



# Happy Birthday, From Mannie Jackson

by Mannie Jackson  
November 3 2020 2:15 PM



EDWARDSVILLE - I've been a friend of the Reverend Jesse Jackson for over six decades. Of all the leaders and activists I've met, known and worked with, Jesse has been by far among the most talented, smartest and committed.

I was called last week to do a one-minute video tribute. I was 18 years old when Govoner Vaughn and I were introduced to Jesse and, frankly, I was initially disturbed by his irreverence and outspoken behavior. He acted like no Negro I'd ever known!



He ignored all warnings of the "colored only" barriers. He was the absolute antithesis of all the unwritten specifications Illinois had for 1950s Black folks and particularly Black scholarship athletes.

Not only was Jesse articulate and very smart, he was a classically well-prepared debater and disruptor. Unlike the typical college athlete, he never pretended to be understated or overly grateful for the opportunity to have a full scholarship or the prospect of becoming one of the first Black Division One quarterbacks.

His aspirations were to win a national championship, get a national ranking and startle the paradigm of Blacks not being strong enough or leadership gifted. He once shook up the coaching staff when he chided the athletic director, saying Mannie should be my No. 1 wide receiver.

The coaches had a hard time with Jesse — he knew the playbook for all positions, had his own ideas and knew which plays and formations best suited the personnel. He could not make himself compliant with B.S. and "coach talk." He knew the game.

For an 18-year-old, he knew how to play the game of life like no one I'd ever been around. Jesse was not a big mouth — he was always diplomatic. Somehow, he believed his 6'4" and 230 lbs, with halfback speed could make the Fighting Illini a winner. He, Gov and I to this day are best friends belonging to a mutual fan club. I can say with certainty he was a legit big-time athlete with a Cam Newton game and persona. In today's desecrated market, he'd be worth a fortune on and off the field. We talked about religion, leadership, politics, Jim Crow practices, desegregation, laws, etc. I always knew he was focused on a higher calling than sports, I wasn't surprised when he became a U.S. shadow Senator and ran so strongly in 1984 and 1988 for USA President. I've watched him debate coaches, professors and heads of major corporations — his memory and debate skills were a constant source of entertainment and pride.

He was the first to give many Black students the words and the proper voice of protest and commentary regarding White American culture and values. He wasn't afraid of a fight, but he'd use his charisms and commitment to bring people together.

When I moved into the corporate world, I could count on the reverend for always being on cue when something was going wrong. He was as prepared and tough in the board room as he had

been on the football field. When I got into sports ownership, I counted on the reverend for his endorsement and friendship.

I thank him regularly for the support he has given me and my family. At my father's funeral in the Edwardsville VFW center, he gave one of his best talks ever. In my family we still quote him some ten years later. I appreciate him in my life and I also look back over the years and appreciate the wonderful contributions he's made to the world and our nation. So, congratulations Jesse Louis Jackson Jr. and happy birthday — it's been wonderful.

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