

THE DECATHLON ASSOCIATION

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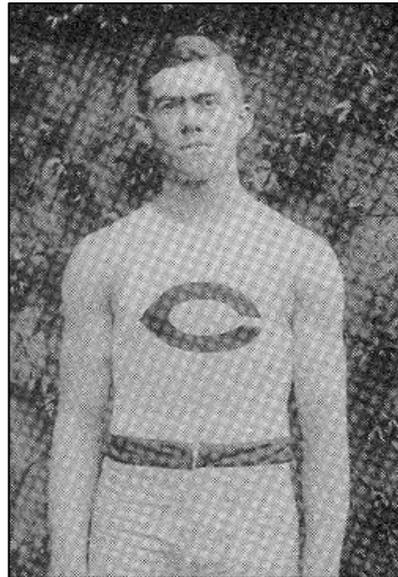
AMERICA'S FIRST DECATHLON 100 Years Ago Today

Hello Again... Today is the 100th anniversary of the first decathlon held in the US, May 22-23, 1912. I thought it might be fun if I produced a *DECA Newsletter* as if reporting that first meet which was held on the Northwestern University campus in Evanston, IL and which resulted in a unrecorgnized (for 75 years) world record. My sources are mainly Chicago daily newspapers and the *Cherry Circle*, the monthly magazine for the Chicago Athletic Association and the Amos Alonzo Stagg collection at the Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. My research was done over a long period of time, beginning in 1985, so I am relying on musty files. I also heavily relied upon chapters from my *Olympic Glory Denied* (Griffin, 1996), *All-Around Men: Heroes of a Forgotten Sport* (Scarecrow Press, 2005) and the accompanying *Complete All-Around Record Book* (Deca, 2005)

Introduction:

In 1910 the organizers of the Stockholm Olympic games had added a pair of combined events to the Olympic schedule: a pentathlon and decathlon. In response, the American Olympic Committee scheduled trials in May, 1912 for both events in each of 3 sections of the nation, with the pentathlon trials preceding the decathlon trials by a week.

Carlisle Indian Jim Thorpe won the Eastern pentathlon Trials on May 18 at Celtic Park in Long Island City, NY. Pentathlon rules called for a point-per-place scoring system and Thorpe's winning total was 7 points (4 wins, one third). Two days earlier only two appeared



J. Austin Menaul, U of Chicago star, won America's first decathlon, the Central Olympic Trials in Evanston, IL. Unknown to him, he set a world decathlon record.

[photo: author's collection]

for the Central Pentathlon Trials at Northwestern University and Avery Brundage had won over Chicago's Austin Menaul, 7-8. The score was overwhelmingly misleading as Menaul's 5 events, using scoring tables, would have netted him a world record. Had the rules required scoring tables he would have held the record for just two days, until Thorpe's 5 marks were tabulated. A Western Trials was won by Jim Donahue, Los Angeles AC.

The Eastern decathlon Trials the following week were cancelled by AAU secretary James E. Sullivan as only two (one was Thorpe) entered. That made the Central

Trails at Northwestern the nation's first decathlon.

**Central Decathlon Trials
Northwestern University
Evanston, IL
May 22-23, 1912**

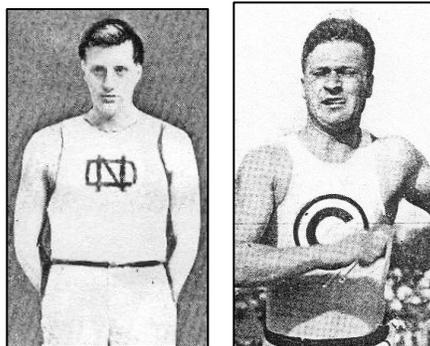
Day One:

Five athletes (out of a dozen entries) appeared at Northwestern at what can only be considered curious timing: 9:00am on a Thursday morning. Those of us who are suspicious can easily conclude that this schedule was an attempt to keep the "college boys" from competing for spots on the US Olympic team in a new Olympic event, the decathlon. The size of the field was curious as well. Two years earlier the AAU All-Around nationals, held at the University of Chicago, had drawn a record 23 contestants. There were plenty of combined event athletes in the mid-west in 1912.

