

# Emil Voigt: The Golden Pioneer

By his granddaughter Robin Voigt



Emil Voigt won the five-mile Olympic final in spectacular fashion, leading the rest of field by 70 yards. Above: his 1908 Olympic gold medal. It was made of 15 carat gold and designed by Bertram Mackennal.

Photos: Robin Voigt Archive

When Mo Farah did the 5000 m 10,000 m double at the 2012 London Olympics, many newspapers claimed jubilantly that he was the first British distance runner in the history of the Modern Olympics to strike gold. But they were wrong. 104 years earlier, Emil Voigt won gold for Great Britain in the five-mile race at the first London Olympic Games in 1908. Voigt was born in Manchester and was the only Briton male or female to do so until Mo's exploits in Stratford. Now Britain can proudly claim two golden long distance runners.

Emil's Olympic time of 25:11.2 recorded more than a century ago will always remain in the record books – it will never be beaten as the five-mile race (just over 8000 metres) was replaced by the 5000 metres and the 10,000 metres in the next Olympic Games of 1912.

The sport itself was very different then. Athletics today is almost unrecognisable from those days. Without the individual sponsorship that athletes enjoy now, competitors in the early 1900s were unable to devote themselves to their sport full-time. They could only train part-time as they held down jobs in order to pay for their own expenses of travel, accommodation and

other costs. There were no special changing rooms or warm up areas at the venues. The Olympic Games were strictly amateur so there was no prize money. Most athletes were not able to afford coaches.

A century ago, running tracks were usually covered with coal cinders. The tracks now are much more high tech. The synthetic, all-weather surfaces in use today are designed to aid speed. They are made from rubber and polyurethane, are more durable, and provide greater cushioning which makes for less stress on the runners' bodies and gives more consistent results.

In Emil's time running attire was also basic. He ran in flat leather shoes with spikes – but they weren't anything like the running shoes of today. Modern running shoes are designed to increase comfort and stability, with air cushioning, mesh uppers to allow the foot to breathe and different sole patterns which result in better traction without the need for spikes. These improvements have eased the pressure on runners' feet and have enabled them to maximise their natural ability on the track.

Clothing was equally simple, cotton shirts and shorts. Nowadays it is designed to be as lightweight as possible



Emil Voigt in sixth place in the middle of the five-mile Olympic final, waiting for his chance to take off in the last lap.

Bottom: the medal which Emil Voigt received two weeks before the Olympic Games for his victory over four miles at the AAA championships. He set a new record with 19:47.4 minutes which stood for five years. He successfully defended his title in 1909. Adjacent: his competitor's badge of 1908.

Photos: Robin Voigt Archive

and made from evaporative heat-resistant materials. There are even cutting-edge aerodynamic suits (known as Velocity Suits or Swift Suits) which have been manufactured to reduce drag, improve comfort and help the overall performance of the professionals.

Little was known about nutrition in those days and how diet and lifestyle can affect your well-being. In fact it was thought that meat, and more meat, was the order of the day.

So Emil holds another unusual Olympic distinction. He was the first vegetarian to become an Olympic champion of the modern era, in any event, from any country. It has been written that Emil was the only vegetarian out of 2024 competitors in the 1908 Games but two other British vegetarians also competed in the early rounds of the Games. Records in those days did not always include detailed information on the participants but it seems certain that Voigt's dietary habits were still highly unusual. He knew how to get the most out of his athletic performance, fine tuning his body by eating healthy foods. His diet consisted of fruit, vegetables and eggs, and was considered questionable by his meat-eating competitors and trainers in that era. Today's athletes are encouraged to eat carbohydrates as their primary food source. Special diets are tailored for them, and plan in great detail what to eat in the days leading up to a competition as well as on race day itself.

Such details are not readily available for the early Games. In fact some records are notoriously unreliable.

People have been listed as having entered certain events but some may have withdrawn before the event took place, and other details such as diet weren't always known. Disputes still continue today as to the correct facts and they are often difficult to corroborate.

How Emil won his Olympic gold is an extraordinary story which featured in the ISOH Journal in December 2008. A detailed account of the race itself and his early life in Manchester is given there. But since then more fascinating information has come to light.

