

Rafer Johnson

*Olympic Gold Medalist and California Special Olympics Founder
William Dickson Leader-in-Residence, Ukleja Center for Ethical Leadership at CSULB*

"From the very start in 1969, I wanted to be a part of helping our Special Olympics athletes succeed. I'm another set of eyes, another set of hands and a heart working to be there for them, finding a way to help them be the best they can be." -- Rafer Johnson

- Notable sports figure, commentator, and philanthropist
- World and Olympic record holder in the Decathlon
- 1956 Olympic Silver Medalist, Decathlon
- 1960 Olympic Gold Medalist, Decathlon

Rafer Johnson, along with a small group of volunteers, founded California Special Olympics in 1969 by conducting a competition at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum for 900 individuals with intellectual disabilities. Rafer's involvement in Special Olympics began the year before, when he attended the first Special Olympics competition conducted by Special Olympics founder, Eunice Kennedy Shriver. That event inspired Rafer to become more involved.

After the first California games in 1969, Rafer became one of the original members of the Board of Directors. The Board worked together to raise funds and offer a modest program of swimming and track and field. In 1983, Rafer ran for President of the Board to increase Board participation, reorganize the staff to most effectively use each person's talents and expand fundraising efforts. He was elected President and served in that capacity until July 1992, when he was named Chairman of the Board of Governors.

Over the years, Rafer has been involved with scores of charities. However, he is most passionate about Special Olympics Southern California. Rafer was the USA Team Captain and Flag bearer at the Rome Games and was selected to light the Olympic Cauldron to open the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. He and his wife, Betsy, reside in Southern California. Their son, Josh, was a Javelin Thrower for UCLA and daughter, Jenny, competed at the 2000 Sydney Games in Beach Volleyball.

Career Highlights

1955 Pan American Gold Medalist, Decathlon
1956 Olympic Silver Medalist, Decathlon
1960 Olympic Gold Medalist and Record Holder, Decathlon
1960 Sports Illustrated, Athlete of the Year
1960 Sport Magazine, Sportsman of the Year
1960 Sullivan Award, Outstanding Amateur Athlete
1960 Associated Press, Athlete of the Year
1960 American Flag Carrier on Opening Ceremony Day at the Olympics
1974 Inducted into the National Track & Field Hall of Fame
1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games, Torch Lighter for Opening Ceremonies
1988 California Special Olympics "Spirit of Friendship" Award
1990 Elected to National High School Hall of Fame
1992 Humanitarian Award, Free Arts for Abused Children
1993 Rafer Johnson Junior High School dedicated in Kingsburg, California
1996 Lifetime Achievement Award, Cedars Sinai Medical Center
1998 Autobiography, *The Best That I Can Be*, published
2009 Change-Maker Award, Children's Nature Institute
2009 Wooden Lifetime Achievement Award, Paralysis Project of America
2010 Fernando Award for Civic Accomplishment, Fernando Foundation
2011 Bakersfield City School District Hall of Fame
2012 Fresno County Office of Education Honors Award