

Gil Dodds: Muscular Christian Celebrity in an Institutional Context

James A. Mathisen

Wheaton College

This paper argues that the modern institutionalized version of “muscular Christian” shifted markedly during the 1940-50’s as a result of a combination of three factors—first, the specific personification of the muscular Christian ideal by world champion miler, Gil Dodds; second, the emergence of a new youth-oriented version of fundamentalist Protestantism in “Youth for Christ”; and third, the rapid institutionalization of sport as a proselytizing tool, beginning with Sports Ambassadors in 1952.

Gil Dodds burst onto the national indoor track scene in early 1942 when he defeated Leslie MacMitchell, winner of 19 consecutive mile races. In 1943 Dodds ran the fastest indoor mile ever by an American. Despite losing seven races to the Swedish champion, Gunder Hagg, in a summer AAU tour, Dodds won the Sullivan Memorial Trophy as the American amateur athlete of 1943. In 1944 he began a consecutive victory streak of 39 races. Then in January 1945, Dodds abruptly retired from running to pursue the ministry fulltime after his graduation from seminary.

Coincidental with Dodds’ emergence as a world-class miler, fundamentalist Protestantism discovered radio and then Saturday evening rallies as means to attracting youthful converts. In New York, Jack Wyrzten left his insurance and danceband business to direct youth rallies attracting 20,000 or more teenagers. Gil Dodds appeared at Wyrzten’s rallies and then toured with him in the summer of 1944 to tell youth about his faith in God. Wyrzten’s rallies became the prototype for the new ‘Youth for Christ’ national organization which Dodds joined in 1945 as a fulltime speaker and exhibition runner.

Youth for Christ had discovered the appeal sports had in attracting youthful converts. Dodds traveled extensively and spoke often, before attempting a running comeback in early 1947. By January 1948, he had set a new indoor mile record and pointed toward the 1948 Olympics. But one week before the Olympic Trials, Dodds injured his Achilles tendon and could not run in the Olympic qualifying meet.

Along the way, Youth for Christ went international with its youth rallies, and Dodds made seven tours abroad between 1949-54. In 1950 Youth for Christ sent Dodds to Japan and Korea to speak and to run, and the next year it sponsored an European tour for American college basketball players. In 1952 a Youth for Christ missionary in Taiwan named Dick Hillis requested a basketball team to aid him. Entrepreneurial coach Don Odle responded with his “Venture for Victory” team which included seminarian Bud Schaeffer. The basketball and missionary results exceeded expectations. Hillis left Youth for Christ to found the mission organization Orient Crusades, and Schaeffer directed its sport evangelism arm, eventually renamed Sports Ambassadors, the first of the sport evangelization entities.

Today the International Sports Coalition exists as an umbrella, institutional structure which includes scores of large and small organizations dedicated to using sport as a means to proselytizing. From Gil Dodds to Youth for Christ to Sports Ambassadors and beyond, “muscular Christian” has become a multi-billion-dollar evangelistic enterprise.