

THE OLDEST OLYMPIAN PASSES AWAY

by Matti Hannus

Viktor Jalmar Kivenheimo, a Doctor of Philosophy, the oldest Olympic competitor in Finland and probably the oldest Olympic medalist anywhere, ever, died in Mikkeli on 29 October 1994, aged 105. He was also the oldest at the time in Finland,

Born at Tuusula on 25 September 1889, “Jalmari” Kivenheimo (originally Stenvall) started his life in the same year as such famous and notorious people as Adolf Hitler, Charlie Chaplin, and Hannes Kolehmainen, about whose great distance runs in Stockholm in 1912 Kivenheimo still vividly recalled over 80 years later (Kolehmainen died in 1966).

A fine athlete in his youth, Kivenheimo was selected to the Finnish Olympic team for the Stockholm Games in 1912, at which he was a member of the silver medal winning Finnish gymnastics team. He later earned a degree in biology at Helsinki University and then in 1948 became a doctor of philosophy, specializing in botany.

Kivenheimo made his life’s work at Rauma Teachers’ College, at which he taught geography, natural history, and agriculture from 1920 to 1957. From the early 1980’s to the early 1990’s, he lived with the family of his daughter in Arizona, USA, where he continued his daily gymnastics, stretching, and jogging schedule up to the age of 103.

As far as is known, Kivenheimo was the last living competitor from the 1912 Olympic Games. At the moment, the oldest Finnish Olympic medalists are Doctor of Medicine Heikki Savolainen (87), a gymnastics medal winner in five Olympics (1928-1952), and Sulo Nurmela (87), a cross-country skiing medalist in 1936.

The oldest man in Finland after Kivenheimo is another athlete, Santeri Kääriä, a leading cross-country skier in the early part of the century, who lives alone in his hut at Virolahti and still takes care of his everyday chores at the ripe old age of 104.