

The Boys in the Canoe

How a father's Olympic sacrifice turned to gold 28 years later.

Priscilla, catch,” Frank Havens, my coach, called as I entered the Washington Canoe Club’s boathouse ready for workout. Into my hands flew a shiny medal — a gold medal from the 1952 Helsinki Olympic Games. The medal Havens won for his father, America’s top canoeist, who sacrificed his Olympic dreams for his family.

NBC has told the Havens family story during its Summer Olympics coverage. Bud Greenspan, an Emmy-award-winning documentary filmmaker, says the story is one of the greatest moments in Olympic history. Former Sen. Bill Bradley, a gold medalist, calls Havens’ father “an American hero.” The story exemplifies “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat,” but for Frank Havens, a 92-year-old A&N Electric Cooperative member, the story tells how love and sacrifice for one’s family ultimately won gold.

THE BOYS IN THE CANOE

As boys, Bill and Bud Havens helped their father haul 300-pound blocks of ice to their icehouse in Rosslyn, Virginia. From there, they delivered it to customers with icebox refrigerators. Moving the blocks developed powerful muscles in the boys.

Across the Potomac River, in Georgetown, the 1904 Washington Canoe Club beckoned. The brothers joined the club and began racing canoes and kayaks. By the 1920s, Bill and Bud were among the fastest paddlers in the world.

1924 SUMMER OLYMPICS

When the club learned the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris would include canoe and kayak racing, 20 members competed to represent the United States. An article from the club’s archives said, “The ardor and enthusiasm of the men to win a coveted place in the Olympic crew, the finest athletic plum ever offered a canoe-racing man, kept up throughout the qualifying trials.”

Bill Havens, 27, became the top-seeded member of a four-man crew. His burly brother, 21, also made the team. The men trained throughout the cold spring of 1924. It rained so hard the Potomac River overflowed. In the meantime, the club scrambled to raise \$2,000 — a sizeable amount in 1924 — to send the crew to the games.

Bill Havens faced a tougher obstacle to Olympic gold than horrible weather and funds. He and his wife were expecting their second child in July — just when the

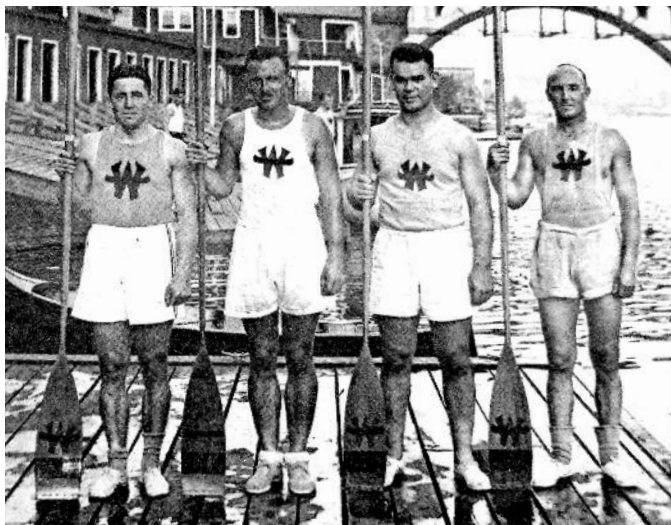
canoe and kayak races were to take place in Paris. Havens had a choice to make.

In June, the *S.S. America* left with Team USA for France without Bill Havens. The team included James Rockefeller; Jack Kelly, Grace Kelly’s father; Johnny Weissmuller, Hollywood’s future Tarzan; Benjamin Spock, of Dr. Spock fame; and Bud Havens. As portrayed in the Oscar-winning movie *Chariots of Fire*, the Americans trained to win. In July, Havens and the Washington Canoe Club’s crew won three gold, one silver and two bronze medals in six events.

Bill Havens’ wife gave birth to their second son, Frank, on Aug. 1 — four days past the Olympic events her husband missed. The paddler competed in future races, but never won an Olympic medal.

