**The Rise and Fall of the Imperial Mile.**

**Roger Bannister’s Part in the History of Track Athletics.**

Although running a race against another person could be considered the oldest sporting activity, it was not until the second half of the 19th century that track racing, with seven specified distances, was formalised, when the British Amateur Athletics Association (AAA) was established in 1888.

The enabler was an oval shaped track of 440 yards. All races, except the 100 yds Dash, were binary fractions or multiples of a mile. This constitutes the Imperial Programme used by the English-Speaking World (The British Empire and the USA.)

The rest of the world settled, for obvious reasons, for a track of 400 metres. It was extremely convenient that the two tracks are almost identical; the 400m track is 2½yards short of the 440yards (or if you prefer, a 440yard track is 2.3 metres longer than the 400metres). As they set out their seven races, they started with the 100 metres and doubled to match the Imperial equivalents. When it came to the fourth race, the obvious choice should be 1600m (four full laps); instead, they chose the inelegant 1500m, and then dubbed it ‘The Metric Mile’. I can only assume that they were beguiled by the ‘five’ in fifteen-hundred, thinking it more ‘decimal’ than sixteen-hundred. Surely the ‘never run’ 1600m is the Metric Mile and a better description for the 1500m is The Lesser Metric Mile since it is 120 yards short of a mile. The race is inelegant because it necessitates a start at the end of the first bend; there could be twelve men in the race, so some kind of stagger must be applied at that start line. This frequently leads to a scrappy beginning of elbows, of pushing and accidental tripping. Finally, what kind of race is one of 1½ kilometres?

As a result, the One Mile race was considered the preserve of the English Speakers. The word mile, in English, can just mean – distance; and further, in order to run a mile on a Metric track, one has to start from a mark 9 metres behind. However, for the purposes of this discourse, there is one other feature which sets the One Mile above other races. It concerns the, now obsolete, wind-up stop watch with a second hand which makes a full revolution in 60 seconds. When, in the 1930s, the World Record for the One Mile was about 4 minutes and 10 seconds, folk began to fantasise about a runner who could match the four circuits of the second hand with four circuits of the track. In other words:

4 circuits on the clock – 4 circuits on the track - 4 minutes - -one mile.

A template has been struck; the Arithmetic is easy to follow; the search is on for a Knight in Shining Armour to deliver the Trophy; and in these isles we long for an English King Arthur to come to the rescue.

This is the stage to introduce ‘The Invitation Race.’ It is perfectly acceptable to include an Invitation Race at an Athletics Fixture. Runners outside the limitations of age, allegiance or geography of the main meeting are invited to compete in an advertised race, which very often is The One Mile. It adds to the pleasure of the spectators; it gives keen athletes a chance to compete against runners better than themselves; and sometimes it is the theatre for an attempt at a record at national or international level. In the latter case the *bona fide* credentials of the race will be scrutinised before the record time is ratified.

It is not clear when, in the 1930s, the Four Minute mile fervour, really, took off. Perhaps in 1932 when New Zealander Jack Lovelock wrestled the record from a couple of Nordics, into English-speaking care with a time of 4m. 7.6s. This was just before the reign of Sydney Wooderson.

Here I might add a few words on amateurism. For most sports in the 19th and the greater part of the 20th centuries, a strict amateur code was applied – no more so than in Athletics. A working man might, with difficulty, be able to compete on grants and expenses, but those with private means had an easy passage. This accounts for the dominance of Public School/Oxbridge men and women in Athletics at that time.

Wooderson was an unassuming cockney with poor eyesight; he was an Articled Clerk in a solicitor’s office, and clearly had no private means. He, not withstanding, dominated middle distance running in the latter half of the 1930s, winning races in the International sphere to the delight of English supporters. He held the World Record for the Half Mile. When in August 1937 he reduced the Mile record to 4m. 6.4s, in the eyes of the nation, he, at only 23, was the man to seize the trophy, sometime in the early 1940s

For any topic involved in the second half of the 20th century, the Second World War is bound to have a significant influence. As far as Athletics is concerned the War robbed the sport of a generation of young men. A more pressing challenge in a noble cause will occupy these men – forget Athletics for a few years!

