

Charley Paddock's sprint around the world

by Al J. Stump



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It was fortunate that Charley Paddock of Pasadena, California, the original "world's fastest human" and Olympic champion of 1920 at 100 meters, spoke French and Spanish. His language skills impressed Baron Pierre de Coubertin. While visiting America, the Baron had noticed an ignorance of foreign tongues by athletes and officials.

Chunky Charley Paddock, competing in the 1920 and 1924 Games, won two gold and two silver medals to go with his world records of 10"4 for 100 meters and 20"8 for 200 meters. His famous "flying finish" - a dramatic leap upward and down at the tape - intrigued de Coubertin. He invited Paddock in 1924 to his Paris office, near the Place de l'Opéra. And the two became warm friends.

It was there that the "California Comet" proposed his grand scheme : literally, he would sprint around the world.

In circling the earth in spikes, he would stage exhibitions, lecture on speed-running and hold training clinics. *"I'd like to further spread the gospel of sportsmanship," Paddock informed de Coubertin.*

When the IOC President heartily approved of the ambitious plan, the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States - which frequently feuded with Paddock over his "outside" activities -

could only agree to the globe-trotting. In the spring of 1925, Charley departed from San Francisco on a unique expedition. His travels - forgotten today - took him from Egypt to the playfields of Japan and China, from Scandinavian stadiums to those of Europe, Mexico and Australia, among other stops.

"My main intent," Charley Paddock later wrote, "was to increase interest in Olympic footracing in places only vaguely informed about international competition."

He survived illness, injuries and an airplane crash to make the trip a great success. In one city, Berlin, the legendary "fastest human" was the main attraction of a meet drawing 55,000 spectators. In Finland and Sweden, he was held over for two weeks by a fascinated public.

For a running mate, Paddock picked Loren Murchison, one of America's swiftest dashmen. The two sailed first for Tokyo. There Japanese sport officials played host, with curious crowds turning out. Japanese runners, handicapped by short legs, couldn't understand how the also short Paddock (five feet, eight inches) could move so fast. *"I taught them starting technique, running turns and my so-called 'freak' finish," he recorded. "And a very happy time was had by all concerned."*



Charley Paddock.

After providing the same lessons in cities of China, the Americans moved on to Manila. A match between Catalan, the great Philippine sprinter, and Paddock was cancelled when Charley fell sick of tropical fever. Murchison raced Catalan and narrowly beat him at 100 yards.

Next, they travelled to Cairo, Egypt and encountered a strange challenge. No white man ever had climbed the 481-foot Great Pyramid of Cheops and returned in less than thirty minutes. *"I was still ailing and couldn't fly," related Paddock. "But Murchison went up like the sprinter he was. He came down as quickly - and was timed in thirteen minutes exactly !"*

In Berlin, they met their first defeat. Germany's champion of Europe, Huber Houben, upset both Yanks before a huge audience and a new star, Helmut Kornig, ran second. A few days later, Paddock beat both of the Germans in a rematch. He advised Kornig, *"Work hard, don't drink beer, get your knees higher - and you will go far."* Three years later, at the Olympics, Kornig won a silver medal at 200 meters.

After appearances in Amsterdam and Paris, the pair caught a plane to Scandinavia, under sponsorship of Adrian Paulen, Holland's fine mid-distance runner.

"When I visited Paavo Nurmi in Abo, we exchanged ideas," wrote Charley. *"Nurmi told me he ran in heavy sweat suits at high noon on Finland's hottest days, removing every ounce of excess water from his system. He dried himself out as no man ever had. Physically superb, he couldn't be beaten in many Olympic races."*

In Helsinki, Paddock made sure that the supply of "world's best" reindeerskin sprinting shoes, with which Nurmi earlier had supplied him, would remain available. Clinics were held in Sweden, Norway and Finland. In ten days, Paddock won sixteen races. *"Creating,"* he observed, *"an interest in sprinting such as the northern countries never had known".*

During the tour, a hydroplane carrying Paddock lost power and crash-landed in the Baltic Sea. He was marooned in a leaking ship for twenty terrible hours, until rescued by fishermen.

Enroute home, the Marco Polo of track visited the Antipodes, Panama and Mexico. It is interesting to note that in countries where Paddock taught his methods, many regional champion sprinters and Olympic medallists soon later were developed : Martinus Osendarp (Holland), Georg Lammers, Arthur Jonath, Helmut Kornig (Germany), John Treloar, Hec Hogan (Australia), Takayoshi Yoshioka (Japan), Lloyd LaBeach (Panama).

In total, the pioneer educators reached sixteen countries in ten months. During his long career, Charles William Paddock claimed fourteen world records at various distances. He was named *"America's most versatile young man"* of the 1920s. Paddock starred in

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numerous Hollywood movies, was a syndicated sportswriter, wrote two books, lectured on sport and life throughout the United States and abroad and even appeared as an actor on the legitimate stage.

At age 43, a decorated Marine captain in World War II, he was killed in the crash of a military plane at Sitka, Alaska.

Today, "Paddock Field" in his Pasadena home town is named for him. And his features and record glitter from a bronze plaque at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

A. S.