A WORLD TOO BUSY FIGHTING TO PLAY GAMES

Like their father and uncle, Frank and his older brother, Bill “Junior,” gravitated to paddling. At age 16, Junior just missed a slot on the USA team going to the 1936 Summer Olympics in Nazi Germany. He missed being with American runners Jesse Owens and Louis Zamperini, and the University of Washington’s rowing team, made famous in the bestseller, *The Boys in*



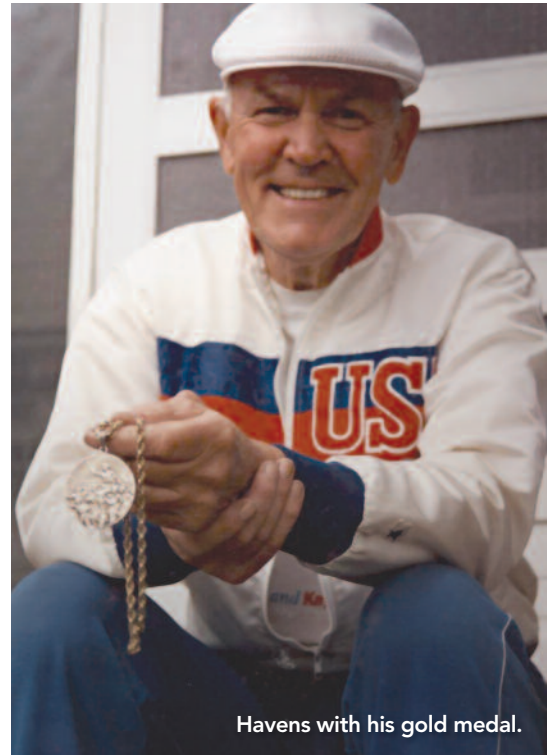
(From left) J.F. Larcombe, Karl Knight, Bud Havens and Bill Havens train at the Washington Canoe Club for 1924 Summer Olympics.



Brothers Frank and Junior Havens, second and third from left, competing in 1947.



Frank Havens in Harborton.



Havens with his gold medal.



Havens' 1948 silver medal and 1952 gold medal.



Havens in his Washington Canoe Club shirt.

the Boat. But in 1939, Junior set a new world record in the 1,500-meter kayak race. He won three national championship titles and made the 1940 USA team for the games in Japan. Unfortunately, World War II shattered his opportunity. While serving in the Army Air Corps, the USA team selected him for the 1944 games in London, but Havens and the Allies were too busy fighting the Nazis to play games.

Frank Havens also served in the Army Air Corps, as a waist gunner in a B-24. “We flew over the eastern seaboard and Caribbean searching for enemy subs,” he explains.

GOING FOR DAD’S GOLD

After the war, Junior Havens urged his 6-foot-2-inch brother, now a University of Maryland football player, to try out for the 1948 Olympics. Both brothers qualified for the rescheduled games in war-torn London.

“The U.S. Olympic committee told us to bring canned food, candy and soap for the Brits,” Frank Havens says. “Nazi bombs had destroyed much of the city, and the people were still hungry after six years of war. The Brits would ask, ‘You have any gum, chum?’”

According to *Olympics 30: Greatest Olympic Stories*, the British housed athletes in military barracks, German prison camps, college dormitories and private houses.

“We stayed in Quonset huts,” Havens recalls. “Nothing like the fancy Olympic villages they have today!”

Junior Havens finished fifth in the 1,000-meter canoe race. Frank Havens

won the silver medal in the grueling 10,000-meter solo race.

Following the London games, and determined to win gold for their father, the brothers followed an intense training program for a tandem race in the 1952 games in Helsinki, Finland. Fate destroyed Junior Havens’ chance again when he severed tendons in his hand while helping a fellow teacher free her car stuck in snow. Like his Uncle Bud, Frank Havens sailed to the Olympics without his brother.

While training in Finland, Havens broke all three paddles he brought from the U.S.

“I went to Doc Whitall, Canada’s coach, and asked if he had any extra paddles,” Havens explains. “Doc became a friend at the London Games. He lent me his own personal paddle even though I would race his Canadians. Wasn’t that something?”

With Whitall’s paddle, the 28-year-old took off in the solo 10,000-meter race, high kneeling in his canoe.

Havens’ telegram home after the race said, “Dear Dad, thanks for waiting around for me to get born in 1924. I’m coming home with the gold medal you should have won. Your loving son, Frank.”

Havens’ 57:41-minute time set a world record.

“When I won, a teammate carried me on his shoulders while I waved the American flag,” Havens recalls. “On the medal stand, I cried when I heard the national anthem. I thought of my father’s sacrifice for me, my brother’s disappointments, and a gold medal for the U.S.”

