

FROM THE TRENCHES TO THE TRACK, AND BACK

By Harry Gordon

Once upon a rice-field, when the freezing bite of the Korean winter was almost as hostile as the gunfire that was all around him, an Australian soldier conceived an utterly bizarre ambition to run for his country at the Olympic Games. In the toughest race of all, the marathon Against the most talented distance runner of the age, Emil Zatopek

So he started to train. He would jog each day along the bumpy track that skirted his battalion's community of fox-holes on the Korean front line, treading warily because the land was laced with landmines, and crouching a little because his commanding officer had warned him that he could be a target for snipers. "You don't want to get scratched, do you?," was the laconic advice from Lieutenant Colonel Frank (later Lieutenant General Sir Frank) Hassett.

The year was 1952, and the soldier was Captain Claude Smeal, a signals officer with a brave and bloodied infantry unit called the Third Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment. The Olympics that year were to be held in Helsinki, and Smeal happened to be a compulsive runner. Even before he was shipped

out to Korea, he used to run 16 kilometres a day to and from work in Sydney.

When the Australian selectors met to choose the team for Helsinki, Smeal wasn't even considered. They knew of him: he had been a good club runner and had won a state marathon title. But nobody had nominated him, he had not competed in selection trials, he had no recent form, and he was busy fighting a war.

The team was announced in March, and he felt no resentment about his absence from it. But he clung doggedly to the ambition that veered towards fantasy. There, among the landmines and the bullets, he kept plodding away in shorts, a St George (Sydney) club singlet and makeshift shoes, an early morning jogger long before the custom became fashionable.

One day two war correspondents who had heard about the man who ran when he wasn't in actual combat paid him a visit. Noel Monks, of the London Daily Mail, and Norman Macswan, of AAP-Reuter, were so impressed that they offered to act as timekeepers while he ran a trial over the marathon distance of 26 miles 385 yards ... very roughly measured. And they did. ⇨

Note from the Editor:

In 1994, both of them Dutch, published articles about what happened to Dutch Olympians in the Second World War.

Ruud Paauw, in his article After the Glory, wrote in Volume 2, Number 1, January 1994, about the (late) discovery of the fate of Jewish female goldmedal winners in Dutch team of the gymnastics competition at the 1928 Olympic Games from Amsterdam. This information was later elaborated upon by Dr. Uriel Simri in his article o Jewish Olympians in the Second World War, titles: Jewish Olympic Champions - Victims of the Holocaust, published in Volume 6, number 1, Winter 1998.

Anthony Th. Bijkerk wrote an article Just a Name, in volume 2, number 3, September 1994, about an unknown Dutch fencer in the 1908 Olympics in London, who, as a member of the Dutch Underground was shot to death by the Germans.

Harry Gordon, who wrote the article following about the convergence of Olympic sport and war, was a war correspondent with an Australian infantry battalion in Korea during the winter of 1950-51. He went on to cover the first of his many Olympic Games in 1952.

With these examples, the Journal of Olympic History would welcome any further submissions on the subject of war and the Olympics. As Gordon says, it is a fertile field for research and there are many more interesting stories to tell. Not only about Olympians from the allied forces, but a well from those on the other side, like the story on the Japanese equestrian goldmedal winner in 1932, Baron Nishi, who died defending Iwo Jima in the Pacific.

So, please research, and then come back to us with your stories!

They reckoned that he ran the 44 minutes, 20 minutes outside Jim Peters' world record and about six minutes outside the Olympic qualifying time. But the conditions had hardly been ideal. Monks, an Australian, cabled his old boss, Sir Frank Packer, and suggested that he use whatever power he might possess to have Smeal named as a late inclusion to the Australian team, already by now on its way to Helsinki for the Games. Packer did have power; he ran a large newspaper and magazine publishing empire. (His son Kerry now runs an even bigger one, which includes a major television channel).

When motivated, Packers (like Murdochs) tend to move swiftly and at a significant level of influence. Within two days the Sydney Daily Telegraph had published the story of the time trial; Australian selectors had added Smeal to the team; the Minister for the Army had announced that he would be granted special leave; the Department of the Army had booked a passage for him from Tokyo to London; and a late entry form was on its way to Helsinki by express post. Smeal hitched his way from the battlefield to Tokyo by jeep and transport plane.

