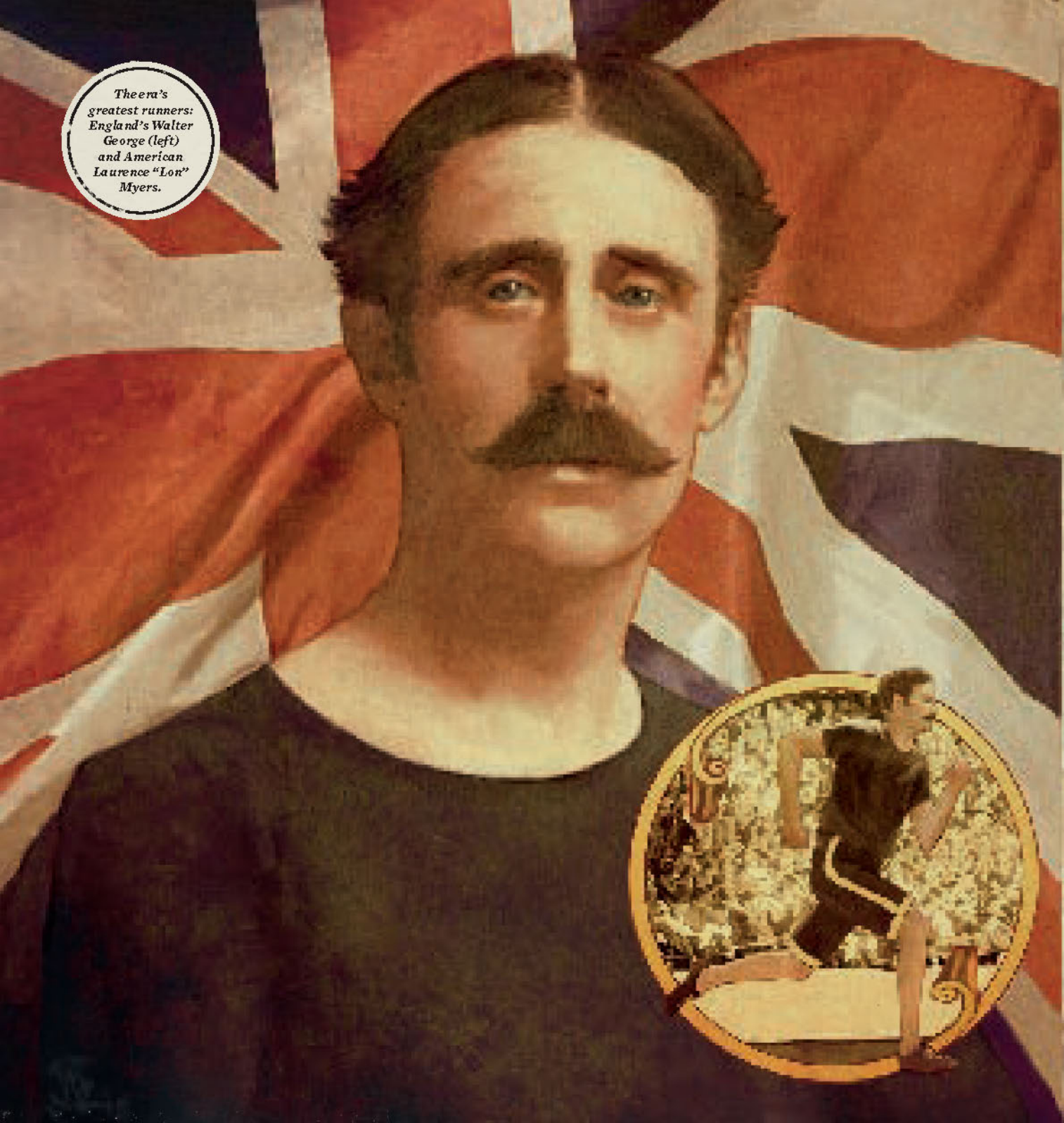


The era's
greatest runners:
England's Walter
George (left)
and American
Laurence "Lon"
Myers.



