

THE WORLD'S FASTEST HUMAN
By Kenneth S. Greenberg

The "Roaring Twenties," which spawned the Stutz Bearcat, the Flapper, the Charleston, Rudolph Valentino, bathtub gin and Charles Lindbergh, was also the Golden Twenties of sports, which produced such immortals as Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Bobby Jones, Bill Tilden, Paavo Nurmi, and Charlie Paddock, "The World's Fastest Human."

This July 21st will mark 25 years since the death of Charles W. Paddock. He was killed in an airplane crash near Sitka, Alaska in 1943 while serving as an officer in the U.S. Marines.

Born at Gainesville, Texas, August 11, 1900, Paddock began his high school education at Pasadena HS in the fall of 1915. For three years, 1916 to 1918, he was State and Southern California prep titlist in the 220 and Southland champ in the 100. He was beaten in the State 100 in 1917, but won in 1916 and 1918. His best times in major high school competition were 10.0 and 22.0. During three years of high school running Paddock lost only four races. He finished first in the other 91 starts.

At the Far Western Championships in San Diego in 1916, as a freshman in high school, Paddock lost a 220 yard race by one foot to Henry Williams of Spokane, who had previously beaten Howard Drew. But Paddock beat Morris Kirksey in this race, as he was destined to trounce him on the next 24 occasions they met. The time was 21 4/5 around a turn on a soft track.

Paddock entered U.S.C. in September 1918. That same year he was sent to Camp Zachary Taylor, Kentucky, to study for a commission in the artillery and in three months he became the youngest artillery officer in the U.S. Army. He reentered U.S.C. in February 1919 and was undefeated in dual meet competition.

On April 12, 1919, at the Southern California AAU meet held at Claremont, Paddock ran 9 4/5 and 21 4/5 to beat Homer Chaney of Pomona. This race in 9 4/5 brought an invitation from the AAU to join the American doughboy team which was soon to compete in the Inter-Allied Games at Paris. On the ship to Paris Paddock was asked how fast he had run the 100. His reply: "I was once timed in 9 4/5." But when he saw astonishment register on every face, hastened to add: "But it was a slow nine-four." He was known thereafter as "Slow nine-four."

The sprints at the Inter-Allied Games were run in the middle of a rainy afternoon (6/25/19), before a crowd of 40,000 Allied soldiers. The track was soggy. Soldiers from all the Allied nations filled the stands of Pershing Stadium. The 100 meters was run in roped lanes. Paddock was a surprise winner in both races.

Paddock's introduction to board-racing during the 1920 indoor season must have been traumatic. A notoriously poor starter, he was smashed in the Boston AA Games, failing to reach the finals in the 40 yard dash. His next attempt at indoor racing was in the Old Madison Square Garden at a distance of 70 yards. The race was won by Jackson Scholz (Missouri U), a great starter; Loren Murchison was second and Paddock a poor third.

Two weeks before the beginning of the 1920 outdoor season Paddock toured the 311 yard track at Bovard Field (USC) in 33 3/5 (2/14/20). He was undefeated during the dual meet season. At Berkeley (4/7/20) Charley ran two great races. In the 100 three watches caught him in 9 3/5, a fourth watch registered 9 4/5 and he was given the slower time. In the 220 three watches showed 21 1/5, a fourth watch 21 2/5 and again he was given the slower time. The world's records were 9 3/5 and 21 1/5.

One week before the Final Olympic Tryouts Paddock ran a match race at 100 meters against Jackson Scholz and several others. The race was held at Ebbets' Field, Brooklyn, on grass. Charley won in 10 3/5, equalling the world record and establishing a new turf record. In the Final Olympic Trials held at Boston, Murchison won the 100 in 10.0 followed by Scholz, Paddock and Kirksey. Paddock won the 220 in 21 2/5 followed by Kirksey, Murchison and Scholz.