Not so, in neutral Sweden. Two young men enjoyed racing against one another during the war years. Arne Andersson and Gunder Haegg, over a period of five years, played the ‘Invitation’ game to perfection. They took turns in inviting the other for a One Mile race on running tracks across Sweden. Soon, the World Record was achieved and passed. One can imagine the envy and frustration of budding milers in North Africa or the Burmese Jungle when this news filtered through…and on a Metric Track too! Where was Sydney Wooderson at this time? His poor eyesight rendered him unfit for active service. He spent most of the war years mending army wireless sets, despite being a qualified solicitor, never mind being a qualified international middle-distance runner. Not being able to stand up to Andersson and Haegg must have rankled. By June 1945 Haegg had set a World Record of 4m. 1.4s against his name.

But we must not end this stage on a sour note. What these men had achieved was a massive *tour de force* un-rivalled in sporting history; between them they broke eleven World Records (six miles, five 1500s). They kept the torch burning for milers and other athletes during dark times; and finally, showed the world, emerging from the shadows, that the Four Minute Mile was achievable, without doing it themselves.

When Roger Bannister came up to Exeter College, Oxford in October 1946 to read Medicine at the age of 17½, he was the prototypical post war candidate – just too young to be conscripted. He was a keen middle-distance runner at school and greatly admired Sydney Wooderson who was his inspiration as he progressed as an athlete. The course he had selected, with a view to a qualified occupation, is arduous and it could be eight years before he can draw an adequate salary. Similarly, his progress to becoming a top International athlete will involve hard work and emotional challenge. The title of his autobiography ‘Twin Tracks’ needs no explanation.

One can read elsewhere an account of Bannister’s fascinating progress as an athlete. Before we pick him up in May 1954, there are two adverse incidents to note. In 1952, at the Helsinki Olympic Games, such was his fame that he was expected to be a medal winner (preferably Gold) in the 1500 metres. The British press fuel the fervour. Bannister, himself had high hopes and he prepared his mind and body for one exhausting race against formidable opponents. The heats could be used as a last training session before the final on the following, or next following day. Just before leaving for Finland, he discovered that semi-finals had been introduced for the 1500 metres – this had never been done before; this meant, for him, three races on three successive days. Bannister felt uneasy; he is not prepared for this, but surely it will be the same for his opponents? In the end, it turned out badly; he crouches on the start line, not having fully recovered from yesterday’s race. At the finish, he lacked the energy in a tight finish and takes the ignominious fourth place. Sports writers in the press are un-forgiving.

In the Summer of 1953, Four Minute Mile fever abounds whenever Bannister turns up for a mile race. He had whittled his time down to 4m. 3.6s. He has two rivals in this three-headed contest. John Landy from Melbourne, Australia and Wesley Santee of Kansas USA. Each man had run a mile in about 4m. 3s. Reports were coming from across the oceans almost daily of advanced notices or results. The Bannister camp is jittery.

On 27th June 1953, the Surrey Schools were holding their annual Athletics Meeting at Motspur Park, in South London. A few days before the event, friends of Bannister persuaded the organisers to insert an Invitation One Mile race into the programme. Details of the ‘field’ are scant, but only three matter: Don MacMillan, a rising star from Australia, training in the UK, Christopher Brasher a promising cross-country runner, good friend of Bannister and Roger Bannister, himself. In the race, MacMillan paces Bannister for a blistering 2½ laps and drops out. Meanwhile Brasher jogs round the track so that when he had completed two, Bannister was coming up to his third. As Bannister approaches, Brasher moves off, fresh as a daisy, and he paces Bannister to the tape, then drops out of the race. Bannister’s time is 4m. 2.0s, the third fastest mile ever. The British Board refused to ratify the time as a record; Bannister and his ‘team’ were roundly condemned by the press.

