Schoolboy Ted Meredith’s amazing Stockholm Games

Harold Wilson, Jr.

The 800 meter final at the 1912 Games in Stockholm was one of the greatest Olympic Athletics events ever. Included among the eight runners who had qualified were six Americans, with Hanns Braun of Germany, considered the top rival. Mel Sheppard of the U.S.A., who had won both the 800 and 1500 in London four years earlier, was the strong favorite. Another contender was the U.S.A.’s Ira Davenport of the University of Chicago, a Western Intercollegiate 440 and 880 yard champion. The Americans intended to set a fast pace early in an effort to reduce Braun’s fast finish. Sheppard and Ted Meredith, the “Mercersburg Schoolboy”, were expected to set the early tempo. Sheppard was angry because he had been “left at the post” at the start in his semi-final, barely surviving to run the next day. The event was held in late afternoon, Monday, July 8.

The field for the 800 was so strong that Emilio Lunghi of Italy, the world record holder, was eliminated in the trials.

As the race unfolded on the new stadium’s unusually shaped 383 meter track, Sheppard sprinted into the early lead with Meredith second and Braun third. A very fast pace was maintained. Three times on the first lap Meredith tried to take the lead from Sheppard and three times Sheppard fought him off. The first 400 meters was completed in 52.4.

Around 600 meters, another American, Hec Edmundson, came up to challenge Meredith. To avoid being boxed, Meredith surged up to Sheppard’s shoulder. “Peerless Mel” suddenly sprinted himself and quickly opened a five-yard lead. At the same time, Braun moved up on Meredith who then began a sprint. After thirty meters, Braun faded and Meredith again found himself at Sheppard’s shoulder.

Realizing that he could win the race, and was still “full of running”, Meredith went after Sheppard. These two fought each other down the final stretch right to the finish line. Ira Davenport passed Braun to make it a three-man race. Inch by inch Meredith gained on Sheppard, passing him as they neared the tape. Davenport rushed up to narrowly miss taking second. Meredith won the gold medal by 18 inches in the world record time of 1:51.9. Sheppard won the silver medal and Davenport the bronze in a photo-finish at 1:52.0. Dan Caldwell of the U.S.A. made it up to fourth. The first four finishers had broken or equalled Sheppard’s existing world mark of 1:52.8.

Meredith continued on a few strides and was timed in 1:52.5 at 880 yards, another world record. The organizers had planned to time both 800 and the half-mile.

On the second of three days of 800 meter competition, Meredith had startled the rest of the field in his semi-final by leading all the way, sprinting from the start and leaving Braun and Sheppard behind. His time was 1:54.4 and he was now recognized by some as another serious contender for the gold medal.

However, Mike Murphy, the head coach of the U.S. team, told the legendary Pop Warner, Jim Thorpe’s coach at the Carlisle Indian School who had come to Stockholm at his own expense to help Thorpe, that he didn’t think that Meredith had much of a chance in the final – he suggested that he was a few years away from reaching the top.

In the years following, there have been reports that Murphy asked Meredith to act as a “rabbit”, running
and a world record setting 4x400 meter relay team - 3:16.6 - with Ted, no such instructions were given.

Later in the Games, Meredith ran the second leg on a world record setting 4x400 meter relay team - 3:16.6 - and finished a tired fourth in the 400 meter final. In the relay, the U.S.A. team of Sheppard, Meredith, Lindberg and Reidpath gained on every leg, leading all the way. It was Sheppard’s ninth race at Stockholm and Meredith’s eighth. In the three team final, France was more than four seconds back in second place, while bronze medalist Great Britain was more than six seconds behind the winning Americans.

Hanns Braun of Germany, who also finished second in the 400 meter final to win an Olympic silver medal, was killed in World War I. His memory is much revered in Germany.

James Edwin “Ted” Meredith was just 20 years old at the Stockholm Games. He had been born in Chester Heights – then part of Aston Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania – near Philadelphia – on November 14, 1891. His parents were Mary Ann Leahy Meredith and James Hauxwell Meredith, his mother the daughter of immigrants who escaped the potato famine in Ireland and his father from a well-established farming family. Ted was the fourth in a family of seven children, including his younger brother George and five sisters. The Merediths traced their roots to Wales. The Meredith name is derived from the original Welsh - Myrrudd to Meradudd to Meredydd, finally becoming Meredith, an English spelling, about 1500.

