

When the “Flying Finns” Flew in Cleveland, March 19, 1925

By Edward Bolte

The 1920's were called the “Golden Age of Sport”. Athletes like Babe Ruth in baseball, Robert Jones in golf, Red Grange in football, Jack Dempsey in box and Paavo Nurmi in track and field dominated the sport pages. Called the “Flying Finn” he competed in three Olympics 1920, 1924 and 1928, winning 9 gold medals and 3 silver medals.¹ At a track meet at Stockholm on August 25, 1923, he set a time of 4 minutes 17 seconds for the mile becoming the world fastest man.² (see image, Paavo Nurmi running in 1920 Olympics at Antwerp Belgium, Wikipedia)



Paavo Johannes Nurmi was born on 13 June 1897 in Turku, Finland,³ his father was a carpenter. The young Nurmi was influenced by the exploits of Hannes Kolehmainen at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics winning the first medals for Finland.⁴ His talent for running was noticed during his military service and encouraged to train for the 1920 Olympics, which made his reputation as “The Flying Finn”.⁵

In the April 2025 issue of the *Finnish American Reporter* is an article about Paavo Nurmi, about his American tour in the winter and spring of 1925 throughout the United States and Canada⁶. Did Paavo Nurmi as part of the tour run in a meet in Cleveland? To answer this question, I used *Cleveland the Making of a City* by William Ganson Rose which covers Cleveland history from 1796 to 1946. On page 830, “The Finnish world champion runner Paavo Nurmi at the Public Auditorium on March 10 and won the international 1.5-mile race.”⁷

I now had a date to work on, so now I went to the Historic *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, a database at Cuyahoga County Public Library. The *Cleveland Plain Dealer* of March 3, 1925, reported that Paavo Nurmi and his teammate Willie(sic) Ritola will try to set new world records at the Aviation and Athletic carnival at Public Hall Tuesday night.⁸ In the same article it was mentioned Cleveland was added to the Finnish stars tour was because of the influence of the large Finnish immigrant communities of Ashtabula and Cleveland.⁹



Cleveland Public Hall where Paavo Nurmi and Ville Ritola ran on March 10, 1925

Further research was needed so I checked the *Ashtabula Star-Beacon* at the Ashtabula County District Library. The March 5, 1925, *Star-Beacon* reported the Finnish stars will race in the “greatest track meet in Cleveland., featuring the greatest athletics ever to perform in Cleveland.”¹⁰ Many Ashtabula Finns will attend, in addition the *Humina* Band, will attend with the director G.E. Walstrom who has reserved 200 seats out of the total of 7,000 seats.¹¹

By March 9, 1925, the preparations for greeting the Finnish stars were well on the way. At Public Hall in Cleveland Kalle Potti the Finnish consul in Ashtabula, greeted Nurmi, Ritola, and August Faber an Ashtabula native who participated in the 1924 Paris Olympics. The *Humina* band performed prior to the track meet to honor the Finnish athletes.¹²



Humina Finnish Band from Ashtabula, Ohio, c. 1920, photo courtesy of Edward H. Bolte, Jr., Cleveland, Ohio

Both Nurmi and Ritola easily won their races. Paavo Nurmi ran the mile and three quarters. While he lapped the entire field, he failed to break the record of his time of 8 minutes and 3 2/5 seconds. His teammate Willie (sic) Ritola running in the three and one quarter mile race setting a new world's record 15 minutes and 50 2/5 seconds. The surprise of the evening was Ugo Frigerio the Italian Olympic walking champion set a world record of 23 minutes 21 1/4 seconds in the 5, 500-meter walk.¹³

The tour began at Madison Square Garden on January 6, 1925. Nurmi competed in 55 events (45 indoors) in five months, including a meeting on February 21, 1925, with President Calvin Coolidge at the White House, the first Finnish person to meet a U.S. President.¹⁴ In an article appearing in the *Ashtabula Star-Beacon* on March 12, 1925, "He is elusive and stays out of sight much of the time." The reporter further states, "He seems indifferent but when is once opened and 'ice is broken' he is nice as a chap as anyone who would want to meet."¹⁵ Nurmi left America fearing he competed too often and burned himself out.¹⁶

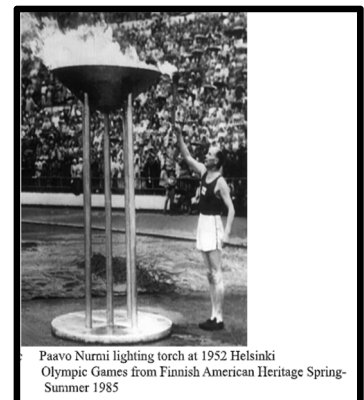


President Coolidge with Paavo Nurmi on right At White House February 21, 1925. From Wikipedia

Nurmi's career ended in April 1932 when the International Amateur Athletic Federation suspended Nurmi from international events, pending a investigation into his amateur status.¹⁷ After being barred from the Los Angeles Olympics, Nurmi, suffering from physical ailments, allowed the ban to become permanent in 1934.¹⁸ His attention turned to business. He owned a men's clothing store in Helsinki also building several apartment buildings.¹⁹

In February 1940, Nurmi and his protégé Taisto Maki had a coast-to-coast of the US tour to raise money for Finnish relief headed by former President Herbert Hoover. Returning to Finland in April 1940 he served in the Continuation War June 1941 until discharged in January 1942.²⁰

On July 19, 1952, the Helsinki Olympics opened to celebrate the second Olympics after World War II.



Paavo Nurmi lighting torch at 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games from Finnish American Heritage Spring-Summer 1985

Greeted to a tumultuous roar from the crowd as he entered the stadium the 55-year-old Paavo Nurmi as if he was making sprints from the stadium tunnel as he was making the last dash of a 1,500-meter race.²¹ Nurmi was convinced by Urho Kekkonen then Prime Minister of Finland, later President, to do this to cap his illustrious career. He died on October 2, 1973, honored by his country as the greatest of all Finnish athletics.²²

When I visited Finland in 1986, I took the Tourist Tram 3T for a tour of Helsinki. One of the sights was the Olympic Stadium where I saw the statue of Paavo Nurmi as the greatest Finnish athlete. Finland has a history of great athletes in track and field, ice hockey, cross country skiing, ski jumping, world rallying, and Formula One Racing, but Paavo Nurmi tops them all.

As they returned from Cleveland what was on their countrymen's minds when they saw their hero, run



Statute of Paavo Nurmi at Olympic Stadium Helsinki Finland

for Finland, having pride in their small but plucky country independent for only a few years.

Paavo Nurmi's Olympic Medals

1920 Antwerp Games

- Gold: 10,000 meters
- Gold: cross-country, individual

• Gold: cross-country, team

• Silver: 5,000 meters

1924 Paris Games

• Gold: 1,500 meters

• Gold: 3,000 meters, team

• Gold: 5,000 meters

• Gold: cross-country, individual

• Gold: cross-country, team

1928 Amsterdam Games

• Gold: 10,000 meters

• Silver: 3,000 meters steeplechase

• Silver: 5,000 meters

Source <https://www.britannica.com/sports/Olympic-Games>

Endnotes for When the "Flying Finns" Flew in Cleveland

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8. *Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, Ohio), March 5, 1925: 20. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.eresources.cuyahogalibrary.org/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A122AFBBA107AC9E4%40EANX-NB-1262C96E87C8D71F%402424215-126034D7A18B72E9%4019-126034D7A18B72E9%40>
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