“The Nonpareil, the Runner of the Ages”: Paavo Nurmi and His 1925 American Exhibition Tour

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In January 1964, Paavo Nurmi, a successful 66-year-old businessman and Finnish national icon, left his homeland and made the long journey across Europe and the Atlantic to America. He did so to attend a series of banquets honoring past and present champion athletes. It was not, however, his first trip to the United States. He had been there twice in the 1920s, the first time late in 1924 and through the following spring, setting records seemingly everywhere he raced, from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles, and myriad places in between.1 During his 1964 visit, Nurmi was invited to the White House to meet President Lyndon Johnson. The Finnish Ambassador who accompanied his non-English-speaking countryman said it was Nurmi’s first visit with an American President since “his days of glory when he was the Flying Finn.”2 By the 1960s, all of Nurmi’s records had long since been broken and his glory days had faded from many memories and were growing ever dimmer; they are even more so today, at least in the United States.

In Finland, though, Paavo Nurmi is firmly entrenched in collective memories. There are many ways to inventory this. The internationally famous sculptor Wäinö Aaltonen completed a statue of him in 1925. Scores of articles have been published about him. There have been several films and TV shows, too. His likeness has appeared on stamps, banknotes, and coins. Streets are named after him. His childhood home is designated as a historical site. A few years ago, an opera about his life, Paavo the Great, a Great Race, a Great Dream, was performed.3 Simply put, he was and remains the most invincible and famous athlete in the country’s history—indeed, he is virtually mythical among some Finns.4

But one need not be Finnish to recognize that Paavo Nurmi might have been the greatest runner of the twentieth century. He won nine gold and three silver medals during his Olympic career, which included all three Olympiads in the 1920s.5 He set dozens of world records.6 And he forced people to rethink what was humanly possible on a track.7 As a result, the quiet, slightly built Nurmi was widely celebrated in Finland, and far beyond. In the United States during much of the 1920s, Paavo Nurmi was often mentioned in the same breath as athletic superstars like Jack Dempsey, Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Bill Tilden, and Bobby Jones. “All of us admire Paavo Nurmi and glory in his triumphs, even if Americans have

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to take his dust,” acknowledged the *New York Times* in 1925. “He is the nonpareil, the runner of the ages.”

That was then. Today, Paavo Nurmi seems to have lost his place in the pantheon of athletes from the so-called Golden Age of American sports. Most diehard American sports fans have never heard of him. Like many others who enjoyed fame in his or her own time, Nurmi appears to have been forgotten, a victim of the idiosyncratic nature of collective memory. Yet thinking critically about Paavo Nurmi, his achievements, and American responses to them can provide us with a valuable portal to the past. Doing so can help us better understand some important American cultural values and anxieties during the tumultuous 1920s. Unwittingly, Nurmi helped illuminate contemporary concerns by coming to America.

His exhibition tour of the United States in 1925 drew huge crowds and garnered tremendous media attention. He was dubbed “Paavo the Peerless” and “the modern Mercury.” The hype was real. On the track, Nurmi rarely disappointed. He won 53 out of 55 races and set more than thirty indoor world records, sometimes lapping his competition. That remarkable five-month tour offers an opportunity to consider how Americans and the American media understood and represented Nurmi and how he was located within a variety of cultural discourses, including the rationalization of athletic training methods, racial and national identity, amateurism and professionalism, sportsmanship and athletic iconicity.

“The Olympics’s Greatest Star”

Who was Paavo Nurmi? Where was he from and what had he done before coming to the United States in December 1924? Nurmi was born in Turku, which is on the southwest coast of Finland, in 1897. His family origins were humble. His father, Johan Fredrik Nurmi, was a carpenter. Like many Finns, then as now, the elder Nurmi was “honest and straightforward, but also introverted and tough.” He was also a religious man, explained his son, and believed “that any kind of sport is undesirable” and so “he antagonized it accordingly.” This did not stop young Paavo, who was constantly running: with boys in his neighborhood, alone in the woods, and, he later said, in races with “the morning mail train.”

In Nurmi’s youth, it is important to note, Finland was not yet an independent country, but was part of Tsarist Russia. Prior to 1809, when Russia formally gained control of the region after a series of wars, most of Finland had been a Swedish province for over 500 hundred years. Turku (Åbo in Swedish) was founded in the middle of the 13th century and was the most significant city in Finland, the center of both religious and civil authority, until Finland became an autonomous Grand Duchy in the Russian Empire, at which point Helsinki became the country’s capital. This is worth mentioning because early twentieth-century Turku retained many Swedish cultural influences. Thus, Nurmi’s running contests at school were sometimes enlivened by the “competition between Finnish-speaking Finns and Swedish-speaking Finns.”

In 1910, Nurmi’s father died. His mother, Matilda Vilhelmina Laine, worked as a cleaner, but Nurmi also had to work—first as an errand boy for a bakery and then as an apprentice mechanic—to support his family while he was still attending school, a fact that most biographical accounts suggest contributed to his work ethic, determination, and ascetic lifestyle.