◆ RISE *of a* RUNNING NATION ◆

◆ This is the story of **LAURENCE E. MYERS**, a track star whose blazing speed brought American track and field out of the dark ages of sack and three-legged races and legitimized the sport. ◆
◆ Whose epic 1882 duel against Britain's best miler mirrored the race for global supremacy between the U.S. and England. Whose go-for-broke style dazzled audiences and critics alike. It's also the story of a man who raced to the top, only to slip into obscurity. ◆

◆ By **BILL DONAHUE** ... Illustration by **Bruce Emmett** ◆



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◆ *By BILL DONAHUE ... Illustration by Bruce Emmett*



HE TRAVELED TO ENGLAND HUNGRY.

A lean and rosy young man who stood 5'8" and weighed 112 pounds, Lon Myers was 23 years old that summer of 1881, and the pride of the Manhattan Athletic Club. He ran with his bony arms held low, his skull wrapped pirate-style in a bandanna, and he held national titles in the 100 and 220, and world records in the 440, 880, and 1,000 yards. He had no equal in the U.S.

So in June, he sailed to England for that country's amateur track championships. Modern athletics was born there in the 1850s when pubs built cinder tracks on their grounds, attracting drunken hordes bearing tankards of ale and smoking cigars as they wagered on gaunt harriers. By the time Myers boarded his ship, the British ruled the track—as they did much of the world, with their colonies as far-flung as Bhutan and Fiji—and held nearly all the world records. One British track authority scoffed at the foreigner's dazzling times. "There isn't a man in America who can properly hold a watch," he sniffed. "Let Myers come. He will go back a sadder but wiser man."

Instead, Myers trounced the Brits,

winning six of his seven races. He finished one 440-yard race running sideways, taunting his foes. Spectators were awestruck. *The London Land and Water* raved, "It is impossible to speak too highly of Myers's style and pace."

Still, there was a tinge of failure to Myers's victorious British tour. He'd sailed to England, in part, to face Britain's premier harrier, Walter George. A strapping 23-year-old pharmacy assistant, George had grown up chasing hounds in the midlands, and evolved a training regimen that involved the "100-up" (basically leaping, high-kneed, in place) and taking baths in brine. George was the country's top amateur and the star of Birmingham's best team, the Moseley Harriers. He'd recently run the mile in a blistering 4:19 $\frac{2}{5}$. But asthma sidelined him for the championships that July, and his club's secretary, Harry Oliver, winced as he announced that George would be "deprived of competing [against Myers] for his own honour and for the honour of England," lamenting, "Never before and perhaps never again, will there be such a chance."

But a new powerhouse was emerging to promote track and field in the United States. The New York Athletic Club (NYAC) was an exclusive, all-male club, a magnet for the hedge-fund types of its day that would soon boast as members George W. Vanderbilt and John Jacob Astor, Amer-

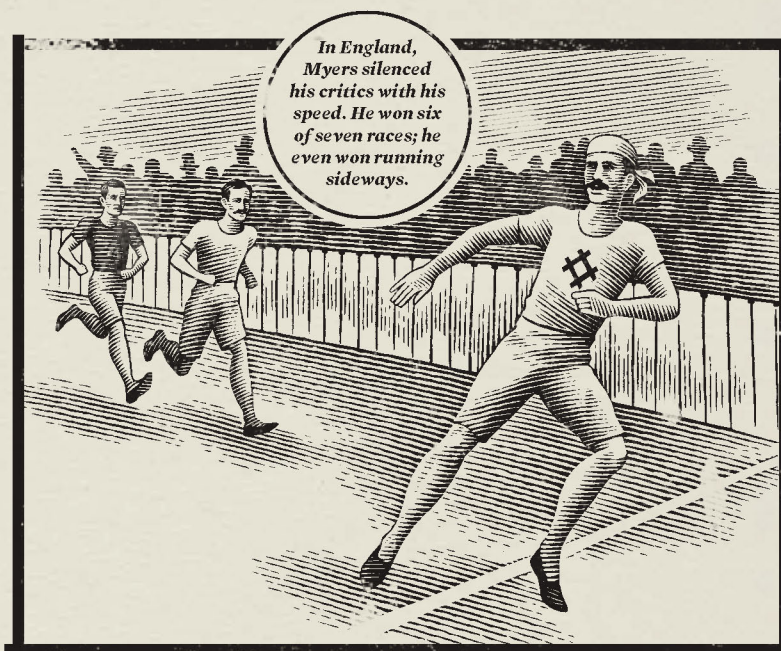
ica's first multimillionaire. In late 1881, its president, William Curtis, wrote to George inviting him to battle Lon Myers at the Polo Grounds, a baseball park on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. The club needed George's star power as it clamored to trump its main rival, Myers's Manhattan Athletic Club, in a battle for eminence in New York society.

