Winning a bronze medal in the 800-meter race in St. Louis in 1904, Emil Breitkreutz '06 (above) became USC's first Olympian. Fred Kelly '16 (right) was the first Trojan to capture Olympic gold, taking the top prize in the 110-meter hurdles in Stockholm in 1912.
Between 1904 and 1924, 20 athletes with ties to the University of Southern California competed in four Olympics — setting in motion an Olympic heritage that is unrivaled today. The 1904 Games in St. Louis marked the third occurrence of the modern Olympics, and the first outside Europe. Held in conjunction with the 1904 World’s Fair, celebrating the purchase of the Louisiana territory from France, the athletic competitions did not attract as broad an audience as the cultural exhibits, and only a handful of Europeans braved the transatlantic voyage and long train ride required to reach Missouri. Nonetheless, the Games drew some 650 contestants from a dozen countries — including USC’s first Olympian, bronze medal winner Emil Breitkreutz. No Trojans competed in the 1908 Games, originally awarded to Rome but reassigned to London in the aftermath of the disastrous eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906. But the pace of Trojan competition picked up in 1912, when four USC track stars captured two gold medals in Stockholm, where modern innovations such as automatic timing devices, finish-line photos and a public address system made their debut. After the 1916 Games, slated for Berlin, were cancelled with the outbreak of World War I, the 1920 Olympics went to Antwerp, honoring the suffering inflicted on the Belgian people during the conflict. More than 2,500 athletes representing 29 countries participated — among them six Trojans who competed in track and gymnastics, bringing home three gold medals and a silver. Paris reprised its 1900 role as Olympic host in 1924, introducing new traditions that included the Olympic motto — Citius, Altius, Fortius (Faster, Higher, Stronger) — and the closing ceremony. The 1924 Games also signaled the widespread acceptance of the Olympics as a major world event, confirmed by the presence of more than 1,000 journalists. Nine Trojan athletes competed in Paris, collecting three gold medals and a silver.
As a youth, Charles “Charley” Paddock ’23 enjoyed distance running, but his father persuaded him to focus on sprinting because of his great natural speed. It proved to be wise advice.

After interrupting his college studies to serve as a lieutenant in the U.S. Marines during World War I, he returned to USC, joined the track and field team, and excelled in sprints under legendary Coach Dean Cromwell, the "Maker of Champions."

In April 1919, USC’s student newspaper, The Southern California Trojan, called Paddock “the boy who is so fast that he is a mile or so ahead of his own shadow.” That fall, he became an international phenomenon at the 1919 Inter-Allied Games in Paris, a competition that pitted soldiers of the Allied nations against each other.

But it wasn’t just speed that endeared Paddock to the public. He became famous for dramatic, photogenic finishes — leaping for the finish line from about 12 feet out, arms wide, gliding forward to break the tape with his chest.

The flamboyant technique won him a place in history at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp. In an incredibly tight race, Paddock took the 100-meter gold in 10.8 seconds, beating fellow American Morris Kirksey by about a foot.

According to The Complete Book of the Olympics, Paddock described the finish in this way: “I saw the thin white string stretched to the breaking point in front of me. I drove my spikes into the soft cinders and felt my foot give way as I sprang forward in the final jump for the tape. There was nothing more that I could do. My eyes closed as my chest hit the string and when I opened them, my feet were on the ground again and I was yards ahead of the field. I did not know if I had been in front when the string was broken. I dared not ask.”

In the 200-meter final, Paddock led the race through the first 180 meters, but just as he began to take off for his flying finish, his U.S. teammate Allen Woodring passed him. Although both runners were timed at 22.0 seconds, Paddock received the silver medal. He later led off the U.S. 4x100-meter relay that won gold in a world-record 42.2 seconds. For his efforts, Paddock later received the very first official Olympic flag.

In March 1921, he went on to tie one world record and set another during a USC-California track meet — prompting a San Francisco sports columnist to dub him “the fastest human.” A month later at a Southern Pacific Amateur Athletic Union meet, “Sir Charles,” as he was known on campus, set four world records and tied a fifth — all on the same day. His record in the 100 meters stood until 1956.

Paddock qualified for his second Olympic team in 1924, and in Paris once again advanced to the finals of the 100- and 200-meter events. This time he was less successful, however, finishing fifth in the 100 meters and winning silver in the 200-meter race. In Chariots of Fire, the 1981 Academy Award-winning film about those races, Paddock was portrayed by Dennis Christopher.

Paddock competed in his third Olympics in Amsterdam in 1928, but did not reach the 200-meter final.

