

INDOOR HEROES

BY ERIK LAHMY

Athletics is an open-air activity, and apart from the mesh roof of the Munich Olympic Stadium, there has never been anything but air between the record-breaker and the sky above him. But indoor athletics exists... and has done so for over a century. The World "Indoor" Championships in Paris are only a boost to a movement already well under way. It is therefore an opportune moment to take a look at the original and exciting movement of athletics on the covered track.

On the 18th and 19th of January 1985, Paris will host the first World Indoor Athletics Championships, but for over a century now the foremost Olympic sport has been holding more or less regular competitions on covered tracks.

Is it the fact that the events take place in the confinement of a closed structure that explains the relative unpopularity of this alternative form of athletics? Very little documentation exists on indoor athletics and the histories which focus on the feats of the great names in racing and competition usually draw a veil of silence over all that does not fall within the summer season.

It is a shame, because the indoor stadium has been the scene of many interesting high-level encounters and has its share of exciting stories. Athletes find indoors a way of practising their sport regardless of climatic conditions. The weather is stormy? What does it matter, because the walls and roof of the stadium will protect them from its inclemencies! When the mercury drops below zero and freezes the ground, heated halls can provide a remedy. Athletics is then no longer at the mercy of the elements and can become a year-round activity.

Research on the origins of organised sport have revealed evidence of what is considered today to have been the first indoor athletics meeting. It took place, it is believed, in the Ashburn Hall in London on 7th November, 1863, and its programme consisted of four races (110 yards, 220 yards, 440 yards and 880 yards) and a triple jump. The organisation was placed in the hands of the West London Rowing Club. Indefatigable researchers have also come up with an article which

appeared in 1859 containing some indications of a form of athletics in an enclosed space. A certain W. Priestley had bet £22 that he would be able to take 500 hurdles at intervals of 10 yards in less than 40 minutes, at the Lambeth Baths in London. Purists contend, however, that this did not constitute a "meeting" in the exact sense of the word.

The Americans, who are usually at the forefront when it comes to invention and innovation in the field of athletics, were nevertheless preceded by five seasons, the time it took for indoor athletics to cross the Atlantic, the first meeting being held under the influential auspices of the New York Athletics Club in a building situated between 3rd Avenue and 63rd Street, later known as the "Empire City Skating Rink".

Whereas this form of competition did not seem to generate much enthusiasm in the Old World, it caught on in a big way in the United States, developing very rapidly and attracting large and enthusiastic crowds. Thus it was that America staged the first indoor athletics championships.

This great premiere was held in the Old Madison Square Garden, on 8th Avenue, in 1906. But before that, the founding fathers had worked in the relative anonymity of unrecognised organisations. Nevertheless, official or not the forerunner of "national" meets is considered to have been held on the 21st November, 1988. The extremely comprehensive volume "Indoor Track", a painstaking statistical compilation by Scott Davis and Ed. Gordon, records the fact that in 1893, a certain A. P. Schwartner achieved a standing long jump of ten feet seven inches, without bringing the roof down

on his head. This makes Schwartner the oldest recognised indoor champion, since there are no traces remaining of the other events, races, jumps or throws, included in the programme that year. In two thousand years, will Schwartner be spoken of in the same way as Koreobos, the first known Olympic athlete, or Connolly, the triple jumper who won the first gold medal of the modern Games? That we shall leave for posterity to decide.

OPEN DOORS AND CLOSED TICKET OFFICES

Because they had no access here to winter events, the Europeans who were lucky enough to participate in the United States retained an unforgettable impression which they still speak of with enthusiasm long afterwards.

Roger Debaye, a French athlete soon to reach the age of 80, still remembers as if it were yesterday his tour of the United States in the winter of 1948-49. He visited seventeen universities, and, as he recalls, "there was not one which did not have its covered stadium either for training or open to the public". Mr. Debaye was able to run in the packed Old Madison stadium in New York and he remembers that the doors of the stadium had to be opened for the sprint events. Thus the fleet-footed speed kings of the time, Harrison Dillard, Ed. Conwell and the others, ended their spectacular dashes among the cars - temporarily brought to a halt - on Eighth Avenue, Manhattan! This is a small indication of the fact that any self-respecting indoor season inevitably leads towards the open air.

