

All American Rifle Shooters and Smallbore Gold Olympic Medals
By
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The National Rifle Association first distributed "Golden Bullets" to honor All-Americans in the sport of rifle shooting in 1936. Coincidentally, and ironically it was the same year of the Berlin Olympic Games in which the United States would not enter a rifle team. However, two names on the inaugural team would become familiar to shooters in years to come. Robert K. "Sandy" Sandager of the University of Minnesota would rise to prominence as an international shooter in the post World War years. Ohio State University students Robert Hughes, and later his brother Roger, would become the first siblings to attain All-American honors in 1936 and 1940 respectively. While that in itself would be enough to earn a place in the shooting history book it was their father's generosity that insured their place.

Grover Hughes donated a pair of statuettes to be awarded to the winners of a two-division match fired at the 1931 NRA Instructor-Junior School at Camp Perry during the National Matches. The Hughes Trophies, as they were originally known, feature a small boy with hips slung and arms akimbo. The young lad's cheeks are puffed out and his lips are pursed and from that stance comes the trophy's better-known name: The Whistler Boy. As fate would have it the first recipients of the trophy, the original Whistler Boys, were the Hughes brothers, Robert won Division A for while Roger was the Division B champion.

The 1940 and 1944 games were scheduled for the capitols of two great nations. However, Tokyo and London's hosting of the Olympics would be

delayed, as both Japan and Great Britain were belligerents in World War II. The war not only disrupted the four-year flow of Olympic competition but also caused the only break in the awarding of All-American honors; there would be no teams named from 1943 through 1946.

When the All-American program resumed in 1947 The University of Maryland saw two members of its team, coached by Distinguished Rifleman Colonel Harlan Griswold, named as members. A quick glance at a team gathering might make one think that the popular movie actor Mickey Rooney was a member of the Terrapin varsity rifle team. In reality it was 17-year-old All-American Arthur E. Cook. One year later "Cookie" would be in England shooting the English Match, 60 shots prone, in the first post war Olympics. He and teammate Walter Tomsen would each shoot a world record 599X600. However, Cook would win the match on a tiebreaker, becoming the youngest Olympic Gold medallist in rifle shooting. Cook's victory would also set a precedent. Since the inception of the All-American program no member of a United States Olympic smallbore or air rifle team has won a gold medal unless they have first earned All-American honors.

In the years following 1948 the size of the smallbore target would be reduced and no US shooter would win gold shooting prone until Ed Etzel, in a spirited 40 minutes, shot an Olympic record of 599X600 before a hometown crowd at the 1984 Los Angeles games. Etzel actually finished first in the match in two ways; he won the gold medal and was the first of the 71 competitors off of the line. The All-American from Tennessee Technological University, smallbore

rifle 1972 through 1974, went on to earn a doctorate in education, have successful coaching career with the West Virginia University rifle team, and serve as the National Collegiate Athletic Association Rifle Committee's Secretary and Rules Editor.

At the 1964 Tokyo games a young United States Army captain named Lones Wigger came within a hairsbreadth of breaking the United States' 16 year gold drought in the English Match when he and Laszlo Hammerl both equaled the world record. Like Cook and Tomsen in London a tie-breaking rule was needed to determine the winner, and it would not favor Wigger. The first Olympic smallbore three-position victory for the United States came four days later when Wigger decisively won the gold medal in three position, establishing both an Olympic and world record in the process. Wigger, an All American from Montana State College from 1957 through 1959, would go on to become the United States' most successful rifleman ever and, arguably, the best in the world in the 20th Century. His daughter, Deena, would follow in his footsteps as both an Olympian, in 1988, and an All-American. She was selected to both the smallbore and air rifle teams from 1986 through 1990 while studying at Murray State University.

Jack Writer attended West Virginia University, where he was an All-American from 1964-66. An Army Reserve Officer Training Corps student he was commissioned and assigned to the United States Army's Marksmanship Training Unit at Fort Benning, Georgia, where he earned an Olympic berth to Mexico in 1968, finishing second in the three-position match. Four years later, at

the Munich games, he established a new world record in the standing position on his way to the gold medal and a world and Olympic record in three position.

At Munich, as the Star Spangled Banner played in honor of Writer, fellow Army teammate Lanny Bassham stood one step below him with a silver medal suspended from his neck. The competitive Bassham, knowing his technical skills were on a par with the likes of Writer and Wigger, had come to feel his weakness was in the mental part of the game. Over the next four years he would develop a mental training program that would lead him to the position gold medal in Montreal. Bassham had done his undergraduate studies at what is now the University of Texas at Arlington where he was a four-year All-American from 1966 to 1969. Bassham's two sons, Brian and Troy, were All-Americans at the University of Texas at El Paso. Troy, while a Staff Sergeant with the U. S. Army Marksmanship Unit, won the United States National Smallbore Outdoor Three Position Championship in 1998 and 1999. As a civilian, in 2001, he again won the championship, placing him second on the list of all time winners.