He joined the team in London, was issued with a tracksuit and measured for a blazer. He was beaten by Zatopek in the Helsinki marathon, but hardly disgraced: he finished 44th in a field of 68, and had the satisfaction of seeing 13 rivals, including the record-holder Peters, drop out along the way. When the whole astonishing adventure was over, Smeal said goodbye to his team-mates and went back to the same unfriendly neighbourhood among the fox-holes, a very fulfilled man.

The story of Claude Smeal and his marathon is worth recalling --- not just because the man's resolve was breathtaking in its innocent audacity, not just because you could set the whole thing to the music of "The Power of the Dream". More than that, it symbolises the meeting point between sport and war, one of humanity's more intriguing intersections. Those pastimes possess starkly different objectives --- for one, destruction; for the other, competition and goodwill --- but history demonstrates that they have tended to entice the finest kind of youth. Certainly both nourish camaraderie and a desire for victory. One end product of both sport and war has been the hero, sometimes rewarded with a medal or two.

In Australia, it has been the sportspeople and the soldiers who have provided a large proportion of the nation's legends. Their deeds have become enshrined in history books: they attract awe and inspiration. They cannot be measured against each other --- who would even try to compare a Victoria Cross (the highest British Commonwealth award for war-time gallantry) with anything else, least of all an Olympic gold medal? --- but the affinity is irrevocably there.

Because it exists, and because Australia has no exclusive mortgage on the sportsman/soldier phenomenon, it is planned to celebrate the relationship internationally before the Sydney Olympic Games. On September 7, eight days ahead of the opening ceremony, flags from various nations, including those of former enemies, will be flown at a ceremony to honour peace and pay tribute to the hundreds of Olympic victims of war. SOCOG, the Australian Olympic Committee, the New South Wales state government, the Sydney City Council and the Australian veterans' association, the Returned and Services League, have been involved with the planning. I have been invited (indeed, since I began writing this article) to frame the wording on a plaque to be unveiled by IOC president Juan Antonio Samaranch for the occasion in Sydney's Hyde Park.

Maybe no Australian embodied the soldier-sportsman ethos more thoroughly than Cecil Healy, who was killed on the Somme just before the Great War of 1914-18 ended. A member of the winning 4 x 200 metres freestyle swimming team in Stockholm in 1912, he possesses the sad distinction of being the only gold medallist for Australia to have been killed in war. Another Australian who lost his life in France, and who also won gold, was Frederick Kelly, a member of the winning Leander rowing eight which represented Great Britain at the 1908 Olympics. Kelly, born in Sydney, studied at Oxford and won a Distinguished Service Cross for bravery at Gallipoli before his death in 1916. A third Australian to die in action in France during the Great War --- in which 60,000 Australians lost their lives --- was Claude Ross, a 400 metres runner at the Stockholm Games.

Cecil Healy did not really need a war, or even an Olympic Games, to make him a hero. He was a founder of the Manly (Sydney) Surf Club, and he plunged into the surf often to save scores of lives. For one act of courage at Manly, the Royal Humane

Claude Smeal, who travelled from a Korean battlefield to contest in the Helsinki Olympic marathon (Cathy Smeal)



Society awarded him its silver medal; for another, the Manly Surf Club gave him its gold honour badge; for yet another, the father of a youth he rescued insisted on presenting him with a watch and chain.

At the Stockholm Olympics in 1912, Healy not only shared gold with other members of the winning relay swim team. He performed an act of chivalry, which cost him individual gold. It happened after the three United States swimmers, the great Hawaiian Duke Kahanamoku, Ken Huszagh and Perry McGillivray, failed to show up for the start of the semi-finals of the individual 100 metres freestyle. The races were held, and, with the Americans out, the qualifiers for the final were Healy (who had won the first semi-final), his countryman Billy Longworth (who became ill and was forced to withdraw from the final) and the Germans Walter Ramme and Kurt Bretting.

In that company Healy would have been the favorite. After the qualifiers had been named, though, he intervened in the matter, arguing that the Americans should be given another chance. Through the Australian representative on the international jury, he asserted that it would be unsportsmanlike to deprive the Americans, and particularly a swimmer of the

calibre of Kahanamoku, of an opportunity to win. Largely because of his advocacy, a decision was made to allow the Americans to swim in another semi-final, in which Kahanamoku and McGillivray qualified for the final. The Hawaiian went on to win the final, with Healy taking the silver medal.

