

# A CASE OF CITIZENSHIP

By Glynn A. Leyshon

**In the 1920 Olympic Games there were several off-venue problems which, of course, does not make these Olympics unique. There was a move afoot, for example, to abolish the marathon as too inhumane and substitute for it a 15 mile race.**

The influential *London Daily Express* felt the Olympics should be abandoned all together as boring and a waste of money... "Let us play the Games and scrap the Olympics." At another level there was, if not a controversy, a peculiarity. It involved the only two Canadians to win gold medals and had to do with citizenship. One was a Canadian living in the USA and competing for Canada; the other was an American living in Canada and also competing for Canada. One was legitimately so engaged and the other was not. No one, at times, seemed completely sure of the circumstances and appropriate regulations. When the Canadian living in the USA won his medal the Montreal newspaper registered the victory as an American triumph despite the fact that he had even won the trials in Montreal.

The athletes in question were Earl Thomson and Albert "Happy" Schneider. Thomson, a high hurdler, was born in Birch Hills, Saskatchewan but moved to Long Beach, California when he was about eight. The reason for the move was a better climate for his ailing mother. Thomson's father probably felt it was a temporary arrangement for he never relinquished his

Canadian citizenship nor, for many years, did his illustrious son. Earl Thomson did finally become an American much later in life.

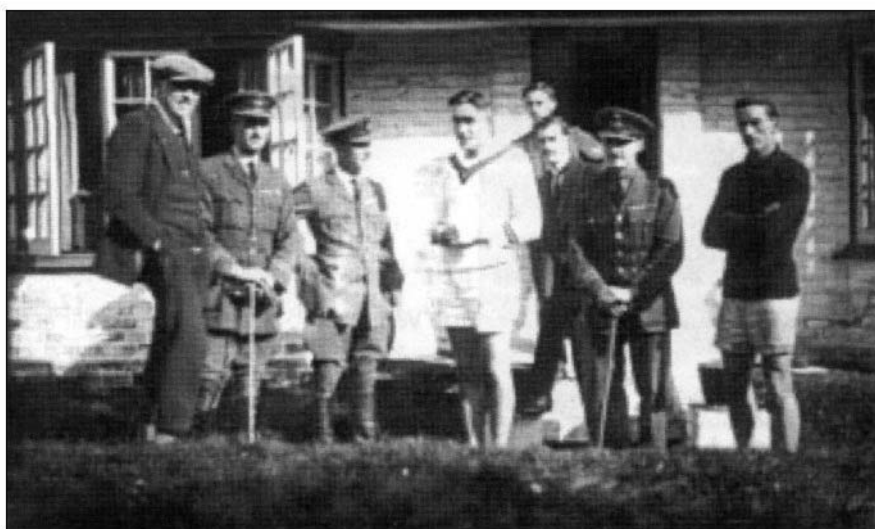
At about the same time, Albert Schneider, a boxer, moved with his parents from Cleveland to Montreal where his metallurgist father had taken a position in a steel plant. Schneider did not become a Canadian citizen and he later in life moved to the US to live.



Earl J. Thomson was an outstanding young athlete. He played many sports from ball games to track to swimming and even took punishment for missing farm chores to participate in these pastimes. There is also the fact that he was shot in the chest in a hunting accident and nearly died, which is a story in itself. Because of the "flagship" nature of track in the Olympics, much more is known about Thomson than about Schneider. Boxing, on the other hand, had developed such an unsavory reputation during the preceding years that it had not even been included in the 1912 Games. The exposure

of track and the relative anonymity of boxing contributed to the confusion surrounding the subsequent events at the 1920 Olympic Games.

Thomson entered the trials in Montreal and easily won the high hurdles and the high jump thus qualifying in two events for the 1920 Olympics. Schneider won the Canadian welterweight (147 lbs) boxing title. Thomson knew immediately that he was going to the Games; Schneider read that he was a team member in the local paper, *The Montreal Star*. By his own admission, he did not even know boxing was an Olympic event!



Photos: (above) 1917 - Earl Thompson at Armed Forces meet, (opposite page) 1920 - Earl Thompson at Olympic trials, (below) 1920 - Earl Thompson in the hurdles race

So we have an American living Canada and a Canada living in America both competing under the Maple Leaf. The one, Thomson, was well known and had established a world record in the hurdles while a student at Dartmouth. At an armed forces meet in Bowmanville during WW I (he had joined the RCAF as a patriotic Canadian) he was a one-man track team winning five first places and one second place. Thomson was a headliner. Schneider, on the other hand, was unknown to any but the locals and especially unknown to the Canadian Olympic Committee. When he won the Dominion title, which constituted the trials, he was automatically placed on the Olympic team. No one questioned his right to be there and he, a naive young man, did not think to suggest his citizenship might be a problem.

In Antwerp, Thomson dominated the 110 m hurdles and won in a world record time of 14.8 secs. A record that stood for 11 years.

Schneider had a more difficult time. He reached the finals only to run into his toughest opponent a man named Ireland representing England (how confusing can this citizenship item become?). After regulation time, the match between Schneider and Ireland was ruled a draw so the judges decided on another round, and the tough Schneider prevailed.

In the medal ceremonies, both Thomson and Schneider faced the prospect of mounting the podium without a Canadian flag flying. The host Belgians had not provided one so the awards were made under the Union Jack. The two competitors remained in their adopted countries for years. Thomson eventually becoming a US citizen and coaching the Navy track team for decades. Schneider turned professional, had 75 fights and retired to the state of Washington.

There is an argument to be made for reassigning Schneider's medal to the USA; after all, he was an American citizen. On the other hand he never began boxing until he reached Montreal and without that training could never have won. Should Thomson's, medal be reassigned too? An erstwhile Canadian, Thomson had never participated in sport until he arrived in California and all his training came at the hands of his US coaches (in fact, he was treated at the Olympics for a minor injury by the American trainer). So perhaps it is a sawoff and the record books should stay as they are.