1954 will be Bannister’s last year as a track athlete; once qualified, he must move on. He still had two years of National Service to do. He marks 6th May in his diary. On the first Thursday in May, traditionally, the Athletics Season commences when Oxford are hosts to the Amateur Athletics Association (AAA or Three As). Last year Bannister took the Mile title in 4m. 3s. During the first four months, Landy, in the Southern Hemisphere, had time and opportunity to break the four minute barrier, and ran about six miles in roundabout 4m. 3s. Sante, similarly, in the warmer southern states of the US ran mile races, fewer in number, also in 4m 3s or thereabout. Meanwhile, Bannister makes use of a track near the hospital where he is about to finish his qualifications as a doctor. Under the supervision of his trainer, Franz Stampfl, he and his friend Norris McWhirter tackle the challenge in a more clinical way, concentrating on single circuit running, with slower circuits in between. This had to take place in his dinner hour, and in all weather.

On the Thursday morning Bannister and his team are at the Iffley Road Track; conditions are not promising. Some rain had fallen, but that’s all right. The church tower of the nearby St. John the Evangelist was flying the Flag of St George. The previous Tuesday was a minor Feast Day for the English Martyrs of the Reformation – very significant at Oxford, where nearly four hundred years ago, three Englishmen died at the stake. The churchwarden had decided to give the flag a couple of extra days airing. The horizontal attitude of the English Standard was a cause of great concern to the team; a strong westerly wind means any attempt at a record was out of the question.

Later in the afternoon, the team, in their track suits, are back at Iffley Road. In the meantime, the bulk of the London Daily Papers had decided that the strong wind will preclude any serious attempt at the mile record and returned to the Capital, convinced that they could find better things to do on this drab day.

When Roger Bannister examines the Match Programme, he is surprised to find that, as well as his name and that of Chris Chataway and Chris Brasher, the name of W T Hulatt. He knew nothing of Hulatt’s inclusion, and vice-versa. Tom Hulatt is a working-class miner from Tibshelf in Derbyshire, a competent mile runner – in fact he is the County Mile Recordholder. We can only assume that someone in the upper echelons of the AAA thought the programme contains too many Public School/Oxbridge competitors and, unilaterally, called him in to give a bit of balance. This caused some concern – seven runners in a mile race begins to look crowded. However, T N Miller’s name is scratched from the list; his late inclusion in the home team failed to reach him in time!

Now, let’s examine the crowd. Bad weather would not deter a keen Athletics fan from attending any meeting in which Roger Bannister is on the card. They are, mainly, male students from the Oxford Colleges, but the fixture had been widely advertised. There was no official count of those present, but I myself would settle for about two thousand. They are enthusiastic, they understand the arithmetic of a ‘Four Minute Mile’ ; but they are weary like sports fans, over the globe, about the non-appearance of this ‘Pot of Gold’. They are spared, though, the pessimism from the Bannister team.

It was a remarkable occurrence, by any standard, when at five to six the wind abruptly dropped; St George, no less, is the bearer of good news. Bannister nods, the race is on. He has a few words with Tom Hulett “Look, Tom, the two Chris’s and I have a plan; allow us to get off first – good luck, you might get second place.”

At six o’clock precisely, six men line up on the slightly curved start line. The crowd are keyed up, but silent. Bang! - but the runners are called back; Brasher has made a false start – the tension has been raised and the crowd reflect this feeling. The starting pistol is obeyed this time, and it is Brasher who takes the lead. There is a plan – there is a simple plan. Try to run an even race of four 60 seconds laps; Brasher to pace for two laps, Chataway to take the third, leaving Bannister to tackle the fourth alone. This requires each man to produce a personal best in the same race; Bannister, for instance, has run three-quarters of a mile in under three minutes many times in training – keep it simple.

Bannister is cosseted between Brasher and Chataway as they enter the first lap. Half way along the back straight, Bannister is heard to shout: ”too slow”, but when they reach the quarter, the timekeeper calls 57.5 – so much for the simple plan. Now this can mean two things – you’ll pay for this later or nice to get a couple of seconds under your belt, early on. The crowd consider this dilemma, audibly, and begin to have a life of its own. Brasher continues at the 60 second rate and takes his charge to the half-mile; “One minute fifty-eight point two” calls the timekeeper; the crowd whips up to a roar, “this looks good” it says. Brasher has, indeed, done a good job, but his responsibility is not over; however, exhausted he feels, he must push on at this pace until he is relieved. The transfer of care is a delight to watch on the BBC footage. On the start of the first bend, Chataway moves out to pass the two men ahead of him, Bannister follows him slipping into the space which opens ahead of Brasher, like a baton change in a relay. Brasher can, and must, finish the race in his own time. The crowd recognise this as a serious commitment and the noise is ratcheted up.