Emil Voigt was born in Manchester in 1883 and grew up in the working class district of Ardwick, Manchester. The Voigts originally came from Prussia and in 1863, they had moved from Luckau (in Brandenburg near Berlin) to work in the booming cotton industry in Manchester. Emil's father was aged two when his family arrived in England.

He married Elizabeth Robb from Wigtown in Scotland. Sadly Emil senior died at an early age so life was tough for his young family. They moved from house to house staying with relatives and at the young age of 14 Emil left school to work in a factory to help support his mother and younger brother Louis.

By chance one day, while out walking, he saw some cross-country runners from the Slade Harriers Club in Manchester and made his way down to the finish line to talk to them. He decided that he'd like to try cross-country running and joined the club. He was only 14 years old and had no experience of running but he was immediately successful, winning the first race he ever entered – this was over four miles. He was a natural.

He ran with the Slade Harriers for 10 years and also joined the Manchester Athletic Club to try track running. He was only 166 cm tall and weighed 53 kg but he had a talent, allied to stamina and determination. He loved to run and he loved to win. His younger brother Louis Stanley Voigt also took up the sport and proved a gifted runner in his own right. They became known in the local press as the 'Brothers Voigt' as they often ran together and would cross the finish line side by side.

Emil won many events, but as he only ever competed in the north, he wasn't well known in other parts of England and certainly had never been heard of internationally ... until the 1908 Olympic Games.

He was the surprise packet of the Games for the host nation. He only decided to enter at the very last moment, a mere six weeks before the athletic events began. The British athletics community began to sit up and take notice when he won the Olympic Trials.

Emil was normally a miler, but in the Olympics, he was entered for the five miles, a distance he'd never run competitively before on the track. There was no one mile event (Although the metric 1500 was included, along with other shorter events. The race over five miles

was the only individual event to be over an imperial distance.) Emil knew he was not a sprinter but he was keen to compete in the Games when they were held in his own country, so he decided 'to give the five miles a go'. He had been running longer distances in cross-country races, but in the 12 months before the Games he had only been competing in half-mile and mile races on the track. However he always retained the belief that he could run well whatever distance he put his mind to.

He applied to take part in the Games at the last moment, sending a telegram to the British Olympic Selectors on the night of their final meeting in London. The committee was made up of members of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) and fortunately, Emil's telegram arrived just as the meeting got underway. He was accepted as a late entry and found he had only one week to train before the British Trials in London. With so little time to get ready he began a punishing training schedule, running three times a day – before breakfast, at lunchtime and up to 9 o'clock at night.

The national Trials for the five-mile race were held on the 30<sup>th</sup> May 1908 at the new Stadium, in Shepherd's Bush, London. Emil caught the train down from Manchester the day before his race.

*The Times* wrote that it was "one of the finest contests witnessed" that day, and described the closing stages of the race: "A. J. Robertson, the national and international cross-country champion; W. Coales (Thrapston), the Midlands Counties cross-country champion; and E. R. Voigt (Manchester AC) were almost together when the last lap was entered, and after a desperate struggle, the result was a win by Voigt of two yards".<sup>1</sup> The time was 25 mins 26.4 secs, with Emil winning the first five-mile race he had ever entered.

With only a few weeks until the start of the Olympic athletic events Emil returned to Manchester to continue his training there. He did not take on a coach as he had very different ideas about what would work for him. He continued with his rigorous regime of running three times a day and incorporated daily massage and deep breathing into his final preparations. He devised a vegetarian diet.

He had become a vegetarian at the age of 23 at a time when it was regarded with scepticism by the mainstream population. Vegetarians were considered to be radical and their beliefs were dismissed as a fad. Throughout the remainder of his life he remained a devotee and joined the Vegetarian Cycling and Athletic Club, spending weekends cycling through the Manchester countryside enjoying the fresh air, exercise, picnics and company of like-minded people. The club held monthly rides on Saturday afternoons and shorter moonlight runs, with everyone singing merrily as they cycled along.

He had a good understanding of how the body functioned and he based his diet for the race on energy-

building foods. While the other athletes sang the praises of a concentrated beef extract called OXO – the sponsor of the 1908 Games – Emil refused to endorse it and his diet leading into the Games consisted of eggs, vegetables and fruit – brown bread and hot milk for breakfast; milk pudding or cheese and nuts for lunch; and for dinner a variety of vegetables, always including potatoes, and plenty of fresh fruit such as apples and bananas. He was a non-smoker and teetotaler and in between he drank cups of tea but no alcohol.

