

THE WALL CAME TUMBLING DOWN

By John A. Lucas, Track and Field Historian and Professor Emeritus, The Pennsylvania State University

Charley Paddock brings down the wall at the 1928 Penn Relays:
A recognition of his 100th birthday.

Robert E. Lehr, in his Penn State University Ph.D. dissertation on the history of the United States Olympic Committee, called Charles W. Paddock (1900-1943) one of the century's greatest sprinters and along with Finland's Paavo Nurmi, the most controversial athlete of the 1920's regarding violations of the "pure athletic amateur code."¹

Captain Paddock died on July 22, 1943, in a fiery airplane crash in Sitka, Alaska. Four military personnel perished on that day.²

I knew nothing of multiple Olympic champion Paddock, as I sat in Harvard Stadium on Saturday, July 24, 1943, a starry eyed kid, not yet sixteen years old, having just completed my own second track session at The Boston English High School. Gunder Hagg of Sweden won the invitation mile that day, in 4:05.3, a new American record, defeating Gil Dodds (4:06.7) and Bill Hulse (4:07.8). I knew just about enough of the sport, as did the 16,000 spectators, that we had witnessed a "Gunder the Wonder" phenomenon.

The marvelous journalist from *The Boston Globe*, Jerry Nason, wrote of Hagg:

...the fabulous fireman of Gavle, Sweden, sped around the track as if answering a four-alarm-tire.³

The equally-skillful writer from the *New York Herald Tribune*, Jesse Abramson, wrote:

The gaunt refugee from a barber shop [Hagg] never altered the seemingly effortless lope that is his incredible style.⁴

Neither sports writer took note of the fact that immediately after the race, the announcer asked us all, athletes and spectators, to stand at attention and to "bow your heads, for word that Captain Paddock, many times Olympic champion, has just died in an air crash in Alaska."

I had not heard of Paddock, but my eyes were focused on Hagg, jogging the track, "warming-down" and oblivious of the message in a foreign language to him.⁵

Many years later (1977), my article on Paddock mentioned briefly the extraordinary incident at the 1928 Penn Relays - the wall came tumbling down on him in the invitational 175 yards dash.⁶

Paddock joined the U.S. Army during the First World War, somehow kept fit, and was the star sprinter at the Paris 1919 Inter-Allied Games, continued collecting sprint medals at the Antwerp and Paris Olympic Games of 1920 and 1924.

He was the first to be hailed as "The World's Fastest Human" and continued breaking world records from 100 yards (9.6) through 300 metres (33 1/5).

There was a "big buzz" in the city of Philadelphia when he agreed to run in the 1928 Penn Relays - the 34th annual version of the oldest relay carnival in the world.

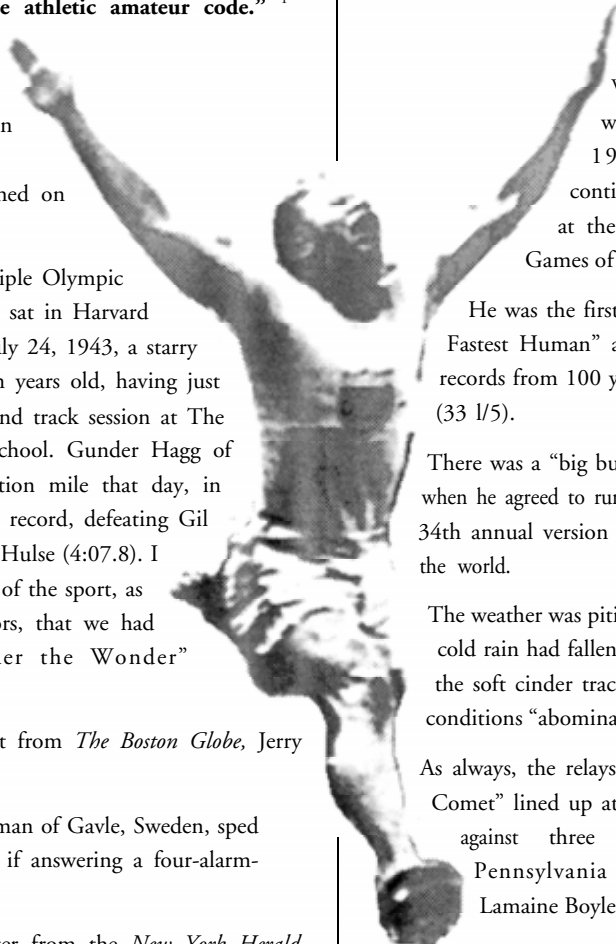
The weather was pitiless on Saturday, April 28. Ice-cold rain had fallen for a week on the city and on the soft cinder track. *The New York Times* called conditions "abominable."

As always, the relays unfolded and the "California Comet" lined up at the far end of Franklin Field against three unheralded University of Pennsylvania sprinters - Folwell Scull, Lamaine Boyle, and John Ball.