In writing back, George said, "I should like to know whether [Myers] will promise to run me a friendly match on what I consider fair terms...three races—say half-mile, three-quarters, and one mile." The best-of-three series would play out over three weeks and, to remove any taint of corruption that scarred much of the 19th-century pro track circuit, would provide the winner nothing but bragging rights as the "best runner in the world," says Roger Robinson, a running historian and author of *Spirit of the Marathon*. "Everyone was asking, 'Can America stand up to England?' This race would answer that."

L

AURENCE E. MYERS is one of the most important runners in the early history of track and field. At a time when the three-legged race

and the sack race were considered serious competitive events in the United States, his explosive performances over a range of short and middle distances inspired respect and awe among spec-



FROM "HOW TO SPRINT," SPALDING'S ATHLETIC LIBRARY (TOP LEFT)

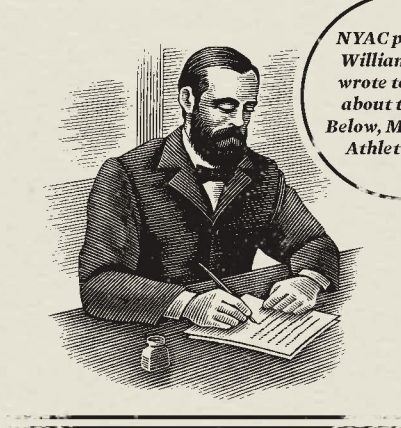
tators and gave the fledgling sport legitimacy. He was the Jesse Owens, the Prefontaine, of his era, and as the U.S. was emerging as a global power, he was one of the first to make clear to the world: The Americans are coming. He was the homegrown superstar who captivated audiences, then nearly disappeared from history.

He was Jewish, a minority at a time when anti-Semitism in America was taking on a keen edge, with Jews being barred from some hotels, restaurants, and social clubs. As a Jew, Myers was a rarity in track and field, a sport then dominated by immigrant Irishmen and the pedigreed WASPs of the NYAC. The NYAC was reputed for anti-Semitism long into the 20th century: The *Jewish Telegraphic Agency* wrote in 1959 of the club's "tight bars against Jews and Negroes," and in the mid-1930s, Marty Glickman, a Jewish world-class sprinter, was shunted from the NYAC lobby by the club's president, Paul Pilgrim. (The first African-American wouldn't be admitted until 1989.)

Myers was a Sephardic Jew, with noble roots in Spain and Portugal. His ancestor Myer Myers was one of colonial America's top silversmiths, and Myers himself grew up in Richmond, Virginia, part of the Jewish elite that fought with honor in the Confederacy. He began running at age 20 to ward off consumption, a pulmonary disease, but he never really got well. Throughout his life, he suffered frequent bouts of malaria, shivering with fevers in an age before antibiotics. He was often beset with pneumonia, and in letters he frequently wrote about his afflictions: "I was sick for two days, I caught cold all through my body, and my head ached so that I could not lift my eyes."

Jaunty and ebullient at times, Myers bet on horses and taunted those "wise-aces" who criticized his easy-does-it workout regimen. He once played poker all night and, without eating or sleeping, broke a world record the next day. He quipped that in his racing bandanna he looked like an Egyptian mummy. The proprietor of a skating rink, he was also a columnist for the *New York Sportsman*. But he often lapsed into depression. According to *The New York Times*, "He would be irritable without cause, cruel to the ones he loved best, and combative to the point of truculence.... No training methods suited him then, and no one could handle him."

Old photos of Myers reveal coal



NYAC president William Curtis wrote to George about the duel. Below, Manhattan Athletic Club.



black eyes glaring with intensity. In races, he'd push himself so hard that his locker room agonies of "retching, coughing, and vomiting" became ritual. The *Times* editorialized after one of Myers's races that he reached the finish line "thoroughly exhausted and in great distress. The effort to excel in athletic sports is undoubtedly to be commended, but there can be no question that, carried beyond certain limits, it is not only unwise but harmful."

