

Last Interview With Great Sprinter—Charley Paddock

S.F. NEWS 7/23/43

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(It seems only yesterday I was talking to Charley Paddock. Now he is dead, killed in an airplane crash in Alaska. Over here in sports we are going to miss many fellows who were around a year, or even a month ago, before this blasted war is over. Charley was probably the greatest competitive sprinter the world has ever known and he ran for 12 years, beating them all when the chips were down. Several months back I interviewed Charley in Maj. Gen. Upshur's office, and to refreshen readers with an outstanding sports personality, a great guy, and more lately an important cog in Uncle Sam's machine, *The News* reprints this interview.)

The office of the commanding general, Marine Corps, Division of the Pacific, is hardly a place where you would expect to find a University of Southern California track star in action. And yet maybe it is. There have been so many U. S. C. track stars it probably would be difficult to go anywhere and not find one, or several.

At any rate, if you look closely these days in the office of Maj. Gen. Upshur you will distinguish the familiar figure of a man who used to do a wagon-load of record breaking between 1916 and 1928.

And if you are going back to names in those days you will not need a guide to identify the blond gent with two bars on his shoulders as Captain Charles W. Paddock, the original world's "Fastest Human" and hero of many a great sprinting epic.

Talking about sprinting with Captain Paddock is like thumbing the pages of a rare old volume of sports. . . . He won the 100 and 200 meters in the Inter-Allied Games at Joinville-le-Pont, near Paris, in 1919. . . . He met and defeated all the great sprinters in an era that produced such knights of the cinders as Loren Murchison, Howard Drew, Jackson Scholz, Morris Kirksey and Harold Abrahams. . . . He won the Olympic 100 meters in 1920 against probably the greatest field of competitive sprinters ever to toe the marks. . . . In short, he helped rock the cradle of spectacular record breaking.

"Of course, I will be criticized for being prejudiced," says Captain Paddock, "but that era after the last World War—the early twenties—will always seem to me to be productive of the greatest champions in all branches of sport. It produced Babe Ruth, Jack Dempsey, Bobby Jones, Man O' War, Bill Tilden—and of course Charley Paddock.

"No matter how you try to glamorize the next decade you can't begin to compare their champions with those in the 1920's. I know the record book will try to prove differently in track, but they have better running surfaces today."

Captain Paddock believes that Morris Kirksey, now a psychiatrist in a Stockton hospital, was the greatest sprinter he ever met. And Kirksey and Paddock met 32 times. Paddock won all 32 races, and never once in those stirring 100 and 220-yard duels was the margin much more than a yard. Usually it was less than a foot.

"Kirksey never beat me, but he scared hell out of me 32 times," is the way the original Fastest Human looks back on those memorable days.

How did Paddock do it?

"My flying finish," contends Captain Paddock.

For the benefit of those not well versed in sprinting lore, Paddock's flying finish was a tremendous leap to the tape, with both hands spread like the wings of a P-40. Personally, I never thought much of its artistry and would bet a dollar Paddock's jump caught the eye of many a reverent, albeit dim-sighted, judge of the finish while some other sprinter's chest actually nipped the yarn first.

"That's where some of you writers are haywire," snapped Captain Paddock with ill-concealed horror that anybody should question his running art. "I used a high running style and actually when I jumped I came down on the string. Take the Olympics of 1920. What a race! Kirksey had it in the bag. Two yards from the tape the pictures show he had a slight edge over me. But I won by a few inches. My flying finish did it."

How did he get the title Fastest Human?

"I really ran for that title," says Captain Paddock, turning back the pages to the afternoon of March 26, 1921, at Berkeley. "I ran the 100 in :9.6, and the

220 in :20.8 that day. I tied the 100-yard mark and broke the 220-yard mark by two-fifths of a second.

"Jack James, a San Francisco sports columnist, next day wrote of my exploits and handed me the title 'the Fastest Human.' That title stuck with me even in the days when I broke down, as they say around a horse track, yet unlike a horse I kept running."

Paddock Learned to Run on Beach Sand

The first important testing ground for Paddock's talent was the Inter-Allied Games. Charley was a 19-year-old second lieutenant in the field artillery at the time. Some 40,000 soldier boys and dignitaries saw the unknown kid from Pasadena whip a nifty field of sprinters in both sprint races. Among those who fell to Paddock's flying feet were Eddie Teschner, the pride of Harvard, John Lindsay of New Zealand and Sol Butler of Dubuque, Iowa.

After those two triumphs, Paddock lost his first race, coming out second best several times to Elsie Nightlife of Paris from Maison Garonne to the Moulin Rouge and Zelli's.

Paddock came back to the United States in 1919 generally recognized as the premier sprinter of the world, although the more exacting critics saved opinions until he won the 1920 Olympic 100 meters against Kirksey, Murchison, Scholz, Ali Kahn of France and Harry Edwards of England on a soggy track.

How does a world champion get started?

"I was a kid 15 when I spent the summer at my family's summer home near Hermosa Beach and there on the narrow, hard strip of sand close to the water's edge I watched Fred Kelly, first Olympic champion from the West, having won the high hurdles in 1912, and the two Stanton boys—Forrest and Ed—from California cut up the sand."

It wasn't long before Paddock was trying to emulate these older runners. And, amazing as it may seem, the kid, green as he was, soon was to defeat them all. That's the way with natural runners. They stand out the first time they put on spikes.

Best Competitive Sprinter of All Time

Paddock was not a beautiful runner. But in my estimation he was the greatest competitive sprinter ever to snap a tape. In my all-time sprint book I'd pick Jesse Owens first followed by Paddock and then Kirksey. Owens in a mythical race would beat both Paddock and Kirksey but the latter pair would eclipse such recent runners as Frank Wykoff, George Simpson, Eddie Tolan, Ralph Metcalfe and Harold Davis without much question.

In making this statement, I take into consideration two things. First of all, Owens was the poetry of motion. He was a perfect running machine. Paddock might win on a soggy track, because his forte, beyond his great competitive heart, could be traced to his strength. He ran with his shoulders, arms and body.

And second, although by no means secondary in forming my opinion, is the fact that the 9.4 sprinters of today are running on far better tracks than the runners did 20 years ago.

But whom does Paddock think was the greatest sprinter he ever saw.

"George Anderson," he insists. "Yep, the same George Anderson who was an intercollegiate champ at California in 1934. But George clipped his career before it started when he hurt his leg playing touch football. I never saw a guy with his potentialities before he hurt his leg in high school."

As to track coaches, Captain Paddock thinks Dink Templeton "knew more than all the rest put together," that Dean Cromwell is the most inspirational coach, and that Boyd Comstock taught him the most about sprinting.

"But it was too late," sighed yesteryear's Fastest Human. "That's the tragedy of athletics. When a guy really knows how, his physical being is past it peak."

And you can say that again, too, Captain Paddock.



Charley Paddock—posed for Marine Corps a month ago.