

EMIL VOIGT

THE UNIQUE OLYMPIAN

by his granddaughter Robin Voigt

Emil Voigt competed in the Olympics 100 years ago, winning a gold medal in the five-mile race for England in the 1908 London Olympic Games. He was unique in many ways. He is the only gold medal distance runner England has ever had, male or female; he was the only vegetarian out of 2023 competitors in the Games; his training methods were unorthodox; and uniquely he still holds the Olympic record today. His time of 25:11.2 of 100 years ago will always remain in the record books; it can never be beaten as the five-mile race became a metric event (replaced by the 5,000 metres and the 10,000 metres) in the next Olympic Games of 1912.

Emil was born in North West England in Ardwick, Manchester on 31 December 1883. His father Emil Robert Voigt senior was born in Germany but migrated to Manchester in the late 1870s. In 1882 at the age of 21 Emil senior met and married Emil's mother Elizabeth Robb who was from Wigtown in Scotland. They were to have two sons, Emil who was the eldest and Louis who was 3 years younger.

Emil was a fascinating character – energetic and full of ideas. He travelled widely and spoke five languages. He became involved in so many different things throughout his life – running, cycling, radio, politics, sports broadcasting and writing, engineering, vegetarianism, aviation - to name just a few.

In his younger years not only was he good at sport but he also became very interested in politics at an early age, joining the Clarion Movement, cycling throughout the north of England, distributing pamphlets for the Independent Labor Party, calling for social reform for the working class. A restless individual he travelled throughout Europe extensively, both as an athlete and also as a correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*.

In later life when he migrated to Australia he became one of the foremost pioneers in early Australian radio, founding his own radio station 2KY in Sydney in order to give a political voice to Labor to help improve working conditions for the masses and bring about social justice for everyone. Having had a tough childhood and seen poverty and the inequity first hand in the working class city of Manchester of the early 1900s, he passionately championed the cause of the underdog and rose high in the ranks of the State Labor

movement in Australia. Like many socialists at that time, he supported many communist ideals, and although he didn't actually join the Communist Party, he came under the surveillance of the Secret Service both in the UK and Australia.

During those early years as an athlete he was described as an unassuming man with a cheerful disposition, having a small and wiry build, 5 foot 5½ inches tall, and weighing 8 stone 3 lbs. A vegetarian, non-smoker and teetotaler, he maintained a lifelong interest in sport and keeping fit. He was particularly enthusiastic about the benefits of massage, writing a book and giving talks on the subject. He also advocated deep breathing as a means to healthy living.

At the age of 22 he became a vegetarian and joined the Vegetarian Cycling Club, spending weekends cycling through the Manchester countryside, enjoying the fresh air and exercise, picnics and the company of like-minded people.

However running was his passion. As a boy he had played football but upon leaving school he took up cross-country running after meeting, purely by chance, some cross-country runners from the Slade Harrier Club in



Emil Voigt, aged in his 80s, proudly posing with the beautiful Olympic Certificate that was presented to him to commemorate his win in the 1908 London Olympic Games. As well as the gold medal and certificate he received a laurel crown and silk Union Jack. Robin Voigt

Manchester. He decided to join the club and at the age of 14 won the first race he ever entered – the four miles. He had a natural ability and throughout that first season he was successful every time he went out to compete. He continued on for the next 10 years, with the Slade Harriers and with the Manchester Athletic Club, winning numerous open races. He was a versatile runner, competing in and winning at many different distances, from 800 metres to 10 miles, throughout his career.

The story of the way Emil won his gold medal in London was nothing short of amazing – he chose to contest the five-mile race in the Olympics although he had never run the distance before, he entered at the last moment which meant he only had a couple of weeks to train for the event and he competed with a badly injured foot.

It was the only time this non-metric distance was included in the official Games, although the race had been included in the Intercalated Games held in Athens two years before and won by another British athlete, Henry Hawtrey in the time of 26:11.8.

After 10 years of competitive running and at the age of 25 Emil was planning to retire, but with only a matter of weeks to the start of the London Olympic Games he changed his mind and suddenly decided he would like to try for success at the Olympics while they were being held in his home country.

The British Olympic Trials were being held in just one week's time and he asked a Manchester Club official if he thought it would be too late to enter. The British selectors were having their final meeting that night in London and the official thought it unlikely that his late entry would be accepted but on the off-chance sent a telegram anyway. The official asked him what distance he would like to run and, although Emil had been training for much shorter events, the half mile and one mile races, on the spur of the moment Emil told the official to put him down for the five-mile race. He had run four mile races in the past but never attempted the five miles, however he always had the belief he could run any distance he set his mind to.