Swedish organizers had, a year earlier, distributed worldwide the order of events, conducted some practice meets (always won by their star Hugo Wieslander) and had developed a set of scoring tables. They were not completely satisfied the latter and were in the process of developing a new set of tables to be used in July at the Stockholm Games. It is not entirely clear whether the new tables were available to the American Olympic Committee or AAU for the conduct of its Trials in May. Regardless, the host for the Midwestern (Central) Decathlon Trials was the Chicago AA and they **did not** have a set of scoring tables, which, meant that meet director Martin Delaney, the Chicago AA coach, relied on an antiquated points-for-place system, low score wins, the same system used a week earlier for the pentathlon trials. This system was last used for a ten event contest in 1892 for the AAU All-Around (an annual decathlonlike one day event) before the AAU developed its own all-around scoring tables.

The five who did make it to Northwestern that morning were:

Avery Brundage, 24, Chicago AA who had AAU all-around experience. Brundage was a 5-11, 185 lb graduate of the University of Illinois ('09) who had set the school record in the discus. Delaney had characterized him as a



Two of the major Trials competitors were **George Philbrook** (left) a husky thrower from Notre Dame, and **Avery Brundage** (right) of the Chicago AA

"nervous athlete, unable to come up to his best when it counts." (*Cherry Circle*)

George Philbrook, 25, a notable thrower who raised eyebrows as a 7th year collegian at Notre Dame. He had spent 4 years at Whitman College in Spokane, WA before enrolling at South Bend, drawing the ire of midwestern coaches.

J. Austin Menaul, 24, a versatile 5-10, 160 pound senior from the University of Chicago who was accompanied by his coach, Amos Alonzo Stagg.

Eugene Schobinger, 20, a versatile vaulter and hurdler from U of Illinois. He had placed in 2 previous AAU all-arounds as a teenager and later was decorated during WWI.

R. Leslie Byrd, 24, a burly and notable thrower from Adrian College (MI) who represented the Chicago AA. He would win the Olympic silver medal for the discus in Stockholm.

So, in spite of attempt to discourage the college boys, only Brundage was not a collegian at the time.

Day One: May 22, 1912

100 meters:

Menaul was an easy victor in the sprint, being the only legit runner in the field. He had spent most of the 1912 spring running on Stagg's premier mile relay team. His recorded time was 11 2/5 seconds implying that time pieces with 1/5 and not 1/10th of a second hand were used. Often his time is recorded as 11.4 but this is somewhat misleading. A photo of the finish sits in the Stagg papers at the Regenstein and shows Menaul at least 12 feet ahead at the finish.

Using the outdated all-around procedure for timing a sprint, officials had placed lines of white chalk on the track, 1 yard apart and finish line officials were to estimate how far back each athlete was when the winner crossed the finish line. This was standard AAU All-Around procedure. Only the time of the winner was taken. The official results were:

Pts/place

- | | |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1. Menaul | 11 2/5 seconds |
| 2. Brundage | 1 1/2 yards back |
| 3. Schnobinger | 2 3/4 yards back |
| 4. Philbrook | 5 1/2 yards back |
| 5. Byrd | 7 yards back |

An examination of the photo indicates that the judgement on Brundage was extremely generous (it is not entirely obvious that he was even 2nd), and a favorable bias (in distance from the winner as the winner crossed the finish line) existed for all non-winners. Using the then standard 1/5th timing, a more accurate rendering would be:

- | | | |
|---------------|--------|---------|
| 1. Menaul | 11 2/5 | seconds |
| 2. Brundage | 12 | " |
| 3. Schobinger | 12 | " |
| 4. Philbrook | 12 1/5 | " |
| 5. Byrd | 12 2/5 | " |
| 6. | | |

*After One: Mena 1; Brun 2, Scho 3, Phil 4, Byrd 5.
Actual scores: 1. Mena 857.20, Brun 714.40, Scho 714.40, Phil 666.80, Byrd 619.20.*

Long Jump:

As was common in early decathlon days all distances/heights were measured imperially (feet & inches). A century later it is still not an uncommon problem. At Evanston, with a crowd of nearly 100 spectators (I count the people in the photo backgrounds) Brundage led after round #1 with a 20-6 1/4 leap, fairly standard for him. He improved in round # 3 by 1/2 inch, but Schnobinger won the event at 20-7 1/2 and the bulky (he stood 6-2 and weighed closs to 200) Philbrook covered 20-5 3/4 of Illinois real estate. Menaul also improved in the fianl round to 19-10 1/2.

