A. C. GILBERT

By John A. Lucas

1908 CO-OLYMPIC POLE VAULT CHAMPION...AND A LOT MORE

"I've never worked at anything that wasn't fun," said Alfred Carlton "A.C." Gilbert (1884-1961).[1]

"A.C." was a fine gymnast as a boy; a professional magician; a college wrestler at Yale University; the co-winner of the pole vault at the London Olympic Games in 1908; a graduate of the Yale Medical School; inventor of the two very famous toys, the "Erector set" and the "American Flyer" train. He was, for more than 35 years a valued volunteer contributor to the American Amateur Athletic Union [AAU]; the Intercollegiate Amateur Athletic Association of America [IC4A], and to the American Olympic Committee [AOC]. When Gilbert died on January 25, 1961, he was called "The great inventor of the Erector Set"; the "Happiest Millionaire"; the first scientific pole vaulter"; "Man in a Boy's World," and the "creator of the American Flyer electric train."[2] His close friends called him "Gilly."

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Gilbert had a brilliant, practical scientific mind, in addition to being an outstanding multi-skilled athlete. He earned an "M.D." degree from Yale University, but never found time to practice medicine. His scores of inventions and ingenious toys served the nation and thrilled millions of children. His world-famous "Erector Set" and the "American Flyer" electric train made him a multi-millionaire.[3] Gilbert's life-long devotion to Yale University and to the school's lofty tradition of track and field, made "Gilly" an icon at the New Haven campus. Despite an extraordinary career, Gilbert devoted thousands of volunteer hours in the service of the AOC, later called the United States Olympic Committee (USOC).

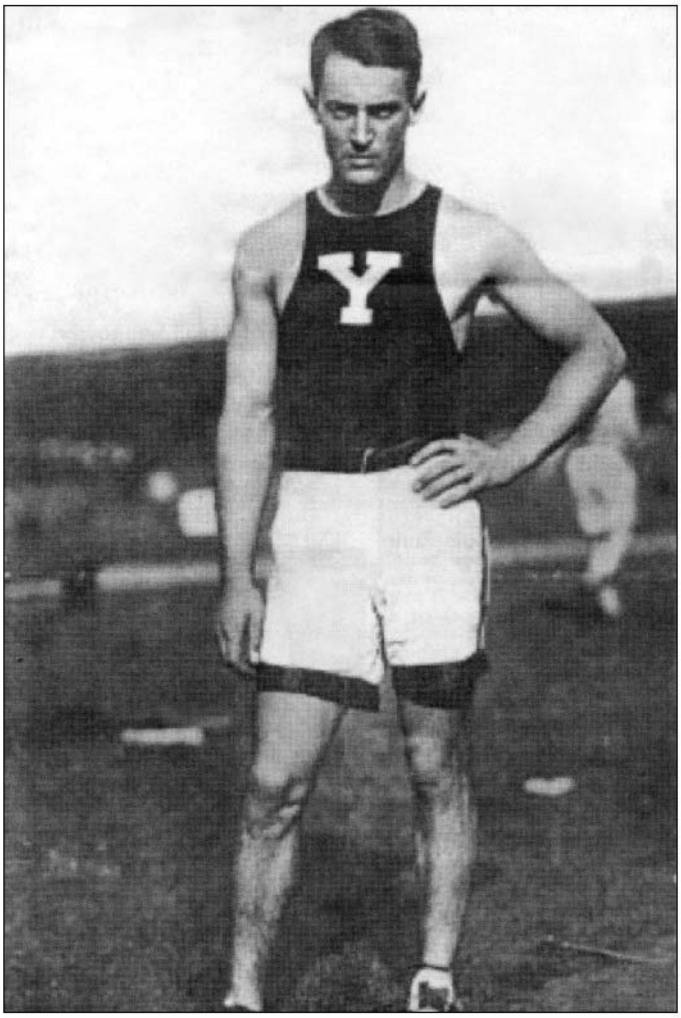
No less interesting about this petite athlete (5'8"; 140 pounds) was the contentious circumstances of his shared victory in the pole vault at the Games of the Fourth Olympiad in London 1908. As a boy, Gilbert had climbed a 25-foot rope in a world-record seven seconds. Later, he invented a vaulting "box" for safer and higher vaulting. Prior to the Olympics, Gilbert vaulted 12'6" and 12'7 ½" - both world records. It seemed that the 1908 Games' gold medal would be his, outright.

