

Scott A.G.M. Crawford
Eastern Illinois University

Foxhunter and Red Rum as National Icons: Significant Equestrian Episodes in Post World War II British Sports History

In 1952, British sports teams and British athletics were facing up to the fact that notions of British superiority were mostly made up of myth, nostalgia, past glories and a sort of boundless optimism that homegrown champions, just like the heroes of the Rover, Hotspur, Adventure and Boy's Own comics, would magically emerge. There was a palpable sense that Finland, in the shape of the Olympic Stadium at Helsinki, would provide British sportspersons with a dramatic stage to showcase guts and championship qualities. As it turned out the hero of the Games was a grimacing figure with a tortured gait. Emil Zatopek of Czechoslovakia won the 5000 meters, 10,000 meters and the marathon. Not one British track and athletic won a gold medal. More than that, no single British athlete won a gold medal in the rest of the Olympic disciplines.

However, the drought was ended in an extraordinary manner. Exceptionality took place in the sphere of equestrianism. A rider called Harry Llewellyn, on a horse named Foxhunter, jumped clear in an afternoon session and this resulted in a grand prix gold medal for the British team. And there emerges the legend, fable, legacy, and accomplishments of a British horse named Foxhunter. Once during a Harringay competition Llewellyn scolded Foxhunter and tapped him firmly with a gloved hand. The crowd went totally silent. A flood of angry mail reached Llewellyn. The message was simple – "You must not hit Foxhunter because he does not belong to you, he belongs to the nation... He [Foxhunter] was the chap they liked – not me. I was not a national hero, but he was!"

Red Rum is the only horse in the history of the Grand National to win the race three times and on the two occasions that he ran, and did not win, he came second. "Rummy" as he was known affectionately, had his first GN win in 1973. In every sense

of the word Red Rum was a hero. He had a great heart and an enormous fighting spirit. And yet the magical element was the manner in which he was loved as if a national treasure. This preliminary essay is a work-in progress and while it focuses on the recognition afforded Foxhunter and Red Rum as British "national treasures," future work is designed to examine the heroic interplay of horse and rider (see Llewellyn and Foxhunter - and jockeys Brian Fletcher, Tommy Stack and Ron Barry with Red Rum). The plan is to eventually cast the net wider and document the cultural role of the horse as hero, celebrity and national icon on the global stage. See, for example, pacer/trotter Cardigan Bay in New Zealand and thoroughbred racers Seabiscuit in the United States and Phar Lap in Australia.