His intensity, however, drove spectators delirious with excitement, inducing his most ardent fans to leap off the grandstand or dash out onto the track. Before Myers, the sport was in the dark ages: Venues were slipshod; a track might be a 520-yard circle or a 160-yard jagged oval. In addition to the sack and three-legged events, track competition included "horse races" that featured teams of shirtless runners pulling carts bearing fire hoses as bettors in top hats heckled and cheered. With his thrilling splits, Myers proved that such gimmicks were unnecessary when it came to captivating crowds. He was the first in the world to break 50 seconds in the 440 yards—despite losing a shoe with 120

yards to go. In 1880, he won national titles in four events in a single day. He could run 10 seconds in the 100 yards and 4:29 1/2 in the mile. And he had a gift for theater. He once challenged a top ice skater to a race wearing ice cleats. He won.

W

ALTER GEORGE was, in contrast, a stolid jock. When asked to predict the outcome of his duel with Myers, he replied, "I am not at all sanguine that I shall win a major-

ity, or even one, of the three events as I know what a really splendid runner Mr. Myers is. All I ask is a fair field and no favour."

Handsome, with pale blue eyes and a fine auburn mustache, George hailed from Worcester, an industrial city in Britain's West Midlands (and birthplace of Worcestershire sauce). He was nearly six feet tall and 150 pounds, and as an athlete trained with the "dedicated concentration...of a Zen Buddhist," and "with the poise of a ballet dancer," writes Peter Lovesey in his book *Five Kings of Distance*. When George traveled to races, female admirers tracked him down via telegram; before one event, he stayed up all night, then met with a young lovely from Brighton for breakfast, riding with her through West London in a hansom cab.

George sailed west for New York on September 28, 1882. As an athletic star, he traveled in luxury on the S.S. *City of Rome*—then the world's largest ocean liner, with four high masts. A delegation from the NYAC greeted him when he reached Castle Garden port in Manhattan on October 7, and George stepped ashore into a crowded and complex metropolis.

New York in 1882 was a city split between the rarefied world of white tie balls and fetid, violent tenements where two-thirds of the city's population lived 15 to 20 per room amid the stench of slop jars. There was horse manure in the streets, with epidemics of cholera and typhus devastating communities. By the time George arrived, there was also electricity. Thomas Edison had opened the world's first central power plant, the Pearl Street Station, the previous month, electrifying a few streets in the financial district. George and his

coach, Will Caldicott, a 30-something hop and seed merchant, strolled amid the bright lights.

Nine miles uptown, on a stretch of Manhattan newly converted from farmland and bordered by a sprawling, multiracial squatters' colony, the Polo Grounds sat in darkness.

IN THE WEEKS leading up to his showdown with George, Myers trained in the warm autumn sun on the midtown grounds of the Manhattan Athletic Club. He ate heartily, increasing his weight from 112 to 115 pounds. Paparazzi hounded both runners, and in saloons and on street corners, fans placed their bets. A wager of 10 or 15 cents might suit a workingman who earned a dollar a week, though it's possible some laid down hundreds or even thousands in deals that were not quite legal but still tolerated by the police, who often got a cut of the proceeds.

When Myers awoke on November 4 for the first of the three races, the 880 yards, it was cold. So bracing were the winds that day that the *The New York Times* reported, "It was said that Myers weighed a pound less than he should weigh" and "a heavy wind would seriously impede his running."

George was the early favorite among bettors, but as the afternoon start neared and the winds slackened, the odds shifted toward Myers, the hometown hero. He did, after all, hold the world record for the 880-yard distance: 1:55 $\frac{3}{5}$.

There were 2,000 spectators in the stands despite the chilly weather, and the prerace buildup took its cues from heavyweight prizefighting. George came out, according to *Bell's Life*, a London paper, "enveloped in an ulster, and accompanied by his friend and an attendant, he walked spiritedly down the path to the starting point. The applause bestowed upon him was of no stinted kind. Two minutes later, Myers and his faithful Scotch trainer, John Frazier,

forced their way under the rails through the crowd."

The runners took their places on the starting line, and at the gun, George took the lead. But the Polo Ground's $\frac{1}{3}$ -mile cinder track was makeshift, an afterthought on a field that suffered abuses from baseball games, lacrosse matches, and football tackles. The going was difficult. In one sandy section, Myers and George sank to their shoetops, and in another 150-yard stretch, their spikes left inch-deep marks in the freshly laid ashes. Still other patches were hard as pavement.

