

GEORGE WASHINGTON ORTON

by John A. Lucas

DIRECTOR OF THE PENN RELAYS - 1919-1925 AND MUCH MORE

Olympic Games Champion, G. W. Orton (1873-1958), wrote a letter to the alumni director of his undergraduate University of Toronto:

I am enclosing dues for the Alumni Association. Though I graduated in 1893, I still take interest in the University. I am 77 but very thankful that I am in very good health and mentally as good as ever, whatever that might mean.¹

From 1891 through 1902 - a dozen years - no athlete in North America won more amateur long-distance running championships than did Orton.² He was born in Strathroy, Ontario, Canada, January 10, 1873, and "prepared for college at the Guelph Collegiate Institute, and graduated from Toronto University in the Class of '93, and in the fall of that year, he entered the University of Pennsylvania."³

Orton's "double-majors" were history and foreign languages, graduating with a Ph.D. in 1896.⁴

He was only 5'6", 125 pounds, but splendidly gifted in body and mind. For fifty years following his retirement from active sporting competition, Orton was translator in five languages; coached at the scholastic, preparatory and university levels; was director of the Penn Relays

from 1919-1925; was director of the Philadelphia Municipal Stadium (1926); founded children's sports camps in New Hampshire; founded the Philadelphia Playground System; wrote three books and scores of

essays (see appendix). "I managed to keep out of mischief," he said, late in his life.

Orton was important for several reasons. His intelligent application to scientific training in long-distance running made him a pioneer in the field. He was Olympic champion and one of North America's greatest runners. He led a productive and honest long life. And lastly, from an "Olympian" point of view, and from the very beginning, he pointed out the artificiality of nationality. It matters little that Dr.

Orton was sometimes American, sometimes Canadian. Much more importantly, he was a member of the human race, someone who made a positive difference in the youthful lives of tens of thousands.

For this researcher-writer, it seems appropriate to call George Orton a "Canadian-American." *The Olympic Review* of November, 1983, wrote of Dr. Orton:

Although official records since 1904 have always listed Etienne Desmarteau as the first-ever Canadian Olympic gold medallist . . . George Orton, hitherto always known as the American winner of the 2500 metre steeplechase at Paris in 1900, was in fact a Canadian.⁵



George Washington Orton
Olympic Champion 1900

Note: Dr. Lucas attended the Penn Relays from 1949 through the Millennium year 2000 as athlete, coach, official and honorary official.

END NOTES

1. Orton to George W. Stoddart; letter dated January 23, 1950. See University of Toronto Archives [UTA].
2. See Appendix for Orton's "*Athletic Accomplishments 1891-1902*." The most important sources are:
 - a. Edward R. Bushnell, *The History of Athletics at the University of Pennsylvania (1909)*.
 - b. George W. Orton, *A History of Athletics at Pennsylvania 1873-1896* (no date; circa 1897).
 - c. Bill Million and Ian Buchanan, *The United States' National Championships in Track and Field 1876-1985* (1985).
 - d. AAU of the U.S. *Official Track and Field Handbook 1949-1950*. See pages 121, 126-127.
 - e. IC4A Annual Meeting, May 29-30, 1908, p. 108; IC4A Annual Meeting, May 28-29, 1926, pp. 273-274.
 - f. University of Toronto Archives [Archives].
 - g. Bill Mullon, *The 1900 Olympic Games (1998)*. See pages 49-50.
3. See UTA (end note 1).
4. Orton's obituary says that he wrote several volumes on athletics, camp life; coached at the preparatory and university levels; founded Philadelphia's playground system; "started that city's relay carnival" (sic), and "was fluent in nine languages." See *The New York Times* [NYT], June 27, 1958, p. 25. See UTA: "Orton graduated First in Italian and Spanish in 1893, and Honour standings in three other languages."
5. See *Olympic Review*, 193__ (November, 1983), 781-782.