Emil also put great store in massage and deep breathing. Throughout his athletic career he advocated "correct conditioning and correct massage". He emphasized that "all the vital organs – the heart, lungs and liver – must be in as fine a condition as the actual muscles used in running. You hear people talking of a second wind. Now just what is that? It comes after half a mile or so of running when the body clicks into coordination. Nutrition is being carried to various parts of the body at the correct tempo – and everything is in harmony. But to get this, the vital organs must be in top shape".<sup>2</sup>

One month after the British Trials, Emil again took the train down from Manchester to London, this time to compete in the AAA four miles at the White City Stadium on 4 July. Although further British Olympic Trials races were being held that day, the four miles was not one of them; this was a race for the national title which Emil had decided to use as a warm-up event to test his progress.

The four mile distance had been contested in England since 1880. Voigt had never competed on the track over four miles but this was the closest to the Olympic distance. It would therefore be a chance for Emil to build up his race experience just before the Olympics.

He needn't have worried about his form. He won the four miles with ease, 30 yards ahead of everyone else, in an AAA championship record of 19:47.4, beating the previous best time of 19:48.8 set by Fred E. Bacon 14 years before in 1894. Arthur 'Archie' Robertson from the Birchfield Harriers was runner up in 19:52.8 (He finished fifth in the Olympic five miles final) and third was his friend and rival, fellow Mancunian A. E. 'Eddie' Wood of the Essex Beagles.

Emil's win was described in the *Manchester Guardian*: "A good feat by another of England's Olympic representatives was the performance of the Manchester Athletic Club member, Emil R. Voigt, who won the four miles in the fast time of 19 min 47 1/5 sec, thus beating the previous best championship figures of 19 min 48 4/5 sec by F. E. Bacon in 1894. 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 of the midland champion, A. J. Robertson, Birchfield Harriers".<sup>3</sup>

Emil's belief in his ability to do well at distances on a track was well-founded – with two weeks to go to the Olympics his preparation was looking good.

Like many of the early Olympics, the London Games of 1908 ran for an extraordinary period of six months, and incorporated both summer and winter events. The first event was began on 27 April and the closing banquet on 31 October. The athletic events were scheduled for the summer and the heats of the five miles were held on 15 July. A few days beforehand Emil took the train down again to London to take part.

Eight heats were held and 35 of the best runners in the world took part. Emil won his heat and automatically qualified for the final but what was not known at the time was that after the race he pulled up injured. As a result of his excessive training he had torn away the muscles under his foot during the heats. He kept his injury to himself and masked his pain. He has no thought of pulling out of the final.

Never one to give up, Emil had a plaster of Paris arch support built into his sandshoe and was able to rest for the next two days while waiting for the final on 18 July. Only two close friends knew of his injury and they arrived at the Great Stadium with their hearts in their mouths, ready to watch his race and cheer him along.

Heavy rain had been falling all day, the track was soggy and it was bitterly cold and windy. The conditions were unfavourable for fast times and Emil was injured but they knew how determined he could be; once he had made his mind up he was the kind of person who rose to a challenge. They knew he was an intelligent runner, that he could wear down his competitors and that he had a telling sprint at the finish. They never doubted him; they had seen him in training and felt that Emil could take out the race.

The cheering grew louder and louder as the competitors came out onto the track for the finals. The Royal family were in the stadium which was full of excited spectators, holding a sea of black umbrellas against the rain. Emil doggedly lined up for the race, not knowing whether he would be able to finish, but he was determined to 'give it a go'.

The crack of the starter's pistol rang out and he took off. He had decided to hold back, to remain in the middle of the pack for most of the race, then when he got the opportunity in the closing stages of the race he would go for it with everything he had.

With the cumbersome plaster cast inside his sandshoe he ran through the pain for the first few miles, but soon forgot about it and got into a comfortable rhythm. He conserved his energy for most of the race, and by the four-mile point he had worked his way into the front bunch of four runners. They were running shoulder to shoulder with the Swedish runner Johann Svanberg just out in front.