There were more on-the-field arguments, disputes, and "high-drama" at the London Shepherd's Bush Stadium in July of 1908 than at the previous three Olympic Games. The most bizarre was the disqualification of the Italian marathon "winner", Dorando Pietri on July 24. It was the same day as the pole vault finals.[4] Gilbert dug a hole at the end of the runway - a "box," removed the nail from his wooden pole, and attempted to vault "in the modern manner." He was not allowed to do so, and many year's later, 1952, he told a writer from *The New Yorker,* exactly what happened. The writer faithfully reproduced the scene:

> [Gilbert] went to an ironmongery and bought a hatchet, and carried it, concealed under a sweater, when he stalked onto the field to compete. While waiting to make his first leap...he suddenly whipped out his hatchet and began digging a vaulting box.[5]

Outraged officials discharged Gilbert from the field only to allow him to return, provided he used a spiked pole and no "box." The young "Eli" was positive that a vaulting pole with a nail at the end, and no vaulting box, was archaic and dangerous. "I was only trying to chop down a tradition," said Gilbert to Arthur Daley of *The New York Times,* thirty-eight years after the fiasco.[6] The vaulters were divided into "sections" or "heats."

Over on the track the elongated and painful finish of the marathon race was unfolding. Few watched the pole vault and, according to some, the vaulting



A.C. Gilbert, co Olympic champion pole-vault 1908 (photograph taken from National Police Gazette 1908); courtesy: Yale University Stirling Library.

officials seemed distracted. Eyewitness journalists wrote conflicting reports, not only about the Dorando Pietri-John Hayes marathon finish, but also about the pole vault. *The Times* of London wrote that there were six sections in the vault qualifying competition and that Edward Tiffin Cooke Jr., all-around star athlete at Cornell University, vaulted 12'2" in "section 3," while Gilbert managed 12"0" in the next section. The *New York Herald* writer disagreed: "Both Cooke and Gilbert vaulted 12'2" in the preliminaries."[7]

In a 1939 conversation with Avery Brundage, Gilbert remembered that "I won my heat at 12'0" and Cooke did 12'2" in his own section...But in the final, I did 12'2" and Cooke went out at 11'9".[8]

It was Gilbert's contention that "wrong-headed" English officials "Made a ruling (for a tie) on the grounds that...in his heat he had jumped as high as I did in the finals... [but] I was the actual winner..."[9]

"Damn it," said Gilbert:

...that's the only time in history that a man was ever allowed to make a record in a heat...I always say that I won the Olympics."[10]

Modern Olympic historians Mallon and Buchanan correctly state that the Cooke-Gilbert tie for first place "was the only time this has happened in Olympic pole vault history."[11]

In a third place tie at 11'9" were Clark S. Jacobs (University of Chicago); B. Soderstram (Sweden), and E. B. Archibald from the United Kingdom.

The marathon race stole the world's sporting headlines and the controversial pole vault was nearly

ignored. Dr. Gilbert went on to an additional half-century, and more, of very productive work and fun. Much of this eventful life of coaching, invention, business, big-game hunting, and family, are preserved in an autobiography entitled, appropriately. *The Man Who Lives in Paradise.*[12]