Healy's was a classic sporting gesture. but it belongs to another age. Any swimmer today would maintain that, if for any reason a rival swimmer failed to make it to the starting blocks, that was his or her problem.

Most of the great Australian swimmers of the time saw combat in what was a distant war for Australia. Among them were Harold Hardwick (Olympic gold and two bronze, 1912); Frank Beaurepaire (Olympic silver and bronze, 1908, silver and bronze, 1920, silver and bronze, 1924); and Ivan Stedman (silver, 1920). Stedman, wounded in Belgium, was decorated for saving an English gunner from drowning.

In a letter in my possession, Stedman talks of learning at Villers Brettoneux from another swimmer, Tom Adrian, of the death of Healy. Adrian, he said, was "very despondent". Adrian never recovered from the awful experiences of the Somme: in 1924, as coach of

the swimming champion Andrew "Boy" Charlton, he threw himself from the liner Ormonde into the Indian Ocean on the way to the Paris Olympic Games, in a fit of despair. He was rescued, but stayed, for the short remainder of his life, a traumatised victim of war. Charlton, incidentally, went on to win gold in the 1500 metres freestyle.

Another group of Australians who saw heavy service in World War I were the 1908 Wallabies rugby union team, winners of the gold medal. One of them, Sid Middleton, who was awarded a Distinguished Service Order for war-time gallantry, achieved the rare feat of representing Australia in two sports: having won gold in 1908 as a rugby player, he was a member of the unsuccessful 1912 rowing eight. Another of those Wallabies, Dan Carroll, made history a different way: after serving with the US Army in France, he won a gold medal as playing coach of the US rugby team in 1920. He remains the only Australian to have won Olympic gold medals for two different countries.

Research into this convergence between sport and war --- and I recommend that much more of it be done, because it's a fertile field --- leaves one with a kind of angry admiration for a legion of young people from other times, other places. That, and a bunch of sad lists.

Ian Buchanan's absorbing book, *British Olympians: A Hundred Years of Gold Medallists*, tells of the death in World War I of 13 athletes who had won gold medals for Britain. It also discusses the deeds of the 1908 400 metres runner Noel Chavasse, who performed the incredible feat of winning a Victoria Cross and Bar (that's two VCs); of the death on a battlefield of the winner of that 1908 400 metres, Wyndham Halswelle; and of Phillip Neame, who won both Olympic gold (in a shooting event) and a Victoria cross.

Australia lost no Olympians in World War II, but two men who served as members of air crew in the Royal Australian Air Force, the high jumper John Winter and the singles sculler Merv Wood, both won gold medals in 1948. Buchanan's book lists a bobsled team at the 1948 winter Olympics as the most highly decorated British team ever. Between them its crew of four former RAF fliers had won two Distinguished Service Orders, three Distinguished Plying Crosses and three Air Force Crosses.



Carl "Luz" and Jesse Owens., IOC Archives

In the pages of the *Journal of Olympic History* (Winter, 1998) Dr Uriel Simri wrote about Jewish Olympic medallists who had become victims of Germany's Nazi regime. They included three Olympic pioneers from the first modern Games in 1896: the German cousins Alfred and Gustav Flatow, who between them won five gold gymnastic medals, and Austria's Otto Herschmann, who was placed third in a swimming event in 1896 and second in a fencing competition in 1912.

In their joint book *Quest for Gold*, Bill Mallon and Ian Buchanan re-tell the story of Carl "Luz" Long and Jesse Owens how Long, the German long jumper, befriended Owens and gave him valuable advice which helped him to get through the qualifying round of the event, which the black American went on to win. Their friendship prospered, and they swapped letters often. Long joined the German army and fought in the North African desert, where he died in action. The authors quote words from a letter Long wrote to Owens, mentioning his infant son

My heart tells me this is the last letter I shall ever write. If it is so, I ask you something. It is to go to Germany when this war is done, someday find my son Karl, and tell him about his father. Tell him, Jesse, what times were like when we were not separated by war. I am saying --- tell him how things can be between men on this earth.

That test articulates what the Olympic spirit is all about, more than any number of fancy words. It sums up eloquently the result of one collision between sport and war. There are so many more that deserve research and publication.

And yes, Owens did go to Germany afterwards and meet Karl Long. He told him of his father's unselfishness and courage, and of the affection that had developed between them. And when Long was married, Owens stood beside him as best man.