The bell rang for the last lap and suddenly 700 yards from home Emil made his move. "He tucked his elbows down, threw up his head and went away on his sprint"<sup>6</sup>, passing them one by one. As he headed into the straight he was way out in front and the excited crowd of 80,000 rose to its feet to wildly cheer him on to the finish line. He won the race in spectacular fashion by 70 yards, in the time of 25:1.2, running the last mile in a blistering 4:51.8. It was a remarkable win against all odds.

The British papers were full of the news of his win. *The Athletic News* wrote that he was "the finest amateur runner over five miles that Britain has ever had and he is yet to prove just how fast he can go"<sup>5</sup> while the *Daily Express* reported: "The dapper young Manchester runner quit his field when he wanted to and romped home an easy winner"<sup>6</sup>. The Official Report of 1908 stated that the other front runners "made efforts to shake off the little Manchester man, but he never let them go, and came away in his own inimitable style more than a lap from home. Running in beautiful style all the way, he went clean away from his field, lapping the two rear division men in the last furlong".<sup>7</sup>

Emil returned to Manchester by train the following day with Eddie Owen who had taken second place, and they were given a hero's welcome. A huge crowd was waiting at the station and as they stepped from the train they were lifted shoulder-high. The sound of bagpipes broke out triumphantly and Emil was carried by the euphoric crowd from the station down to the approach of Piccadilly. Overwhelmed by all the attention and somewhat embarrassed he managed to slip away and make his escape in a hansom cab.

One month after his win in the five miles at the Olympic Games Emil made an attempt on the world record in a five-mile handicap race held on 29 August 1908 at Fallowfield in Manchester. Just before the race got underway there was a heavy downpour which soaked the track and made running conditions extremely difficult for the runners, putting an end to any real chances of a record. He won the race from scratch in 25:30.4 but did not beat the Shrubbs' world record of 24:33.4 set at Stamford Bridge on 12 May 1904.

The race was described in the *Manchester Guardian* the following day: "Record-breaking, like record-making, depends largely for its success on the state of the weather. The competitors themselves may be in the best condition, but unless the day is favourable their attempts must end in failure. The weather spelled failure on Saturday.

Before E. R. Voigt, the Olympic five miles champion, turned out in his attempt to lower Shrubbs' five mile record made at Stamford Bridge in 1904, there was a heavy shower of rain, which practically put an end to Voigt's chance of success. Voigt ran in beautiful style, but he is a light runner, and the track was much too heavy for him.



At over eighty years of age, Emil Voigt, proudly showing the beautiful Olympic diploma that was presented to him to commemorate his victory in the 1908 London Games. As well as the gold medal and certificate he received a laurel crown and a silk Union flag. Right: A caricature of Emil Voigt, honouring his Olympic win for Britain in the 1908 five mile race.

Photo: Robin Voigt Archive

For the first mile he was 24 seconds behind Shrubbs' time, and in the next mile he lost another 10 seconds. He eventually finished the distance in 25 min 30.5 sec; or nearly one minute outside the record.

One pleasing feature in the race was the sportsmanship shown by E. Owen, Broughton Harriers. He had a splendid chance of winning the race, but sacrificed it in order to make the pace for Voigt.<sup>18</sup>

Until he entered the Games and won the gold Emil had been planning to retire at the end of 1908, but buoyed by his Olympic success he decided to continue his career for a while longer. He competed in races throughout England over the next two and a half years, winning two more British titles, and he also travelled to Europe and proved one of the star attractions in big international races in Sweden, Finland, Germany and France.

He became British four-mile champion for a second time in 1909 and British one-mile champion in 1910, then 10 days later backed that up by winning the British one-mile handicap from scratch race, as well as winning Northern Counties Athletic Association events and other races in the northern part of the country.

When Emil turned to track racing he did most of his running at the Manchester athletic ground in Fallowfield, competing and training there several times a week. Occasionally he raced at Belle Vue Gardens which was another popular venue for sporting events in Manchester. Later when he began competing in the bigger British national events he would travel down to Stamford Bridge in London.

On 19 June 1909 Emil repeated his success at Crewe, backing up to take out the three miles that he had won the previous year just before the Olympics, this time improving his time, crossing the finishing line in 14:32.4, with Eddie Wood second (off 50 yards) and Archie Robertson third.