Like so many talented, energetic persons, "A.C." found time for family, big-game hunting, and unfailing volunteer service to the American Amateur Athletic Union (AAU); the track and field organization "IC4A", and to the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). His close friends called him "Gilly", but not so the legion of Yale pole-vaulters who called him "coach", and responded with national and world-record performances during the 1920's and 1930's. Gilbert's pole-vault article in the 1961 Encyclopedia Brittanica was hailed as the work of a "scientific genius." In 1928, Gilbert was a member of the "American Olympic Association" (AOC) and on the long ocean voyage aboard the "S.S. Roosevelt," bound for Amsterdam, he served as "Morale and Recreation Officer" for the team. In Log Angeles 1932, "A.C." served as his country's "Chef de Mission" and at the same time was a member of the International Amateur Athletic Federation's (track and field) "Jury of Athletics," and two years later was chairman of the National AAU Track and Field Committee. He went to the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin as the AOC's "Chairman of the Administrative Committee", and, again as "Chef de Mission." Lastly, following the long and debilitating World War II, A. C. Gilbert accompanied the U. S. Olympic Team to London as the "USOC Member-at-Large." The year was 1948 and the ever-young Gilbert was 64.[13]

"I've enjoyed life, right from the very beginning," Gilbert wrote and said, many times. At his passing, *Newsweek* magazine called him the "Happiest Millionaire." *The New York Times* obituary said of "Gilly" Gilbert that "his life was a blend of Frank Merriwell, Theodore Roosevelt, Peter Pan and Horatio Alger." His friend from that same newspaper, Arthur Daley, wrote;"A. C. Gilbert never quite separated himself from the world of the small boy. He was a rare one."[14]

Notes:

1. See revealing essay "Toy Maker Plays His Life for Real," The *New York Times* (NYT), October 3, 1954, p. 27.
2. Yale University's Stirling Library Archives (New Haven, Connecticut) have extensive primary documents on Gilbert. This researcher was given permission to read them, over a period of three days.
3. See revealing essay by Carter Henderson, "Secret of A. C Gilbert's success: Toys that amuse and educate, too," The *Wall Street Journal,* January 2, 1953, p. 6; Gilbert Millstein, "Toy King, A. C. Gilbert," *Life Magazine* (November 18, 1946), 67-74 ("Gilbert's company did $240 million in retail business in 1946").
4. Scores of books and essays exist on American Johnny Hayes and his eventual gold medal award in the marathon, but only after contentious discussions over Pietri's faltering finish. Almost nothing exists on the "strange" pole vault final.
5. "American Boy Gilbert," *The New Yorker* (December 20, 1952), 36-55.
6. See "Man With Two Hobbies," *The New York Times* (NYT), March 6, 1946, p. 32.
7. See *The Times* [London], July 25, 1908, p. 8; Herald, July 25, 1908, p. 13.
8. See Gilbert to Brundage letter dated March 1, 1939, in the Avery Brundage Collection (ABC); reel 15; box26. The extant records are divided on the spelling of Cooke's name (some spell it "Cook"). *The 1909 Spalding's Athletic Almanac* and *Complete Record Olympic Games of 1908,* compiled by James Edwara Sullivan, notes that "Cooke and Gilbert vaulted 12'2", an Olympic record" (p. 129).
9. Ibid; see Gilbert to Brundage letter of 1939.
10. See endnote #5, p. 40. Of little help are the *Los Angeles Daily Times,* July 25, 1908, p. 7; Public Ledger of Philadelphia, July 25, 1908, p. 18, and *The Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 25, 1908, p. 7.
11. Bill Mallon and Ian Buchanan, *Guest For Gold The Encyclopedia of American Olympians* (New York: Leisure Press, 1984), p. 300. See p. 287 for Cooke biography.
12. The book was published in 1954 by Rinchart and Co., in New York City, with the assistance of Marshall McClintock. See book review in the NYT, September 12, 1954; sec. 7, p. 36.
13. "Alfred C. Gilbert is the greatest pole vault expert in the world," wrote track and field historian H. Archie Richardson in "Yale contributed vaulting technique to track world," The Christian Science Monitor, January 4, 1946, p. 14. See also *Time,* 25 (March 11, 1935), 40, which noted "Gilbert's study of pole vaulting...has raised the sport to the level of a precise and dangerous science."
14. See *Newsweek,* 57 (February 6, 1961), 62; NYT, January 25, 1961, pages 1, 33; "Man in a Boy's World," by Arthur Daley, in *NYT* February 15, 1961, p. 44. See also the *New York Herald Tribune,* January 25, 1961, p. 17.