When Havens came home, he presented the medal to his father.

A LIFE DISAPPOINTMENT BECOMES A BLESSING

Steve Goodier of God’s Work Ministry has shared the Havens’ story as an example of a disappointment becoming a blessing. He says Frank’s father “acted on what he believed was best. Not everybody has the strength of character to say no to something he or she truly wants in order to say yes to something that truly matters. ... No matter how unfair life may seem right now, we are to stand strong in our faith and know that God will work things out for our benefit in ways that we never thought possible.”

THE POPE, PRINCESS GRACE, BING CROSBY AND MUHAMMAD ALI

Frank Havens competed with Team USA in four Olympics. He fondly remembers Grace Kelly, the Oscar-winning actress, whose brother, Jack Kelly Jr., competed in rowing at the same four Olympics.

“She came onboard our ships before we sailed to wish us luck,” Havens recalls with a smile. When she became Princess Grace after marrying Prince Rainier of Monaco in 1956, Havens says she, her husband and singer Bing Crosby met them at the 1960 games in Rome. “She cheered for her brother and each of us on the water. She was a beautiful, gracious lady.”

Havens also remembers Cassius Clay, who won a boxing gold medal in 1960 before changing his name to Muhammad Ali. The boxers roomed next to the canoeists in the Olympic Village. “Clay had a motor mouth even then,” Havens says, laughing.



Historical photo of the Washington Canoe Club at regatta time.



Present-day Washington Canoe Club.

Havens recalls a midnight concert in the Roman colosseum. “The pope blessed all of us. That meant a lot to me.”

Havens, who won 10 national championships, did not add to his medal count at the 1956 games in Australia or the 1960 games, but to this day, he is the only American canoeist to have won an Olympic gold medal in a solo single-blade race.

NEW BOYS AND OLD MASTERS IN THE CANOE

Frank and Junior Havens each had three sons, who, like their fathers, trained at the Washington Canoe Club.

“My father and uncle had us on the water before we could walk,” says Dan Havens, 65.

In 1985, family members watched the Olympians compete in the Masters Games in Toronto. Frank Havens won eight gold medals and Junior Havens won two golds, two silvers and a bronze.

“We beat the Canadian team that won the silver medal in the 1952 tandem race,” Frank Havens laughs with satisfaction.

The brothers continued their winning streak at the World Games in Denmark in 1989.

‘THERE GOES THE OLYMPIAN’

Frank Havens has outlived his wife Kay, “a real beauty,” and his brother, but the Olympian stays busy with family and friends in Harborton, Virginia, on the Eastern Shore, where A&N Electric



Cooperative provides power. He paddles a mile most mornings, then greets neighbors as he tools through Harborton’s country lanes in his golf cart to the town’s tiny post office.

“Frank is a star,” says Kitty Roberts, a neighbor. “He manages to get in a canoe every morning. It’s so nice to know a man

with his amazing background, energy, kindness and spirit.”

Mary Ellen Belote, Harborton’s postmistress for 49 years, displays Havens memorabilia at the Harborton Museum she and her son, Douglas, opened in 2016.

“Frank is very special to us all,” Mrs. Belote says with a twinkle in her eye.

At a restaurant in nearby Onancock, patrons exclaim, “There goes the Olympian!” as Havens, a Virginia Sports Hall of Fame member, walks to his table. When asked, they all share their affection for the man.

Last fall, a thief ran Havens’ beloved golf cart into the Chesapeake Bay. When hearing of the crime, a local business purchased a new golf cart, decorated it with the Olympic rings, and presented it to the athlete.

“Now everyone knows I was in the Olympics!” Havens laughs, as if people didn’t already know.

PERSONIFYING OLYMPIC IDEALS

The Havens family has inspired canoeists and kayakers throughout the U.S. and Canada, where Frank Havens’ paddle is on display at the Canadian Canoe Museum. Norm

Bellingham, Olympic gold medalist and a former U.S. Olympic Committee officer, says, “These men represented the very best of our country during an extraordinary era in Olympic sport. They personified the Olympic ideals and pursued the highest levels of sporting excellence with dignity, honor and humility. They set the standard for future generations.” ■



Dan (left, rear) and Bonnie Havens, Dodge Havens, Blaise Rhodes, Keith Havens, and Priscilla Knight surround Frank Havens at Frank Havens Regatta at the Washington Canoe Club.



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