

## This Day in History... April 26, 1897

# Birth of Olympian Eddie Eagan

Edward Patrick Francis Eagan was born on April 26, 1897, in Denver, Colorado. He's the only person in Olympic history to win gold medals in both Summer and Winter sports.

Eagan's father, a railway worker, died in a rail accident when Eddie was young. His mother moved the family to Longmont, Colorado, where he spent much of his childhood. When he was a boy, Eagan's hero was the dime-novel character Frank Merriwell, and he modeled his life and beliefs after the fictional character.

When he was 12 years old, Eagan did chores on a nearby ranch. One day, he watched as Abe Tobin, a small ranch hand, knocked down the much larger foreman. Eagan was amazed and said he had seen "grace, rhythm, science, music in action." He spent the next two years learning everything he could about boxing from Tobin. When Tobin left the state, he told Eagan to stay in school, and only "fight for fun." Eagan took the advice to heart – he would only ever box on the amateur level, never earning money as a professional. Tobin's advice also inspired the name of Eagan's 1932 memoir, *Fighting for Fun*.



*Eagan won his first gold medal in boxing at the 1920 Summer Olympic Games.*

Eagan started a successful law practice in the years to come, but by 1932 was feeling a "little cobwebby" and needed a break. His friend and head of the USA's Olympic Bobsled Committee, Jay O'Brien, had an idea – he invited Eagan to join the four-man bobsled team. One of the members had left the team to compete in the two-man competition, leaving a seat open they desperately needed to fill. Despite never having been in a bobsled before, Eagan joined the team and went to the 1932 Winter Olympic Games in Lake Placid, New York.



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during the war and retired as a lieutenant colonel. In 1948, he completed the fastest trip around the globe by a scheduled airline. Traveling 20,559 miles with 19 stops, he surpassed the previous record by 20 hours, 15 minutes.

Eagan was later appointed head of the New York Athletic Commission and served on President Dwight D. Eisenhower's People-to-People sports committee. In 1964, he oversaw the sporting events at the New York World's Fair. Eagan died in New York on June 14, 1967. In 1983, he was part of the first group of athletes inducted into the US Olympic Hall of Fame.



*From the 1990 Olympians issue*

While in high school, Eagan worked to support the family – as a janitor, church caretaker, herding cattle, canning food, and selling newspapers. But he continued to train in boxing whenever he could and participated in his first competition when he was 16. After graduating from Longmont High School, he went to Denver University for a year. While there, he won the western middleweight title. Eagan left school to enlist in the Army during World War I, becoming an artillery lieutenant.

After returning from the war, Eagan attended Yale University, Harvard Law School and the University of Oxford, and was named a Rhodes Scholar. He did this all while enjoying a successful amateur boxing career, winning the 1919 Amateur Athletic Union and 1923 Amateur Boxing Association heavyweight titles.

Eagan's victories earned him a trip to the 1920 Summer Olympic Games in Antwerp, Belgium. He ultimately won the gold medal for boxing in the light-heavyweight division. After those games, he continued his studies and became the first American to win a British amateur boxing title. Eagan then spent two years traveling the world, challenging the best amateur boxer in every country he visited, and winning every match. He was unofficially dubbed the "Champion of the World." Eagan returned to the Summer Olympics in Paris in 1924, but lost in the first round.



*This was the first US stamp to honor the Winter Olympics.*

Eagan's team led in the first three legs of the bobsled race and won by more than two seconds. Eagan later recalled "That run with always be vivid in my memory. It took about two minutes to make, but to me seemed like an eon. My hands seemed to be slipping, but I still clung on." The team won the gold medal and Eagan made history, becoming the first and only person to win gold medals at the Summer and Winter Olympics in different disciplines. Other athletes would win medals, though not necessarily gold, in both games. And Sweden's Gillis Grafstrom won gold in Summer and Olympic Games, but they were all for figure skating, which had been held in the summer until 1920.

Eagan returned to his law career after the 1932 Olympics. He served as assistant US attorney for the Southern District of New York for five years. Eagan then joined the US Army Air Forces, serving in the Air Transport Command during World War II. In that role, he traveled to almost every place the US Army had planes. Eagan earned several decorations



*Eagan and Dempsey developed a lifelong friendship after meeting in a boxing match.*

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