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## Prologue



THE REPORTERS CLUSTERED round the young sprinter after the race and the question they kept asking was: How did you *feel* just before the gun sounded? He answered politely but the intrusiveness grated. “What a fool question,” he grouched to his coach after the scrum finally dispersed. “How does anybody feel before a race — scared as blazes.”<sup>1</sup>

It was more or less how all six runners had felt as they took their marks that July afternoon for the hundred-metre final of the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. The fear had taken hold the night before as they lay in their beds trying to cope with their nerves and had only gotten worse as race time drew nearer. A lot of coaches held that being scared was a good thing for a runner, a necessary building up of emotional tension that could then be unleashed in one almighty effort. But that didn’t make it any easier to bear — certainly not in that final hour in the dressing room, or in that lonely walk down the tunnel that led

to the track, or in those last few moments when you strip to your shorts and stand exposed to the thousands and wish you were somewhere, *anywhere*, else.

The six runners had endured two rounds of qualifying heats the previous day and the semifinals two hours before, a winnowing that had seen eighty-one others fall by the wayside. For one of the finalists a gold medal lay at the far end of the track. For the rest it would be, quite literally, the agony of defeat. It had rained earlier that day; the sky was leaden and the air chilly, far from ideal conditions for sprinting. They dug their start holes in the damp cinders at the chalk line, then took off their warm-up gear and did some final limbering, trying to control the surging adrenaline as they waited to be called to their marks. To the watching crowd the two Americans on the outside, Wykoff and McAllister, seemed good bets to win. So did the muscular figure of London in lane four, representing Britain, and the German ace Lammers in two.

As for the young man in lane three — a Canadian, was he? — he appeared hopelessly outclassed. At 126 pounds on a five-foot-seven-inch frame, he was surely too scrawny for such top-flight competition. Then there was the matter of his experience: he didn't have any, at least not in the big time. This meet was his first taste of international competition.

No, all things considered, the young man didn't have much of a chance. He was probably down there falling to pieces under the pressure, poor kid.

But he wasn't falling to pieces. He was scared, all right, pacing back and forth like a caged lynx, his heart beating a hole through his chest. But he was holding it together, repeating to himself the words his coach had used to soothe him moments before in the change room: *It's just another race. It's just another high school race.*

The six runners were called to their marks. The set command. The crack of the gun. A flurry of pumping legs and arms and then that slight figure emerging in front to breast the tape and claim gold with a leap. Pandemonium in the stands, a delight that transcended borders that such an unlikely youngster had won. And in the press box grin-

ning journalists shaking their heads and beginning to scribble, muttering incredulously: “Who *is* this Canadian kid?”



The kid was Percy Williams of Vancouver and he wasn’t finished. Two days later he captured the two-hundred-metre gold medal as well, completing the Olympic sprint “double,” the Games’ most glamorous feat. The following winter he swept the US indoor track circuit, silencing critics who claimed his Olympic wins were a fluke. In 1930 he broke Charlie Paddock’s nine-year-old world record for the hundred metres, setting a new mark that would stand until the advent of Jesse Owens. In 1932 he returned to the Olympics to defend his double sprint crown, something never before successfully accomplished. And in between he engaged in an ongoing speed duel with some of the fleetest men on the planet, arch rivals Frank Wykoff and Eddie Tolan foremost among them — a battle for track supremacy and the title World’s Fastest Human.

Yet through it all he remained a reluctant hero and very much an enigma. When pressed to explain his secret for winning, he would only shrug and say, “I just ran.”

Percy Williams was showered with such acclaim in his day that he was almost as well-known as contemporaries Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey, a remarkable degree of fame for a runner, particularly one who so assiduously shunned the spotlight. It wasn’t just his athletic prowess that attracted all the attention. Percy’s own story, the quintessential underdog tale, was immensely appealing. He wasn’t the product of some top-flight collegiate track program. He wasn’t a member of a renowned athletic club. He didn’t have a big-name coach or any powerful backing. He was just a kid from nowhere with a talent for running, discovered and pushed to stardom by a man named Bob Granger who earned his living mopping floors at a school. The unlikely pair lacked the basic facilities that were elsewhere taken for granted, Percy doing most of his running on grass fields and dirt tracks. They had no money. To get Percy to the nationals in Toronto they had to

raise funds themselves to buy him a train ticket while Bob worked in the pantry car for his passage. They didn't realize that nobodies like them weren't supposed to have a chance and so they doggedly kept at it — until they made it all the way to the top.

And there was more. There was something about Percy himself that the press and the public found irresistibly attractive. He was clean-cut and clean-living, delicate yet tough, vulnerable yet resolute, obedient to his coach and his father, devoted to his mother, loyal to his hometown and nation — the embodiment, in short, of qualities that allowed just about everyone to see in him whatever it was that they yearned for. Even the dourest of officials and sharpest of promoters couldn't help getting just a little maudlin over Percy. He was so touchingly shy; so humble despite his talents; so much the epitome of the amateur tradition, an athlete who did a little training after school — shockingly little, by today's standards — and still became a champion.

It all added up to make Percy more than just a media sensation. Inevitably, he also became a symbol. For Canada he was the flesh-and-blood representation of how the country viewed itself and what it wanted to be: an underestimated nation that could hold its own and even beat its domineering, often-resented American cousins. And for Vancouver, Percy was expected to be even more — not just the Canadian David standing up to the American Goliath, but the West Coast David standing up to the arrogant East. He was the symbol of a vibrant, fast-growing city that would no longer be overlooked, a city whose time had come.

The fond perception of Percy as a shy, unaffected kid who became a champion and stumbled into the spotlight wasn't far from the truth at the time of his 1928 rise to stardom. In the years that followed, however, while the public image still lingered, the private Percy started to change. He had never much liked running to begin with — it was Bob Granger who drove him — and the fame that it brought him, coupled with the expectations of hometown and country, soon turned into a torment. But worst of all was the disillusionment it led to, the sense that everybody was trying to take advantage of him, to use him in one way or another. It would turn him against the amateur sports estab-

lishment and leave him distrustful of others. It would even turn him against the man who made him, his coach.

The story of Percy Williams is not just a Cinderella tale of an unlikely hero who came out of nowhere to conquer the track world. It is also the grittier inside story of the life of a sports legend in a world in many ways far removed from our own; of what happened to a naïve, sensitive, naturally gifted young man who attained superstardom and passed through the meat grinder of fame — and of what happened along the way to his mentor Bob Granger. It was a journey that would shape the rest of their lives.

At the start of our story, however, all that lies in the future. First Percy has to start running — and Bob has to catch him.