After about 300 yards, the runners reached the grandstand with George ahead by two yards. He ran bent at the waist and grimacing, his arms working violently. Myers ran with his head erect and arms swinging loosely, and at about 400 yards, he drew close to George before again drifting back. He made his move with 130 yards to go and nipped the Englishman by $\frac{2}{5}$ of a

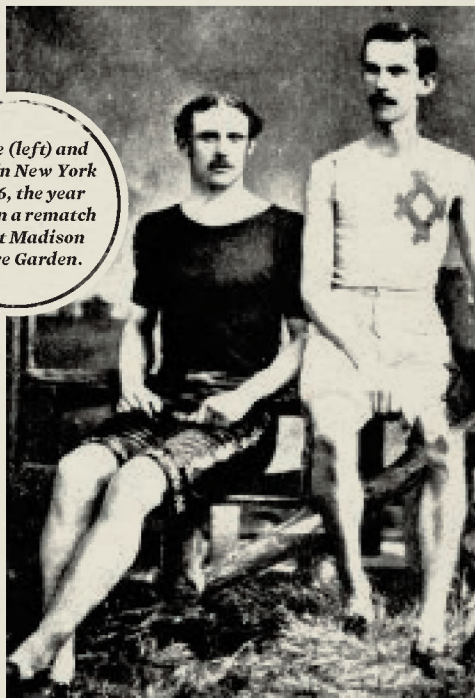
second, winning in 1:56 $\frac{3}{5}$.

Jubilant fans waved handkerchiefs and threw hats into the air, and soon the track swarmed with delighted Myers supporters. Myers seemed pleased, and cocky. "I could certainly have run 1:53, maybe 1:52," he said, implying that he'd simply toyed with George. The wind didn't bother him much, he said later. "I was chilly during the race and caught a cold. Nothing serious."

THE SECOND RACE, the mile, took place on a warm afternoon seven days later on November 11. The favorable weather brought out the hooligans, and the New York Police Department were out in force to stand in a solid hedge between the track and the stands, but less than a minute into the race, fans in the free seats went berserk. "This ungallant 300 rose simultaneously, rushed across the southeast corner of the field with deafening yells, and took partial possession of the lower end of the path," reported *The Spirit of the Times: The American Gentleman's Newspaper*.

The real drama at the Polo

George (left) and Myers in New York in 1886, the year they ran a rematch duel at Madison Square Garden.



After arriving in New York City, George (left) and his coach walked its newly illuminated streets.



GEORGE BEATEN BY MYERS

THE AMERICAN CHAMPION RUNNER WINS ANOTHER VICTORY.

HALF-MILE RACE BETWEEN W. G. GEORGE, OF ENGLAND, AND L. E. MYERS, OF NEW-YORK—ENTHUSIASTIC SPECTATORS—MYERS WINS EASILY.

The first of the three running races between W. G. George, of Moseley Harriers, amateur long-distance champion of England, and L. E. Myers of the Manhattan Athletic Club, the amateur champion of America, for the championship of the world, was run at the Polo Grounds, One Hundred and Tenth-street and Fifth-avenue, yesterday afternoon. The event, which has been the principal subject of discussion in athletic and sporting circles for some time past, attracted to the ground a crowd of some 2,000 spectators, among whom were a few ladies and nearly every man.

Papers in the U.S. and England covered the duel extensively. This article was in The New York Times.

Grounds that day, however, took place inside Lon Myers. His cold had gotten worse, and his gift for transforming pre-race jitters into horsepower eluded him. He stepped to the line preoccupied, worried how his ardent fans had bet heavily on him, not knowing how weak and sickly he was. From the gun, he trailed George. The Brit loped along with dazzling efficiency, and with a quarter-mile to go, led by 10 yards. Myers tried to close, but it was hopeless. "If all New York City had been offered to me," he said, "I could not have run down the straight any faster." George finished in 4:21 $\frac{2}{5}$, but before Myers crossed the line, six idiot fans crowded him. One, thinking the harrier was too tired to finish, grabbed Myers by the waist and tried to drag him off the track. By the time Myers wriggled free and groped to the finish, the stopwatches had him at 4:27 $\frac{3}{5}$.

Afterward, Myers was gracious about the scuffle, saying, "I am heartily glad this hindrance befell me instead of our guest," but he was filled with self-reproach. "I am sorry I was not able to run faster," he said. "My friends and myself have paid a high price."