(A few sources show 1892 as Ted’s year of birth; however, family records and a baptismal certificate from St. Thomas the Apostle Roman Catholic Church in Chester Heights, dated November 29, 1891, confirm the 1891 birth date.)

The Meredith family later moved to a red brick house on a sixty-acre farm near Elwyn in Middletown Township at the site of the old Delaware County Fairgrounds. Horses were trained and family crops were raised. Ted and his siblings performed the normal chores required in a farm family. The fairgrounds horse track provided a venue for training runners.

Using a local trolley or a train, Ted attended the Media High School, located a few miles away in Media, the seat of Delaware County. In 1907, then 15 years old, he was a part of Media’s mile relay entry at the University of Pennsylvania Relay Race Carnival (or Penn Relays) at Franklin Field in Philadelphia. Media finished second to Camden, New Jersey, High’s time of 3:53 4/5, in a field of major schools.

Meredith then enrolled at the nearby Williamson Free School to learn the trade of bricklaying, staying for three years – from April, 1908, until April, 1911.

The Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades is still an independent vocational school. It was founded in 1888 by Isaiah V. Williamson to provide poor boys of high school age with a free education in a technical trade. All students receive three-year scholarships that cover tuition, room and board, and textbooks. All students live on campus.

Ted’s serious running career began at Williamson where his father, James, himself a sprinter of note, had begun a track and field program in 1906. Ted’s grandfather, William Meredith, had a reported reputation as a fast runner in England, where races for small purses were popular. James Meredith, in addition to his work as a farmer and coach, was active in politics and became Delaware County Democratic Party chairman in 1912.

At Williamson, Ted was a three-sport standout. He was a star end on the football team in 1909 and 1910, a “heavy hitter” at guard on the 1911 basketball team until injured, and the outstanding runner on the 1908, 1909 and 1910 track squads, serving as captain for two years, 1909 and 1910.

In Meredith’s first track season at Williamson, 1908, he set school records of 2 minutes 10 seconds in the 880 and 5 minutes 6 seconds in the one mile. He was a member of the mile relay team which set a school record of 3 minutes 41 seconds in a meet at Swarthmore College.

In 1909, with Ted at anchor, Williamson won the mile relay at nearby Chester. Williamson, again with Ted the star, did well at the Atlantic shore community of Ocean City. At the Penn Relays in Philadelphia, Williamson captured four “cups”. In mid-May at the Middle States Interscholastic Championships at Penn, he finished third in the 440. At the West Chester Normal School meet, Meredith won the 220 yard dash. In June, running for the Aquinas Athletic Club at the Middle Atlantic A.A.U. meet, held at a facility called the Orchard in Essington, not far from the present site of the Philadelphia International Airport, he finished third in the 440.

Jim Thorpe, to also become a legendary Olympian at Stockholm, won both hurdle events and five field events at this same meet.

One of Ted’s early running experiences – in the Spring
of 1909 - was a "dash" back to Williamson with a friend - from a party in Media, crossing a long high single track railroad trestle in the dark. The two needed to be back at Williamson by 10 PM to avoid losing all privileges for 30 days. By the time they had left the party, it was 9:44, recalled his Williamson companion. It was three miles to school but the desperate pair reached the gate in time. There was no trophy or record, but it was a victory nevertheless.

In the 1910 track season, Ted Meredith discovered that he had genuine running ability. To start, at the Penn Relays, Williamson, with Meredith running anchor, had won its heat in 3:38, a record for the school. Then, at a meet at Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on May 7, Meredith won both the 220 and 440 yard dashes. At the nearby Glen Mills School the following week, he won the 440 and his relay team finished first.

On May 21, at the Middle States Interscholastic Championship meet at Penn, he won both the 440 and 880, a feat never before accomplished by a single individual. His 440 time was 51 4/5 on a heavy track. At the Princeton Interscholastics a week later, he again won the 440. Finally, in a meet at Ocean City on May 30, the mile relay team was first and Meredith won the 880.

