The memorial lecture to the late Sir Adolphe Abrahams, O.B.E., F.R.C.P. Founder President of the British Association of Sport and Medicine. Delivered to the Association on 31st May, 1968, at the Royal Society of Medicine.

THE CHANGING FACE OF INTERNATIONAL SPORT

Harold Abrahams.

May I say what a kindly thought it was of your secretary to suggest that I should come here this evening to talk to your Society. I particularly welcome the suggestion that this should be a small tribute, a very small tribute, to your former President and one of your most enthusiastic members my late brother.

I do not intend to recapitulate all he contributed to British athletics over a period of more than half a century. His services are well-known to you all; but I do ask your sympathy if for a very few minutes I pay him, however inadequately a small testimonial of my fraternal gratitude.

Adolphe was, of course, some 16 years older than me, he the eldest, I the youngest of a family of six - four of them brothers, consequently he was much more of a father to me than a brother, at any rate for the first 20 years or so of my life. His keen interest in athletics coupled with those of my second brother Sidney - A Cambridge Blue and A.A.A. Long Jump Champion, meant that almost literally from my cradle I was guided and encouraged to perform. One might describe Adolphe as a rather moderate performer, though he did win Inter-Hospital Championships and represent his Cambridge College - but he had not the physique of my second brother, nor of myself. And I think he in later life when I was competing, lived through me many of the dreams which he himself had not the prowess to achieve.

His knowledge of the medical side of athletics was quite invaluable, and his commonsense approach to for instance dieting most encouraging. His insistence for example on the importance of regular visits to the dentist and to the lavatory was undoubtedly responsible more than anything else that during my whole athletic career I only once tore a muscle, and that was certainly because I competed when I was far from fit. I remember one historic occasion when I went to Brook Street to consult him. It was the day before my last appearance in the Oxford and Cambridge Sports, when I was not only burdened with the responsibility of being Captain of the Cambridge Team, but much against my will I had been persuaded to compete in the quarter-mile as well as 100 yards and long jump. I woke up with a ghastly sore throat, felt feverish and ached in every part of my body. He spent a good half hour examining me and then said "You bloody fool - it's nerves" And it was for next afternoon was one of the most successful athletically of my career.
You may not believe me but Adolphe was extremely shy, and this led to an abruptness of manner sometimes. But he was always ready to give advice and encouragement to athletes, and I think I may be allowed to say that he was, in his prime, one of the best Medical Officers British athletics has ever had. Only recently I was discussing with Donald Finlay, surely one of the greatest hurdlers ever, Adolphe's handling of him before the Final of the European 110 metres hurdles in Paris in 1938. Donald felt ghastly and went to Adolphe who examined him and gave him a tablet. In the event Donald won the race in a new United Kingdom Record time of 14.3 sec — a time which was not eclipsed for one day short of 23 years. Adolphe told him afterwards that the pill was a bread one!!! I am sure you will agree that British athletics owes Adolphe a great deal, and I would only add this from my personal point of view — he contributed very largely to my successes.

The first four minute mile may well serve as a starting point for my talk on "The changing face of International Sport".

Ten minutes past 6 on May 6th. 1954. Roger Bannister becomes the first man to run 1760 yards in less than 240 seconds. In August 1923 Paavo Nurmi had set up a world record of 4 min. 10.4 sec. 14 years later our own Sydney Wooderson took 4 second off Nurmi's time; and in the space of just over three years, from July 1942 to July 1945 Gunder Hegg, aided and abetted by a fellow Swede Arne Andersson, took 5 seconds off Wooderson's time. The four minute mile was in sight — actually only 1.3 sec away — a difference of about one half per cent. But it took nearly nine years to wipe out that 1.3 sec. despite the many deliberate assaults made upon it by Bannister in Great Britain, Landy in Australia and Wes Santee in the United States. And yet within 40 days Landy removed Bannister's time from the record books before it had got there with 3 min. 57.9 sec.