It was now Myers one, George one. "You could have predicted that," says Edward S. Sears, author of *Running Through the Ages*. "Myers had speed—he was sure to win the half—and George had endurance. The mile was his. The real race was the three-quarters, where they were evenly matched. That's the one that mattered."

The third and final event was the following Saturday, seven days off. But

suddenly Myers disappeared. For six days, no one heard from him.

G

GEORGE TRAINED HARD all that week, running speedwork under Caldicott's watch on Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, November 17, George took the day off and

lazed about in Mott Haven, a suburb where the NYAC had put him up in a lavish hotel.

His reverie was broken by a telegram from Myers: The American was sick. He had caught a cold in that first race, and was "suffering from mus-

cular debility." Myers had a doctor's certificate excusing him from "athletic sports" for 10 days.

George had not crossed the Atlantic to win by forfeit, and when a reporter happened upon him at The Grand Opera House, he did not mince words. "Anyone can get a doctor's certificate," he said, apparently forgetting his own asthma attacks that had sidelined him from England's amateur championships just the year before. "I don't believe he is ill. A man who is able to walk about is able to run. If Myers doesn't run me on Saturday...we'll show him up in the English papers, and he'll never show his face over there again."

The New York press pilloried George for his trash talking, while *Bell's Life in London* and *Sporting Chronicle* sug-

His reverie was broken by a telegram from Myers: The American was sick.

Myers collapsed at the finish line of the final race. The crowd fell quiet as he was carried away by officials.



gested Myers conveniently “caught cold” after “George’s extraordinary time in his trial on Tuesday.”

Eventually, George calmed down enough to meet with Myers. He scolded the American for canceling on short notice, saying, “I’ll run it if I have a broken arm or leg,” but the two then shook hands and agreed to reschedule the race for Thanksgiving Day, November 30.

W

HEN THEY MET on the Polo Grounds at noon on the 30th, George asked after Myers’s health. With five direly needed new pounds on his ribs, the American replied, “I am feeling first-rate today.”

It was another cold day. In the shade, the temperature was below freezing; up in the stands, spectators shivered. Shoveled snow was piled high along the track, and officials and reporters stood in the deep, white tundra of the infield.

The final race was three-quarters of a mile, slightly more than two laps of the track. The two took off together at the gun, and for the first 150 yards, Myers and George ran stride for stride. Then,

the line in 3:10 1/2, Myers disintegrated. His head rocked and his legs wobbled. He lurched through the last six yards at a near walk, finished in 3:13, then crumpled to the track unconscious. As officials carried him out of the cold, the crowd was mostly silent.

George’s few fans at the Polo Grounds, however, were joyous. By the time he returned to his locker room, a giant flag hung over the doorway. The Union Jack fluttered in the brisk wind, its red cross resplendent against the white snow.

A

FTER GEORGE TRAVELED home to England, there was a grand celebration at the local horse-racing track, Pitchcroft, replete with a bonfire. “For nearly an hour,” reported the *Berrow’s Worcester Journal*, “the sky was radiant with coloured fires, sky rockets, and streamers. A device in pink and green lights containing the words ‘Welcome Home, Champion of the World’ was let off, while the band of the Worcester Artillery played ‘See the Conquering Hero Comes.’”

At an ensuing banquet, coach Will

If the duel was meant to answer, “Can America stand up to England?” the answer seemed clear. In fact, George’s triumph could be seen as a last grasp of greatness. The balance of power was shifting.

as was his habit, Myers let George drift ahead until the Englishman was leading by a stride.

Myers, his arms held low, his bony feet dancing over the frozen cinders, was still trailing when they ran into a headwind at about the half-mile mark. But as they made the final turn, the wind pushed against his back, and now it was the great Jewish-American sprinter against the rangy long-distance guy from Great Britain. “They came up the stretch like racehorses,” reported the *The New York Times*.

But Lon Myers couldn’t close an inch on Walter George. As George crossed

Caldicott said of his star athlete, “We ought to be thankful to him for upholding the prestige of the old country over the new.” Worcester’s mayor praised George’s “pluck, skill, and endurance,” before adding that his victory “attested the superiority of the English race over any other.”

And indeed, if the duel between Myers and George was meant to answer the question, “Can America stand up to England?” then surely the answer seemed clear. In fact, however, George’s triumph could be seen as a last grasp at greatness. The balance of power was shifting. America was rapidly becoming a force.