Pts/place

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------|-------|
| 1..Schnobinger | 20-7 1/2 | 6.28m |
| 2..Brundage | 20-6 3/4 | 6.26m |
| 3..Philbrook | 20-5 3/4 | 6.24m |
| 4..Menaul | 19-10 1/2 | 6.06m |
| 5..Byrd | 18-4 1/2 | 5.60m |

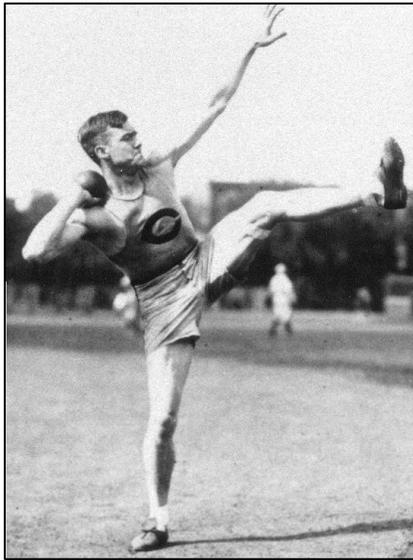
This meant, on the official scoring, Schnobinger and Brundage were tied for the lead.

After two: Schn 4, Brun 4, Mena 5, Phil 7, Byrd 10.

Actual scores: 1. Mena 1509.30, Schn 1420.40, Brun 1415.50, Phil 1363.0, Byrd 1158.60.

Shot Put:

This event featured Menaul, the Big 10 shot champ and Philbrook, an Olympic team shot putter. The "little Maroon" as the Chicago papers called him, opened with a 41-8 1/4 toss which proved to be the winner. The huge Notre Damer heaved 41-3 1/4. In round #2 Menaul snapped (I use this term b/c in an interview with his son in 1987 Richard Menaul explained that his father's shot put success was a result of snapping his wrist as he let go of the 16 pound ball) 41-5 1/4. Philbrook then fouled making him the first decathlete in US history to record a "foul" or no mark. Only Brundage improved in round #3 with a 40-4 1/2 toss.



In retrospect Menaul was, pound-for-pound, one of the world's best shot putters. Although he never weighed more than 160 pounds, his PR was nearly 45 feet. [photo: author's collection]

He had a sterling collegiate record as a shot putter. Whether this was a result of Stagg's coaching is only conjecture.

Pts/place		
1...Menaul	41-8¼	12.705m
2...Philbrook	41-3¼	12.58m
3...Brundage	40-4½	12.305m
4...Byrd	37-11½	11.315m
5...Schobinger	35-5½	10.805m

After three: Mena 6, Brun 7, Scho 9, Phil 9, Byrd 14.
Actual scores: 1. Mena 2299.30, Scho 2020.40, Brun 2170.50, Phil 2131.0, Byrd 1808.60.

High Jump:

The Chicago student was on a roll. Although just 5-10, he happened to be a former Big Ten indoor high jump champ. Interestingly, the bar was raised by 2 inches until 5-10, a height cleared by both Menaul (whose PR was one inch higher) and Byrd. Officials then raised the bar by one inch and only Byrd was successful. He competed in the standing high jump in Stockholm.

Pts/place:		
1..Byrd	5-11	1.805m

2..Menaul	5-10	1.78m
3..Philbrook	5-8	1.73m
4..Brundage	5-6	1.68m
5..Schobinger	5-2	1.575m

After four: Mena 8, Brun 11, Phil 12, Scho 14, Byrd 15.
Actual scores: 1. Mena 3131.30, Phil 2893.0, Brun 2862.50, Byrd 2668.60, Scho 2558.40,

400 meters

The pride of the University of Chicago track program was its mile relay team. The Maroons were annually matched in the Penn Relays finals and won the event a year earlier. Menaul was always a member of that squad but so competitive were the spots that Stagg, with his wife faithfully recording every