The British selectors were made up of members of the AAA (Amateur Athletic Association) and Emil's telegram arrived just as their final meeting got underway. They decided to accept him as a late entry and notified him of their approval. With only one week to go before the British Trials Emil now began to train for a distance race.

The British Trials for the five-mile race were held on the 30th May 1908 at the Stadium, in Shepherd's Bush, London. Emil took the train down from Manchester the day before and lined up against his arch rival A.J. Robertson (Birchfield Harriers). The two had competed against each other many times before, mostly in four mile events. *The Times* wrote that it was "one of the finest contests witnessed" that day, saying "after a desperate struggle, the result was a win by Voigt of 2 yards"¹. The time was 25mins: 26.4 secs with Emil winning his first ever five-mile race with Robertson coming in second and W. Coales (Thrapston) third.

After the Trials Emil was interviewed by *The Athletic News* and said "Until I took part in the Trials I hadn't the slightest idea how I would run five miles. I had never been the distance on a track before. But I felt fit and I finished pretty fresh. Of course that gave me confidence and the hope that I may be able to win the Olympic race."²

Asked whether he had ever run abroad he replied "No, I was located in Austria for two athletic seasons,



Emil Voigt, aged 25, in his running gear, taken soon after his Olympic success. Robin Voigt

1905-1906, but with the nearest track 200 miles away in Vienna, it was not likely I could make trips for such a purpose and I was also very busy then, keenly studying French and German."³

Having now won the Trials, suddenly Emil found himself accepted into the Games with only a few weeks to prepare for the five-mile race. He began an intensive training schedule, running before breakfast, at lunch-time and up to 9 o'clock at night. He also put himself on a strict diet. As a vegetarian his diet leading into the Games consisted of eggs, fruit, brown bread and hot milk for breakfast, a little milk pudding for lunch, vegetables including potatoes and plenty of fruit for dinner, and cups of tea. As part of the training methods he had devised for himself he embarked on regular massage which he considered benefitted his running beyond everything.

Later he wrote books on the subject of massage and devised a course for athletes. He gave lectures on 'modern athletics' where he talked about the importance of diet (the effect of food on the muscular system, energy foods, body-building foods); massage (self-massage, massage and joints, massage and digestion); and training (cinder versus grass tracks, and the differing training methods employed in England, Australia, the USA and Europe).

One month after the Trials Emil took the train down to London again to compete in the AAA four miles at the Stadium on 4 July. The four miles had been held in England since 1880 but was not included the 1908 Games, however he decided to use it as a warm-up event

to test his progress. He won with ease, setting a new British record of 19:47.4, beating the previous best time of 19:48.8 set by F. E. Bacon 14 years before in 1894. Runner-up was again Arthur Robertson (who ultimately placed fifth in the Olympic finals of the five-mile race) and third was A. E. Wood of Essex Beagles.

Emil's win was described in the papers... "the winner made his effort in the last half mile and surprised everyone by the easy manner in which he left his opponents. Full of running, he finished 30 yards ahead."

With only two weeks to go before the start of the Olympic athletic events he returned home to Manchester to continue training there. In the final week he travelled back down to London and once there scaled back his heavy training schedule, running only every second day in order to build up strength. He was concerned too that his feet had become a little sore and confided in his trainer Harry Andrews that he was worried about possible foot trouble. They kept this to themselves and decided it wise to take things easier in the last few days leading up to the race.

On the 15th July the Olympic heats got underway at the Stadium and 35 runners from 14 countries took part in the six heats that day.

Emil lined up in Heat 2 against six other athletes - Bellars (USA), Pagliani (Italy), Nielsen (Denmark), Wakker (Holland), Coulcumberdos (Greece) and Dahl (Sweden). British sporting fans had been hearing about Emil but he was unknown on the international scene as he had never competed in Europe or at that distance before until the Trials.

Emil decided to sit back from the pacesetter Bellars, content to run along a little further back in the field, waiting for his opportunity to pounce towards the end of the race. Then at the four-mile point Emil decided it was time for him to go—suddenly he took off, leaving everyone behind. He ran away with the race, winning by a spectacular 150 yards!

