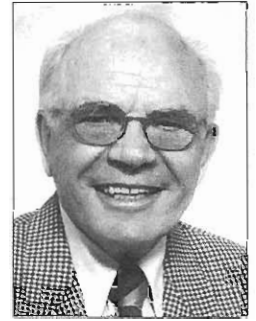


# Paavo Nurmi's Significance for the Finnish-Americans



John O. Virtanen

**T**wenty years before Finland succeeded in freeing herself from Russia and becoming independent, there was born in the city of Turku a boy who was to astonish the world. It would always be said of him that he ran Finland onto the map of the world. He competed for twenty years at the very highest level of world-class runners, and when he changed careers and became a businessman, he showed the same determination as in athletic competition.

## He ran Finland onto the map of the world

During his running career, Nurmi, a bright, stubborn, taciturn, and extraordinarily gifted individual, ran to twenty-three official world records. In three Olympics he won a total of nine gold medals and three silver medals. It is now one hundred years since his birth, and sixty-three

since the end of his career, but few can challenge him for the title of "world's best runner."

Nurmi was twenty-three when he startled the world for the first time at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp. An unknown man from an unknown country, he won three gold medals and one silver. From then on, his career was followed closely.

At the next Olympics in Paris, Nurmi did not disappoint his awed admirers. He won five gold medals in spite of the fact that he had only a brief one-hour rest between the 1500- and the 5,000-meter runs. At both distances he set world and Olympic records. And the "cinder track's iron man" as he was dubbed, did not even look tired when the races were over.

## Nurmi for Finland and for the Finnish-Americans

Paavo Nurmi was born on June 13, 1897 and he died in Helsinki on October 2, 1973. Had America won him over for her own, as many in the United States had wished to do in his triumphant early days, he would have died

there. But the quiet, deadpan "flying Finn" opted for his homeland. During his career, prompted and abetted by Finnish-Americans, he made seven philanthropic and competitive tours in the United States – and his significance for the positive identity of the Finnish-Americans as well as for the bild of Finns and Finland in America was enormous.

The Winter War with Russia broke out on November 1939. Nurmi boarded his retail operation shop against bombs and on January 24, 1940, departed for the United States on a good will and fund raising trip. Nurmi took the serious purpose of the trip to heart. When chided by reporters for being especially grim, he responded, "It's no time for any Finn to laugh." His participation with Finnish-Americans in the *Help Finland* campaign during the war was crucial.

Paavo Nurmi's first American tour was in 1925. He was invited to America by the Finnish-American Athletic Club, whose members individually financed his travel from Turku to New York. Hugo Qvist, president of the FAAC was his manager and ad-

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*Consul John O. Virtanen, Chairman of the Paavo Nurmi Heritage Society, has lived in USA from 1946 to 1980 and is now residing in Turku, Finland.*

viser. Nurmi ran in fifty-five indoor and outdoor track meets, breaking 38 indoor world records, the majority of them his own. He ran from January 6 to May 26 in twenty-one different American and Canadian cities from New York to Los Angeles and San Francisco. In addition, he booked exhibitions at universities, high schools and the army training centers.

Paavo Nurmi was a member of the Finnish Olympic team to Los Angeles Games in 1932, prepared to win Olympic marathon and 10,000 meter races and to bring home two gold medals. Nurmi's popularity was as high as ever in the United States. He was a door opener for the Finnish team, which was given royal treatment from coast to coast. The last goal still shimmered on the horizon: a gold medal at Los Angeles Olympics marathon.

After the disastrous Los Angeles Olympics, where Nurmi was not allowed to run, he put all his energy into his business enterprises. Successful stock market investing provided him with his initial working capital. Nurmi's construction company was one of the most successful businesses ever owned by a former Olympic athlete. At his busiest period he had as many as three hundred people working for him, constructing total of forty apartment buildings in Helsinki.

### Idolized by fans

For Nurmi's historically important accomplishments in America we should thank the American



Two of Finland's running heroes, Paavo Nurmi (right) and Ville Ritola in New York in 1925. (J. O. Virtanen photo collections)

Finns, The Finnish American Athletic Club of New York who invited Nurmi and whose members personally financed Paavo Nurmi's two visits to America. Nurmi was a total success and idolized by American fans – let alone the Finnish Americans. For his appearance at Madison Square Garden on January 6, 1925, all tickets were sold out in advance, including the maximum permissible of standing room admissions.