I used to keep a list of all the miles run inside 4 min. 10 sec; then of course I changed to 4 minutes as the criterion. I think I am right in saying that 4 minutes has now been beaten 301 times, by 89 runners in 167 races. I cannot guarantee the absolute accuracy of these figures but they are near enough to show that four minutes is not a "sensation" any longer. And I'm not going to bother any more about these lists. The record now stands at 3 min. 51.1 sec., and the limit? Anyone's guess is as good as mine, and in many ways others are far more qualified to prognosticate than I am. Perhaps one day we shall be transplanting hearts and lungs for athletic purposes — to produce a three minute miler. God forbid — but one never knows!!

The improvement in athletic performances over the last two decades has been quite fantastic. I used the word "improvement" but one wonders quite seriously whether there is all that improvement in a really comparative sense. Can one really compare one generation with another, even where there is the apparent logometric test of the stop watch and the tape measure. Does one really suppose that Ron Clarke would beat Nurmi over three miles by well over a lap; that Jesse Owens would be 8 yards behind Tommie Smith in a 200 metres and Jack Lovelock more than 100 yards behind Jim Ryun over 1,500 metres.
Some mathematician should produce a programming for a computer which would give you a real "Cost of winning" index. In recent years, as with the cost of all consumer goods, things have certainly changed. The performances of the past that had people delirious with excitement now produce slow hand-clapping. A few examples can now be given, illustrated by taperecordings. Come back with me to the Berlin Stadium nearly 32 years ago, on Sunday August 6th. 1936 at 4.15 p.m., for the 1,500 metres which Lovelock won in a time of 3 min. 47.8 secs. Last year, over 100 athletes beat 3 min. 46.0 secs. The qualifying time for the 1968 Olympic Games is 3 mins 42.0 secs., equivalent to a 4 minute mile.

Another race that gave me intense pleasure was on August 23rd 1946 at Oslo, featuring Zatopek and Wooderson, and won in 14 mins. 08.6 secs. Last year 100 athletes beat 14 mins. 03.0 secs., and the Olympic qualifying time is now 13 min. 50 secs. for the 5,000 metres.

A final nostalgic reminiscence is from the White City Stadium on July 30th 1955, when Chataway won the 3 miles in 13 mins 23.2 secs. The present World Record for this event is 12. mins 50.4 secs.

Is Clarke really half a lap better than Chataway over 3 miles? Is it really true as the ranking lists tell us that Chataway does not now rank amongst the first dozen British three milers? Of course these conclusions are quite fallacious. The truth of the matter is that we must judge athletes by their contemporaries. Don Bradman said "A champion of any era would have adapted himself to be a champion in any era".

I could go on pointing out to you the fantastic change in the standards of almost every track and field event. 12 years ago no one had cleared 7 ft. in the high jump - last year 29 athletes did so.

But you know despite the devaluation of performances - for that is what it is there are some records I was privileged to see which will remain for all time most vivid memories.

In 1921 I went to the United States to compete for Oxford and Cambridge against Harvard and Yale. For 20 years the world record long jump had remained at 24 ft. 11½". With his very first jump Ned Gourdin cleared 25 ft. 3 in. which, I, some three feet behind, regarded as somewhat inhospitable greeting to one who had travelled 3,000 miles. But what is 25 ft. nowadays? I remember the first time I saw the 100 metres hurdles run in under 15 seconds by the Canadian Earl Thompson, the 1920 Olympic Champion. A man had run 120 yards and cleared ten 3ft. 6in hurdles in 14.8 sec!! Can one begin to accept that this performance on bare time means that Thomson would not have reached the last hurdle as the modern record-holder finishes?

I remember how incredulous one was to read that Jack Torrance had put the shot 57 ft. 1 in. Surely it couldn't have been the right weight, or it was put from a stand or something. In 1967, 57 ft. 1 in. would rank you 94th. in the world list.

I hardly dare mention pole vaulting, since the glass fibre pole has completely changed the event. 10 years ago only one vaulter had exceeded 15 ft. 9 in. Last year 97 did so, and this is the qualifying height for the Olympics.
"Quicker, higher, further" - the motto of the Olympic Games - where is it going to stop. Records, records, records. School, Club, County, Match, District, A.A.A. National, United Kingdom National, United Kingdom All-Comers, Olympic, Commonwealth, European, World.

