

Every four years, the world's greatest athletes compete for international fame in the Olympic Games. Some go on to play pro football, where greatness is the exception, rather than the rule.

OLYMPIC GOLD, NFL LEAD

by Mark L. Ford

After Jim Thorpe won the decathlon at the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, it's said that Gustav V of Sweden told him, "Sir, you are the greatest athlete in the world!", and that the future NFL great replied, "Thanks, King."

Because the decathlon comprises ten different events (including the javelin throw, pole vault, and 100 meter and 1500 meter races), it is the acme of athletic potential. Since 1912, there have been 18 men who have earned the decathlon gold medal. How many "world's greatest athletes" have played in the NFL? The surprising answer is FOUR. The other three were Jim Bausch (1932), Glenn Morris (1936) and Milt Campbell (1956), none of whom played for more than part of a season in the NFL. History shows that Olympic glory does not usually translate into NFL stardom.

Exceptions are Bob Hayes, who won two gold medals at the 1964 Games in Tokyo and went on to a great career with the Cowboys, and Hall of Famer Ollie Matson, who won a silver and a bronze in 1952.

More often, Olympic gold becomes football lead, as with Tommie Smith, fist-raising gold medalist in 1968, player in two AFL games for the Bengals in 1969. If you're one of the world's fastest humans, you have a shot at becoming a wide receiver or a kick returner on the 91.44 meter track where football is played. Making the team is another matter – just ask John Capel, Jr., who made the U.S. Olympic team in 2000 but was cut by both the Bears and the Chiefs. Here's a partial list of the citius-altius-fortius guys who later played pro ball:

Stockholm, 1912

Jim Thorpe, GOLD, decathlon
FB, NFL 1920-26, 1928

Antwerp, 1920

Gene Vidal, decathlon, 7th place
FB, Washington, 1 game, 1921

Los Angeles, 1932

Jim Bausch, GOLD, decathlon
FB (7 games), Chi. Cards, Cincinnati Reds, 1933

Berlin, 1936

Glenn Morris, GOLD, decathlon
DE, (4 games) Detroit Lions, 1940

Jack Torrance, shot put, fifth place
T, Chicago Bears, 1939-1940

London, 1948

Clyde "Smackover" Scott, BRONZE, 110 m hurdles
RB, Philadelphia 1949-1952, Detroit 1952

Helsinki, 1952

Ollie Matson, SILVER, 4 x 400 relay; bronze 400 m
RB Cardinals 1952-58, Rams 1959-62, Lions 1963, Eagles, 1964-66; Hall of Fame 1972

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Milt Campbell, SILVER, decathlon

Melbourne, 1956

Milt Campbell, GOLD, decathlon
KR, Cleveland 1957 (9 games)

Rome, 1960

Glenn Davis, GOLD, 440m hurdles; gold, 4 x 100 relay
WR, Detroit, 1960-1961

Bo Roberson, SILVER, long jump

WR, San Diego 1961, Oakland 1962-65, Buffalo 1965, Miami 1966

Frank Budd, 5th place, 100m

WR, Philadelphia 1962, Washington 1963

Ray Norton, 6th place, 100m

HB, San Francisco 1960-61

Stone Johnson, 5th place, 200m

Fatally injured in preseason game with K.C. Chiefs, 1963

Tokyo, 1964

Bob Hayes, GOLD, 100m; GOLD, 4 x 100 relay
WR, Dallas, 1965-74

Henry Carr, GOLD, 200m; GOLD, 4 x 400 relay

DB, New York Giants, 1965-67

Mexico City, 1968

Jim Hines, GOLD, 100m; GOLD, 4 x 100 relay
WR Miami 1969 (9 games), Kansas City 1970 (1 game)

Tommie Smith, GOLD, 200m

WR, Cincinnati, 1969 (2 games)

Curley Culp, member of U.S. team, freestyle wrestling

DT, Kansas City, Houston, Detroit, 1968-81

Munich, 1972

Gerald Tinker, GOLD, 4 x 100 relay
WR, Atlanta 1974-75; Green Bay 1975

Larry Burton, 4th place, 200m

WR, New Orleans 1976-77, San Diego 1978-79

Montreal, 1976

Johnny "Lam". Jones, GOLD, 1976 4 x 100 relay.
WR, N.Y. Jets, 1980-84

James Owens, 110m hurdles, 6th place

RB, San Francisco 1979-80, Tampa Bay 1981-84

Moscow, 1980

Renaldo Nehemiah, 110m hurdles (U.S. team boycotted)
WR, San Francisco 1982-84

Willie Gault, 400 meters (U.S. team boycotted)

WR, Chicago 1983-87 L.A. Raiders 1988-93

Los Angeles, 1984

Sam Graddy, GOLD, 4 x 100 relay

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WR, Denver 1987-88; L.A. Raiders, 1990-92

Ron Brown, GOLD 4 x 100 relay; 4th place, 100m
KR, L.A. Rams, 1984-1991

Seoul, 1988
(none)

Lillehammer, 1992 (Winter Olympics)
Herschel Walker, 7th place, 2 man bobsled
*RB, Dallas 1986-89; Minnesota 1989-91; Philadelphia
1992-94; N.Y. Giants 1995*

Barcelona, 1992
Michael Bates, BRONZE, 200m
KR, 1993-94 Seattle

James Trapp, GOLD, 4 x 100 relay
DB, 1993-96 L.A./Oakland Raiders

Atlanta, 1996 (none)

Sydney, 2000 (none)

Football – at least not the gridiron game – has never been an Olympic event, but it was a “demonstration sport” put on by the host country for the 1932 Games at the Los Angeles Coliseum. The game pitted seniors from USC, Cal and Stanford against those from Harvard, Yale and Princeton.

The West team beat the East, 7-6. USC All-America Gus Shaver was captain for the winning team, but he didn't go on to the pros. His USC teammate, Ernie Pinckert, played for the Redskins from 1932 to 1940.

Will there be a future NFL player competing at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens? Perhaps. The top three finishers in the 200 meter dash at the '03 NCAA championships – Leo Bookman (Kansas), Jerone Mathis (Hampton) and Stanford Routt (Houston) – also played college football. While it's possible that one of the medalists of '04 might take a chance with the NFL, history shows that the Olympics is no gateway to stardom.