Chataway has, himself, been paced for two laps and tackles this third lap with full vigour while Bannister follows in his stride, encouraged by a vociferous crowd. At the bell the timekeeper broadcasts the time on his split stop watch: “Three minutes and half a second”. This changes everything – could this be it, after all the waiting years? The crowd finds an extra ratchet of sound. Now Chataway is approaching the end of his tether, but he must carry on at this, for him, killing pace until he is relieved. Bannister makes his strike at the end of the first bend; he leans inward for extra leverage in his spikes to shoot past Chataway.

He knows what he has to do; he knows he has the capability; the crowd knows the time will be close to four minutes. “Keep going, keep going” is the frenzied cry as the imagined second hand chases him through the last furlong like a thin scythe in the hand of the grim reaper. He breasts the tape ln full flow, collapsing in the arms of his friends. His fate now lies in the unwinding of a spring in the fists of a handful of middle-ages men in trilby hats. One friend who is not at the finish is his coach Franz Stampfl. He was crouched at the 1500m mark, some 120 yards short of the finish. His watch registers 3min. 43.0. This equals the World Record at the time, but would not be ratified since only one watch was used.

Norris McWhirter is a close friend of Roger Bannister. He is also a recognised sprinter who is at the track that evening, running anchor for the AAA in the sprint relay. During the chilly lunch breaks from January to April, at the north London training track, he has been helping Roger Bannister with his interval training techniques; McWhirter, it would be fair to say, is acting as Bannister’s manager. Norris, in conjunction with his brother Ross is, at this time, preparing the contents of the Guinness Book of Records, whose first edition is due for 1955. Ever the opportunist, McWhirter, earlier, had had a word with the Clerk of the Course, to the effect that, if the result of Event 9 is the news we are hoping for, he would like to deliver it.

The timekeepers huddle together while the necessary paper work is done; with a nod to McWhirter one of these papers is passed on to him. The obligatory crackle over the Tannoy brings the crowd to order.

*“Ladies and Gentlemen, Event 9, One Mile. First: R. G. Bannister (AAA) and Exeter College and Merton College Oxford, with a time which is a Track Record and, subject to ratification, an English Native Record, a British Record, a British All-comers record, a European Record, a British Empire Record and a World Record of…three…*

The crowd, deliriously happy, drown him out and those who wanted details will have to look for them elsewhere. Chataway comes second with a creditable 4m. 7.2s and Hulatt takes the third place at 4m. 12s the Oxford pair of Doyle and Gordon are fourth and fifth; Brasher finishes sixth, although he would have had to push through the crowd to find the line. Photographs at the time show spectators running onto the centre of the track; there were no marshals on hand and it would have been plausible for any one of them to slap the winner on the back if he had wanted to.

After the race, in the changing room Hulatt and Bannister exchange words and Roger Bannister autographs his programme. Hulatt is driven home to Tibshelf by his brother – one assumes he had to get back to work. To this day, it is surprising that there is no mention of his name in any of the books by Bannister and his team; it is as though they were embarrassed by his presence. In Tibshelf, though, he is feted for his part in the FMM. When Roger Bannister died in 2018, and the tributes came pouring in, not only did the BBC ignore Hulatt, they all but air-brushed him out of images at the start of the race.

This is by no means the end of the day’s activities. For the spectators there are seven more events to watch, including a double win by Derek Johnson from the home side in the 220 and 440 yards. It cannot be stressed too often that the first sub four-minute mile occurred at a normal athletics meeting. For Bannister and his team, transport is arranged to take them down to London for a BBC interview that evening – one assumes that that the rostrum team had radio contact with Broadcasting House while other reporters would have to scramble for a telephone line. And, for student spectators, particularly, while the news is broadcast round the world, they, residing at the centre of this world, are trying to come to terms with what happened earlier that evening. They feel like the cat that ate the canary. For fifteen years, or so, the four-minute barrier could have been broken anywhere in Europe or the English-Speaking World; now here it is – right in our own back yard.