The son of a wealthy Pasadena business man, the short (5'7") stocky (155 pounds) Paddock was dressed, top to bottom in stripped baby-blue track shorts and top, despite rain that turned the track to mud.

It was bitter cold as the famous starter Johnny McHugh got the four runners off to a fair start.

It was no contest, of course, as the powerful Paddock moved to the front, over the "bog of a track", intent on running 175 yards.. fast.



Paddock wrote about what happened next:

“I was running next to the brick wall. Looking ahead I saw something which made me think I was dreaming. The great wall of the stadium, black with people, was slowly giving way and an instant later fell across the track, carrying with it the first row of spectators who had been leaning against it to watch the start.”⁷

Paddock, famous for his “flying finish”, high-hurdled bodies and, as he wrote, “like a startled antelope” finished the 175 yard distance in 17 2/5 seconds a new world record.

Every wire-service and major American newspaper covered the remarkable Penn Relays sprint race.

John Kieran wrote a poem in the morning newspaper:

Water, water everywhere (the Weather Man’s a wretch!)-

Three inches at the starting line; three fathoms in the stretch;

The very seats were washed away; the very wall did crash;

T was really wondrous training and the benefits we’ll see
If Olympic Games are ever held at Venice, Italy⁸

Ed Pollack wrote in the *Philadelphia Public Ledger*.

Wall crashes, felling 40; 4 boys taken to hospital. Spectators hurled in runner’s path. None hurt seriously as the “fastest human” breaks world record.⁹

Perry Lewis’s *Philadelphia Inquirer* headline cried:

Paddock survives stands collapse and worst weather in history of the classic, swerves and canters to a world record.¹⁰

A dramatic photo of the “track wall collapse” appears on page 5 of this April 29 sport section.

My favorite writer (and mentor), Jesse Abramson, wrote that nearly a hundred fans dropped onto the muddy cinder, none seriously hurt. “They were still falling when Paddock and his pursuers dashed by.”¹¹

Associated Press Sports Editor, Alan J. Gould, was much taken by what he saw on that cold afternoon of snow squalls and icy rain. He allowed readers to see the Penn Relays spectacle:

The flashing, baby-blue-clad figure of Paddock, out in front, swept into view at the height of the Confusion, but enough of the track was left clear of the jumble for

the blond California flyer to swerve and dash by.¹²

Lastly, a *Chicago Tribune* reporter was eye-witness and wrote the next day:

Brick, stone, and people were spilled on to the track almost catching Paddock as he rushed by.¹³

Paddock did make the 1928 Amsterdam U.S. Olympic Track Team for the third time. . . in the 200 metres dash, but failed to make the finals. His running career was finished, but for another decade, he added to his already long list of published articles in *The Literary Digest*; *Scientific American*; *Colliers*; *The Saturday Evening Post*; an autobiography, *The World’s Fastest Human* (1932), and a technical Track and Field text in 1933.

On August 11 in the millennial year 2000, if we are reminded, and if one is so inclined, the Olympic world might wish to celebrate the one hundredth birthday of the first “fastest human”. . . the one who “brought down the wall” at the Penn Relays.

NOTES:

1. See Lehr’s 1985 dissertation, chapter 5, titled: Charles W. Paddock: symbol of AOC problems in the 1920’s, pages 122-157.
2. See *Los Angeles Times*, July 23, 1943, pages 1, 10; *The New York Times*, July 23, 1943, pages 1, 7; *The Times of London*, July 23, 1943, page 4.
3. See *The Boston Globe*, July 25, 1943, page 1
4. See *New York Herald Tribune*, July 25, 1943, sport section, pages 1, 3.
5. Paddock won two gold and one silver medal at the Antwerp Olympic Games in 1920 (100 metres, 4x100 metres relay, and 200 metres), and a 200 metres silver in Paris 1924. “In all, Paddock broke or equalled 94 world records in ten years of sprinting.” See *American National Biography*, volume 16 (1999), pages 893-894, and Bill Mallon and Ian Buchanan, *Quest for Gold* (New York Leisure Press, 1984), page 333.
6. John A. Lucas, “Charles W. Paddock - the first ‘World’s Fastest Human,’” *Olympian Magazine* (USOC), 4 (November 1977), pages 10-11.
7. Charles W. Paddock. *The Fastest Human. An autobiography* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1932), page 230.
8. “Owed to Franklin Field”, *New York Times* [NYT], April 30, 1928, page 17.
9. See *Public Ledger* (Philadelphia), Sunday, April 29, 1928, pages 1, 12 and 13.
10. See *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 29, 1928, pages 1, 2. Charles Bell’s Clever cartoon titled “The Big Incident on Franklin Field” is on page 2.
11. See *New York Herald Tribune*, April 29, 1928, pages 1, 3 sport section.
12. See *The Washington Post*, April 29, 1928, pages 1, 19, 20 and April 30, 1928, page 11. “Paddock traveled better than ten yards a second, through mud. He can make his third Olympic team later this year”, wrote Gould...correctly.
13. See *Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 1928; part 2, page 2.