

Historica Canada Education Portal

Percy Williams

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Percy Williams biography from [The Canadians](#) series. It explores the athleticism of this Canadian sprinter, who won two gold medals at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics. Despite his accomplishments, Williams's life had a tragic ending.

Aims

With a variety of individual and group activities, students will study Williams's accomplishments and compare them with other athletes. Students will also consider the place of athletes in society and decide whether they should be seen as role models.

Background

In 1928, Percy Williams was the fastest man in the world. He became a gold medallist at the Amsterdam Olympics, winning the 100 and 200 metre races. When he returned to Canada he was a hero. He had the world at his feet. He raced for a year in the United States, beating all competitors.

Yet, when he was an old man, Percy Williams committed suicide. He had an unhappy life and the questions abound. He was kicked out of his golf club for stealing other members' booze. He ended up selling insurance.

Yet for those brief moments in 1928 Percy Williams, the slight, dedicated runner from Vancouver knew fame and glory.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

Group Projects

1. Have students create a media interview (newspaper, television, or radio) with Percy Williams. Select 4 or 5 students to play the part of Percy Williams. They should meet and put together what they know about Williams in preparation for the interview. They should try to anticipate some of the questions that could be asked. When they are ready, have a draw to see which student will role-play Williams. Or, you could have them take turns answering the questions. The rest of the students are the interviewers and should incorporate some of the important events of Percy's life into their interview questions. When recording Percy's responses to their questions, encourage the journalists to include both the facts and feelings that Percy would express. Depending on the media they represent they should prepare their report or story for presentation in print, on television, or radio.

2. Percy Williams was seen as a role model for athletes of his time.

Contemporary athletes are also seen as role models. Have students debate whether or not athletes have a responsibility to be role models and how these pressures might affect them.

Individual Projects

3. Percy Williams was voted Canada's Greatest Track Athlete of the first half of the century. Have students choose their greatest track athlete of this generation and compare the accomplishments and lives of these two athletes. They could use: Harry Jerome, Bruce Kidd, Donovan Bailey, Angela Bailey, Debbie Brill, Diane Jones-Konihowski, or other athletes they can think of.

Another interesting study would be to compare Williams with Fanny "Bobbie" Rosenfeld. Rosenfeld was also a star of the 1928 Olympics and Canada's top woman athlete of the first half of the century.

4. Have students list 3 positive and 3 negative events in the life of Percy Williams. Ask them to explain why they chose each of the events and explain how the events affected Percy Williams's life.

5. Have students write a letter to the Canadian Olympic Association, which argues for or against their decision not to include Bob Granger as Percy Williams's coach. Ask the students to support their arguments with facts as to Bob Granger's positive or negative influence on Percy Williams's life.

6. Canada's success in the 1928 Olympics went far beyond Percy Williams's personal victories. The success of the "Matchless Six," the women's team, helped justify women's participation in track and field in the Olympics.

Ask students to briefly outline the accomplishments of the "Matchless Six." Have students choose another Canadian female athlete who has had a positive influence on women's sport and ask them to describe her positive influence. Students could use Catriona LeMay Doan, Marilyn Bell, Barbara Ann Scott, and Petra Burka or other contemporary athletes.

7. Have students design a poster using Percy Williams or the "Matchless Six" to encourage children to participate in sport for their country.

8. The suicide of Percy Williams overshadowed, to a large degree, his accomplishments. Ask students to give reasons for this tragic end to Percy's life. Ask them to explain how the factors contributing to his tragic end could have been avoided.

9. Have students record, on a tape recorder or video, a news broadcast, which includes Percy Williams's victory at the 1928 Olympics, but also covers other important current events at that time. Have them "look into the future" when doing the recording (suggesting possible future outcomes due to events of the time).

Resources

[Percy Alfred Williams - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Cosentino, Frank. *Olympic Gold: Canada's Winners in the Summer Games*. Toronto: Rinehart and Winston of Canada Ltd., 1975.

Roxborough, Henry. *Canada at the Olympics*. Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1963.

"Fifty Years Ago, Percy Williams won 2 Olympic Golds." *Athletics* (August 1978): 26-27.

"Percy Williams: Canada's Greatest Olympian." *Athletics* (Jan/Feb 1983): 8-10.

"Percy Williams: Looking Back to 1928." *Champion* (Mar 1978): 9,19.

"How Percy Williams Swept Olympic Sprints." *Macleans* (November 24, 1956): 32-33,38,40, 42-44,46.

"The Fastest Human: How Percy Williams plus Bob Granger Won for Canada, a Dual Olympic Championship."

Macleans (October 15, 1928): 9, 59-60.