Meanwhile, John Landy has come north. He, like Bannister, has his eye on the British Empire Games on the west coast of Canada in August where it is inevitable that the two men will run head-to-head in the One Mile in what the press, predictably, are dubbing ‘The Race of the Century’. Wes Sante has been called into the draft for military service. In most people’s minds this should have been an opportunity for the US to exploit the situation to seize the Four Minute Mile Trophy for the nation. Very little is heard about him at this time. At the end of his running career, his achievement is the worst of the three men. He holds the dubious record of the most miles run between 4m. 0.0s and 4m. 1.0s without going below four minutes.

Torku, on the west coast of Finland, traditionally, on Midsummer Day hosts an Invitation One Mile race during a National meeting on a metric track. Landy puts his name down for the race, and surprisingly asks Chris Chataway to run against him in this race. Chris agrees. It is difficult to ascertain the motives of each man – but what a treat for the crowd that day.

Landy’s approach to the race is the same as it always is – take the lead from the gun, and run as fast as you need to. Chataway’s best distances are the 3 and 6 miles, but it will do him no harm to sharpen up his one mile time, Landy runs the first three laps at just under 60 seconds each; Chataway hangs on, happy to be paced. At the bell, he has the temerity to attempt an overtaking; Landy, scared of losing, puts on a super-human burst in the last lap. No one is really surprised by a time under four minutes, but at 3min 58sec this was a stunner. He had knocked 1.4sec off Bannister’s Oxford time – he had held the World record for only 46 days. Chris Chataway came home in 4min 4.0s., a dramatic personal best. Both men can be pleased with the evening’s work.

This heightened the expectation for a race not to be missed at the Empire Games. August 7th was a blisteringly hot day that year in Vancouver. The race can be easily summarised. Landy, as expected leads from the gun; unlike Chataway at Torku, Bannister does not stick rigidly to the leader and, at stages, lets a gap develop. Landy interprets this as weakness and when at the end of the last bend before the tape, he turns his head inward to check, Bannister was close enough to zip past him, creating a sufficient gap to give him the race in a sprint finish. Both men run below four minutes, but the Torku record stands. So, each man can derive satisfaction: Bannister takes Gold, but Landy keeps his World Record.

The last International Meeting in this remarkable year is the European Games in Berne. The 1500metres is not a mile, but it is close enough to ‘stand in’ for a mile. Bannister has a few scores to settle. He cannot forget the Helsinki humiliation; it is likely that some, if not all, those who beat him then, will be in the final.

Roger Bannister, himself, describes every detail of the race in his book. It is different from a mile in that the start is at the end of the first bend in the track. Eleven men line up on a curved line and this inevitably means a scrappy start. Anticipating this to be a tactical race with a sprint finish, Bannister adopts what later generations call the Mo Farrah tactic – hang back to start with, move up strategically when an attainable gap appears, don’t get boxed in, make your final strike for the leadership when you sense your opponents least expect it and sprint without looking back, and the Devil take the hindmost. This he did to take his second Gold Medal, as well as a couple of scalps from the Helsinki race. I have it on good authority from a Danish friend that Nielson (Denmark) was much miffed to be pipped at the post by half a second. Revenge is sweet.