Emil later said "Pagliani was lying behind me in the race, wherein Bellars, the American, was cutting out the running. The Italian kept rapping away at my heels, so I pulled out to the right, whereupon he turned his attentions to Bellars for a while. But the Italian still kept pulling at me and the umpires couldn't see what he was doing. An umpire at the north-western bend called out to me and incorrectly said if I did not stop boring he would disqualify me. We had been going terribly slow so I thought that it was high time to get out of trouble by going into the lead."⁴

However, after the heats Emil's worst fears were realized. Disastrously he broke down after the race - the rigorous training he had been undergoing leading into the Games had taken its toll. The arch of his foot had collapsed due to torn muscles.

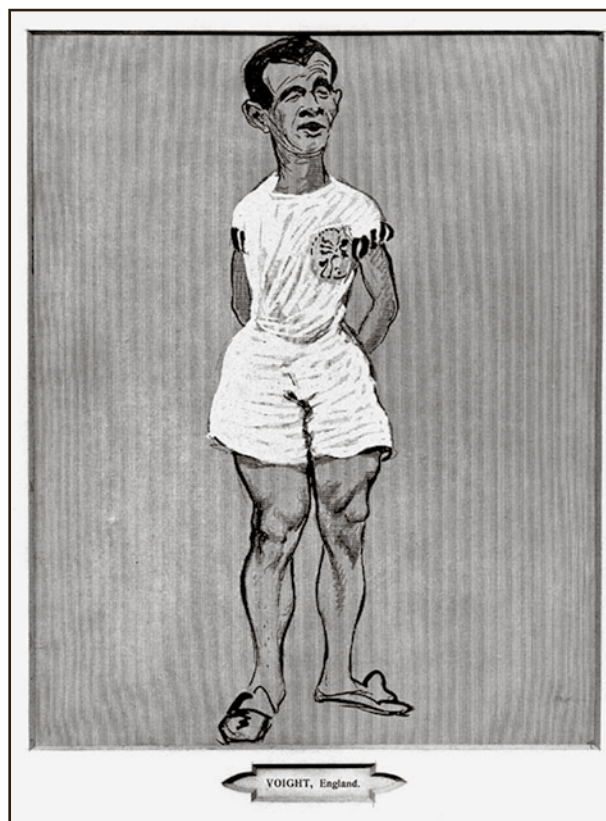
Those around him thought he would have to withdraw from the finals, the injury would take too long to mend and it would be too painful to run, and there could be

serious repercussions for his career should he try to do so. But never one to quit, he decided to catch a train across London and see a bone specialist. The specialist strapped his foot and overnight built a special plaster of Paris arch support for Emil to wear inside his running shoe.

There were only two days to rest his injury before the finals but Emil remained determined that he would still compete whatever it took. He knew the stamina was there and he knew he had the ability.

The press were keen to interview Emil after his win in the heats but he did not let on about his injury to them, so the public and other competitors were not aware of the dire situation he was actually in. He simply said he was surprised he had run so fast, that he was 'in good trim' and looking forward to the finals.

On the 18th July, the day of the finals, it was cold and windy and heavy showers had drenched the track. The stands were a sea of black umbrellas and many famous faces could be seen in the crowd - faces from business, the arts and high society. Royalty too was there. The cheer-



A caricature of Emil Voigt, honouring his Olympic win for England in the 1908 five-mile race, possibly presented to him by one of the athletic clubs he belonged to. Robin Voigt

ing grew louder and louder as the competitors came out onto the track and Emil doggedly lined up for the race.

Not knowing whether he would be able to finish, he decided to 'give it a go'. Whether the injury was to hamper his chances only the race itself would tell. Only his trainer Harry Andrews and two other people were aware of the injury, but Harry knew if Emil could hang

on he had a telling sprint at the end of his races that could wear down the other competitors.

There were 10 runners in the final, four runners representing England – Emil, Arthur ‘Archie’ Robertson who had come second to Emil in the British Trials, Eddie Owen, a fellow Mancunian, who had won his heats by an amazing 440 yards and James Murphy who was a runner from the Hallamshire Harriers club. There were two runners from Canada, Frederick Meadows and John Fitzgerald; two runners from Sweden, Seth Landqvist (who competed in the 1908 marathon and the three-mile team event) and Johan Svanberg (who competed in the 1908 marathon, and in 1906 had come second to Hawtrey in the five miles), Charles Hefferon from South Africa (who came second in the famously dramatic 1908 marathon race) and Frederick Bellars from the USA.

The crack of the starter’s gun rang through the air and the race got underway. Emil ran through the pain for the first mile or two, clumping along with the uncomfortable arch support in his shoe. He said after a while he forgot about the pain and thought he’d “just keep running and see what happened”.

