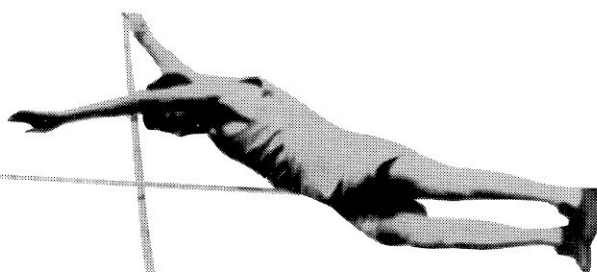


# Bill Halpenny, First Island Olympian



*Halpenny clears the bar at the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association Grounds (undated).*

by Charles Ballem

To a boy participating in the relatively unstructured sports that were played on Prince Edward Island during the summer of 1896, the revival of the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece during that summer was likely of little interest. For Bill Halpenny (pronounced "Hay-penny"), age 14, that summer was probably a series of long days filled with the enjoyment of playing rugby, some track and field activity, perhaps baseball, and more likely than not, fishing and cycling. But within eight years he would be the first Islander to participate in the Olympic Games, and in 1912 he became the only Islander to date who has been there twice.

Sport and recreation activities developed rapidly throughout Canada in the late 19th century. The growth of organizations such as the Montreal Amateur Athletic Association (1881) and Halifax Wanderers Club (1882) provided the catalyst for organized

competition and did much to stimulate a general sport renaissance. In Charlottetown the organization of the Charlottetown AAA in 1891 provided the local stimulus, and by the summer of 1897 the Association had constructed a new sport facility on Upper Prince Street "for track and field, baseball, rugby, cycling and other summer sports." Its opening on Labour Day (September 5) 1897 featured the Maritime Cycling Championships along with track and field events.

An added attraction was the presence of Ellery Clarke of Boston, a member of the United States Olympic team the year previous and gold medallist in the high jump. Clarke was an imposing athlete and his high jump demonstration was popular with the enthusiastic crowd, among whom was young Halpenny, then coming into his own as a jumper and all-round athlete.

Halpenny's track and field interest soon encompassed the high jump; the

broad jump; the hop, step and jump; the hurdles; and the pole vault. It was in the pole vault, considered the most difficult of them all, that he was to excel. Previous to Halpenny, the only Island athletes to achieve success in vaulting were James MacEachern, later to become an active member of the Abegweit Club, and Marcus Henderson. MacEachern claimed the Maritime title as early as 1888 when he defeated Henderson in a competition at the Drill Shed in Charlottetown, before a crowd of several hundred spectators; his best recorded jump was 9 feet, 9 inches at the Scottish Games in Pictou, Nova Scotia, September 15, 1891. Henderson, from Clyde River, jumped 10 feet in 1898 at the Maritime Provinces AAA Championship in Charlottetown as a member of a team from Moncton, N.B. It is conceivable that Henderson was the first pole vaulter that Bill Halpenny actually saw vault.

The enthusiasm generated by the

opening of the new facility in Charlottetown was quickly manifest by a team of four Abegweit athletes who entered the MPAAA Championship meet in Halifax two weeks later. The small group of L.B. "Lou" McMillan, Dan MacKinnon, Cyrus McMillan and Lorne Unsworth made an impressive entry into Maritime competition which had been dominated since its inception in 1888 by the Halifax Wanderers Club. Two years later (1900), the Abegweit Team won the Maritime championship: the first in a long series for track and field athletes from the Abegweit Amateur Athletic Association in Charlottetown.

Bill Halpenny made a spectacular entrance as a member of the Abegweit track and field team in 1901 by breaking the Maritime pole vault record of 10 feet, 1 inch in his first competition at Charlottetown on August 30. Two of his greatest attributes were already evident: he loved to compete and did so at every opportunity, and he was consistently able to give his best performances when the challenge was greatest.

The expectations created by Halpenny's record-breaking performance during his first competition were quickly justified. At a series of regional meets during the next three years he broke his own Maritime pole vault record, established a new Canadian indoor record at a meet in the Hillsborough Rink in Charlottetown, and broke the Canadian outdoor record in a spectacular jump of 11 feet, 5 inches, at Summerside, in July of 1904. So impressive was his performance before three thousand spectators at the Summerside Driving Park that on the following day the executive of the Abegweit Club entered him in the Olympics at St. Louis, Missouri. Within three years of Halpenny's first competitive jump in Charlottetown, the "Boy Wonder" (as he was dubbed by the local press) was on his way to the Olympic Games.

