

The Proceedings of a Joint Meeting of the
British Association of Sport and Medicine
with the
British Olympic Association
held at the Royal Society of Medicine, London,
on 21 November, 1973

OPENING REMARKS

ROGER BANNISTER, CBE, BSc, DM, FRCP

Chairman, The Sports Council

Who would have guessed 10 or 15 years ago, that we should now be holding a conference to investigate the need and place of altitude training in the preparation for athletics? It has a 1984 quality about it which I deplore in what is, after all, supposed to be sport. However, sport cannot be isolated from the rest of the world, whether it be the world of politics or of science. This is a necessary conference, and I do not think it could have been held under better auspices, attracting as it has many of those concerned with the answers to the problem.

If I may develop the problem historically, it started with the heartwarming success of Kenyan athletes who were – it is to be presumed – endowed both genetically and through acclimatisation with certain benefits from living in an atmosphere deficient in oxygen. The next stage came when it was decided, in my view wrongly, to hold the Olympic Games in Mexico, at altitude, although it was well known that this would produce fairly severe complications. So to protect the athletes from assumed ill-effects of altitude, it was necessary to investigate acclimatization.

I remember some early results from a group of American world record holders, including Jim Ryun, who went to altitude for 14 days. After coming down Jim Ryun set up a world record for the mile of 3 min 51.3 sec a record in which I have a little personal interest! Five out of six of the other athletes also achieved best performances. They then went to altitude for another 14 days and after coming down Ryun lowered the 1,500 metre world record. After a third spell at altitude, five out of six athletes again produced best performances.

That was the moment at which it seemed to me that there was something rather special going on. This was an experiment, if you like, on accomplished athletes already at near maximum training, and it was something that weighed more with me than any experiments with groups of policemen – however healthy they might be – in trials of the effects of altitude.

The results of the Mexico Olympics made everyone aware of the possible benefits of altitude training on sea level performance, and they were reflected in the growth of training camps for the Munich Olympics by those countries able to afford them.

We are now in the position of having some knowledge and some suspicions about the benefits of altitude: the Pandora's box of knowledge – some of it dangerous – is, as it were, half open. Most people feel the need to know more.

How better to learn more than by this meeting? The British Association of Sport and Medicine will present expert opinions on the scientific aspects; and, through the British Olympic Association, the governing bodies responsible for British participation in the Olympic Games and many other interested representatives, with responsibility for other sports and at times other than the Olympic Games, will give their views.

There are some questions we should particularly like to see answered at this meeting. Perhaps I might list them briefly, as I see them:

First, does a competitor, after ideal altitude acclimatization, have a significantly improved performance? I think this is by no means proven.

Secondly, if there is an improvement in performance, what is the altitude necessary, how long should the exposure last, and what constitutes the ideal training programme at altitude?

Thirdly, how long do any benefits last?

Fourthly, in what sports do competitors benefit, what are the upper and lower levels of endurance, and what is the pattern of maximum effort involved?

Fifthly, if they consider it desirable, can the British Olympic Association, National Olympic Committees, International Federations, and the International Olympic Committee draw up any workable code to restrict or ban altitude training, knowing that it will merely increase the difference between rich and poor countries?

Lastly – and perhaps the most difficult – is the ethical question. If international bodies allow a free-for-all in relation to altitude training, do we in Great Britain wish to go along with the trend, or is there a price for medals, measured in cost and disruption of normal life, which we think is not worth paying?

I hope these six questions are relevant to those present, and I hope also that the experts here will be able to provide answers to some of them.

MEETINGS OF OTHER ORGANISATIONS

EXERCISE PHYSIOLOGY GROUP

The next meeting of the Exercise Physiology Group will take place on Friday 31st May 1974 at the Joint Services Medical Rehabilitation Unit, Chessington, Surrey. The theme of the meeting will be: 'The physiology of limb injury and cardiac rehabilitation.' Any member of the "B.A.S.M." wishing to attend this meeting should contact:

Dr. C. T. M. Davies,
MRC Environmental Physiology Unit,
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine,
University of London,
Keppel Street (Gower Street),
London WC1E 7HT

BRITISH SOCIETY OF SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

The Eighth Annual Conference of the British Society of Sports Psychology will be held at the University of Salford from 6th – 8th September 1974. Details for application from:

The Administrative Assistant (Short Courses) Room 2,
University of Salford, Salford M5 4WT,

or further information from:

The Convenor,
Dr. J. D. Brooke,
Human Performance Laboratory,
Physical Education Section,
University of Salford, Salford M5 4WT