He decided to stick comfortably in the middle of the group for most of the race. Fitzgerald and Murphy set the pace and Owen went into the lead at the one-mile point of the race. Considering the wet conditions the time for the first mile was surprisingly fast – 4:46.4. Hefferon took the lead at the two miles and was still front runner at the three miles. By the four-mile point Svanberg, Hefferon, Owen and Voigt were running together in a bunch with Svanberg just out in front. But in the last mile Svanberg was fading fast and Owen seeing his opportunity, passed the Swede and took the lead. Suddenly 700 yards from home Emil made his move. “He tucked down his elbows, threw up his head and went away on his sprint”⁵, passing them one by one. Running in beautiful style, he spurted away from them all and won the race in spectacular fashion by 70 yards.

The excited crowd of 80,000 rose to its feet and wildly cheered him on to the finishing line. The unknown little Englishman had come out of nowhere in the finals to beat the world’s best at London’s Olympia. Emil had won the race in 25.11.2, running the last mile in a blistering time, more than a minute faster than he had done in the heats. Second place was taken by Ted Owens (Great Britain) in the time of 25.24 and Johan ‘John’ Svanberg (Sweden) took third in 25.37.2. Robertson only managed fifth place, suffering from the effects of his severe struggle in the 3000 metre steeplechase earlier that day.

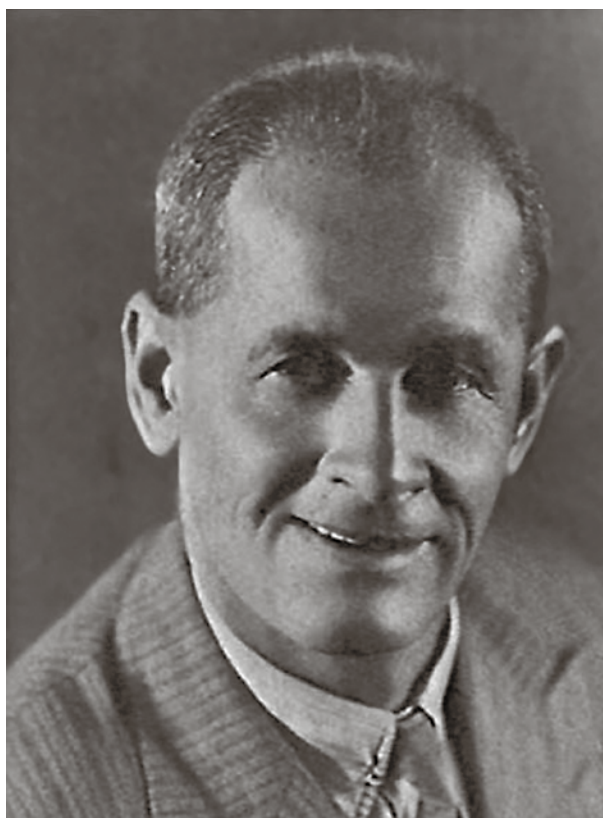
The world record at the time was 24:33.4 held by Alfred Shrubbs who won at Stamford Bridge in May 1904, but considering Emil had so little time to prepare for the race and the weather was against fast times, he was genuinely surprised he had run so quickly when told of his winning time. But those who knew him, never doubted him, it was a truly amazing performance.

Emil was described in the British papers as “the finest

amateur runner over five miles that Britain has ever had and he is yet to prove just how fast he can go, even he does not himself know.”⁶

The next day he returned home to Manchester and was given a hero’s welcome, hoisted high on the shoulders of the crowd and carried through the city streets.

After the Olympics Emil he put off any further thoughts of retiring for a while. He became British four-mile champion again in 1909, British one-mile handicap from scratch champion in 1910 and British six-mile champion in 1910. He was inspired over the next few



A studio photo of Emil Voigt, aged in his early 40s, taken in Australia when he was general manager of radio station 2KY which he founded in 1925. Robin Voigt

years to try for longer and longer distances, competing in 10 kilometre, six mile, seven mile and 10 mile events. He always liked a challenge!

He was invited to tour Scandinavia by the King of Sweden and won a number of events in Sweden and Finland between 1909 and 1910. He also competed in France and Germany. He designed the cinder athletic track at the famous Eläintarha Stadium (which is still in use today) in Helsinki, Finland. The legendary Paavo Nurmi was among those who set 12 records on the surface at this stadium.

Later when he moved to Australia in 1911, concerned by injuries to athletes on what he described as ‘pony tracks’ full of holes, he pressed for similar cinder tracks there. He designed a cinder circuit in Melbourne, the first of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere.