### 1904 Olympics

The 1904 Olympics were fraught with controversy and uncertainty. Both New York and St. Louis had aggressively sought to host the Games. Because the International Olympic Committee was reluctant to stage the Games in conjunction with the St. Louis World's Fair, their approval to St. Louis emerged only months before the Games were due to begin. This made it difficult for most countries to prepare teams and as a result the St. Louis Olympics were little

more than a North American championship. Halpenny's performance in St. Louis was commendable in view of the misfortune he encountered. His pole, shipped by rail, didn't arrive in time for the competition, and he had to borrow one several inches shorter. In spite of the difficult adjustment this necessitated to his technique, he jumped 11 feet and finished fourth in both the Olympic Games and the Handicap Meet staged in connection with the World's Fair. The Olympic gold medal was won with a jump of 11 feet, 6 inches by Charles Dvorak of the U.S.A., only one inch higher than the Canadian record established by Halpenny at Summerside two months earlier. On their return to Charlottetown, Halpenny and his entourage of Abegweit executives were given a rousing welcome. The *Morning Guardian* stated:

A monster crowd with torches and the League of the Cross Band greeted Wm. Halpenny, L.B. McMillan, Jas Darke and R. Nicholson at the station last night on return from St. Louis.

The procession marched to the Labor Hall, Kent St., where speeches were given by the returning ones.

L.B. McMillan expressed the opinion that Halpenny would have won the gold medal had his pole arrived in St. Louis.

### Move to Montreal

Halpenny's contact with the Montreal AAA and several of its athletes, notably Frank Lukeman the Club's outstanding sprinter, was of greater consequence than competing in the 1904 Olympics. Lukeman and Halpenny became close friends during the ensuing years, and it was evident that their friendship and athletic aspirations were mutually influential and supportive. Lukeman made several appearances at the Charlottetown AAA Grounds during the summer of 1905 and Halpenny in turn visited Montreal. The result was that Bill Halpenny left the Abegweit Club in Charlottetown to wear the Winged Wheel of the Montreal AAA—then the most prestigious and widely-recognized athletic symbol in Canada.

While the Abegweit Club was well organized and maintained an excellent outdoor athletic facility, Montreal offered the young vaulter better coaching and competition. In the Maritimes Halpenny was clearly in a class by himself in the pole vault, and while he would eventually achieve the same distinction in Montreal, the greater competitive opportunities offered in the latter pushed him to greater achievements.

However, Halpenny found the transition to Montreal and its leading athletic association difficult, and it was a year before he was listed as a member of the MAAA track and field team, and then



*The 1904 Maritime Champion Abegweit Track and Field Team. REAR: M. McNair, J. Coyle, M.J. Murphy, T. Ranahan, G. Hughes, H.L. Bethune; MID: R.A. Donahoe, F. Hennessey, F. Jenkins, James 'Toby' McMillan, J.W. Jones, J. Howe, L.L. McIntyre; FRONT: H. Harley, Bill Halpenny.*

it was as a broad jumper. Problems were evident when both Lukeman and Halpenny left the MAAA to join its smaller rival, St. Patrick's AAA. But this defection was short-lived. By late summer the pair again wore the Winged Wheel, and in the next decade Halpenny and Lukeman were the MAAA's most prominent track and field athletes.

Halpenny's potential was soon recognized by a comment in the *Montreal Star* that he "shows rare promise of becoming a great athlete" (Sept. 6, 1906).

A year later, Halpenny "made a splendid showing" as a member of the Montreal AAA team at the U.S. Championships in Norfolk, Virginia, finishing in the top four in both Junior and Senior pole vault events. Several weeks later, Halpenny "soared like a bird" at the Canadian Championships in Montreal. He established a new Canadian record of 11 feet, 5½ inches, defeating A.G. Grant of the New York AC and Harry Harley, his former teammate from the Abegweit Club.

#### Pre-Olympic defeat

Canadian trials for the 1908 London Olympics were held in early June, which meant that the athletes were forced to train in adverse conditions. Halpenny dominated the Quebec provincial trials on May 30 in windy and wet weather; besides winning the pole vault, he placed second in the hurdles; the running broad jump; the running high jump; and the hop, step, and jump. However, Halpenny's versatility apparently was a disadvantage at the National Trials a week later. E.B. Archibald of Toronto, competing only in the pole vault, won the event with a new Canadian record of 12 feet, 5 inches. In London, Archibald won the bronze medal with a jump of 11 feet, 9 inches.

