In the 1900s, SU's Myer Prinstein leap to international acclaim in track and field and grabbed four gold medals along the way

By Jay Cox

A century ago, Syracusans traveled by train, trolley, horse-drawn carriage, and Erie Canal boat. Myer Prinstein covered great distances then too—in a single bound, or a hop, step, and jump that carried him from Syracuse to Olympic silver and gold in Paris in summer 1900. Prinstein first leaped into the world record books as a 19-year-old Syracuse University freshman in 1898, a remarkable feat considering he had only been competing for two years. In those days, many of Prinstein's skillful performances occurred at track and field meets on the University Oval. He ran sprints and relays, pole-vaulted, hurled, and high-jumped. And when it came to the running broad jump and the hop, step, and jump—forerunners of today's long and triple jumps—Prinstein was spectacular, setting the world record twice in the long jump, capturing several national Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) long-jump titles, and winning four gold medals in jumping events at three different Olympiads.

True, the early Olympics were far from the spectacle they are today. The 1900 Paris Olympics, where Prinstein collected a gold in the hop, step, and jump and a silver in the long jump, were a disorganized alternative attraction to the 1900 Paris World Exposition. Likewise, the 1904 St. Louis Games, where Prinstein struck double gold, were overshadowed by the city's Louisiana Purchase Exhibition. The 1906 Athens Games, where Prinstein nabbed his fourth Olympic gold, were dubbed the Intercalated Games for veering from the four-year Olympic cycle, and eventually relegated to "unofficial" status.

While the early modern Olympics struggled for attention, Prinstein's impressive athletic ability didn't go unnoticed. At 5 feet, 7 3/4 inches tall and 145 pounds, the sturdy-shouldered Prinstein, who played on one of SU's earliest basketball teams, didn't have overpowering size, but he was fueled by a strong competitive spirit and earned a reputation in the track and field world for coming up big in the big events. "The great feature of his jumping is the rise which he gets after leaving takeoff," New York sportswriter Malcolm Ford wrote. "He does not approach the takeoff with as much speed as [his University of Pennsylvania rival] Alvin Kraenzlein, but he gets higher up in the air and also in better shape... He has an unusually pretty style and impresses one that he always knows what he is doing."

When Prinstein, who began training in 1894 at the Syracuse YMCA, enrolled at SU in 1897, he was living with his family on Orange Street in the shadow of Piety Hill. Orange Street, once sandwiched between Grape and Almond streets where Route 81 now slices through the city, stretched to the Erie Canal and was part of an immigrant neighborhood. His parents, Jacob and Julia Prinstein, were Polish-Russian Jews who settled in Syracuse in 1883. They had five daughters and four sons, and Jacob was a grocer and baker. In the 1898-1900 Syracuse city directory, Myer, the third oldest son, was simply listed as an "athlete."

That, of course, was like calling Beethoven a pianist. After all, within only two years of taking up athletics—and in only his first year of outdoor competition—Prinstein won his first major event: the long jump at the New York metropolitan AAU meet. As an SU freshman in May 1898, he won his first of two Intercollegiate Association of the Amateur Athletes of America (IC4A) titles in the long jump, setting the American and collegiate records. In June, he turned in a world-record leap of 23 feet, 8 7/8 inches at the New York Athletic Club Games. But Irish athlete W.J.M. Newburn soon erased Prinstein's mark, sailing 24 feet, 1 1/2 inches.

In 1899, Prinstein was upended in the long jump at the Penn Relays in Philadelphia and the IC4A Championships in New York by Kraenzlein, who stretched the world record to 24 feet, 4 1/2 inches. At the 1900 Penn Relays, Prinstein out-dueled Kraenzlein, who was recovering from malaria, for top honors in the broad jump and reclaimed the world record with a jump of 24 feet, 7 1/4 inches. "[The event] ended with a broken world's record in the broad jump, and with new glory for Prinstein of
Syracuse University, "a New York Times article reported. "Almost unnoticed in mid-field by the thousands of spectators, absorbed in the more spectacular relay races, the versatile Syracuse athlete won the world’s, American, and intercollegiate championships from A.C. Kraenzlein of Pennsylvania, by one magnificent leap."

