

WHAT SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP?

by Stan Greenberg

Perhaps the lowest point in relations, especially sporting relations, between Great Britain and the United States, occurred during the 1908 Olympic Games in London. Problems became evident at the opening ceremony when it was realized that the American flag, along with that of Sweden, was inadvertently omitted from those flying around the White City stadium. Then, during the march past of teams the bearer of the Stars & Stripes, Ralph Rose, refused to dip the flag to King Edward, stating that "This flag dips to no earthly King" and starting a tradition which survives to this day.

During the first week of the Games, complaints and insults flew thick and fast, especially from U.S. officials. Because heats were drawn in private, they complained that they were rigged in favor of British competitors. (However, later investigations provided no grounds for such allegations). There were also vociferous suggestions of illegal coaching, rules-breaking, and British chauvinism in particular. Added to all this was the fact that the weather, even by British standards, was not good. Eventually, American officials, whose protests were the most numerous and loudest, were actually barred from the field, leading James Sullivan, Secretary of the American Olympic Committee, to state that "their conduct was cruel and unsportsmanlike and absolutely unfair." It is perhaps not amiss to note here that U.S. officials had had everything their way at the 1904 Games in St. Louis where less than 100 competitors in total were foreign, and at which the athletics program had become virtually an American inter-club match.

All the rancor seemed to come to a head on 23 July at 5:30 in the afternoon, for the 400 metre final. There were three Americans and one British runner - John Carpenter of Cornell University, William Robbins of Harvard College, Britain's Lieutenant Wyndham Halswelle, and John Taylor of the University of Pennsylvania, who later, in the medley relay, became the first black athlete to win a gold medal in athletics.

It may be of interest to note what the protagonists had achieved in the preliminary rounds: Taylor won Heat One in 50.8; Robbins Heat Two in 50.4; Carpenter Heat Fourteen with 49.6; and Halswelle Heat Fifteen with 49.4. In the second round, Carpenter won Heat One in 49.8, Halswelle set a new Olympic record in Heat Two with 48.4, Taylor won Heat Three in 49.8, and Robbins won the last heat with 49.0. Significantly the races were not run in "strings" - that is with strings dividing one lane from another so that the runners stayed in their lanes. Later, but too late, the re-run of the final was decreed to be with strings.

In the final, Carpenter drew the inside position, with Halswelle next, Robbins in third, and Taylor on the outside. It appears that the British officials were expecting "tactics" from the American runners - although it was reported that U.S. coach Mike Murphy had urged his runners not to do so - and set judges all around the track. The starter, Mr. Harry Goble, stated later that he cautioned the runners about jostling and told them of the officials' posted around the track.

The AAA (Amateur Athletic Association) rule, printed in the program that day, stated, “Any competitor willfully jostling or running across or obstructing another competitor so as to impede his progress shall forfeit his right to be in the competition and shall not be awarded any position or prize that he would otherwise have been entitled to.” In the United States, Rule III for referees stated that “When in a final heat a claim of foul or interference is made, he [the referee] shall have the power to disqualify the competitor who was at fault if he considers the foul intentional or due to culpable carelessness, and he shall also have the power to order a new race between such competitors as he thinks entitled to such a privilege.”

When the gun was fired, Robbins went immediately to the front, possibly balking Halswelle, and was leading at the 200 metre mark from Carpenter. Taylor had a bad start. Around the last bend, Carpenter moved up to Robbins’ shoulder compelling the British runner to run very wide. As they entered the final straight and Halswelle pulled up on the outside, apparently to try and pass them, Carpenter deliberately veered more and more towards the outside of the track until, with some 30 yards to go, he and the British runner were within 1½ feet of the outside curb. At this point, incensed officials ran onto the track signalling that the race should be stopped and some of them snapped the finishing tape. The runners crossed the line with Carpenter in the lead (in an unofficial time of 48.6), followed by Robbins, and then Halswelle. For the next 30 minutes there was a bitter argument between officials of both countries, which held up the rest of the track program. An official inquiry was held that evening. It was decided that Carpenter should be disqualified and the race re-run two days later. However, the other two Americans refused to run and Halswelle ran it alone in a time of 50.0 exactly, becoming the only Olympic champion to win by a walkover.

The general level of bitterness against the organizers reached such a level that it was thought necessary by the British authorities to produce a booklet entitled *Replies to Criticism of the Olympic Games*. Unfortunately this turned out to be rather pompous in tone and did little to help the situation. One good result of the problems was that it led to future control of Olympic competitions being put into the hand of the various international sports governing bodies, and not left solely to the host country. One final sad footnote to the incident was that the unfortunate Taylor tragically died of typhoid fever a few months after the Games (†2 December 1908).

But what of the winner, whose moment of glory was so cruelly tarnished through no fault of his own? Was he a worthy winner? Would he have won if strings had been provided, or modern conditions prevailed? Perhaps a look at his pedigree might give some insight.

Wyndham Halswelle was born in the Mayfair district of London on 30 May 1882 to a well-to-do Scottish family. Educated at Charterhouse School, he then entered the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, where he shone as an athlete. In 1901 he was commissioned into the Highland Light Infantry, and served in the Boer War in South Africa, where apparently he was able to take part in a few races, making quite an impression. On his return to Britain, he won the Army half-mile title in 1904 before dropping down in distance and winning the 1905 Scottish and AAA 440 yard championships. The following year he took part in the Intercalated Olympic Games at Athens, placing second in the 400 metres and third in the 800 metres. Back home, he won the 100 yards, 220 yards, 440 yards, and 880 yards Scottish titles - all on the same afternoon - and retained his AAA crown with a championship record of 48.8, which was not bettered until 1931. He spent the pre-Olympic year sharpening his speed in sprint races, and hit his best form a few weeks before the Games, setting British records at 300 yards (31.2) and 440 yards (48.4), the latter lasting for 26 years. After the White City debacle he ran once more, a few weeks later, in Glasgow, and then retired. He was killed by a sniper in France on the last day of March 1915.

His own words on the subject were as follows, “Carpenter’s elbow undoubtedly touched my chest, for as I moved outwards to pass him, he did likewise, keeping his right arm in front of me. In this manner he bored me across quite two-thirds of the track, and entirely stopped my running. As I was well up to his shoulder and endeavoring to pass him, it is absurd to say I could have come up on the inside. I was too close after half-way round the bend to have done this; indeed, to have done so would have necessitated chopping my stride, and thereby losing anything from two to four yards. When about 30 or 40 yards from the tape, I saw officials holding up their hands, so I slowed up.”

References

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