

LINCOLN LORE

Bulletin of the Lincoln National Life Foundation - - - - - Dr. Louis A. Warren, Editor,
Published each week by The Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Number 467

FORT WAYNE, INDIANA

March 21, 1938

LINCOLN THE ATHLETE

Abraham Lincoln was the All American athlete among the presidents of the United States. He was six feet four inches tall in his stocking feet and at the time he left Indiana for Illinois at twenty-one years of age, he weighed over two hundred pounds.

Lincoln was the tallest of the presidents, being two inches taller than his closest competitor, George Washington, who might be considered the runner-up to Lincoln as an athlete among the first citizens of the nation. Although Theodore Roosevelt and his tennis cabinet became known for their strenuous type of exercise, there is no evidence that the rough rider was a noted winner in athletic competition.

A correspondent of a large newspaper interviewed William Herndon on one occasion and asked him to give a description of Lincoln when the rail splitter first came to the Sangamon country in 1831. His reply was as follows: "He was at this time fine and noble looking, weighed 210 pounds, was six feet three or four inches in height and of florid complexion." This description would apparently bear out the suggestion that his change of occupation did make, after some years, a big difference in his personal appearance. Lincoln, himself, in his autobiographical sketch said that at the time of his nomination for the presidency, he was "lean in flesh and weighed on an average 180 pounds." At the time of his assassination he weighed but 160 pounds.

It is difficult to properly visualize Abraham Lincoln, the young man, as we have a tendency to associate him with his pictures of later years. His step-mother said that "he was more fleshy in Indiana than ever in Illinois," and it is also very true that he was heavily muscled, having been continuously swinging an axe in the woods from the time he was eight years of age until he became a man grown.

An athlete in the Indiana wilderness was primarily a strong man as most of the competitive contests were based on strength, skill having little to do with the primitive sports of that day. Throwing a maul over one's head may have been the fore-runner of the hammer throw. Tossing a crowbar called for more strength but less skill than throwing a javelin. Sinking an axe head into a stump was an event in which Lincoln especially excelled. William Wood, a neighbor of the Lincolns while they lived in Indiana said, "Abraham Lincoln could sink an axe deeper into wood than any man I ever saw."

As might be expected, lifting heavy weights was one of the outstanding competitive pioneer contests. There are many remarkable stories told about Lincoln's great strength. Mr. Richardson, a neighbor, recalled on one occasion he saw Lincoln "pick up and walk away with a chicken house made of poles, pinned together and covered, that weighed at least 600 pounds, if not more." On another occasion, Lincoln observed three or four men preparing sticks on which to move some huge posts, whereupon he shouldered the posts single-handed and deposited them at the place where they were to be used. Another contemporary states that with certain straps and ropes properly adjusted he could lift 1,000 pounds easily.

When Lincoln was about eighteen or nineteen years old, he began to take on all comers in wrestling matches and there is a tradition that "no man far or near would give him a match." When Lincoln reached the Illinois

country at twenty-one years of age, he found plenty of competition for wrestling honors. It is difficult to get the facts about some of these contests as the stories vary according to the inclinations of the witnesses to have Lincoln either win or lose.

The first bout of the three most famous wrestling contests in which Lincoln participated in Illinois was with Daniel Needham, the most noted contestant whom Lincoln had met up to that time. Needham lived in what later became Coles County, and was the champion of that part of the country. They wrestled at Wabash Point and Lincoln threw Needham twice with so much ease that it angered Needham who then wanted to fight.

The best known wrestling match in which Lincoln engaged was one with Jack Armstrong, the leader of the Clary Grove gang. The contest drew a large number of spectators and although there are many different versions as to how the match ended, all are in agreement that Lincoln came out of the contest the best man.

Another bout took place during the Black Hawk War which also was an important event. The contest came off near Beardstown, Illinois, in the spring of 1832 and was between Lorenzo Dow Thompson, representing the St. Clair County Military Company and Abraham Lincoln, Captain of the Sangamon County Military Company. The outcome of this contest is also in dispute, one group claiming that Thompson threw Lincoln twice, first with a "side hold" and the second time with a hold called the "Indian Hug." One other version claims that Thompson won the first throw catching Lincoln unawares but that the Sangamon captain won the next two.

Whether or not Lincoln was or was not the champion wrestler of all the country side in the pioneer day, it is quite certain he was a good match for any of the strong men then living on the frontiers.

James Gourley seems to have been one of Springfield's outstanding athletes. He claims to have won a race at one time from H. B. Truett when Lincoln served as a judge. Gourley also claims to have raced with E. D. Baker and Lincoln but he does not state which one of them won. Possibly Lincoln's first foot race in Illinois was won at New Salem when he ran against a man named Wolf.

The one contest of the early days which seems to have required some skill where others were largely contests of strength, was the three hops. Lincoln is said to have been able to do forty-one feet in this event which was considered a good record for that time. As late as 1896 at the Olympic contests, the record for the hop, step, and jump was but forty-five feet.

Lincoln's fame as a ball player has usually been confined to his early days in Springfield where he is said to have excelled at old-fashioned twin ball. He also played the game called "fives" which was something like the modern handball although in Lincoln's day, it was played out of doors and the outside of a building served as a rebound board. It was usually played on a court with front and side walls but did not have a back wall. This is the game which it is said Lincoln played on the day he was nominated for the presidency. If Lincoln did play handball as late as May 20, 1860, when he was fifty-one years old, it would imply he was quite an athlete even at the time he was elected to the presidency. It can not be disputed that he was our most athletic president.