*The Athletic News* wrote: "With two laps to go, Voigt took up the second position, and with a lap and a

half to be run he assumed command and finished in pretty style without taking too much out of himself ... it is obvious that Voigt is faster than ever. He will take a lot of beating even in the mile at Stamford Bridge. The four miles he cannot lose".<sup>19</sup>

One week later on 26 June 1909 Emil won the four miles at the Northern Counties meeting in the time of 20:15.4. Then the following week 3 July 1909, as predicted, Emil repeated his success in the British four miles at the AAA Championships at Stamford Bridge.

*The Times*, impressed by Emil's win, reported "Voigt retained the Four Miles Challenge Cup, winning fairly easily from the veteran A. J. Robertson, and it would appear as if there is no-one who can extend him at distances from one to ten miles".<sup>20</sup>

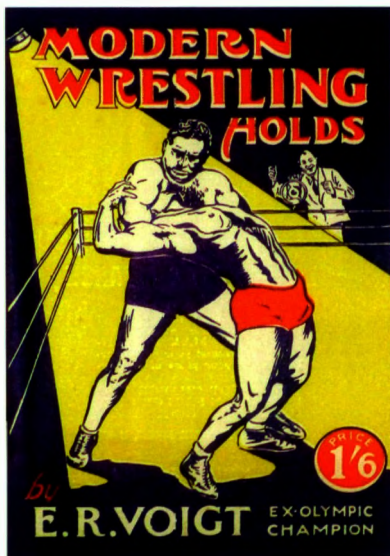
In July and August 1909 Emil went on his first tour of Europe, travelling with a team of British athletes to Russia, and also took part in some smaller races in France and Germany. When the team returned to England, Emil stayed on in Europe. He had been invited by the Crown Prince of Sweden, who had seen Emil win at the Olympics, to take part in their championships in Stockholm.

Top athletes from different parts of Europe competed but Emil was the star attraction at meetings in Stockholm, Sweden and in Tampere, Finland. These pulled record-breaking crowds. He took part in six gruelling events – four long distance races and two over middle distance, with little rest in between, and finished either first or second in each of them. The sports-loving Scandinavians flocked to see his races and the newspapers were filled with stories about him. His races were described as "electrifying".

He maintained a close relationship with Finland through a friendship with Finnish athlete Lauri Pihkala which endured 30 years. Pihkala had competed in the 1908 London Olympic Games in the men's high jump and the discus throw. He also ran in the 800 metres in

Emil Voigt was well-known as the wrestling and boxing commentator at 2KY in Australia and later commented on the wrestling in England for BBC radio. He wrote books about sport and training, as well as sports reports for newspapers in England, Australia, and the USA.

Photos: Robin Voigt Archive



the 1912 Games and subsequently became the coach of Finland's track and field team. He was the editor of the leading Finnish sports newspaper *Suomen Urheilulehti*, and Emil wrote a number of articles for the paper giving training advice to the Finns.

Once back in England after his European tour, Emil decided to take a break from competitive running to concentrate on his business career and didn't resume running again until April 1910.

However, in June disaster struck. He had started preparing to defend his 1909 British four-mile championship crown for the third time and also the Northern Counties four-mile title but never made it to the start line. While competing in the one mile at Fallowfield on 4 June 1910 he looked set to win that race but was dramatically knocked down right on the finish line by Eddie Owen. He was injured and had to pull out of both four-mile events.

The *Manchester Guardian* described the race: "The mile race (at Fallowfield) provided the most interesting finish ever seen on the M.A.C. ground. E. R. Voigt, the four-mile champion, made a great effort to deprive E. Owen, the English mile champion, of the title which he won last year, and he would probably have done so but for an unfortunate accident. Owen has a peculiar style when finishing a race. He swings his arms about after the fashion of the 'trudgeon' stroke in swimming. Voigt was just in front of Owen on entering the finishing straight, but he happened to swerve slightly and was knocked down. Owen kept on and won."<sup>1</sup>

Emil was forced to rest his injury for the next month then competed in the AAA one mile at Stamford Bridge on 2 July. This time he beat defending champion Eddie Owen, winning in 4:26.2. It was his third British title. The track was described as being very heavy as a result of intermittent showers and a large crowd of 8000 attended.

Eleven days after his win in the AAA one-mile at Stamford Bridge, Emil recorded the fastest time for the distance anywhere in the world in 1910 when he won a one-mile handicap held in Manchester on 13 July in the time of 4:19.8.