Menaul went 5-10 for 2nd place in the high jump sans pit.
 [photo: Library of Congress/Chicago Daily News]

clocking, conducted a 440 yard time trial every day in the spring from Monday to Thursday. Menaul had run time trial *every day*. He was an experienced runner and had run the 3rd leg at Penn a year earlier when Michigan upset Chicago by inches in the Championship of America race. The Wolverine anchor was Ralph Craig and he caught the Chicago anchor Ira Davenport. Both made reputations later that summer in Stockholm. Davenport won the silver medal at 800 meters, losing by a step to Ted Meredith. Craig won both Olympic sprints, 100m and 200m. The point is palpable...Menaul ran if fast company. The decathlon 400m in Evanston was ridiculously easy for him and he appears (as a photo indicates) to be cruising as he hit the tape. His

final time of 53 4/5 seconds was well off his capability, but in a points/place scoring system, all he had to do was win the event for the one point. Copious UC/Stagg workout records (all recorded in small books and available in the Stagg collection at Regenstein) indicate that he normally ran in the 51 second range. As a matter of fact Chicago ran a tick off the world mile relay world record with Menaul on the foursome.

The placings in Evanston:

Pts/place:	
1..Menaul	53 4/5 seconds
2..Schobinger	no time
3..Brundage	no time
4..Philbrook	no time
5..Byrd	no time

I carefully examined the photo of the 400m finish at Evanston. These photos were not the typical "Fast Results" that modern officials are used to. Rather they were taken at an angle, but were of high quality and did catch all 5 runners in the frame. I estimated the "actual" times run in Evanston as:

1...Menaul	53 4/5 seconds
2...Schobinger	54 4/5 "
3...Brundage	55 1/5 "
4...Philbrook	56 3/5 "
5...Byrd	57 4/5 "

Using *any* scoring system Menaul's lead was now virtually insurmountable. His official first day score was 9 points (3 wins, 1 second, 1 fourth). Using the 1912A tables that would be used for the Stockholm Games his first day total would have been 3928.26 and his lead over Brundage more than 300 points. Unknown at the time, this was world record pace.

After five: Mena 9, Brun 14, Phil 16, Scho 16, Byrd 20. Actual scores: 1. Mena 3928.26, Brun 3601.82, Phil 3594.68, Scho 3332.80, Byrd 3316.16.

Day Two: May 23, 1912
110m Hurdles:

There was just one section of the hurdles with none of the alteranre lane jazz of today. Only Schobinger was an accomplished

hurdler. He came off the final barrier with a very slight lead over Menaul. Newspaper account of the finish vary from Schnobinger winning and menaul "inches back at the finsh" to Menaul being "four feet back." A photo illustrates the places after the two leaders have cleared the final hurdle, but not exactly the differential at the finish line. Regardless the Illinois lad was clocked in 16 2/5 And the places behind him were:

Pts/place:	
1...Schnobinger	16 2/5 seconds
2...Menaul	no time
3...Philbrook	no time
4...Brundage	no time
5...Byrd	no time.

Yet we have two independent sources that the second place time for Menaul was 16 3/5 seconds. Menaul's own scrapbook indicates as such and Stagg's notes on the meet give him 16 3/5 as well. (I dug them both up in 1987) It seems that Menaul was the victim of the 1/5th second stop watches and his time would have been 1/10 of a second faster if the watches had been capable. After studying the photo I have estimated the time for the other three runners. It is likely that the times, had they all been recorded, would have been:

Place:	
1...Schnobinger	16 2/5
2...Menaul	16 3/5 [or 16 5/10]
3...Philbrook	16 4/5
4...Brundage	17 3/5
5...Byrd	18 1/5

After six: Mena 11, Schn 17, Brun 18, Phil 19, Byrd 25. Actual scores: 1. Mena 4776.26, Phil 4423.68, Brun 4354.82, Schn 4161.80, Byrd 4012.16.

Discus:

The battle as really between a pair of Olympic discus throwers, Philbrook and Byrd. The Notre Dame lad managed 40.98m/134-5, quite a toss since subsequent statiticians have put the world record at that moment at 44.01m/144-4 (by Finn Elmer Niklander) and the AR of Martin Sheridan at 43.54m/142-10¼. Byrd managed 38.89m/127-7.



A month later Byrd (above) would earn the silver medal in Stockholm with a 42.32m/138-10 effort. [photo: 1912 Swedish Olympic Committee]

The discus was purported to have been Brundage's best event but he managed only 35.30m/115-10 while Menaul's 33.00m/108-3 was near his best. Half a century later Menaul's son explained his dad's inability with the platter with, "small hands."