The Indomitable Canadian-American Long-Distance Runner, George Washington Orton (1873-1958; his athletic accomplishments 1891-1902*

"Appendix: Orton Chronology"

- 1891: 2nd place to A. B. George in Canadian mile championships; USA-AAU mile champion (4:27 4/5).
- 1892: Canadian amateur mile winner (4:21 4/5) . . . "the record lasted 30 years."
- 1893: USA-AAU mile 1st place (4:32 4/5); USA-AAU steeplechase victor Canadian amateur champion at both one and two miles.
- 1894: IC4A mile (3rd place); USA-AAU mile winner (4:24 2/5); Canadian mile champion; USA-AAU steeplechase victor; Canadian amateur two-mile winner.
- 1895: USA-AAU mile 1st place (4:36.0); IC4A mile winner (4:23 2/5); Canadian national amateur champion in both the mile and the steeplechase. Columbia U Games "880" in 1:59.0; 9:41.0 two mile.
- 1896: IC4A mile (2nd place); USA-AAU champion at both the mile (4:27.0) and the steeplechase. Two miles indoors 9:57 1/5. Two mile steeplechase indoors in 10:58.0.
- 1897: IC4A mile winner (4:25.0); USA-AAU steeplechase winner; USA-AAU cross-country national winner.
- 1898: National English champion in x-c; USA-AAU steeplechase winner, and USA-AAU x-c victor.
- 1899: USA-AAU Steeplechase 1st place; USA-AAU ten mile winner in 57 min 28 sec.
- 1900: Paris Olympic Games: 1st place 2500 m. steeplechase;

Paris Olympic Games: 3rd place, 400 m. hurdles; Paris Olympic Games: 5th place, 4,000 m. steeplechase; AAU-USA mile champion in 4:42 2/5.

- 1901: USA-AAU steeplechase winner, USA-AAU 10 km, 3rd place.
- 1902: USA-AAU "880" 2nd place; USA-AAU steeplechase, 2nd place. 400 m. hurdles Paris Olympic Games 1900, 3rd place. 880 yards Columbia University Games in 1895 (1:59.0); USA-AAU Championships, 2nd place 1902. One mile USA-AAU National Championships 1st place, 1892; 1893; 1894; 1895; 1896; 1900. Canadian Amateur Championships, 1891 2nd place; 1892 (4. Min 21-4/5 sec); 1893; 1894; 1895. Two mile Canadian Amateur Championships, 1st place in 1893 and 1894. "All College" record 9:41.0 in
1895. 2 miles indoors in 9:57 1/5,
1896. X-C (Cross-USA AAU champion in 1897 and 1898; national champion of England in 1898. Country 10 Kilometers USA AAU championships, 3rd place in 1901. 10 Miles USA-AAU winner in 1899 w/ 57 min. 28 sec. Steeplechase Paris Olympic Games 1900; 1st place 2500 m. (7:34 2/5); Paris Olympic Games 1900; 5th place 4000 meters; 2 mile st. indoors (1896) in 10:58.0. USA-AAU champion 1893; 1894; 1897; 1898; 1899 and 1901; 2nd place in 1902; Canadian champion in 1895.

* Also director of the Penn Relays 1919-1925*

**A compilation and biography by John A. Lucas, *Olympic Games and Track and Field historian, February 2000*.

APPENDIX: Orton Publications

Several G. W. Orton Publications:

Distance and Cross Country Running (American Sports Pub. Co., 1911).

A History of Athletics at Pennsylvania 1873-1896 (1896).

"George Orton on sports in France", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 17, 1900, p. 6.

"America in Today's Paris Games", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 14, 1900, p. 6.

"College stars to race", *The Philadelphia Inquirer* April 12, 1896, p. 24. "

"Training for Interscholastic Athletics," *St. Nicholas Magazine*, 30 (April, 1903), 504-513; also May, 1903, pp. 601-610.

Athletic Training for School Boys (Am. Pub. Co.), 1905.

"Henley!" *Canadian Magazine*, 14 (January, 1900), 223 231 on rowing.

"New World athletes opened the eyes of the English people," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* July 22, 1900, p. 13.

"Penn's Athletes had a pleasant sea voyage," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 9, 1900, p. 6.

"What may be expected of American athletes," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* July 6, 1900, p. 6.

"Our athletes swept things before them at English Games," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 8, 1900, p. 14.

"Paris Athletic Games Concluded," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 23, 1900, p. 6.

"The Pans Athletic Games," *Outing*, 36 (September, 1900), 690-695.