In June of 1910, at the traditional Inter-class meet at Williamson, he won every running event from 100 yards to the one mile run, and anchored his class to victory in both the half-mile and mile relays.

Back on the football gridiron in the Fall of 1910, Williamson played a schedule that was dotted with college opposition. Against Franklin and Marshall College in the opening game, he intercepted a pass behind his own goal line, and, on a field then 110 yards long, ran 115 yards for a touchdown. Williamson lost, but Ted Meredith was a campus hero.

Williamson went on to scoreless ties with Delaware College, Muhlenberg College and Bethlehem Prep. Villanova Prep and Pennsylvania Military College were beaten. In a sport that required eleven men on the field, Williamson’s squad never exceeded thirteen.

Williamson had no coach. The players were self-taught and had no official time to practice - so they went through their drills after dinner - in semi-darkness – using a football painted white.

Meredith graduated from Williamson in April, 1911, with his major in bricklaying completed. He then competed for the Aquinas Athletic Club in some independent meets and was reportedly undefeated for the season.

Mercersburg Academy lies in the Cumberland Valley at the foot of the Allegheny Mountains in south central Pennsylvania. At this time, Mercersburg was both a fine scholastic institution and a power in Athletics. It had been founded in 1893 by Dr. William Mann Irvine, a native of Bedford, Pennsylvania, who modelled the school after Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, his Alma Mater. In just ten years, Mercersburg became the country’s fourth largest boys’ boarding school. Today, it continues as a leading college preparatory school.

Jimmy Curran, a wiry, witty Scotsman, had come to America in 1907. He worked first as a trainer for Mike Murphy at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1910, he met Dr. Irvine and went to work for him at Mercersburg as head coach of the track and field program. Curran was to hold that position for 51 years.

Curran saw Meredith run and approached him about becoming a student at Mercersburg. He persuaded him to come to the school to obtain the credits he would need to enter college. Meredith’s father did not have the financial means to provide the cost of attending Mercersburg so Ted became a student on a working scholarship. His jobs involved caring for the telephone switchboard in the school office and selling photographs of sports events in the school dormitories.

Ted Meredith first came into Athletics prominence in April 1912 when he anchored the winning Mercersburg mile relay team in the prep school race at the Penn Relays with a 49 1/5 second anchor leg. Mercersburg’s time of 3:27 1/5 was nearly nine seconds faster than the winning high school mark. Mercersburg won its event by 50 yards.

At the Princeton Interscholastics two weeks later,
Meredith set world interscholastic records in both the quarter and half-mile. He covered the half-mile in 1:55. Coach Curran said: “Meredith does not seem to know how fast he can run, but I know he is the fastest runner the world has ever seen, and, if he goes after any record from 600 yards to cross country, he will lower every one.”

After Princeton, the Mercersburg team traveled to Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore to compete against the fastest teams from the South. Mercersburg won the team championship and Meredith came home with a cup for scoring the highest number of individual points.

On May 18, at Penn’s Franklin Field in Philadelphia, in the Senior Middle States Interscholastic Championships, he ran a 48 4/5 second quarter mile, winning by 25 yards – this time was another world scholastic record. He covered the half mile in a winning 1:56 4/5 at the same meet.

Meredith’s coach, Jimmy Curran, thought the Olympic trials would be good experience for him. Ted went to the Eastern U.S. Olympic Trials held on June 8, 1912 at Harvard.

University’s Soldier Field in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he was entered in both the 400 and 800 meter events. Mel Sheppard considered young Abel Kiviat of New York City to be his most formidable rival at 800, but he was also concerned about Meredith – after Ted won the first 800 heat in 1:53 4/5, the same time as Sheppard’s win in the second heat. Meredith then finished third behind Sheppard in the final - which was run just two and a half hours later. The entire meet was conducted in one afternoon.

Apparently there was some discussion of not taking Meredith to Stockholm because of his age, but he was made part of the U.S.A. entry in both the 800 and 400. The team traveled to Sweden on the U.S.S. Finland and used the vessel as its hotel during the Games.

Meredith was five feet nine inches tall and weighed 155 pounds. Deemed a natural runner, he was noted for his outstanding “lung and leg power”. He had exceptional speed at the start. Instead of showing “classic” running form, he “flayed his arms like the blades of a windmill”. It was thought by some that Ted’s father’s ability to adapt his knowledge of training race horses to his athletes accounted for Ted’s unusual track stamina.