Roger Bannister ends his running career on a high note in a remarkable year. He moves on to similar successes in Medicine, in Academia, in Administration. But for all that, there was a feeling that something was over, and the future would be different. It is significant that the BBC’s Sports Personality for 1954 was Christopher Chataway and not Roger Bannister

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Landy’s Mile Record lasted three years. The next British runner of note was Brian Hewson. In 1955, at the White City Stadium in London, the mile was won by Lazlo Tabori, a Hungarian; coming second was Chris Chataway, just ahead of Hewison who clocked 3min 59.8. with the awkward distinction of running a mile below four minutes and still only coming in third. In 1957, a promising British runner, Derek Ibbotson lowered the record to to 3min. 57.2sec., on an Imperial track in London. In the 1960s, the ratio of Imperial to Metric tracks was shrinking. When ‘The Wind of Change’ brought more countries to independence, it would seem natural to them to build Metric tracks for their schools and clubs, even if they were in the British Commonwealth. More International Events were created using the Metric track. The writing was on the wall – Imperial Athletics was on the way out. The IAAF, in 1976, declared all Imperial Distance races invalid for record purposes, but allowed the One Imperial Mile to remain. This means that, from the early 70s, any mile race would have started nine metres behind in a metric four- lap race. It seemed an ignominious end to a great British Institution.

Two British runners, Sebastian Coe and Steve Ovett, were to dominate World Middle-Distance events from 1978 to 1985. As well as fulfilling commitments to metric distances, picking up medals on the way, between them, they also set up and broke five World Records for the Mile, reducing it to 3min. 47.3sec., all run on Metric Tracks, through Invitation Events at regular meetings with, one suspects, an element of pacing. Steve Cram rounded off this remarkable British spree with a 3min. 46.3 mile in 1985.

Things could have been different though if, at the beginning, the Metric planners had settled on a four-lap distance of 1600 metres for their ‘Metric Mile’. In this case one need only to add 1 second (or 0.8 sec in a fast race) to the metric time to give, more or less, a time for the Mile.

The current World Record is held by a Moroccan, El Guerrouj at 3min, 43.1sec. at an Invitation Mile in Rome in 1999. In twenty years, I don’t recollect any serious attempt to better this time.

For keen followers of Athletics, the Emsley Car Mile keeps the lamp burning. Established in 1953, in memory of Sir William Emsley Car, one time editor of The News of the World, with the initial purpose of achieving a sub Four Minute Mile, this British institution still exists as an annual Invitation event. Ironically, Roger Bannister, himself did not compete in any of the races.

Over the intervening years, as new generations emerge from schools brought up on the Metric system in the classroom and the playing field , the Four Minute Mile is not forgotten; it has slipped into a convenient slot of English events, curious or otherwise, throughout the 20th Century:

Zeppelins Bomb Scarborough – Scott of the Antarctic – Sinking of the Titanic - Churchill at Cable Street – The General Strike – Malory and Irvine on Everest – Dunkirk – the Blitz – D-day –The Coronation – The Four Minute Mile – Suez – The Sixties – The Three-Day Week - The Winter of Discontent – The Falklands War – The Miners’ Strike – The Death of Diana - The Millennium Dome – The London Olympics – Brexit – Boris - Covid 19.

Sir Roger Bannister makes three intrusions, connected with the FMM after 1954. In 2004, fifty years after the big race, a celebratory dinner was held in London, to which any middle distance-runner of worth, still alive, was invited. The two Oxford men, Doyle and Gordon, were on the list as was Nigel Miller, who missed the race; sadly, Tom Hulett’s name was not, since he died in the 1990s. In 2012, when the Olympic Games came to Britain, the Olympic Torch was carried round the track by RGB , now suffering from complications related to Parkinson’s Disease, in a time closer to 40 minutes.

In a brilliant piece of timing, he died on the last day of the World Indoor Athletics Championship in Birmingham in 2018. This allowed representatives of Athletics , from around the world, to pay a respective silence, followed by a respective round of applause. Two holders of the World Mile Record, Sebastian Coe and Steve Cram, who were at the games as part of their job, gave impromptu and moving tributes to the great man.

If we take 1888 at the beginning of this essay and the death of RGB at the end, we find the Median Point at 1954. If we shortened the range with the start of FMM mania in, say, the early thirties and the dismantling of the last Imperial 440yds track in the late seventies, we, also, get 1954. The Imperial Mile was never more popular than it was in May 1954; and, following the Ascent of Everest the previous year, this was a popular comparison – equally, the Coronation in that same year was a symbolic comparison. But, in spite of all this, the future for the Imperial One Mile Race was one of gradual decline.