The toss by Philbrook moved him within @ 50 points of the overall lead, but, remember, scoring tables were not used. *After seven: Mena 15, Phil 20, Brun 21, Schn 22, Byrd 27. Actual scores: 1. Mena 5454.78, Phil 5405.44, Brun 5120.74, Byrd 4914.5, Scho 4776.48*

Pole Vault:

Schobinger, who had been AAU vault runner-up 2 years earlier, while at the Harvard School (a prep school in Chicago), with a world class 12-0 clearance, won in Evanston at 11-0 and stopped. He had earned his one point. Schobinger was a freshman at Illinois and his coach Harry Gill was on hand. Two years later he would tie for the Big-Ten vault title. He also played football and water polo at Illinois.

It appears that the bar was raised by 3 increments. Results:

place			
1	Schobinger	11-0	3.355m
2.	Byrd	10-3	3.125m
3.	Brundage	10-1	3.05m
4t	Menaul	9-6	2.895m
4t	Philbrook	9-6	2.895m

Apparently Menaul and Philbrook shared the 9 points for 4th and 5th places and were accordingly awarded 4 ½ pts each.

The performances by Schobinger and Byrd tightened the scoring considerably. *After eight: Mena 19½, Scho 23, Brun 24, Phil 24½, , Byrd 29. Actual scores: 1. Mena 6011.98, Phil 5962.64, Brun 5764.34, Scho 5582.08, Byrd 5595.90.*

Javelin

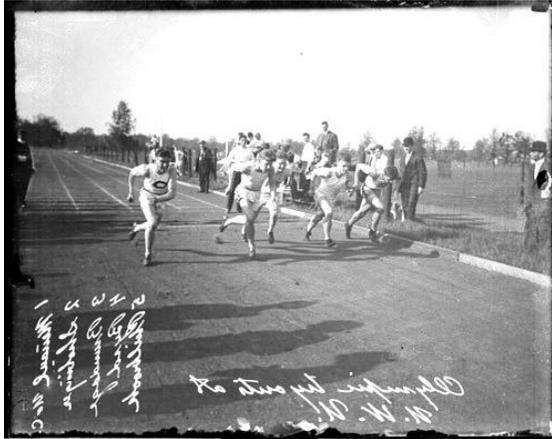
Long throws in Evanston were not expected. The event was relatively new in the US and had been added to the AAU championship schedule in 1909. Every world record since 1863 belonged to a Scandinavian and the current AR was 163-1/49.70m by Brune Brodd/Irish American AC, set a year earlier at the AAU meet. So George Philbrook's 45.98m/150-10 toss was eye-opening. Brundage, Byrd and Menaul were bunched within 22 inches of one another (at 134-8, 134-7, 132-10) and, if tables had been used, would have received about the same number of points. But the points-per-place system produced surprising results. Menaul, with 23½ points now looked unbetabale, given his middle distance talent. Philbrook, now 2nd with 25½ points would have actually taken the overall lead had scoring tables been used. This conundrum would produce surprising results in the final event.

After nine: Mena 23½, Phil 25½, Brun 26, Scho 28, Byrd 32. Actual scores: 1. Phil 6719.265, Mena 6617.355, Brun 6385.115, Byrd 6216.125, Scho 6092.355.

1500 meters:

In current terms, Philbrook needed only to stay with @ 16 seconds of Menaul for the overall victory had tables been used. Yet he was a sluggish runner and even had he known this at the time it would have been highly unlikely. Although he had throwing and jumping skills, the 'little Maroon' was a runner with range. He lined up on the far outside, and, at the report, dashed off to put as much distance between himself and the field as he could. It was no contest. Soon after the start Byrd stepped off the track, willing to take the 5 points for last place, in spite of not

finishing since that is what he would have received had he just walked in. A lap later



The start of the 1500m in Evanston. From left to right: Menaul, Schobinger, Brundage, Byrd, Philbrook. Note that the race started at the end of the straightway necessitating that it finished on a curve!

[photo: Library of Congress/Chicago Daily News]

Philbrook also stopped and threw in the towel, taking the 4 points he would have received. As it turned out he would have needed nothing faster than a 6:09.2 clocking to get second place had scoring tables been in force, and about 6:02 to break 7000 points. Yet he just stopped. Two months later he would do the same thing in Stockholm. It is not as if he was incapable of running a 1500m. Two years earlier, at the AAU All-Around champs he had clocked a 5:32 mile, roughly equivalent to a 5 minute 1500m. It does not appear that he was incapable of running the distance, only that the points-per-place scoring system encouraged him to stop running. In effect, he simply donated the runner-up spot to Brundage.