#### Excellence achieved

Halpenny quickly turned his disappointment into action; reassessing his athletic goals he decided to concentrate on vaulting. To vindicate his Olympic trials setback, Halpenny won a series of victories that included every major North American event in his specialty during the following year. At Travers Island, New York, in September, he won the U.S. National Championship with a jump of 11 feet, 9 inches (the bronze medal height at the London Olympics). At the Canadian Championships in Montreal the next summer he re-established his Canadian supremacy, and in October, 1909, he set

## NEW CANADIAN POLE VAULT RECORD MADE BY HALPENNY

He Cleared the Bar at 11 Feet 5 1/2 Inches, and Was Second in the Running High Jump---Harley Third in Pole Vault.

MONTREAL, Sept. 23.—The Canadian championships held under the auspices of the Athletic Federation of Canada were held Saturday on M. A. A. A. grounds and drew a large crowd. Two world's records were made both in weight competitions. Ralph Rose of California set a mark for putting 18 pound shot, adding 3 1/2 inch to the previous record and making it now 42 feet 7 1/2 inches. M. P. McGrath of N. Y. A. C. established a new world's record for 16 lb hammer, his throwing being 113 feet 7 inches and the old record 107 feet 11 inches.

Two Canadian records were broken in the three mile run J. J. Daly of the Irish Americans out off 18 seconds, doing the distance in 18:25 or 18 seconds under the record. In the pole vault W Halpenny, of the M. A. A. A. made a new mark of 11 feet 5 1/2 inches in an exhibition.

The following are the events in which athletes well known in this province took part:—

Pole vault:—W Halpenny, M. A. A. A. first, 11 feet 5 1/2 inches; A. G. Grant, N. Y. A. C., second; Harley, M. A. A. A. third.

220 yard run—Dead heat between Lukeman, M. A. A. A., and Huff, Chicago A. C.; D. B. Ford, N. Y. A. C., third.

Running high jump—H. A. Gidney, Boston A. C. first; W Halpenny, M. A. A. second; J. J. O'Connell, N. Y. A. C., third, height 5 feet, 10 inches.

Running broad jump—Lukeman, M. A. A. A. first, 22 feet 2 1/2 inches; O'Connell, N. Y. A. C., second.

120 yard hurdles—F. O. Smithson, Malton, Ont., A. A. A. first; A. B. Shaw, Chicago A. A. second; W. R. McCallum, N. Y. A. C., third; time, 15 3/5 seconds.

a new U.S. AAU indoor record of 11 feet, 6 inches at New York's Madison Square Gardens. Second was H.S. Badcock of the New York Athletic Club, an opponent with whom he would develop a keen rivalry.

The Montreal AAA recognized Halpenny with a special gold medal presented at its December meeting, "to commemorate the new indoor record of 11 feet, 6 inches he made in the pole vault event at the AAAU meet in Madison Square Gardens" (*Montreal Star*, December 18, 1909). Only two other MAAA athletes had previously been so honoured for international achievement.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of Halpenny's versatility occurred during the summer of 1910, when he won the MAAA gold medal for the summer competition in the Club's weekly handicap events. By late August, Halpenny was leading the aggregate total by two points over his friend and rival Frank Lukeman and needed points in the 56-pound weight throw and running broad jump. With the benefit of a 6 foot, 11½ inch allowance in the weight throw he placed second, and in the running broad jump he out-jumped Lukeman with one of the best jumps of his career, 23 feet 3½ inches.

The close friendship that existed between Halpenny and Lukeman was

disrupted shortly afterwards when Lukeman announced his intention to move to Ottawa to work in that city and compete for the Ottawa AAC. Lukeman was enticed by an attractive job offer, combined with his periodic disagreement with MAAA officials. There was no fanfare for his departure, only a notation in the *Montreal Star* that Bill Halpenny and several teammates were at the train station to see Lukeman off to Ottawa.

At the Canadian Championships, just two days after Lukeman announced his decision to move to Ottawa, Halpenny did not vault to expectations and lost his Canadian title to Alex Cameron of the Toronto Central YMCA. Cameron displayed excellent technique in winning with a jump of 11 feet, 9 inches. Halpenny and Lukeman were soon reunited at the U.S. Indoor Championships at Madison Square Gardens, where they were the only Canadian entries. Both athletes were in winning form, with Lukeman winning the 150-yard sprint in the fast time of 14.5 seconds, and Halpenny successfully defending his title in the pole vault for height, and placing second in the pole vault for distance.

