



MEL SHEPPARD

2009 Inductee

By Chris M. Slawecky

Mel Sheppard is renowned as the greatest middle distance (800 to 1500 meters) runner of his era.

Sheppard, known as "Peerless Mel," was the third man to claim Gold in both the 800 and 1500 meters at the same Olympics, when he won both events at the 1908 Summer Games in London. His mastery of these events at those Games included establishing a new 800 meter world record and a new 1500 meter Olympic Games record. When his 1500 meter record was broken in the next heat, Sheppard simply went out and matched that new record the very next day. Sheppard won a third Gold in London by anchoring the 1600 meter medley relay.

Now more than a century later, Sheppard is still the last American to win 1500 meter Olympic Gold. He recalled winning the race and establishing his new world record in his 1924 autobiography *Spiked Shoes & Cinder Paths*: "If it was necessary to die at the finish, why, that would be perfectly satisfactory as long as I hit the tape first."

In 1912, Sheppard finished second in the 800 meters to win the silver medal in Stockholm, Sweden, but won another Gold medal as a member of the winning 4 x 400-meter relay team, establishing in their victory Olympic and world records that would last for more than a decade.

Previously, Sheppard dominated his middle distance events at many Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) competitions to claim several national titles: He was a five-time 880 yard outdoor champion (1906 through '08, then 1911, 12) and two-time 1000 yard (1906, '07) and 600 yard (1908, 09) indoor champion. He also teamed to win the AAU mile relay championship in 1909.

Sheppard was born in Almonesson, a section of Deptford Township, N.J., in 1883. He moved with his family to the Grays Ferry section of

Philadelphia when he was about 15, then moved again with his family to West Philadelphia, near Fairmount Park, a few years later. Soon thereafter, Sheppard joined the Preston Athletic Club and began pursuing his athletic interests. He competed interscholastically here for both Temple College Prep in 1903 and for Brown Prep in 1904 and 1905.

In his formative years, Sheppard also ran in fast crowds off the track. He wrote in *Spiked Shoes* that he was a member of the Grays Ferry Roaders, a neighborhood gang who often rumbled in the streets with the Pine Streeters, the Race Streeters, and other rival gangs like the Ramcats, "with whom we would fight when we had nothing else to do."

After retiring from competition, Sheppard served as civilian athletic director for several military bases during World War I, and coached the very first women's track team at the 1928 Olympic Summer Games in Amsterdam. He also served as field secretary for Playground & Recreation Association of America.

Sheppard died at his home in Queens, N.Y., in 1942. He was inducted into the U.S. Track & Field Hall of Fame in

1976, the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame in 1989 and the Pennsylvania State High School Track & Field Hall of Fame in 2004. The 600 yard race at the Millrose Games, the oldest invitational indoor track and field meet in America, has been christened The Mel Sheppard 600 in his honor.

It seems entirely appropriate that this South Jersey native who discovered the joys of track and field as a Philadelphia schoolboy should assume his rightful place alongside his peers in the Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame.



Chris M. Slawecky serves as Senior Editor of the award winning website AllAboutJazz.com and as the "Jazz Voice" of the Concord Music Group website. He has contributed to every Philadelphia Sports Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony program.