

J. Neil “Pinky” Patterson – Detroit University School 1906



A 3-time state high jump champion whose school record still stands, J. Neil Patterson won the Penn Relays as well as the U.S. national title while still in high school,

Born July 27, 1885, Patterson (he went by “J. Neil”) became known as “Pinky” during his 9th grade year at Detroit University School (now Grosse Pointe University-Liggett). The nickname came from a case of scarlet fever he endured that year, one that kept him out of school for much of the year. That delay in his schooling was part of the reason that in 1906, he was a 20-year-old senior.

A gifted athlete, he could hurdle well (16.1 over the 42-inch barriers), but his specialty was the high jump. In 1902 he placed 2nd in the state meet as a 9th grader. The next year, scarlet fever kept him out of school entirely—in effect, he redshirted the entire year. Then the next three years he won it. As a senior, he set a meet record of 6-1.25. He also was the Penn Relays champion that year (the only high schooler competing in the special events, or open, category). He wrapped up the summer season by winning the AAU National title over the best collegian and open jumpers in the country.

That put Patterson on the fast track to the Olympics. He competed for the University of Michigan and the Chicago Athletic Association. In 1908, he won the Central Olympic Trials. He would be the youngest member of the U.S. Olympic team that year. In London, he would clear 6-0 and finish 7th on an “off day”. No record can be found of him participating in athletics after that point.

An automobile enthusiast, he is thought to be the first person to drive the entire transcontinental Lincoln Highway in 1913. He carried a jug of water from the Pacific Ocean and dumped it into the Atlantic when he finally arrived in New York City.

In World War I, he was a captain in the Signal Corps, and by the end of the war was stationed in Detroit to oversee the entire production of war planes. Afterward, he made his living in real estate in the Los Angeles area. That’s where he died at age 63, on December 20, 1948.