How can we halt this mania for records, which after all form an infinitesimal part of National and international competitions. Of course we can't keep records out of athletics, but cannot we somehow secure that records are not looked upon as more important than races, however good. Press, Radio and television have introduced athletics into millions of homes throughout the world, and the inevitable result, the inescapable result is that the entertainment aspect of sport is becoming far more important that the competitive side. Are competitions primarily to be for the competitors or for the spectators? If the latter is the answer, it is plain that the amateur-professional problem will become more and more acute.

The unfortunate thing about using the word "amateur" at all is that it is one of those words which stirs up tremendous emotional reactions, whereas what we need is some calm rational thinking about where we are going and where we want to go. You cannot compare athletics with for example lawn tennis in this problem. I don't feel that there is any serious probability of athletics abolishing amateurism. Frankly there isn't the money in it for large appearance fees or big money prizes. A few people in each country might for a very brief space make some sort of living out of competing and advertising but the number is very limited. So far I am concerned I would not permit money prizes (though there is no real difference between £20 and a £20 wrist watch except to the Inland revenue) nor would I allow appearance money. But the matter is not a question of morality, it is a question of control. The rules should be directed towards restraining activities which if widespread would adversely affect the sport for all.

I do not feel that there is a widespread need for a change of rules, and certainly we could not "go it alone" as in tennis.

One aspect of international sport, which is really closely related to the amateur-professional problem, is the ever-increasing prestige attached to winning an Olympic gold medal - and the national importance of a country not being defeated. The fuss that some sections of the public make and which the press seem to encourage is that it is a national disaster if an athlete loses a gold medal by half an inch.

I am very much in favour of inter-national sport - I think the more athletes from different nations can get together the better. We surely should endeavour in this much troubled world to find common matters of interest which can be shared.

Excessive nationalism is a plague. Of course it is ridiculous to say as is said that the Olympic Games cause ill-feeling. They give human beings a chance of expressing ill-feeling which exists, and they also provide a great opportunity of learning to appreciate a performance no matter what the nationality of the performer. I personally would abolish all flag-wagging and national anthems. Of course one does not want to disguise the nationality of a winner, but cannot the fact that he is a world champion take precedence over his nationality.
I'm not going to pretend that I don't get excited over a British triumph - of course I do, but I don't imagine that the end of the world is in sight because we didn't reach the final of the Europa Cup last year.

One of the things that most distrubs me is the ever-increasing number of international competitors. In my opinion in athletics there are far too many. The expense of taking teams abroad is crippling even with 50% Govt. help with fares.

I have touched on a number of aspects of international sport. I am conscious of just touching the surface of many and of omitting any reference to others. Perhaps you will kindly remedy this by a discussion which I hope will follow.

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WEIGHT LIFTING INJURIES TO THE BACK IN ADOLESCENTS

Last spring a correspondent, Mr.T.A.Mason, of 262 Park Rd, Haringey, London N.8, a former Weight Lifting coach, drew our attention to the possible dangers to the vertebral column of the "Press", especially when used by adolescents, either in competitive weight lifting, or even in heavy weight training. Although we recognise the dangers of hyperflexion at any age, perhaps insufficient attention has been paid to injuries brought about by repeated hyperextension, such as is necessary in "pressing" a weight in the Olympic classical "Standing Press".

It is difficult for one coach, or even one orthopaedic clinic, to gather enough carefully recorded case histories to be of statistical significance, but we would be grateful to B.A.S.M. members who can give us clinical details of any cases they have in their clinics or clubs, in which spinal injury has occurred that might be attributable to "pressing" weights in training or in competition. We would also be grateful for details of any competitions in weight lifting held for competitors under the age of 18. The loan of any good radiographs of the articular facets injured by this exercise would also be appreciated. Would members please communicate with Mr. Mason direct, at the address given, or send information to the Editor of the Bulletin of B.A.S.M., 8 Outwoods Rd, Loughborough, Leics.