The breaking of the four-minute barrier on 6th May 1954 can be celebrated, both, as a Coronation and as a Provisional Requiem for the Imperial Mile under the Presidency of Sir Roger Gilbert Bannister C. H.

*©Roger Shakeshaft April 2021.*

***Dedicated to the memory of Adrian Vaughan Rowlands (Jesus, Oxford) who took a Long Vac job of Assistant Lock-keeper at Iffley Lock in 1954. Died by his own hand 1983.***

**Addendum 01**

**Sante – Landy - Bannister**

Let’s get this clear: In the period from the end of the Helsinki Olympics in Autumn 1952 and May 1954, no one would have been surprised if any of these three men had run a mile in under four minutes. In the first four months of 1954, in the southern states of the USA and Australia, Sante and Landy enjoyed being in a climate that would have made this prize possible – opportunities denied to Bannister, stuck in a London winter. But the prize went to Bannister on the earliest day possible for UK Athletics in 1954 – it was a close-run thing.

Wes Sante had much going for him; He held the World Record for the Indoor Mile. He lived in a country which prided itself in producing world class athletes year after year. He was held in high regard in the state of Missouri. On the other hand, he had several brushes with the authorities over taking prize money as an amateur. It is well known that Indoor Athletes quite often do not perform as well outdoors. Sante was drafted into the US Marines towards the end of this period, but somehow the US authorities missed an opportunity here. He never ran a mile under four minutes, although he clocked under 4min 1.0sec half a dozen times. Perhaps he was just unlucky.

John Landy was Australia’s star athlete at that time. A man with private means, he could train in the warm climate of Victoria all year round. He was, like Bannister, a university student who had to balance his time between study and sport. He and all Australia had the Four Minute Mile in his sight. He was a prodigious in his training. In his summer of 1953/54, he clocked up half a dozen Miles at 4m. 3s. or thereabout, but not in fierce competition. His style in competitive racing was simple: take the lead as soon as possible, stay there until the tape, by which time the opposition has been run into the ground. There are two points of criticism here. “If at first you don’t succeed, try something different” and if one aspires to being a world beating athlete, one must compete against other top athletes, now and again.

Roger Bannister is single minded about the FMM. Whatever one thought of the legality of the Motspur Park debacle in 1953, it did show how committed he was to the cause. During the first four months of 1954, while Landy and Sante were sunning it in comfortable climes, Bannister could find an hour at most on a damp and chilly track in Paddington, close to St Mary’s Hospital where he was finishing his medical training. On hand most of the time is his old friend Norris McWhirter, acting as manager and, at times, tutor under the direction of his coach Franz Stampfl. Stampfl could only manage fleeting visits, but his technique is clear. The mile is divided into four quarter mile laps – each one is to be tackled separately, to be put together only when each is perfect, preferably on the day the attempt is executed. On that day he will be using two runners, both of international standard, to pace him as part of their race. On top of that, his knowledge of the workings of the human body is an important part of the preparation for the big race. Incidentally, he is not worried about taking the lead in a middle-distance race; in 1954, running 2¾miles in three races, he led for barely 10% of the distance in total, yet managed to win in each case.

To summarise:

*Get outdoors, Wesley, where the real competition is*

*If at first you don’t succeed, John, try something else*

*I have a fiendish plan. Carpe diem, Roger and out.*

**Addendum 02**

Then and Now 1954 – 2014

I have picked on 2014 as a modern comparison year, being sixty years after the FMM. It is close enough, but pre-Covid19. I ask you to imagine the human body and training techniques had developed slowly, putting off an attempt to run a mile in under four minutes until 2014. Latter day Bannister, Chataway and Brashers are on hand to execute the same plan. What are the differences?