Later that spring, Prinstein won the IC4A long-jump crown to set the stage for a classic showdown with his rival at the Paris Games. Before that happened, however, Prinstein and three SU teammates had to get to Paris. They couldn’t afford the transatlantic journey, but an oil baron rescued them with an offer to ride aboard one of his tankers. They accepted and trained for the games aboard the ship.

In the qualifying round of the long jump at the Paris Games on Saturday, July 13, Prinstein emerged as the leader, leaping 23 feet, 6 1/2 inches. But controversy soon erupted. Officials from Syracuse and several other Methodist-affiliated schools forbade their student athletes in Paris from competing on Sunday, the Christian Sabbath. They had appealed to French organizers not to hold events on a Sunday, but the request was ignored and the games went on, minus the majority of the American athletes. There was, however, one notable exception: Kraenzlein. With Prinstein sidelined by the Sabbath, Kraenzlein took six jumps in Sunday’s finals and nipped Prinstein’s mark by a quarter-inch to set an Olympic record and grab the gold. Prinstein received the silver, but was irate because Kraenzlein had personally agreed with him not to jump on Sunday. Prinstein protested and challenged Kraenzlein to a jump-off on Monday. Kraenzlein refused. Prinstein then reportedly hauled off and punched his rival. “The Prinstein-Kraenzlein feud was one of the most fabled in the early history of track and field,” according to the Encyclopedia of Jews in Sports.

A day later, Prinstein collected the gold in the hop, step, and jump with an Olympic record leap of 47 feet, 5 3/4 inches. In winning the gold, he defeated American teammate James Connolly, who’d won the event at the 1896 Athens Games to become the first Olympic champion of the modern era. Kraenzlein, meanwhile, hit gold in three other events, ensuring himself a place in history as the only athlete to win four individual track-and-field golds in one Olympiad.

That fall, a preview of the upcoming 1901 track and field season in the SU Weekly reported that team captain Prinstein would “compete in the jumps, the pole vault, and all the dashes up to 440 yards. Trainer McCormick has no objections to his training for all these events, as he is confident of his ability to do all well. Prinstein will probably be the best all-around athlete Syracuse has ever had.”

In his final season at Syracuse, Prinstein continued to register impressive performances in the jumps and dashes. He won the long jump at the Penn Relays, but was injured in the IC4A Championships. “It is to be regretted that Myer Prinstein, who has done so much for Syracuse in athletics, will not be with us next year,” an editorial in the SU Weekly said.

His storied SU career at an end, Prinstein, who’d studied liberal arts and law and was proudly claimed by both the classes of 1901 and 1902, began practicing law in Syracuse and eventually landed in New York City, competing for the Irish-American Athletic Club. His days of international acclaim were far from over.

At the 1904 St. Louis Games, he turned in a remarkable performance by winning gold medals in both the long and triple jumps in the same day. In the long jump, he covered 24 feet, 1 inch to smash Kraenzlein’s controversial Olympic record of four years earlier. He also finished fifth in the 60- and 400-meter dashes.

Two years later in Athens, Prinstein squared off in the long jump with Ireland’s Pat O’Connor, who had toppled Prinstein’s 1900 world record a month after it had been set. Prinstein accomplished his mission, beating O’Connor to win his fourth Olympic gold. An injury, however, hindered his triple-jump performance and he finished back in the pack, failing to capture a third-straight gold in the event.

With that, Prinstein concluded his Olympic career. Away from the jumping pits, the Jamaica, Queens, resident practiced law and later became a businessman. On March 10, 1925, less than two decades after his final Olympic exploits, he died from a heart ailment at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. He was only 45 and left a wife and young son behind. “Prinstein Is Dead; Was Noted Athlete,” read The New York Times headline. In its obituary, Syracuse’s Post-Standard cited him as “one of the greatest athletes developed at Syracuse University.”

Even today, it’s hard to ignore Prinstein’s accomplishments, which include being inducted posthumously into the International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in Israel. The distances he leaped have been surpassed, but in the history of track and field he stands among the first Americans who began the country’s longtime domination of the Olympic long jump. Likewise, after he won the triple jump in the 1904 Games, it would be 80 years before another American, Al Joyner, captured the title. And don’t forget that double-gold medal day in St. Louis—no jumper yet has won the long and triple jumps in the same Olympics, let alone on the same day.