He didn't defend his AAA four-mile title at Stamford Bridge in 1910 as he didn't want to risk competing in anything longer than a mile until his injury was completely healed. That year the title was won by Albert Hill, the future double Olympic champion of 1920.

But Emil's 1908 championship record of 19:47.4 for the four miles survived until George Hutson beat it in 1913 with 19:32.c. By then Emil was living in Australia. Hutson won 5000 m bronze in the Stockholm Olympic Games in 1912 but was tragically killed in action in the first few months of the First World War. It wasn't until 1924 that Emil's time was beaten again in the British championships by William Cotterell who clocked the time of 19:45.6. Even the great Paavo Nurmi only recorded 19:52.2 in the 1922 race.

Emil was one of those unusual athletes who had the ability to win at both middle and long distance. He was in his prime and could have won more titles had fate not intervened.

In 1910 he became involved in the politics of the sport, pressing for better conditions for the athletes. He took on the might of the AAA (Amateur Athletic Association) gathering support from athletes all over England. Going against 'the government' eventually caused him to be banned from their events and cost him the chance to go for any further national titles.

The AAA was becoming rather heavy-handed, dictating to the NCL (National Cyclists' Union) and the NAU (National Athletic Union) how events should be run. The AAA was not prepared to listen to either the unions or the athletes, who were less than happy with conditions at the meetings and many of the regulations governing their sport.

A fierce dispute developed between the AAA and the NCU. The NCU was dissatisfied about the staging of its events and wanted control of its own affairs. Athletes competing in track and field were also unhappy because the conditions at venues were poor, there were problems with the handicap system and prizes offered were often much less than advertised. The athletes were not allowed any input as to how things should be run and had no means of redress.

Emil, being the 'political animal' that he was, decided to do something about it and formed a breakaway

union. He wanted to give the athletes a voice. He called a meeting in Manchester on 21 July 1910 to air the athletes' grievances and establish their objectives.

A large gathering of athletes, engaged in running, cycling, walking and other field events, attended. Among those present was Eddie Owen a man he had just beaten in the one-mile British championship and who was still the current three-quarter mile record holder; J. C. English, the steeplechase champion; W. Scott, the distance runner; and other well-known athletes of the time.

Emil urged for better dressing room accommodation and said that the value of prizes given was notoriously far less than the sum mentioned on the prospectus, and though the subject had often been brought before the AAA and the NCU the scandal still existed. He said that complaints against handicapping were quite justified and athletes should certainly be allowed a better method of redress.

It was agreed to form the AAU (Amateur Athletes' Union) and Emil was made Chairman. He outlined the objectives of the new union which were: to promote and protect the interests of all amateur athletes; to inquire into handicapping anomalies; to secure improved dressing room accommodation; full value in prizes; and better railway facilities for athletes to travel to the events. He underlined that athletes should be represented on the present organisations governing amateur sport.

The debate widened from the initial dispute between the AAA and NCU, with Emil's AAU, the NAU, and the ASA (Amateur Swimming Association) all becoming involved. The tension became so great with the AAA that not only did the NCU and NAU agree to join forces against them but also a number of previously run AAA clubs crossed over to be under the new banner as well.

*Lloyd's Weekly News* reported: "As a sequel to the amalgamation, the Southern Cycling Union have decided to include two flat (running) events – a mile and a half-mile – in their programme for the annual Good Friday meeting at Herne Hill. More important still perhaps is the fact that E. R. Voigt, the famous Manchester runner, who is mile champion of the AAA and five miles Olympic champion, has promised to run at this meeting. It will be remembered that Voigt was practically the originator of the National Athletic Union".<sup>2</sup>

In March 1911 Emil took part in a 'rebel' NCU/NAU event, not sanctioned by the AAA, which was held at Hull. By doing so he was automatically suspended from participating in any further AAA events. It robbed him of any future British titles and it was not long after this he set off to start a new life in Australia. The long-running dispute between the AAA and NCU was finally settled a year later in March 1912.

Emil continued to run in Australia from 1911 until 1913, winning titles there but the First World War brought an

end to his career. He returned to Manchester in 1914 to help in the war effort, setting up a factory, staffed by 200 women, manufacturing aircraft parts. At the end of the war he travelled back again to Australia and settled in Dee Why in Sydney.