Vaulters from the Toronto Central Y gave Halpenny some of his toughest competition. At the 1908 Olympic trials E.B. Archibald frustrated him, and at



the 1910 Canadian Championship Alex Cameron won his title. A year later at the Canadian meet, Halpenny defeated Cameron with a jump of 12 feet, 2 inches to regain the title; he also "missed by a fraction" a world's record of 13 feet, 3 inches: "Halpenny made three tries for the world record and would have succeeded in his last effort had it not been for the loose end of the number card on his back which caught the cross-bar and threw it down" (*Montreal Star*, September 25, 1911).

Since his defeat at the 1908 Olympic trials, Halpenny had vindicated himself to a remarkable degree. Awaiting the 1912 trials he could reflect on many achievements, including Canadian and U.S. outdoor pole vault championships, and a U.S. indoor record. But another trip to the Olympics still had to be earned on the day of the national trials. Halpenny, however, rose to the challenge, defeating his old adversary Alex Cameron. At the age of 30, and with over a decade of international competition behind him, Bill Halpenny was about to represent Canada at the Stockholm Olympics.

### 1912 Olympics

The Stockholm Olympics remain a landmark as the Games that brought to fruition the spirit of the movement as envisaged by Baron De Coubertin, who called them "an enchantment." Nearly four thousand competitors from 28



*Abegweit and League of the Cross athletes returning from the Maritime track and field championship, won by the Abegweit Club. REAR: Bill Halpenny, Barney Francis, Gordon White, George Francis, unidentified; MID: D. Cox, Phil MacDonald, Sammy Doyle, Dr. McGuigan, Elliott McGuigan, Fred McCarey; FRONT: Wallie Scantlebury, Alex Stewart.*

countries attended, including 24 pole vaulters. After several hours the vaulters were reduced to six, including Halpenny. The crossbar was now beyond the Olympic record as Halpenny raced down the runway and soared over the bar. He had set a new Olympic record but misfortune struck—landing off-balance he "fell so heavily on his breast" that serious chest and rib injuries forced him to withdraw. The competition was eventually won by Badcock, setting a record of 12 feet, 11½ inches.

However, his injury pointed up the inadequacies of the landing pit to cushion a fall from 13 feet, and the International Olympic Committee acknowledged his misfortune by awarding Halpenny a special Olympic bronze medal. The only precedent for such an award was in 1908 when a similar medal was presented to Dorando Pietri of Italy for his determination to finish the marathon. (Pietri had finished first, but was disqualified because officials had assisted the exhausted and distracted runner.)

### Pre-War achievements

Halpenny recovered from his injuries in time to contest the Canadian track and field championships in Montreal on September 28. Here he vanquished the Olympic record-holder, H.S. Badcock, before a large crowd at the MAAA Grounds. For the moment, he was

recognized as the outstanding pole vaulter in the world. He repeated as Canadian champion the next year in Vancouver, but the 1914 meet, due to be hosted by the Abegweit Club in Charlottetown, was cancelled after war was declared. This was a great disappointment for Halpenny and his hometown fans, since while his exploits were well known locally, the athlete had not vaulted in Charlottetown since he had left for his first Olympics 10 years earlier.

### Return to the Abegweits

Following the War, Halpenny accepted the invitation of the executive of the Abegweit Club to return to Charlottetown as coach of its track and field team. The appointment had an immediate impact as young, aspiring athletes trained under Halpenny's direction. The CAAA Grounds, virtually abandoned during the War, were again the scene of a vigorous athletic program.

Halpenny's first success as an Abegweit coach was achieved in September 1921, when the team won the Maritime Championship at Saint John. The following September, the team again won the Maritime title in Halifax, an occasion where Halpenny took on his last great challenge with the vaulting pole. Now 40 and out of competitive jumping for several years, he felt the urge to jump one last time to

### AT THE CANADIAN AMATEUR ATHLETIC CHAMPIONSHIP

The Montreal Daily Star  
Sept. 25, 1911



Halpenny Trying to Make a World's Record

## The Canadians Do Not Distinguish Themselves in 400 Metres at Stockholm To-day.

Happenny Gets a Bronze Medal - Sweden Obtains Three First Places in Pentathlon - More Records Broken.