* There will probably be traffic cones on the roadside; bicycles will not be allowed to block the pavement. Partly-uniformed marshals will direct the spectators. The track and the inner grass will be off limits to all except performers currently active.
* The Programme will cost £2, at least. Oxford will not be competing against the AAA; rather the BAA. the Amateur status has long been abandoned.
* One will not go hungry. There is bound to be a refreshment stall of some sort.
* The event cannot be squeezed into two hours. For many years now, women have expected to be treated equally with men and in order to have a full programme of track and field events it must be an afternoon event of four hours.
* In contrast to 1954, there will be people of colour both on the field and in the crowd, and no one will consider this strange at all. It would be strange if any man was wearing a tie.
* Gone are the group of timekeepers and judges huddled together at the finish line. Their job has been superseded by a rotating camera; it is faultless and can measure down to a hundredth of a second. The wind up stop watch Is now a museum item.
* I cannot conceive that the tactics employed by the three men would be different sixty years on. The original plan was both simple and clear, yet with room for some adaptation if things went slightly awry. Whatever overhead score boards are available, one would expect someone to announce the lap times. The reaction of the crowd would be no different; the crowd would be fuelled by a mixture of long frustration and eager anticipation. Whether there is a latter day McWhirter, I cannot tell, but we can be sure that the Guinness Book of Records would be in there somehow.
* Drugs. The only drug evident in 1954 is tobacco, represented by the pipe in the mouth of the chief timekeeper. I would be surprised if any competitor or student in 2014 had a packet of fags on their person. Performance enhancing drugs would be a real issue in 2014. In a friendly match like this one, testing would not be felt necessary; but if a record – especially a World Record – is to stand a chance of being ratified, facilities for drug testing would have to be available at Iffley Road.
* The most glaring difference, by far, is the presence of the i-phone or one of its multifarious derivatives. In 1954, one could count on the fingers of four hands the number of genuine images. The London Dailies’ photographers, almost to a man, returned to the capital in the afternoon, convinced the attempt was off. All that was available were: Freelance Norman Potter’s images (Getty images), Oxford Mail, Cherwell, and any snaps from spectator’s cameras. (Here the author must register his bewilderment at not taking his camera with him that day), Today, coloured images in their thousands can be transmitted into every far-flung corner of the globe. Within seconds the breaking of the FMM would be common knowledge throughout the world. Back in 1954, we felt that, for a brief period, we were privy to a secret before it is released, in stages, to a world audience. Today, there are no secrets; technology at The Four Micro-second Mile will see to that.

**Addendum 03**

**The Personal Experience – A Comparison**

During the 2020 Lockdown, there seemed plenty of time to find a contemporary sporting activity comparable to the evening in May 1954, but so many had been cancelled. The BBC Sports Personality of the Year was Lewis Hamilton – Formula One, not quite “sport” as we know it, but beggars can’t be choosers. I have re-arranged the chronological order of fixtures, but the principle is true.

Suppose a brother and sister, say, keen followers of Formula One, happen to live on the outskirts of Northampton.

“Look, Julie,” says Tom, “I see that Lewis Hamilton is racing at Silverstone today and if he comes first, he is going to set up a World Record of F1 wins; how about popping over to see it done – it’s only ten miles?”

So, they hop on their bikes and in forty minutes, they are at Silverstone. They weave their way round a few cars in the car park and prop the bikes against the wall by the main entrance. They pay £2 for a programme, but get in free because it is late in the race.

They find no trouble getting to the trackside and are thrilled, beyond measure, to see Hamilton take the Chequered Flag just in front of them, thus securing the World Record. When it comes to the Podium Ceremony, Tom has an urge to pat his hero on the back. They, both, cross the track hoping to congratulate Lewis, but forgot about the Methuselah of Champagne ritual, finding themselves soaked in the bubbly stuff.

“I’m hungry” says Julie “let’s get home and beat the rush; I don’t think much of the food here.”

The bikes were there where they left them. Winding, easily, through the traffic, they were home within an hour, ready for a nourishing fish and chip supper.

“Not a bad day’s outing,“ mused Tom “a dazzling World Record and only cost a couple of quid.”

Although they took showers and changed clothing , nevertheless the aroma of Champagne spray clung to them for quite a period, reminding them of an unforgettable experience.

Similarly, for those of us still here, with a sixth sense and the breeze of imagination, we can, at times, recall some of the zest from that effervescent evening in 1954 at the Iffley Road Track, Oxford.

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