

One of his favorite amusement as a boy, together with his brothers and sisters, was to roll along with – or inside of – the empty boxes of a conveyor belt of a cannery of his hometown, Kingsburg. One day, when he was ten years old, he waited too much time to hop off, and his left foot wedged between the belt and the metal rollers, and his instep got entirely torn loose. Surgeons sewed the flap of skin back into place, but the functional recovery process was long, and the foot never returned to normality. Throughout his athletic career and his whole life, it kept hurting. That painful injury did not hamper that boy so keen on sport, to become one of the greatest decathlete of all time. His name is Rafer Johnson and, three years before winning the gold medal at the Rome Olympics in 1960, he toured Italy for a fortnight.

La Gazzetta dello Sport of 12 July 1957 gives notice of his arrival with the following words: «*The decathlon world record holder Rafer Johnson is due to arrive at the Malpensa airport to-day, at 16.45, directly from the United States. Johnson is going to spend a few days in our country. He will be present in Parma on July the 14th and 15th to watch the decathlon second and third-class level italian championships, then will be in Brescia on 16 July, and later on also at Schio together with the decathletes of our national team*». The day after, the same newspaper confirms: «*Yesterday Rafer Johnson arrived in Italy with flight number 647 coming from New York. He made a call to our editorial offices, then left us to go to Parma where, during the decathlon national championships of second and third-class level (in those years italian athletes were divided into categories of technical level, and not according to their age), he will exhibit his athletic qualities. Italian decathlon record holder Franco Radman and others top class decathletes of our country will take part in the competition as guests, too. In the following days, at Brescia and Schio, Johnson will give lectures and show films about decathlon to Italian coaches. Then he will set off for other countries: Jugoslavia, Pakistan, Ceylon, Belgian Congo, China, for an amount of 45 days*».

Also the sport newspaper of Bologna, *Stadio*, on July the 13th writes about Rafer's presence in Parma: «*Beside his track exhibition, in the evening he is going to lecture about training methodologies of all-round athletes*». On July the 14th the same *Stadio* writes that «*There was also the world record holder Rafer Johnson, but he contented himself just with a few samples of his talent*». It was a hot day, indeed, and, as *La Gazzetta dello Sport* of 15 July refers, «*after an exhibition of hurdling technique, Johnson chose to shelter under a large sunshade*».

A more detailed account is that of *Stadio* 15 July: «*The presence of Rafer Johnson, world record holder at decathlon, undoubtedly helped to increase the interest towards the national championships of second class level decathletes, joined by some of our top-class athletes who competed as guests. The famous champion from the United States of America, who is touring Europe, was invited by the Italian Track and Field Athletics Federation (FIDAL) in order to promote in our country a growth of interest towards this event that in Italy can count on a small number of lovers. Johnson gave a show of his abilities in some exhibitions, impressing the eyewitnesses with his style, than talked about his training methodology. He surprised the audience when he explained that in the United States there is a spontaneous good number of decathletes because it is policy of their schools and colleges to teach the whole set of track and field athletics events, and to organize multiple competitions also for very young boys, with lighter implements, hurdles of lower heights and shorter distance to run. In short, the main target is to form all-round athletes. Johnson delivered his lecture in English language, and his words, promptly translated into Italian by our coach Carlo Riccardi (before the Second World War Boyd Comstock's right-hand man, when Comstock was head coach of italian track team), were keenly appreciated. A*

certainly positive experience for our athletes (among whom there was also Franco Sar, in those days just a good prospect), whose fruitfulness will become visible in the months to come». Luigi Ridolfi, FIDAL president, Giorgio Oberweger, head coach of our national team, coaches Lauro Bononcini, Alessandro Calvesi and Giuseppe Russo attended this interesting meeting too.