Bassham's gold medal was a close run race as his friend and Army teammate Margaret Murdock shot identical aggregate scores. Bassham made a case to the officials that they both were entitled to gold medals but lost the argument because a tie breaking rule was in existence. During the awards ceremony Bassham chivalrously pulled Murdock up to the top step and stood with his arm around her during the national anthem. The relationship between All American honors and the Gold Medal would have still remained intact if the tiebreaker had gone the other way. Murdock was a two time All-American from

Kansas State University in 1963 and 1964 and her silver at Montreal makes her the only woman to ever win a medal in open rifle shooting at the Olympics.

The Los Angeles games of 1984 saw the beginnings of the establishment of separate women's competition in the various shooting disciplines, with total segregation completed by the 1996 Atlanta games. Pat Spurgin spent her collegiate days at Murray State University where she excelled in both smallbore and air rifle. Her skill was such that she was, beginning in 1984, named to both the smallbore and air rifle All-American Team for four years. As an 18-year-old college student she was tall, poised, and focused beyond her years. Her score of 393X400 in the forty shot standing air rifle match earned for her the first gold medal awarded to a woman in Olympic Air Rifle competition. Like Art Cook, another young college student who had won a gold 36 years earlier, she returned to school in the fall and continued her academic and athletic career.

The first United States rifle shooter to win a gold medal after the shoot-off system was adopted was Launi Meili. As a member of the 1988 team at the Seoul Games she had a disastrous experience. In a good position to medal she became unraveled as the shoot-off began and ended up in seventh place. Four years later she arrived in Barcelona a seasoned and confident veteran. The Eastern Washington University All-American in smallbore and air rifle finished the qualifying round in first place by two points. She faced the ten shot shoot-off, in the standing position, with some anxiety. This time she channeled her nervous tension to her purpose and shot a string that lead her to the gold. Meili now coaches the US Air Force Academy rifle team while the rifle she used to earn her

gold medal is been on display in the National Firearms Museum at NRA Headquarters.

The Olympics returned to the Australia in 2000 and the United States Shooting Team was ready. All Americans Mike Anti, Glenn Dubis, Jason Parker, and Ken Johnson were primed to win. Tom Tamas, who entered the Army right from high school had no opportunity to earn All American status was ready to go and hoping to break the All American stranglehold on gold. On the distaff side All Americans Thrine Kane, Melissa Mulloy Mecozzi, Jamie Dickman, and Nancy Napski Johnson were just as intent as the men. Nancy Johnson, cheered on by Olympic team mate and husband Ken, took to the line for the first event of the Sydney Games, the women's air rifle match, and came away with the only gold the US shooters would win that Olympiad. Again All American status seemed to lead toward gold.

Matt Emmons, a four year All American from the University of Alaska-Fairbanks, lay down on his shooting mat in Athens in 2004 and arose the Olympic champion in prone. Four years later he would expand his collection of Olympic medals by adding a silver in prone and in 2012, at the London Games, round out his set by winning an elusive medal in three position, a bronze. As an interesting sidelight his collection would make the second complete set of Olympic medals on the Emmons family mantle. Kateřina Kůrková Emmons had bronze on Athens, a gold silver in Beijing.

Eight years would pass until an All American would win gold. Jamie Beyerle, the only junior ever to win the US National Smallbore Prone

Championship, took home a gold in three position at the London Games. Niccolò Campriani, an All American from West Virginia University and an Italian national, earned both a gold medal and a niche in shooting history trivia when he became the first All American to win a gold medal for a foreign country.

There seems to an ephemeral connection between the relationship of Olympic shooting Gold and All-Americans and baseball. Harry Frazee, owner of the Boston Red Sox and Broadway producer, needed funds to stage the play "No, No, Nanette!" To raise the money he sold one of his players; a very good young pitcher named George Herman Ruth, better known as "Babe" or "The Bambino", to the New York Yankees. The sale began what Red Sox fans call "The Curse of The Bambino"; the team has not won a World Series since the 1919 transaction. In a parallel, it seems that, just as the Ruthless Red Sox seem condemned to never again win another World Series, no Olympic Gold medal in smallbore or air rifle will be won by the United States unless an All-American is squeezing the trigger.