Following the Games, several of the American stars, including Meredith and Sheppard, toured Europe, gathering awards and enjoying the sights. In Budapest, Hungary, since Meredith had won the majority of the exhibition races, he attempted to let Sheppard win as both slowed near the finish. However, the local runners, thought by the Americans to be worn out, suddenly darted past and won. They were mobbed after the race by their delirious countrymen.
The American team returned to major celebrations in New York and Philadelphia, and, for Meredith, in Media and Elwyn. Curran spoke at the Media reception.

Ted Meredith was now ready for the University of Pennsylvania. George Orton, who had won the 2500 meter steeplechase at the Paris Olympic Games in 1900, was the Penn coach. The University – or “Penn” – is an old and distinguished institution. Founded by Benjamin Franklin before the American Revolution, it had the first medical school – 1765 – and business school - 1881 – in the United States. The Wharton School of Finance remains one of the best. Penn is one of the eight Ivy League schools. Much of the campus in West Philadelphia was built in the late nineteenth century. It is a mixture of neo-gothic, ivy-covered brick and stone buildings, interspersed with a dormitory quadrangle and fraternity houses.

As a freshman in the winter of 1913, Meredith won an indoor quarter mile in Brooklyn, New York, beating T. J. Halpin, Mel Sheppard, and Alvah Meyer who had won the silver medal in the 100 meters in Stockholm. In April at the Penn Relays, he was a member of the Penn team that won the freshman mile relay championship. In December, he was named to the All-America College team, along with several Penn teammates.

Meredith was a sophomore at Penn in the 1914 season. In May, he won the Intercollegiate (IC4A) 440 championship in 48 2/5 seconds. He won the National A.A.U. title in 50 1/5, running for the Meadowbrook Club which was sponsored by famed merchant John Wanamaker. In September, he was one of only four college men to be named to the All-America team.

Between his sophomore and junior years, Ted met his future bride, Tillie Bassett, and they started dating. Tillie was a daughter in a well-to-do merchant family from West Philadelphia. She was tall, very attractive, bright and vivacious. Her family had Welsh roots as well. Also, his family left the Delaware County farm and moved to South 54th Street in West Philadelphia, and World War I began in Europe. His father continued as a successful coach of Athletics – at West Catholic High School in Philadelphia.

Now a Penn junior in February 1915, Ted set a new world record for 500 yards at the New York A.C. Indoor Games, clocking 59.8. In April at the Penn Relays, Meredith’s Penn team set a new world record for the mile relay, beating Harvard and its star, Bill Bingham, by five yards in 3:18.0. Kaufman, and Delta Kappa Epsilon fraternity brothers Joe Lockwood and Don Lippincott preceded Meredith, the anchor man.

In May, he ran the fastest quarter mile ever run in Canada, and later that month, at Franklin Field, he set new IC4A Intercollegiate records of 48.0 for the quarter mile and 1:54.6 for the half mile. In September, at the National A.A.U. meet, held at the Pan-Pacific Exposition grounds in San Francisco, and again running for Meadowbrook, he dashed to a 47 seconds flat time on a straight course -
Meredith’s anchor has been estimated at somewhere between 45 plus and 46 plus seconds, an unheard-of time in those days.

In May, he scored a 100, 220, 440 triple victory against Dartmouth, and, running for Penn the last time at Franklin Field in a dual meet with Cornell University, he lowered his world record for 880 yards to 1:52.2.

Later in May, at the IC4A Intercollegiates at Harvard’s Soldier Field, with Stanford and California bringing strong teams, Meredith won the 440 in a world record 47.4 and the 880 in 1:53. Both were Intercollegiate records. The interval between the two events was only two hours. Ted credited Harvard’s Wilcox for pushing him to the 440 record and Harvard’s Bingham for doing the same in the 880.

Meredith had a distinguished college career at Penn — well beyond his accomplishments on the track. He received a Bachelor of Science degree in Economics at his June 21, 1916 graduation. He had been captain of the varsity track team. He had been elected to membership in the Phi Kappa Beta Junior Society and the Sphinx Senior Society. He was Vice President of his class as a junior. As a graduating senior, Ted was also honored as Spade Man, one of the four most popular men in his class. He received a small silver spade.