After retiring from competition, Paddock flirted with an acting career and went on to tour the country as a lecturer, write two books and work as a sportswriter. On July 21, 1943, he died in a plane crash near Sitka, Alaska, while serving in the Marine Corps during World War II.

Paddock was inducted into the USA Track & Field Hall of Fame in 1976 and the U.S. Olympic Hall of Fame in 1991.
EMIL BREITKREUTZ '06
In St. Louis in 1904, Emil Breitkreutz became USC’s first Olympian, winning bronze for the 800 meters in 1:56.4. After his running career, he went on to coach basketball at USC.

GOLD, SILVER, BRONZE
THE 1904 OLYMPICS IN ST. LOUIS WERE THE FIRST TO AWARD GOLD, SILVER AND BRONZE MEDALS FOR FIRST, SECOND AND THIRD PLACE.

LEE BARNES ’28
With world-record-holder Charles Hoff of Norway out due to injury, Lee Barnes, then a Hollywood High School student, won gold in the pole vault in Paris in 1924. Barnes went on to study at USC from 1924 to 1928, and in 1927 was one of several Trojan Olympians hired by Buster Keaton for a series of track and field stunts in the silent film College. Barnes appeared in the film as a stand-in for Buster Keaton, pole-vaulting into a second-story window.

TROJAN VICTORIES AND HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 1904–1924 OLYMPIC GAMES

USC OLYMPIANS: 20   GOLD: 8   SILVER: 2   BRONZE: 1

CHARIOTS OF FIRE
THE 1924 PARIS OLYMPICS WERE IMMORTALIZED IN THE ACADEMY AWARD-WINNING FILM CHARIOTS OF FIRE, A HISTORICAL DRAMA DIRECTED BY HUGH HUDSON AND PRODUCED BY ALAN LADD JR. ’55.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE
THE 1924 SUMMER OLYMPICS IN PARIS WERE THE FIRST TO FEATURE AN OLYMPIC VILLAGE — CABINS BUILT NEAR THE STADIUM TO HOUSE VISITING ATHLETES.

FRED KELLY ’16
Freshman Fred Kelly became USC’s first Olympic gold medalist when he led a U.S. sweep of the first four places in the 110-meter hurdles at the 1912 Games in Stockholm. At USC, Kelly competed in the high and low hurdles, long jump and shot put. After earning his degree, Kelly distinguished himself as an airplane pilot.
OLYMPIC TRADITIONS


ALMA RICHARDS LLB '24

While an undergraduate at Brigham Young University, Alma Richards was spotted by a basketball coach who raised money to send him to the 1912 Olympic Trials after watching him effortlessly clear 6 feet in the high jump. Richards won gold at the Stockholm Games. He later earned his law degree from USC and became a high school teacher.

CLARENCE “BUD” HOUSER DDS ’26

Clarence “Bud” Houser developed a discus-throwing style — one and a half rapid turns in the circle before release — that has been copied by many athletes. In 1924 in Paris, he became the first Trojan to win double gold medals in individual events at a single Olympic Games, capturing gold in both shot put and discus. Houser won gold again for discus in Amsterdam in 1928.

EARL THOMSON

After surviving a near-fatal rifle accident in 1914, Earl Thomson (who studied at USC in 1915) developed into one of the world’s best hurdlers. In 1920, he competed for Canada at the Olympic Games in Antwerp, where he won gold in the 110-meter hurdles in a world-record 14.8 seconds.

GLOBAL ENTERPRISE

THE STOCKHOLM OLYMPICS IN 1912 WERE THE FIRST TO BRING TOGETHER COMPETITORS FROM ALL FIVE CONTINENTS.

THE OLYMPICS OF ART

THE 1912 STOCKHOLM OLYMPICS INTRODUCED ART COMPETITIONS, WITH MEDALS AWARDED FOR WORKS OF ARCHITECTURE, LITERATURE, MUSIC, PAINTING AND SCULPTURE INSPIRED BY SPORT-RELATED THEMES. ART REMAINED PART OF OLYMPIC COMPETITION UNTIL 1948, WHEN IT WAS DROPPED DUE TO THE DIFFICULTY OF DETERMINING ARTISTS’ AMATEUR STATUS.
After winning gold while setting Olympic and world records in discus at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles, Lillian Copeland ’30 captured gold again at the second Maccabiah Games, a competition for Jewish athletes, in 1935. But these would be her final major competitions. Fundamentally opposed to the Nazis’ prohibition of Jews on the German Olympic team, Copeland elected to boycott the 1936 Games in Berlin and did not defend her title.