He continued his athletic career in Australia. On arrival in Melbourne he joined the Malvern Harriers and was welcomed into the fold of the Victorian AAA. His first race in Australia was in the seven-mile road race handicap in Brighton, Victoria. He became the Australian six-mile record holder (1911), the Victorian one-mile champion (1913) and the Australian two-mile record holder (1913). He was said to be in his prime as a runner, winning events over the next three years until the outbreak of World War 1 sadly put an end to his career in 1914.

Newspaper stories in Australia described him as... "one of the most stylish runners ever seen on the path... a brilliant middle and long distance runner... one who has seldom been equalled in the world's history for speed and stamina."⁷

Emil eventually moved to New Zealand in 1947, setting up a business in Auckland. He continued to run regularly right into his 80s, jogging several kilometres every day up the steep mountain behind his property in Mangere Bridge. In the 1950s he trained some of New Zealand's top runners.

He retired from business and the sporting world in the 1960s and lived out his life in Auckland, finally finding time to take things easy (in his sense of the word), indulging in some of his other passions - aviation (gliding, in particular, which he took up in his 80s), fishing, photography and music. He passed away at home in Auckland in 1973 at the age of 90. ■

FOOTNOTE: *An intriguing mystery remains and Robin has asked if any ISOH members have any further information on a 'second' Emil Voigt who competed in the 1904 St Louis Olympic Games. This Emil was said to be a US gymnast who competed for the St Louis Concordia Turnverein Club and won medals for Club Swinging, Rings and Rope Climbing. It seems unlikely that this Emil Voigt is the same man as there is no record within Robin's family of her grandfather ever being involved in gymnastics. However an element of doubt remains as neither Emil nor Voigt were particularly common names, both Emils competed around the same era in consecutive Games, both described themselves as physical instructors and both Emils had fathers who were named Emil Senior. It appears that all this is just a huge coincidence but there is very little information available about the 'second' Emil on the Web. If anyone has any further details Robin would love to know - she can be contacted by email at rvinca@pacific.net.au.*

Notes:

- 1 *The Times* 1 June 1908
- 2 *The Athletic News* 20 July 1908
- 3 *The Athletic News* 20 July 1908
- 4 *The Athletic News* 20 July 1908
- 5 *The Manchester Guardian* 20 July 1908
- 6 *The Athletic News* 20 July 1908
- 7 *The Referee* 14 June 1911

"BRINGING PIN-PONG BACK HOME TO LONDON 2012

by Don Anthony

So said Boris Johnson in his throw-away line in Beijing. Well it is true of course! Table tennis did develop on British table tops and the invention of the plastic "celluloid" made small balls possible – ping-pong and pong-pong as a new indoor family game for the Edwardians.

Badminton is a stately home near Bath. It has given its name to another Olympic sport. The "shuttle-cock" it uses came from Asia discovered there by British colonialists. It was first played indoors when driven there by rain on the lawn and Badminton's ball-room was the venue. The first court marked out was of hour – glass shape; this was because on one side of the room there was a fireplace – and on the other the swing – doors opened inwards!

Badminton courts in the Holyoake, USA YMCA, gymnasium were first used to "bat about" a ball with the hands by tired business men wanting exercise but too frail to manage basketball and gymnastics! The instructor, one Willy. G. Morgan, son of Welsh emigrants to the USA, first thought of it as "badmintonette" but then subtracted the "bad" because no game, he thought, should start with such an adjective"! "Mintonette" sounded too much like a French bedroom activity to last and "volleyball" became the name of the game. It was poetic justice in

Beijing last month that the USA should win gold in both volleyball and basketball – the two games they launched on the world in 1895 and 1890 respectively.

The power-house of the YMCA in Britain was Lord Arthur Kinnaird; it is often forgotten that although the YMCA flourished in the USA – and exported from there worldwide – is began in London! Kinnaird is the name of the stadium in Chiswick, London, where Kinnaird's club Polytechnic performed. The Polytechnic Athletics Club was represented in the foundation meeting of the IOC in Paris in 1894. Kinnaird himself had a much richer Olympic history. He was treasurer of the National Physical Recreation Society (NPRS) in 1886 which took over the work, and the motto indeed, of the National Olympian Association (NOA) founded in Liverpool in 1865. Kinnaird was also named by Pierre de Coubertin as a member of his "Comite Brittanique" in 1892 – three years before the formation of the IOC. In 1904 he was on the "Welcoming Committee" for the visit of the IOC to London – described by Coubertin as its "first outing". Meanwhile Kinnaird followed his YMCA engagements as a major leader of that body, and also his work as President of the Football Association. His temperament is nicely