
ZARNOWSKI, FRANK. *Olympic Glory Denied, And a Final Opportunity for Glory Restored*. Glendale, CA: Griffin Publishing, 1996. Pp. v, 285. Illustrations, bibliographic essays, index. \$18.95.

There is undoubtedly a “canon” of who constitutes our sports immortals, but the list of those who might have belonged is a lot larger than anyone might imagine. This is the compelling conclusion the reader will draw from the evidence presented in *Olympic Glory Denied*, written by one of the world’s foremost experts on decathlon history, Frank Zarnowski, who served as a USA national team coach and a track and field color commentator for the Olympic Games.

Olympic Glory Denied is a series of profiles of 11 world-record holding decathletes—J. Austin Menaul, Charles Hoff, Fait Elkins, Hans-Heinrich Sievert, Bill Watson, Heino Lipp, Russ Hodge, Guido Kratschmer, Bob Coffman, Sigge Wentz, Dan O’Brien—who missed out on Olympic glory for various reasons, either from injury, politics, or some weird twist of fate. He vividly demonstrates in these stories that there is a thin line that separates Olympic immortality from abject obscurity. The “hook” for this book, written prior to the 1996 Olympic Games, is the opening chapter on Dan O’Brien and the author’s speculation as to whether or not he would end up with the likes of J. Austin Menaul or with the likes of Bob Mathias. (O’Brien did indeed “redeem” himself from his 1992 failure in the Olympic Trials to win the next Olympics, but whether he will be remembered on par with Bob Mathias remains to be seen.)

The chapter on Fait Elkins is particularly intriguing. His name is so obscure today, but in his heyday, in the mid-1920s, Elkins, of Native American background, was being hailed as the next Jim Thorpe. Elkins, who had an unfortunate career as a tramp athlete, easily won the 1927 AAU National Championship in the decathlon and was figured a possible gold medal winner in the 1928 Olympics in Amsterdam. A leg injury at the U.S. Olympic Trials knocked him out of contention for Olympic immortality.

Elkins began as a student at the Haskell Institute, an Indian training school in Lawrence, Kansas, where, as a high school-level freshman in 1922, he set several school track and field records competing on the collegiate level. Every summer he would vanish, presumably playing semi-pro baseball somewhere under an assumed name, and in the fall he would show up for football.

In the 1923 season, playing on the Haskell team under his Indian name of "Rapid Water," Elkins played against the best collegiate teams in the country and helped his team to an 11-2-1 record. He was being hailed as a future all-American. The following season, however, saw Elkins begin his tramp odyssey by playing on the nationally ranked Southeastern Oklahoma State basketball team, where he was considered an impact player.

For the next several years, Elkins, by now popularly known as "The Chief," bounced back and forth between Haskell and Southeastern, appearing on each school's football, basketball, or track teams, later joining teams at the University of Dallas and the University of Nebraska. On July 4, 1927, Elkins won an unprecedented one-day decathlon meet in 90 plus-degree heat, and set a mark that had only been surpassed by Thorpe, Harold Osborn, and the world champ from Finland, Paavo Yrjola. Elkins was tabbed as a favorite for the 1928 Olympics, but a pulled tendon in the 100-meter event in the 1928 Trials forced his withdrawal.

Elkins entertained an offer from Branch Rickey to play baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals (even though there is nothing in his official record that he ever played baseball), but eventually played pro football as a starter for the Frankford Yellowjackets, where he became a fan favorite. It is obvious that Elkins, whose multi-sport skills were extraordinary, was an athletic phenomenon, but, through circumstances both of his own making and of the fickle hand of fate, all his potential was dissipated and he remains an unknown figure today.

Heino Lipp was one of the great decathletes in history, but all his achievements have been obscured, a combination of being a victim of Cold War politics and Stalinist tyranny. He was an Estonian, whose brother was deemed a disloyal Estonian nationalist and was eventually murdered in a camp in Siberia. Therefore, Lipp was kept as a political prisoner and was not allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union. Four days after Bob Mathias won the 1948 Olympic decathlon, Lipp in Tartu, Estonia, produced a decathlon score considerably higher than that of Mathias.

Lipp's achievement, however, was discounted or disbelieved in the West, because the Iron Curtain policies of Stalin did not allow foreign observers, so there was no way to verify the results. The West never saw Lipp perform, and neither did Soviet bloc countries other than the USSR. Lipp, for example, was not allowed to travel to Budapest for the World University Games in 1949. Photos of the physically imposing Lipp were done in the style of the superman image of the new Soviet man, a Stakhanovite, which undoubtedly did not inspire confidence in the credibility of his achievements from western followers of the sport.

In 1951 the Soviet Union joined the Olympic movement and participated in the 1952 Games. Lipp's absence from the games was explained by the Soviet

press as being due to “illness.” The real story is that the K.G.B. had vetoed Lipp’s participation in the Olympics even though it was a short distance away in Helsinki, Finland. Competing in 1952, he probably would not have challenged eventual gold-medal winner Mathias, but a silver medal was well within the range of possibility. (Lipp’s training was hampered when his scholarship was revoked in another Estonian repression in 1950, and he had to stalk deer and track small game animals daily to sustain himself.)

Lipp was a Soviet champion 12 times and set 13 national records, and never gave the Soviet regime any cause of concern, yet his “suspect” family made him a “political unreliable” to the authorities.

Olympic Glory Denied is obviously the work of an amateur historian, but it is top-notch amateur history. Zarnowski exhibits the tenacity of a devoted fan in his research for the stories. He has explored German, Soviet, and Austrian archives as well as archives in the States (plus collections of family memorabilia) to uncover the stories of these remarkable decathletes.

Zarnowski also exhibits some of the flaws of an amateur historian, such as his inability to exclude information (this book needed pruning by an editor!). There is also a tendency to “remake” history when the outcome is not to his liking, such as correcting the “mistakes” of the scoring on J. Austin Menaul’s decathlon qualification scores to show that he was wrongly deprived of a decathlon world record.

There is a lot to value in *Olympic Glory Denied*, and historians of the Olympic movement, Native American sport figures, and Soviet sports will find it particularly worthy.

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