

Jim Nendel
Pennsylvania State University
**The Finnish Finish: The 1932 Olympic 5000-Meter
Final**

Five-hundred meter races are not normally considered to be thrilling affairs, but the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic final at that distance in track and field proved to be an extraordinary event. Grantland Rice considered it “among the greatest races ever run in an International meet.” Not only did the race end in a photo finish, it was marred by questionable tactics used by the winner on the last lap. Interestingly, two outcomes occurred from the race, which were unsuspected before the event. The first was that a Finnish runner named Paavo Nurmi, who was banned from participating in the Games, would have an impact on the result of this race won by his countryman Lauri Lehtinen. The second was that a young man from Oregon named Ralph Hill, misidentified by some Olympic historians as an Englishman, would set the tone of these Olympic Games in losing the 5000-meter race.

This paper examines the 5000-meter final and the forces that were at work behind the AOC decision to not appeal a clear foul by Lehtinen, which cost an American runner a gold medal. It also challenges the theories of Mark Dyreson, and Steven Pope pertaining to the sole purpose of the games being for the U.S. to win in order to promote nationalism. Hill’s case stands in marked contrast to this viewpoint and is examined as a possible shift of focus by the AOC to portray a different viewpoint of the American sporting missionaries. I argue that other prominent figures of the time including Paavo Nurmi, J.S. Edstrom and Avery Brundage played significant roles in the decision made at the conclusion of the race to award the race to Lauri Lehtinen. The story of Ralph Hill is one, which helps us to understand how the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games were hailed as a grandiose success. His show of sportsmanship was the antithesis of typical American behavior at past Olympic festivals and set the tone for the remainder of the Los Angeles Games.