The 1920 Olympics were held at Antwerp. Paddock won the first semi-final heat in the 100 meters as the four Americans qualified for the finals. Kirksey, off to an excellent start, led for 95 meters but Charley nailed him at the tape. The time was 10 4/5. The U.S. entries in the 200 meters were Murchison, Kirksey, Paddock and George Messengale of Missouri. Because of illness Messengale's place was taken by Alan Woodring of Syracuse. In the finals Charley set the pace but was nipped by Woodring at the tape in 22.0

Paddock, coached by Dean Bartlett Cromwell, lengthened his stride a full six inches in the spring of 1921, and improved his start. Early that season Charley startled the track world with two blazing races in a dual meet with California at Berkeley (3/26/21). His main competition came from Bob Hutchinson(Cal), a 9 4/5 man and a powerful furlong runner. The time in the 100 was 9 3/5, equalling the work record set by Howard Duffy in 1902 and tied by Howard Drew(USC) on this same track(3/28/14). Paddock's time in the 220 was 20 4/5, shattering a world record (21 1/5) set by Bernie Wefers in 1896. Charley was pressed by Hutchinson who was timed in 21 1/5. After watching Paddock in this meet, Jack James, A San Francisco sports writer, called Paddock "The Fastest Human."

Three days later(3/29/21) against Stanford at Palo Alto, Charley beat his old rival Morris Kirksey by one foot in a 9 3/5 hundred and was timed in 21.0 for the 220. The five watches in this race showed 21.0, 21.0, 21.0, 20 3/5, 20 3/5. There was no wind aiding the runners either at Palo Alto or at Berkeley, yet neither the 20 4/5 nor the 21.0 were accepted as world marks.

Paddock was just hitting his stride. Three weeks later in the SPAAU meet at Redlands(4/23/21) he set new world marks at 100 meters(10 2/5), 200 meters(21 1/5), 300 meters(33 1/5) and 300 yards(30 1/5). He also ran 100 yards in 9 3/5.

The swiftest performance of Charley Paddock's career was at the LAAC tryouts at Tournament Park, Pasadena(6/18/21) two weeks before the National AAU meet. This race was to establish a permanent place in the record books for "The Fastest Human." The track at Tournament Park was hard as a brick on a hot windless day. Charley's toughest competition was to come from Vernon Blenkiron of Compton High School. Two races were run. The first race had tapes at 90, 100 and 110 yards. Paddock had a three yard lead at the 100 and won going away. Blenkiron's time was 9 4/5 at the 100. Paddock's time at 90 yards was 8 4/5. At 100 yards he was timed in 9.5, but as splits in tenths of a second were not recognized he was given 9 3/5. Charley's time at 110 yards was 10 1/5, chopping 3/5 off the existing record.

Certainly 10.2 for 110 yards is one of the best sprint marks ever made. First consider that 110 yards is about 2 feet longer than 100 meters and that the accepted world record for 100 meters was 10 3/5 in 1921. Then consider that the best the likes of Jesse Owens(1936), Ralph Metcalfe(1932) or Harold Davis(1941) ever ran was 10.2 for 100 meters; and that Eddie Tolan(1932), Harrison Dillard(1947) and Melvin Patton(1948), all pretty good sprinters in their day, did not break 10.3 for 100 meters (sans wind).

Using comparative times, Paddock ran 2 feet farther than Owens, Metcalfe and Davis at 100 meters and approximately 5 feet farther than Tolan, Dillard and Patton at that distance.

Paddock's second race that memorable day broke three tapes at 130, 150 and 200 yards. He was timed at 12 2/5(130), 14 1/5(150) and 19.0(200), each mark a new world record. Two weeks later at the National AAU on the same track Charley won the sprints in 9 3/5 and 21 4/5, easily defeating Morris Kirksey.

Charley Paddock was in continuous competition for ten successive seasons - 1919 through 1928 - and was a member of three Olympic teams. He won five AAU titles, four Student World Games in Europe, two sprints at the Inter-Allied Games of 1919, two Olympic gold medals (100 meters 1920, 4x100 meters relay 1920) and two silver medals (200 meters 1920, 1924).

Though Paddock probably reached his best form in 1921, five years later at the SPAAU meet (Los Angeles, 5/15/26) he tied the unofficial world 100 yard record(9.5) in a memorable race against Charley Borah(USC) with one of his celebrated flying leaps at the tape. Many thought the race should have been judged a dead-heat. But the judges said otherwise and it was Paddock's catapulting dive for the tape which caused them to rule in favor of Charley.

One cannot help but wonder how "The Fastest Human" of 1921 would fare in 1968 at Mexico City against a 100 meter field composed of Charlie Greene, Jimmy Hines, Lennox Miller, Willie Turner and Paul Nash. Would he finish first or last, Mr. Potts?