The cancellation of the 1916 Berlin Games prevented Meredith – and many other worthy athletes – from competing for Olympic glory. Ted was probably in his prime and might have achieved the 400 and 800 double — not accomplished until Alberto Juantorena of Cuba won both at Montreal in 1976.

Meredith held the world 800 meter and 880 yard records from 1912 to 1926, when Dr. Otto Peltzer of Germany lowered the marks to 1:51.6. Ted held the 400 records from 1912 to 1926, when Dr. Otto Peltzer of Germany may have achieved the 400 and 800 double — not competing for Olympic glory. Ted was probably in his prime and might have achieved the 400 and 800 double — not accomplished until Alberto Juantorena of Cuba won both at Montreal in 1976.

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While in college, Ted began to write sports articles, particularly providing analyses and predictions for upcoming track meets in which he would be a participant. His articles, with a by-line, appeared regularly in the Philadelphia Bulletin. In August of 1915, Lawson Robertson, now a Penn assistant coach, took a group of Eastern college champions to the West Coast for the National A.A.U. meet. Many stops were made along the way and Meredith wrote that, “I am getting in perfect condition.” In the Spring of 1916, he covered the dual meets and the Intercollegiates in Boston. His writing continued for many years after graduation and included a Spalding book, “Middle Distance and Relay Running”.

During the summer after graduation, Ted and his fraternity brother, Warren Wells, began an import-export business involving dye stuffs and chemicals. He traveled to Europe to promote the fledgling company and, while in Sweden, won a 400 meter race and a sterling silver humidor at a meet in Stockholm.

Meanwhile, he helped establish his brother, George, a runner of some promise, at Mercersburg. George Meredith developed under Curran’s coaching, went to Penn, and was a member of the Penn two-mile relay team that set a world record of 7:49.4 at the Penn Relays in 1923.

On April 6, 1917, the United States entered World War I on the side of the Allies. That Spring, Ted, running for Wamaker’s Meadowbrook Club, won trophies for the 660 and an Inter-City Club mile relay.

On June 1, 1917, Ted Meredith enlisted in the U.S. Army and served for 21 months, including thirteen – December 1917 to January 1919 – as an aviator in France. After training as a pilot at Cornell University and in Michigan, Meredith left for France in November. After some further instruction, he became part of the 99th Aero Squadron. The group of early military fliers worked closely as aerial observers with U.S. artillery and other ground components of U.S. forces in France. On August 6, 1918, Meredith became commander of the 99th. He had been promoted from Lieutenant to Captain. German aircraft were met in combat in the later stages of the War.

Shortly after the November 11 Armistice, Ted was relieved of his command and given orders to return to New York. In March 1919, he was honorably discharged at Garden City, Long Island, New York. On April 5, 1919, Ted and Tillie Bassett became engaged. They were married in June and moved to an apartment on West 181st Street in New York. Ted entered the investment business for many years after graduation and included a Spalding book, “Middle Distance and Relay Running”.

The team traveled to Antwerp in rather spartan conditions on an Army transport vessel and training at sea was difficult. At the Games, Ted advanced through two rounds to the 400 semi-finals where he was eliminated. He ran the opening leg on the U.S.A.’s 4x400 relay team which finished fourth, just missing the bronze medal.

The Antwerp Games marked the end of Ted Meredith’s running career. He returned to New York in time for the
birth of his first son, James Edwin Meredith, Jr., on September 20, 1920. He and Tillie took an apartment in West Philadelphia. Ted continued to sell stocks and bonds for Paine, Webber.

He went to Paris for the 1924 Olympic Games, working as a journalist for the Christy Walsh Syndicate. A real estate venture in Florida followed. On November 24, 1926, Ted and Tillie’s second son, John Rodney Meredith was born. The Merediths were now living in Narberth, a compact suburban town surrounded by Lower Merion Township on Philadelphia’s Main Line.