Meanwhile Menaul lapped on and won by 23 seconds over Schobinger, in 4:37-1/5. Brundage was a half lap in arrears slogging in at 5:13-3/5.

pts/place	
1...	Menaul 4:37 1/5
2...	Schobinger 5:00 3/5
3...	Brundage 5:13 3/5
4...	Philbrook dnf
5...	Byrd dnf

The Final Scores:

	official	accurate
1...Menaul	24½ pts	7414.555 WR
2...Brundage	29	6963.915
3...Philbrook	29½	6719.265
4...Schobinger	30	6749.155
5...Byrd	37	6216.125

Chicago news accounts were effusive about Menaul. The *Record Herald* reported that "his work yesterday was not as impressive as that on Thursday...the manner that he performed leaves little doubt that he is the man most available in the west (read: mid-west), if not the United States...and there is little doubt that he will be chosen to make the trip to Stockholm this summer. Perhaps most impressive about Menaul's performance was the wonderful fighting spirit he showed. Time after time when he seemed beaten he fought back he fought back on his last trial and secured himself better places."

Menaul's score of 7414.555 was the best score yet in the decathlon's early history, 500 points better than a 6903.92 mark established by Sweden's Hugo Weislander the previous fall. But nobody knew it! And by the time Jim Thorpe blew away all records 7 weeks later, no one really cared. I dug all of this up in the 1980s, 75 years after the fact.

Postscript.

Two days later, at the Western decathlon trials, only Jim Donahue appeared. He contested the first day against specialist in each event and appeared ready (again: assuming scoring tables had been in use) to challenge Menaul's mark. But the weather in Berkeley was cold and rainy and he stopped after just 5 events.

Menaul did indeed receive a letter from James E. Sullivan a week later naming him to the Olympic team. And so did Brundage, and Philbrook, and Byrd later for his discus prowess. So did Thorpe and Donahue. In fact, unknown at the time, each nation was allowed 11 (!) decathlon entries. So the USA loaded up adding athletes who had never contested a combined event. Eventually the Americans

started 6 in Stockholm (the Swedes 8!). Jim Thorpe won the decathlon with a world record avalanche (1000 points higher than Menaul's Evanston score) after an equally impressive impressive pentathlon victory. Menaul injured himself training on the boat ride to Stockholm and did not start the decathlon but placed a respectable 5th in the pentathlon. Donahue was 3rd in the pentathlon, 5th in the decathlon. Novice Roy Mercer of Pennsylvania was 6th in the decathlon. Philbrook was in contention for most of the decathlon but did not start the 1500m. Brundage finished neither of the events but he is still officially listed as 6th in the pentathlon. But in fact, he walked away, never finishing.

Also, please note that there is a certain amount of speculation in my account. But one can only wonder what would have happened had the AAU/Chicago AAU obtained a set of scoring tables. This may have forced Menaul to press the three races he won handily instead of settling simply for first place. Ditto for Schobinger in the vault and Byrd in the high jump as both stopped once they had won the event. And who knows what scores might have appeared if Philbrook and Burd finished the final event. In fact it was the erroneous scoring system that influenced the results. Thankfully it did not preclude a world record. It only elongated its recognition....by 75 years.



Jim Thorpe (left) and Austin Menaul (right) finally got to race one another in the Pentathlon 1500m in Stockholm. Thorpe won, 4:44.8 to 4:49.6.

Epilogue

It was revealed in January, 1913 that **Jim Thorpe** had played minor league baseball for two summers away from Carlisle. His trophies, medals and records were stripped. In 1983, 30 years after his death, the International Olympic Committee returned facsimile medals to his family and restored his name to the record books.

Austin Menaul graduated from the University of Chicago and spent a good deal of his professional life working as a livestock buyer for Swift and Co in the Chicago. He retired in 1951 and died in 1975. **George Philbrook** became a noted coach at the University of Nevada-Reno, producing an American record holder a generation later. **Avery Brundage** set up a Chicago construction firm and later became the president of the International Olympic Committee. He died in 1975, 5 weeks before Menaul's death. **Eugene Schobinger** became a decorated war hero with the 183rd Brigade in France in 1918, he was a life-long salesman.

Richard Leslie Byrd joined the US Marine Corps, fought in WWI and died in 1958.

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Emmitsburg, MD