The Americans, who were never afraid of anything, even held a number of "indoor" meetings during the war in uncovered stadia, which is surely the limit! It was a matter of necessity, and in fact most covered stadia were being used as armouries and military training camps, reserved at that time for less peaceful activities than sprinting and jumping. Such were the rigours of war.

Sport then was very different from what it is today. The sporting year was harmoniously built up around the "university season", which lasted all year, and where each activity had its slot without encroaching on the others. The school year started with cross-country, followed by two months of basketball, two months of indoor athletics, two months of American football, two months of baseball and finally two months of summer athletics outdoors. The various activities fitted together in an

atmosphere of mutual respect, where no one tried to poach on the preserves of anyone else, and, in theory, a gifted all-rounder could take part in them all. Subsequently, rivalries between sports and extreme specialisation have made us strangers to a world which still existed barely a generation ago.

THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

The small surface of the Old Madison stadium (it is not easy to cover a surface which will provide an Olympic-size track with laps of 400 m), which forced the doors to be opened, provided a challenge to the imagination in the devising of events. The impossibility of holding throwing events over long distances due to lack of space led to the invention of the "heavy hammer", weighing 35 pounds. Straight tracks reduced to a minimum length led to a profusion of ultra-short sprints. Distances which would probably never otherwise have seen the light of day came to prominence in the confines of the Madison stadium and the Houston Astrodome (which boasts the largest wooden track in the world, with a circumference of 322 m), namely 50 yards, 50 meters, 60 yards and 60 meters on the flat and over hurdles. The imagination of the organisers proved all the more fertile, since new distances meant possibilities of beating more regional and world records, and provided a means of obtaining greater publicity for the managers, glory for the athletes and pleasure for the public, while the local orchestra accompanied the chants of the "cheerleaders", white-hot with enthusiasm. Today, statisticians wallow in mountains of figures and keep scrupulous records on some one hundred and two events which give rise to "best world times", fifty seven men's and forty-five women's events.

That is not all. Matters become much more complicated when the "class" of track where the records were set is taken into account. In fact, as the international authorities have never laid down precise rules on the subject, tracks are distinguished by particular characteristics which make them more or less conducive to good performances, for instance their dimensions (the larger the track, the less the athlete is hampered by the curves), the quality of the surface (cement, wood, tarmac and synthetic materials) or the presence or absence of banking on the curves. This means that in practically all events on curved tracks, i.e. in most events over more than 60 meters, there may be up to six

different "best times". For example, in 1982, the American Mark Belger held the 800 m record at 1'50" on a track less than 140 meters long. The best time on an unbanked track between 140 and 165 m was held by Brian McElroy with 1'51"2, whilst the German Detlef Wagenknecht (GDR) held the record for banked tracks between 140 and 165 m with 1'45". Mark Belger had achieved the fastest time on a track between 165 and 200 m without banking with 1'48"1. Finally, a time of 1'47" had been recorded for John Woodruf, Olar Beyer and Adras Busse, giving them a joint best time over 800 meters, this time on a circular track more than 200 meters in circumference.

All in all, it is hard to see the wood for the trees, but indoor athletics was able to indulge in these illogicalities, which were in the nature of teething troubles, because, by declining to grant it any official recognition, the International Federation left it to its own devices.

The truth is that the international sports pundits did not take these extravagances seriously, and when Roger Debaye, returning from the United States in 1949, suggested to his Federation that it should organise a winter competition in the old Vel d'Hiv, it was pointed out to him that a covered stadium was the home of "the circus, not of sport". The first French "indoor" went took place nevertheless, but it was not followed up.

EUROPE DRAGS ITS FEET

The Germans were more receptive to the idea of indoor events, where athletes could throw, run and jump under cover in the winter season, and they held their first indoor meetings in the thirties.

As we have seen, the English, who had launched the movement in 1863, did not stage their first "National" until seventy two years later in 1935, at the Empire Pool, Wembley. This championship was repeated every year until 1939, when the second world war struck it a blow from which it was not to recover until 1962. Since then, the English indoor championships, held at Wembley until 1965, and subsequently in the covered stadium at Cosford, have had a place, without exception, in every year's sporting calendar.

