

CALIFORNIA INTERSCHOLASTIC FEDERATION-SOUTHERN SECTION (CIF-SS)

BLACK HISTORY MONTH 2026:

CIF-SS HONORS WOODY STRODE: ATHLETE, ACTOR, CIVIL RIGHTS PIONEER

#146 Historical tidbit.

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The great Woody Strode at various points in his life and career.

Many people are familiar with Woody Strode as an actor, with the IMDB website listing among his trademarks: “Impeccable musculature and towering height” and “Often played quiet, dignified men of action.” Less well known is that he played an important, pioneering role during the early civil rights era as part of the integration of African Americans in major sports leagues. And, least known of all – Strode was an outstanding CIF-SS athlete!

Strode was born in Los Angeles on July 25, 1914, and he attended Thomas Jefferson High School, located just two miles away from the L.A. Memorial Coliseum. He had a remarkable year of 1933 as a student athlete in Spring and Fall sports for Jefferson.

At the time, the Los Angeles Unified School District was still part of CIF-SS. The CIF-LACS did not start competing as a separate section until the Fall 1935 sports trimester, but separate city league championships were already being held by 1933.

Strode was a member of Jefferson’s fast-improving track team. Jefferson would go on to win the city league championship in 1935 and, starting in 1937, Jefferson won the newly formed CIF-LACS championship seven years in a row. He can be said to have helped establish the winning tradition of “The Mighty Dems.”

The high point of Strode’s high school track career occurred in May 1933, with three major meets held less than three weeks apart. The Los Angeles Times cited the achievements of “Woodrow Strode” in its coverage of all three events.

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First, on Monday, May 1, the Los Angeles City championship was held at Housh Field on the campus of Los Angeles High School. Strode won the 220-yard Low Hurdles event and placed second in the Shot Put. This placed him third overall in the entire meet in terms of individual points scored.

Second, on Saturday, May 13, the CIF-SS championship was held at the Coliseum. There, Strode placed third in the 220-yard Low Hurdles, and second in the Shot Put. With his contributions, Jefferson finished third in the meet behind El Centro and Los Angeles.

Third, on Saturday, May 20, Strode returned to the Coliseum for the State championship. Here he once again finished third in the 220-yard Low Hurdles and second in the Shot Put.

One of the inspiring things about this is that on Friday, March 10, a magnitude 6.4 earthquake was centered in Long Beach. The devastation extended to the Jefferson campus, with six buildings completely destroyed. Yet, Strode and his teammates went on to distinguish themselves just two months later.

Strode's achievements continued that Fall, for he was also an outstanding football player. A story in the Los Angeles Times, covering Jefferson's 7-6 loss to Fremont, played Friday, November 10, 1933, lists the line-ups of the two schools and reports that Strode was an End. As was common in the early 1930s, Strode played that position on both offense and defense. At the end of the season, CIF-SS archives show, Strode was named to the All-CIF First Team. Not only that, he was also selected Player of the Year.

It is as a football player that Strode truly made history. He went on from Jefferson to attend UCLA, where he also played football and ran track. In football, he was teammates with two other African American athletes who would emerge as key figures in 1940s professional sports – Jackie Robinson (Muir High School in Pasadena) and Kenny Washington (Lincoln High School in Los Angeles).

Robinson, of course, would go on to break the color barrier in Major League Baseball when he joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947. But there was another major sports league with a similar injustice – the National Football League. Founded in 1920, the NFL had employed a few African Americans on their teams each year through the 1933 season. And then, nothing. No African Americans played in the NFL for 12 years, through the 1945 season.

That finally changed after the end of World War II and the relocation of the reigning champion Cleveland Rams to Los Angeles for the 1946 season. In March 1946, 27-year-old Washington was signed to a contract, and a few weeks later, 31-year-old Strode was signed as well. Washington was a Running Back and Strode an End for the Rams that season, as the team went 6-4-1 and placed second to the Chicago Bears in the Western Division.

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Washington only played three years in the NFL and 1946 was Strode's only year in the league – but they had earned their place in American sports history by reintegrating what is today the country's leading professional sports league. One indicator of the long road that they pioneered is that it was not until 1962 that the Washington Redskins employed their first African American player, and the NFL was at last fully integrated.

Strode was 32 years old when he played his final NFL game – an “advanced age” for a football player. But not for an actor. He embarked on a legendary second career, which allows us to conclude this story where it started. His credits include Cecil B. DeMille's “The Ten Commandments” (1956), playing the King of Ethiopia; “Pork Chop Hill” (1959), which may be the best movie ever made about the Korean War; and four John Ford westerns.

Interestingly, his two best-known roles may be movies in which he did not speak a word of dialogue. In 1960, he appeared in “Spartacus,” earning a Golden Globe nomination for Best Supporting Actor. He was a silent gladiatorial combatant against Kirk Douglas' Spartacus, refusing to kill Spartacus when he had the upper hand, instead turning his rage on their Roman captors. And, best of all (in this writer's humble opinion), he co-starred with Jack Elam as a gunslinger in the great, elongated title sequence of Sergio Leone's “Once Upon a Time in the West” (1968). It is a tribute to his athleticism and ability as a performer that Strode could command such presence without saying anything.

...And, in his amazing life he also served in the U.S. Army Air Corps during World War II. Strode died on December 31, 1994, in Glendora, California, at 80 years old. Truly a great American, and a great CIF-SS athlete.

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