like to be number one.."* -Florence Griffith-Joyner

One of the most memorable moments of Olympic history was when Florence Griffith Joyner became an track and field champion, winning 3 Gold Medals during the 1988 Seoul games. It was then that the persona known as "Flo Jo" became known worldwide. With her shiny one-legged running outfits, long hair, and brightly painted fingernails, she captured medals and the attention of the world with her speed, grace, and charm. She captured world records in track and field and was named "The World's Fastest Woman." President Clinton recognized her talent and appointed her as co-chair of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

Florence Griffith Joyner was born Delorez Florence Griffith on December 21, in Mojave, California the seventh of eleven children. Her family nicknamed her "Dee Dee." At age 7 she began chasing rabbits in the housing project in South Central Los Angeles her family had moved to that year. Her mother was strict and raised her to adhere to house rules that included no television and early bedtimes. She once remarked about her home life, "The main reason I wanted to be successful was to get out of the ghetto. My parents helped direct my path." She was a star adolescent athlete and student. She won the Jesse Owens National Youth Games at the Sugar Ray Robinson Youth Foundation and was a straight-A student. Breaking several of Jordan High School's records in track and field, she graduated and attended California State University at Northridge and was coached in track and field by Bobby Kersee. Two years later she transferred to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) following Coach Kersee.

FloJo tied out for the Olympics in 1980, but did not qualify for the team. That was the year the President Jimmy Carter kept the United States team out of the Olympics being held in Moscow because of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan. In 1982, Florence won a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) championship by running 200 meters in 22.39 seconds. The following year, she won an NCAA championship by running 400 meters in 50.94 seconds. She qualified for the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles and after winning a silver medal in the 200-meter dash in those Olympic Games, she went into semiretirement.

In 1987, Florence returned to competition, taking second place at the World Championship Games in Rome. After rigorous training she made a highly dramatic comeback in the trials for the 1988 Olympic Games. At the 1988 Seoul Olympics, Flo Jo topped off her track career with three gold medals for the 100, 200, and 400-meter races, as well as a silver medal for the 1600-meter relay. Her time for the 200-meter run at the Seoul games is a world record that has yet to be broken. That year she was voted US Olympic Committee and Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year, winning the Sullivan Award as the nation's top amateur athlete and Awarded the Jesse Owens Award as an outstanding field and track athlete.

Throughout her career, Griffith-Joyner was accused of drug use. Some of her track competitors bought into false rumors that her times could only be the result of using performance-enhancing drugs, mainly because her performance improved dramatically over a short period of time. In 1989, another sprinter, Darrell Robinson, claimed that Griffith-Joyner had paid him to obtain human growth hormone. She denied this, calling him a "compulsive, crazy, lying lunatic." In and out of competition, Griffith-Joyner never failed a drug test. She announced her retirement in 1989 from the sport to pursue writing and acting.

Following her retirement announcement, FloJo's image of charm and flashy dress landed her a new career in her own clothing design and cosmetics businesses. She designed uniforms for the NBA's Indiana Pacers team. That same year, 1989, she became spokeswoman for the American Cancer Society, the Multiple Sclerosis Foundation, and Project Eco-School. In 1990, she and her Gold Medalist husband, Al Joyner had a daughter, Mary Ruth (MoJo) Joyner. President Clinton recognized her influence and expertise by appointing her co-chair of the president's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports when he took office in

1983. She was dedicated to helping other young people to overcome their disadvantages. She and Al co-founded the Florence Griffith-Joyner Foundation for disadvantaged youth in 1984. Florence was inducted into the United States Track and Field Hall of Fame in 1985. Sadly her life was cut short in 1989 when she died of an epileptic seizure. Everyone agreed that she left this world too soon.

Flo Jo's success is especially great when her beginnings are considered. She began her life in the projects of South Central Los Angeles. The values of independence and individualism were instilled in her household from an early age. She began running at age 7. Her adherence to her family's values made her a true role model. Her excellence in all endeavors inspired fans to achieve their own successes and reach higher in life. She will always be remembered for her athletic prowess, grace, charm and beauty. The image of her victoriously waving the American flag at the Seoul Olympics is forever indwelled in our hearts as an image of her career and motivation that defined the "American Dream."

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**Jim Mathis, CSP is an international Certified Speaking Professional, executive coach and trainer. To subscribe to his free personal and professional development newsletter, please send an email to: [subscribe@jimmathis.com](mailto:subscribe@jimmathis.com) with the word SUBSCRIBE in the subject. An electronic copy will be sent out to you every month. For more information on how Jim and his programs can benefit your organization or group, please call 888-688-0220, or visit his web site: [www.jimmathis.com](http://www.jimmathis.com).**