During his American tours, one competition followed fast on the heels of another. Nurmi's overwhelming superiority in all of them led people to indulge in flights of hyperbole and speculation. Did he train rigorously or was he a supernaturally gifted "freak"? An American medical

researcher proclaimed him the "Finnish Wonder." His physical measurements were taken, his build was studied. His running style was photographed and the photos used in training other runners. The press showered nicknames on him: "Finnish Phantom," "Winged Mercury," the "Antelope of Turku", the "Nonpareil," along with the well-known "Flying Finn." The *Boston Globe* extended his attributes to all Finns, declaring them to be "the finest human specimens in the world, sturdily built, rugged, strong, and light of foot." Even an American bankers were overwhelmed of Nurmi's tour by openly declaring that "any country producing a Paavo Nurmi had to be worth of investment." As a result the loan of 400 000 000

dollars (which in 1997 would amount to nearly twenty three billion Finnish marks) was granted to Finland. A great accomplishment for Nurmi and Finnish-Americans.

### Laden with honors

During his lifetime, Nurmi received the acknowledgments of three American Presidents, *Calvin Coolidge*, *Richard Nixon*, and *Lyndon B. Johnson*. He was a hero to Supreme Court Justice *William O. Douglas*, who admired him because "he stood for excellence" and had given Douglas "a sense of my outer limits."

In addition, there are other honors bestowed upon Nurmi's heritage in USA such as *Nurmi Street* which was named after the Flying Finn in 1929 by the city council of Sylmar, San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles, California.

*Paavo Nurmi Center*, a building for physical education, was constructed at Suomi College, Hancock, Michigan, in 1969 and named in Nurmi's honor.

On June 24, 1996, *Time Magazine* selected Paavo Nurmi as the foremost among the 93,254 athletes who had competed during one hundred years of Olympic history.

### The heritage of Paavo Nurmi

Paavo Nurmi, a highly successful businessman, established and funded the Paavo Nurmi Foundation on February 29, 1968, with a donation of several apartment buildings and one million marks



Finnish American Athletic Club, New York, at the turn of 1920's and 1930's. (J. O. Virtanen photo collections)



Paavo Nurmi's last invitational run at the Madison Square Garden in New York, 18.2.1966. He was an honored guest of the New York Athletic Club. (J. O. Virtanen photo collections)

cash, for the purpose of supporting medical research of heart decay. Nurmi's son, Matti Nurmi, is today the chairman of the board.

Paavo Nurmi's home, at Jarvatiehenkatu 4, has been restored by the city of Turku to its original condition.

In 1978 I began to research material regarding Nurmi in the

American newspapers and historical archives. My collection of nearly 1000 photos and lot of newspaper clippings I have donated to the Finnish Sport Museum Foundation, located at the Helsinki Olympic Stadion.

When *FinnFest Inc.* was organized in 1982 to have one big annual festival open to all Finn-

ish Americans, the photo exhibit of Paavo Nurmi became a part of the events. The six photo panels, with 72 pictures, were assembled here in Finland and donated to the *FinnFest USA*. The exhibit has been on display in each *FinnFest* location annually. Over one hundred thousand people has seen the exhibit. Paavo Nurmi Run as well has become part of the *FinnFest* annual festival programs. An interest of the Finnish Americans toward Paavo Nurmi still continues.

The centennial of Nurmi's birth has been celebrated in Finland with a whole series of ceremonial events. Among the many honorable newsmen and celebrities attending were the president of the International Olympic Committee, Juan Antonio Samaranch.

*The Paavo Nurmi Heritage Society*, (Paavo Nurmen perinneyhistitys ry) was established in Turku on June 13, 1991. The purpose of the Heritage Society is to commemorate and make Paavo Nurmi's life work known as widely as possible. In honor of Paavo Nurmi's Centennial, an international competition for design of the Paavo Nurmi Monument: "*The Memorial and the Dream for Turku*" will be announced in the fall of 1997 by The Paavo Nurmi Heritage Society and the City of Turku. The monument will be a great physical facility to demonstrate Paavo Nurmi's greatness on the track, as well as in life.