In 1886, Myers (left) and George ran a rematch duel in Madison Square Garden. Below, the event program.



Industry in the United States surged during the 1880s, thanks to cheap immigrant labor and abundant natural resources. By 1890, the U.S. economy was the most productive in the world. With wealth came military might in the form of battleships, and quick, successive



victories over Britain in disputes over land in Venezuela and sea access in Alaska. When a west London neighborhood hosted the 1908 Olympics, the two countries were so embroiled in a battle for global hegemony that the Games were dubbed “The Battle of Shepherd’s Bush.”

At the opening ceremony, the U.S. flag bearer, a shot-putter named Ralph Rose, eschewed local custom by refusing to dip the American flag in front of King Edward VII. Nationalistic jousting ensued. In the 400-meter final, perhaps the most controversial Olympic race

ever, American John Carpenter finished first, but officials accused him of impeding a British runner and nullified his victory. When the race was to be rerun, Carpenter skipped it in protest of what he deemed a biased call, and a Brit, Wyndam (Continued on page 108)



● CONTINUED FROM PAGE 85

Halswelle, took the gold. Still, the U.S. track team so dominated that Olympics that *The Times* of London lamented, “Our men were as children beside the athletes of the United States.”

George’s superiority over Myers was fleeting. The pair met again for a three-race duel in 1886 in Madison Square Garden, where the American swept all three races amid capacity crowds while a brass band played “Yankee Doodle Dandy.” After the final race of the series—the mile—the *New York Herald* wrote, “Pandemonium seemed let loose, men by the hundreds jumped down from the boxes, smashing seats and chairs, and, like a great tidal wave, overflowed the center of the building.... The excitement continued for several minutes until the gas was extinguished, forcing everyone out of the building.”

With his first duel, Myers announced the arrival of the American runner on the global stage. With his final match, he signaled Americans’ ascent to the top.

IN THE FOLLOWING DECADES, George worked as a coach and groundsman for the Mitcham Athletic Club, near London. In 1937, when Sydney Wooderson set a mile world record in England, the former miler, now a lean, stooped old man in a brown three-piece suit, was present to shake his countryman’s hand. That same year, as George celebrated his 50th wedding anniversary, King George VI himself sent warm wishes. Today, a bronze plaque marks the runner’s birthplace in Worcester, where you can still buy a commemorative Walter George plate.

There is no such lingering celebrity for Lon Myers. For the man who legitimized the sport of track and field in America, who galvanized audiences with record-setting, often theatrical performances, who heralded the emergence of a young country as an athletic powerhouse, there are no plaques, statues, or shrines. The Manhattan Athletic Club didn’t last long enough to perpetuate his memory, having shut its doors in 1893 after losing

its battle with the New York Athletic Club to land the city’s elite business tycoons as members. The NYAC’s own two-volume history contains only fleeting mention of that first showdown at the Polo Grounds.

Why the obscurity? All we have are theories. Perhaps because he was Jewish, and as such, ineligible in the late 19th century for membership in the NYAC, which has been the principal guardian of American track-and-field history for nearly 150 years. “If he’d been a member of the New York Athletic Club, they would certainly have kept his memory alive,” says historian Roger Robinson. “Their clubhouse is an important archive of tributes to the role their members have played in the sport. But given attitudes [toward Jews] at that date, Myers would not have been eligible.” And even among Jewish sports fans, Myers lacked a constituency that may have kept his name alive, says Alan S. Katchen, a track historian at Capital University in Ohio and a one-time regional director of the Anti-Defamation League. “He was a Sephardic Jew with deep roots in this country,” says Katchen. “He didn’t speak Yiddish. He had very little in common with the poor immigrants living in Manhattan then. He wasn’t one of them.”

Perhaps, too, he simply did not live long enough for times to change. After a brief post-athletics career as a horse-racing bookmaker, Myers died at age 40 of pneumonia. He was unmarried, and services were held at the home of his father, Solomon, in Manhattan.

When Solomon buried his son in Kensico Cemetery outside the city, he did so with a gesture befitting his career as a jeweler. He placed beside the family headstone a small marker carved with the diamond insignia of the Manhattan Athletic Club. Then he inlaid the diamond with a pane of cherry-colored glass. The glass is shattered now. There are only a few splinters left. ■

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