

Track and Field



Josy Barthel



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The One-race Man

As a rule, talented athletes last for two or three seasons at least, notching up a few spectacular successes here and there. But there are exceptions. Among these is the Luxembourg athlete Josy Barthel who popped up like a jack-in-the-box to win the gold medal in the 1,500 m in the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. Never before in the history of athletics had anyone from this tiny and distinctly unsparty country stood on the top step of the Olympic podium.

Josy Barthel was a good runner of international calibre, but no one would have dared forecast that he could win the gold medal. No one, that is, except his coach, the German Waldemar Gerschler who had moulded his compatriot Rudolf Harbig into one of the best middle-distance runners of the pre-war period. Gerschler, who had perfected a new method of coaching known as interval training—so called because this form of training proceeds by fits and starts and has the effect of building up an athlete's resistance—realized that he could do a great deal for his new protégé. He was helped by the fact that, apart from the early heats, there were also unexpected

semi-finals to be run, which somewhat sapped the strength of Roger Bannister, one of the hot favorites.

The German Werner Lueg, on the other hand, was still to be reckoned with. On 29 June in Berlin, he had equalled the world record over the distance, a record held jointly by the Swedes Lennart Strand and Gunder Haegg (3 min 43 sec). However, during the afternoon of 26 August 1952, before a crowded stadium, Josy Barthel was to upset all the forecasts during a race which proved tactically fatal for Lueg when his teammate Rolf Lamers failed to pace him as expected. It was up to Barthel to move up in the final straight and, against all odds, win in a time of 3 min 45.2 sec. This was the only major victory of this athlete from Luxembourg.

JOSY BARTHEL

Born April 24, 1927, in Luxembourg

AWARDS AND RECORDS

Started in athletics at the age of 16
1952 OG: gold medal in 1,500 m
Was president of Luxembourg Athletics Federation

1,500 m final at the 1952 Olympics: the unknown Josy Barthel winning from R. McMillen (USA)