He went on to achieve fame again in Australia, this time as a pioneer of early Australia radio and also became involved in politics. He was one of the prime movers in the newly burgeoning radio industry there, founding radio station 2KY in Sydney in 1925. It was the world's first Labor station and arguably the first commercial radio station in Australia, certainly the first with the ability to broadcast beyond just the immediate local area due to its powerful transmitter, and funded by a broad range of advertisers. It was possible to receive the station in some country areas and even across the Tasman in New Zealand.



When he retired from running, Emil Voigt went on to achieve fame again as a pioneer of radio in Australia. He founded 2KY in Sydney in 1925 – one of the first commercial stations in Australia and also the world's first labor station. By his forties he had become general manager of the station.

Photos: Robin Hoag Archive

He set up his radio station in opposition to the Government-run stations to try and break their monopoly. His aim was to help bring about social reform for the working class by giving a fuller and more accurate account of what was happening within Australia. Once again he was criticised by the authorities for being inflammatory and he was watched very closely by the Federal Secret Service.

Emil became a thorn in the Australian Government's side; they thought that 2KY was broadcasting in code to Moscow after midnight – which was untrue. The station was constantly monitored, many restrictions were placed on what they could put to air and some of their early

Manchester Athletic Club officials show Emil Voigt's granddaughter Robin (right) the Illuminated Address which hangs in his honour at their clubhouse, as she presents them with the pedometer he used for training.



Photo: Great Run

broadcasts were mysteriously sabotaged. Cables were cut by person or persons unknown as they were about to go on air. Emil was instrumental in having a Royal Commission set up in 1925 to investigate the early radio industry and made an appearance to give evidence.

In 1936 Emil, fed up with his treatment and constant obstacles, returned to England to work with the BBC for a while. He formed several engineering businesses, in Manchester and London, but never lost his passion for sport. He wrote sports reports for newspapers in England, Australia and the USA and gave lectures on training, massage and fitness.

Emil eventually retired to New Zealand in 1947, set up an engineering business in Auckland and also dabbled with the idea of developing television in New Zealand. He helped train some of New Zealand's runners in the 1950s.

He continued to run his whole life, jogging several miles a day to keep fit. He would run up Mangere Mountain, an extinct volcano, immediately behind his property. All he had to do was open the garden gate, the path was right at his back fence and he would take off like the wind. He was still exercising regularly in his mid-80s but had slowed down to a brisk daily walk up the volcano's side and across the top ridges, or sometimes he would walk along a quiet street, doing two miles a day to keep in trim. The papers remarked that he had an active mind and was fitter than most people half his age. He lived until he was 90, and passed away at home in Auckland on 15 October 1973.

In 2008, the BUPA Great Manchester Run, organised by Nova International, dedicated their showpiece race to him in commemoration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his Olympic victory. They set up a five-mile checkpoint on the course and challenged the runners to see if they could beat his time of 100 years ago. World champions, Olympic medallists, runners from northern clubs, celebrities running for charity and everyday people took part. The event was held over two-days with children's competitions the day before the main race. More than 91,000 people applied to take part in the run that year but as some streets of Manchester are narrow places had to be balloted, with 31,000 runners permitted to enter. With all the advantages available to runners today, only 49 managed to better his time.

Each were awarded a certificate, designed by Emil's granddaughter Robin graphic designer and writer from Australia, who had been invited over to watch the race. Local, regional and national television, radio stations and newspapers all ran stories about Emil Voigt leading into the event itself which was broadcast live by the BBC. The Manchester Central Library put on a special display as a tribute. Two of their specialist staff researched the Library's archives and assembled a display featuring old newspaper stories about him, Ancestry family records, census papers, old street maps and photos. The exhibition was opened by the Mayor and BBC television filmed the event.

An early British running champion and hero, Emil was described 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".<sup>13</sup>

Emil Voigt was a man ahead of his time – a unique individual filled with ideas and energy to burn. He was a talented athlete, a pioneer of early radio, an idealist who fought for the rights of workers, and throughout it all a hard-working, successful business man. He serves as an inspiration and role model for our athletes of the future. Britain and Manchester can be justifiably proud. ■

- 1 *The Times*, 1 June 1908.
- 2 *The Auckland Star*, 1964.
- 3 *The Manchester Guardian*, 6 July 1908.
- 4 *The Manchester Guardian*, 20 July 1908.
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- 7 *The Official Report of 1908*.
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