In 1928, Ted was appointed assistant track coach at Penn, under head coach Lawson Robertson. Among the people he worked with directly was Bill Carr who smashed the 400 meter record at the 1932 Olympic Trials and Los Angeles Games. He was well-liked and successful as a coach. He also continued his writing work for the Philadelphia newspapers and served as a meet official for many years.

The Great World Depression that began in late 1929 hit the Merediths hard – as it did many millions in the United States and around the world.

Through his old friend, Dan Ferris, secretary of the A.A.U., Ted received an offer to coach the national team for Czechoslovakia for the 1936 Berlin Games. Meredith accepted and, in the summer of 1935, the Merediths sailed for Europe. They settled in Prague and experienced living in that beautiful capital for the next 18 months.

Ted’s Czech athletes were reasonably successful in Berlin but did not medal. The Meredith family of four was in Berlin for the Games. It is thought that his work laid the foundation for the success of later Czech athletes – such as Emil Zatopek. He worked particularly closely with the athletes of S.K. Slavia, long a soccer power in Europe.

Following return to the United States in early 1937, Ted and Tillie separated. In the Fall of 1937, Meredith got a six-month contract to prepare and coach the Cuban team for the Central American Games, held in Panama City in February 1938.

Tillie and Ted were divorced in 1939. Ted moved to New York and did some further insurance, investment, real estate and travel work, finally finding employment with the Internal Revenue Service. He retired in 1955 and moved to Haddonfield, New Jersey to live with son Rodney. In March 1957, he suffered a stroke. A fall caused a broken hip.

Ted Meredith died on November 2, 1957 in Cooper Hospital in Camden, New Jersey, following an operation.

In 1978, Ted Meredith was named a Distinguished Alumnus of the Williamson Free School. He is member of the USATF Hall of Fame, the Penn Relays Wall of Fame, the Pennsylvania State High School Track and Field Hall of Fame, and the Hall of Fame of the Delaware County Chapter of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame.

He has many survivors today. Deceased son Ted Jr.’s children include granddaughter Sally Meredith Nortrup (the June 2007 recipient for her grandfather’s induction into the Delaware County Chapter of the Pennsylvania Sports Hall of Fame), grandson George F. Meredith, and granddaughter Louise Meredith. George and Sally are twins. Son Rodney is also deceased, but his three sons, John Rodney, Jr.; Christian and Andrew, survive. Meredith great grandchildren incluclude Andy, Steven, Madeline, Hannah, Caleb and Rebecca.

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Ted Meredith. Flag as Inappropriate. This article will be permanently flagged as inappropriate and made unaccessible to everyone. Are you certain this article is inappropriate? Excessive Violence Sexual Content Political / Social. Ted Meredith. Ted Meredith. Meredith retired from competition in 1917 and served in the army during World War I. He made a comeback for the 1920 Summer Olympics, where he. Categories. 1912 Summer Olympics. Encyclopedia Article. International Olympic Committee, Sweden, Olympic Games, Austria, Belgium. Read More. Suggestions. Athletics at the 1912 Summer Olympics â€“ Men's 800 metres. Encyclopedia Article. Ted Meredith of Mercersburg Academy is still recognized as the greatest American prep runner of all-time. At Princeton in 1912 he took almost two seconds off the national interscholastic record with a 49.2 440y and he set a new 880y record of 1:55.0. The 20-year-old schoolboy's Olympic career started auspiciously. He defeated the defending champion, [Mel Sheppard], in the 800 m in a new world record of 1:51.9, and continued on to the 880y mark, where he also posted a new world record of 1:52.5. In the 400 m he misjudged the pace and finished fourth but he claimed a second gold in the 4×400 m relay. On his return from Stockholm, Meredith enrolled at Penn, and at the 1916 IC4A he set a world record of 47.4 for 440y and won the 880y. James Edwin "Ted" Meredith (November 14, 1891 â€“ November 2, 1957) was an American athlete, winner of two gold medals at the 1912 Summer Olympics. Meredith made the 1912 Olympic team shortly after his graduation from Williamson Free School of Mechanical Trades in 1911, whilst he was a student at Mercersburg Academy under Scots-American coach Jimmy Curran. In Stockholm, he won a gold medal in the 800 m run with a world record 1:51.9. He ran on to the 880 yard mark and also set a world record for that