After the already mentioned halts at Brescia and Schio, the champion from United States rushed unexpectedly to Rome. The sport newspaper of the capital city of Italy, *Il Corriere dello Sport*, on July the 24th, gave notice of his arrival and of a brief track exhibition followed by a lecture planned for Saturday the 27th at 10 o'clock in the morning at Terme stadium. The same newspaper, two days later, reported that Johnson paid Italian Track and Field Athletics Federation a visit, at 6 p. m. They wrote a remarkable article about the great champion on July the 27th: *«Broad shouldered, 1.90 tall and about 90 kg of weight, a friendly look and a handshake like a steam-roller. This is Rafer Johnson, the 22 years old (to be reached on his next birthday, the 22nd of August) decathlon world record holder from California, who has a keen interest towards our city (to-day probably still vivid, as he willingly accepted to come back to the capital city of Italy in 2010 for the celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the Rome Olympics). He stated he will be back here for the 1960 Olympic Games, and that has already increased and bettered his training amount of work and method in order to be capable of scoring, by that date, well beyond 8000 points. With a long row of «good, good» he underlined his appreciation for the Olympic stadium, and found likeable the atmosphere of the Marmi stadium. Apart from athletics, he was particularly impressed by Saint Peter cathedral. Decisively less lovable are to Rafer the 1500 meters, the last and most fatiguing of the ten events of a decathlon. A mischievous question about them got discharged like a torpedo by our Peppino Cuccotti, coach and former long jumper, as Johnson's time at 1500m, when he established the world record, was a modest 5:01.5. Rafer's personal best at this distance is, however, 4:54.2, so we can infer that his slow performance on the day of the record was due to a time-table planned just to reach the target without any risk. During the press conference, held in the hall of the Italian Track and Field Athletics Federation, the californian talked about many others interesting topics. One was the world record. He thinks it is not going to last long. There are others good athletes in the world who threaten his score of 7985 points, but he himself is sure to be able to do much better than that. The problem that bothered him in the last Olympics, where he had «to content» himself with winning a silver medal, should be soon overcome thanks to the surgery he underwent lately. The injured leg is healing, gaining back its strength, again able to endure any kind of strain. Rafer added that he got favourably impressed by Italian athletes, that he found athletically sound, and had a special mention for our new decathlon record holder Franco Radman; Johnson said he would be really glad to have him as a guest in the United States to train together. Martucci, head of the press office of our Olympic Committee, nodded to Rafer's words, and will soon work out a specific plan. If this plan is concretely going to be carried out, the first one to be glad of it will surely be Radman himself. Of course Franco will have to sustain the effort of the college life, with its set of hours dedicated to the various activities, training included. In this rigid discipline regulated by a fixed time-table, we discover the key to both success and weakness of the American society, rich in vital force but merciless to those who do not keep up with it. And U. S. sport, in our opinion, share the same mechanism. Johnson went to the Olympic stadium to have a look at it and to film it with his camera, a hobby he is fond of, than Ottaviano Massimi, on behalf of FIDAL, handed to the champion a bronze reproduction of the famous Roman she-wolf. Martucci explained to Rafer the meaning of the mythic tradition that links together the she-wolf and the capital city of Italy, and Johnson listened all-ears to his words. At the end the californian thanked everybody for*

the welcome received, something he stated it is really proud of, and wished a bright future for Italian decathlon. To-morrow, the scheduled time-table will have the Terme stadium as a meeting place, at 10 o'clock in the morning. On that track, Johnson will show us his talent at sprinting (personal best at 100m 10.3), hurdling (personal best at 110m hurdles 13.8) and long jumping (personal best 7.76). Roman athletes are invited to join the champion. As it has already happened at Parma and Brescia (where some Italian middle distance runners and throwers had settled down to take advantage of the same sport center from 15 to 25 of July), Johnson wants to share his training sessions and methods with our athletes also in Rome».

We can't help mentioning that also the federal magazine *Atletica* (issue of July 18) wrote a few lines about the presence in Italy of this outstanding US athlete, in the article that talked about the national championships for second and third-class level decathletes: «The two days competition was attended by the decathlon world record holder Rafer Johnson, who gave evidence of his great talent with a few exhibitions».

Decathlon was not (and has never been) a popular event in our country, so the Italian Track and Field Athletics Federation (FIDAL) decided to do something to promote it. It was not just a matter of technical notions. That's why they chose a champion instead of a coach. And a champion from the United States, the nation who in their opinion was the cradle of track and field, the country we all, in Italy, thought had the mastery of knowledge about this sport. Johnson represented the inaccessible that materialized among us, the icon of decathlon itself. This policy paid off. Three years later FIDAL got the better result ever achieved at decathlon in the Olympic Games by an Italian athlete, the sixth place of Franco Sar (**m.m.**)