

Speedskater doesn't want to be lone Black woman to win Winter gold

BY HOWARD FENDRICH
AP NATIONAL WRITER

MILWAUKEE — When American speedskater Erin Jackson won the 500 meters at the Beijing Games four years ago, she knew, of course, that it was her first Olympic medal. She also was aware that it had been a while — 28 years, to be exact — since a woman from the U.S. finished first in that event.

What she had no idea about until days later: Jackson was the first Black woman, from any country, to claim an individual gold medal, in any sport, at any Winter Olympics.

Jackson definitely does not want to be the last.

"It was just really surprising, I guess, because I felt like, 'How could that be?'" she said in an interview with The Associated Press at the U.S. Speedskating trials ahead of the Milan Cortina Games. "When you think about how many Winter Olympics we've had, I just thought it was really strange. I hope people can see my story and the stories of other Black women in winter sports and then, hopefully, we'll have more coming up soon."

They're not there yet.

The 33-year-old Jackson is the only Black athlete among the 21 speedskaters on the long track and short track squads for the United States at these Olympics, although this could be the most diverse Winter Games roster the country's had overall.

"I can't imagine being a younger kid watching the Olympic Games and never seeing somebody that looked like me do what I'm trying to do," said U.S. speedskater

Brittany Bowe, a two-time bronze medalist. "For her to be able to do that, and she is now that face for young Black girls to be able to look up and say, 'She can do it? Now I can do it! — it's monumental.'

Bowe famously gave up her spot in the 500 four years ago to her longtime friend after Jackson slipped at the trials; an extra U.S. berth later opened up, allowing both to race in China.

Jackson, already the first Black woman to win a World Cup 500, took full advantage. She was focused on the piece of metal she wanted dangling from her neck, not the historical significance.

"We didn't even think about that at the time. I didn't even realize it until a day or two later," U.S. Speedskating national team coach Ryan Shimabukuro said. "She's proud of it, obviously. And I'm proud of her for it. But we didn't really think about that, as much as: What is the best way to skate the fastest?"

These days, though, increasing the kinds of faces seen in her sport is one of Jackson's goals, along with bringing home more hardware from Italy, where she'll compete in the 500 and 1,000 after winning both distances at the trials despite being about a month removed from a torn left hamstring.

"I just hope that I can help other people of color get involved in winter sports and speedskating. ... It's really important to see people like you achieving something, because then maybe that can inspire you to try the same things," said Jackson, who grew

up in Ocala, Florida, and was a top inline skater before switching to the ice four months before qualifying for the 2018 Olympic speedskating team.

"I just always want to be a good example," she said, "or someone who other people can look to."

When she's done competing, Jackson intends to set up a foundation modeled after EDGE Outdoors, a group based in Washington state that helps provide scholarships for minority women to get into skiing and snowboarding. Jackson has worked with them, reviewing scholarship applications. She also has been

involved with the Utah-based Sisters in Sports Foundation, which offers mentorship and funding for female athletes with disabilities.

"One of the biggest issues with winter sports is there is a really big barrier to entry around cost. They're really expensive sports to get into," Jackson said. "That kind of limits the talent we can have and the people who can give it a shot."



ERIN JACKSON competes in the women's 500 meters at the U.S. Olympic trials for long track speed skating at the Pettit National Ice Center Jan. 4 in Milwaukee.

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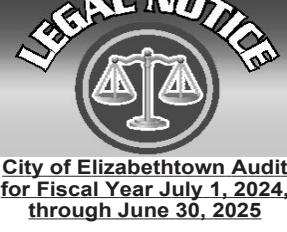
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