One unusual and noteworthy aspect of indoor games in Britain is the fact that women did not have to wait any longer than men; their championships took place from the outset in the same years as the men's championships. For once, they did not receive short measure.

The opening of the meetings to foreign competitors ensured that competition between athletes of different nationalities took place at an early stage. However, the first authentically international indoor match did not take place till much later - exactly one century after the meeting in Ashburn Hall. On the 6th and 7th of April 1963, Great Britain was host to Germany at Wembley. The Germans were victorious in the women's section, but the British led the field in the men's events.

YATCHENKO'S GREAT RECORD

The scene was now set for the birth of the European Indoor Championships. The lists of records presented here start with the meeting in Sofia in 1970. That was the first year that the indoor games were given the blessing of the IAAF, although the first meeting took place in 1966 with a different programme, which, among other things, included "mixed" American-style relays which were quite spectacular. After the Westphalenhalle in Dortmund on the 27th of March 1966, Prague in 1961, Madrid in 1968 and Belgrade in 1969 were host to these meetings of the flower of Continental athletics.

Since they began, the European Indoor Championships have produced 46 indoor records (although we must point out once more that these are not authenticated by the IAAF). The year 1970 alone gave rise to seven. Two hurdlers, the Italian Eddy Ottoni and the East German girl Karin Balzer each achieved three world records, he in the single year 1967, in the heat, semi-final and final, and she between 1967 and 1970.

One major indoor feat was achieved in 1978. In Milan, a nineteen year old Ukrainian, Vladimir Yatchenko, beat the official open-air high jump record of 2.33 m, held by himself, with a jump clearing 2.35 m.

This competition has left those who were lucky enough to see it with enduring memories. Yatchenko's performance was a moment without precedent. As his attempts to clear the bar had not all been crowned with success, his record jump was in fact his twentieth jump of the event, which is probably also a unique achievement.

Yatchenko was a real prodigy. His world record of 2.33 m had been set the previous summer in the context of a junior meeting between the USSR and the United States, when he was only eighteen years old.

In Milan, fourteen of the eighteen competitors in the high jump had cleared 2.15 m and seven of

them had cleared 2.21 m. Joint European indoor world-record holder Alexandre Grigoriev cleared the bar at 2.25 m. then faded out. The German Wolfgang Killing, who several days before had equalled the 2.28 m set by Grigoriev, cleared 2.27 m. on this occasion, which would have made him a handsome victor, but which in fact only gave him third place. Two exponents of the straddle style, Yatchenko and Rolf Beilschmidt (GDR) had still to jump. Both of them cleared the bar at 2.29 m, then, left alone at the finish, Vladimir, who had been a little unsure of himself up till then and had missed several attempts, cleared successively and without any further opposition, 2.31, 2.33 and 2.35 meters. His last two jumps were world record breakers.

A TRUER PICTURE THAN THE OFFICIAL RECORDS

It is a pity that the high authorities of sport do not recognise indoor performances which, achieved in perfectly regular conditions, beat the official world records. This has not happened very often, but there have been two occasions in the pole vault when the best indoor performance beat the then world record. In 1943, in the old Madison stadium in New York, the unforgettable Cornelius Warmerdam cleared 4.78 m with a bamboo pole. He had held the world record since 1942 with 4.77 m. Forty years later, a Frenchman, Thierry Vigneron, after a superb launch, touched the bar at 5.85 m. without dislodging it at the European Indoor Championships in Goeteborg. Like Warmerdam, he was himself world-record holder, with 5.83 m.

Not only do indoor events produce perfectly valid performances, but, more important, they ensure a consistency of results which "open air" events cannot guarantee. Under the cover of the stadium, there are no favourable winds, no excessively good or bad conditions. When it comes to athletics as an exact science, it is surely indoor athletics that count. Indoor records? They surely give a truer picture than the official records!

Today, the first World Indoor Athletic Championships constitute a major step forward in the recognition of an activity which is gradually shedding its image as a event in isolation. Paradoxical as it may seem, in the third week in January, in Paris, the world of indoor sports is opening its windows on the world after over a century of claustrophobia.