W. HAPPENNY.



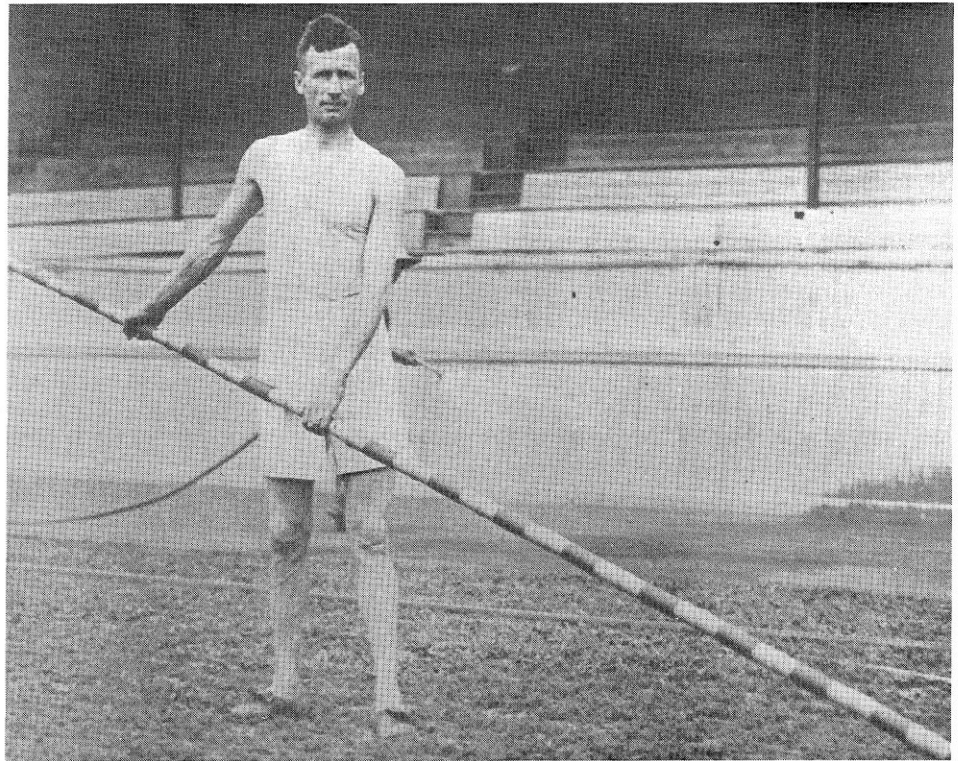
Montreal jumper who received bronze medal at Olympic games and broke a rib.

*Halpenny's name was frequently misspelled by this newspaper.*

regain the Maritime record he had held for 19 years, but which was now held by Len McDonald of Pictou (11 feet, 1 inch). Performing before over three thousand spectators and a group of his proteges that included Phil MacDonald (who became a member of the 1924 Canadian Olympic Team), Barney Francis (national champion in 100-yard dash and broad jump), Halpenny raced down the runway and cleared the bar for a new Maritime record:

*... making the most spectacular vault ever seen in Halifax ... and the reception he was accorded when Announcer J.D. Vair shouted, "Halpenny clears at 11 feet, 4½ inches" was fit for a king (Halifax Herald, September 8, 1922).*

When the team returned to Charlottetown, Bill Halpenny and "Our Boys" were given a rousing welcome which included speeches from Lt. Governor



*Halpenny, c. 1912.*

Heartz, Mayor Jenkins, and President Sammy Doyle of the Abegweit Club.

Following his success as track and field coach with the Abegweits, Halpenny accepted the position of Physical Director at the League of the Cross Gymnasium, where he developed a successful program in gymnastics, basketball, volleyball and physical exercise.

In June 1924, Halpenny assisted in forming the League of the Cross Athletic Association, which sponsored teams in track and field, baseball and football. The organization was designed to augment the extensive program of the Abegweit AAA and make a substantial contribution to competitive and recreation sport in Charlottetown.

In the most moderate terms, Bill Halpenny's commitment to athletic excellence was unusual and his accomplishments remarkable. During his athletic career he became Canada's most outstanding pole vaulter, reaching the pinnacle of achievement in amateur sport. As Prince Edward Island's first Olympian, his accomplishment is worthy of emulation.

### Notes

Bill Halpenny resided in Charlottetown for the rest of his life with his niece

Mrs. Clair Hodgson, nee Catherine 'Kit' Doherty. He was born May 23, 1882, the son of Catherine Margaret Halpenny, and died in Charlottetown February 10, 1960.

In 1970, Bill Halpenny was inducted into the P.E.I. Sports Hall of Fame and in 1976, Sport P.E.I. established the Bill Halpenny Award for presentation to Island athletes for outstanding achievement in sport at the international level.

Resources for this research were obtained from the Montreal *Star*, Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick, and the Killam Library, Dalhousie University; the Charlottetown *Guardian*, Confederation Library, Charlottetown; the Halifax *Herarld*, Public Archives, Halifax; and the Canadian Olympic Association, Montreal.

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