The British Are Coming!
Chariots of Fire Revisited – Lord Puttnam remembers.

One of the most successful Sporting films ever made will have a special meaning this summer. The 1981 Oscar winning “Chariots of Fire” told the story of the 1924 400m champion Eric Liddell, the first Olympic champion to be born in China.

In this Olympic year Producer Lord Puttnam reflected on the genesis of the film.

“I had always loved the film “A Man for All Seasons”. What I loved about it was that important thing in the cinema, the conceit that you would act as he did if you were put in that position.

Originally I was looking for a story something tangible that someone would do something extraordinary but contemporary.

“I literally stumbled across this story. I was reading a book by Bill Henry. It was called the “official” history of the Olympic Games, how official it was don’t know, but I can tell you how old it was, it finished in 1948! So I read this book and I got to 1924. Now it turned out that the book got all sorts of things wrong, but the important thing thank god that he got right was this guy who refused to run in the heats which were run on a Sunday. He eventually ran at the distance he was not fancied at (400m) - he was definitely more fancied in the 100m and yet he won. I thought boy oh boy, this is exactly it.”

The completed film told the story of Eric Liddell’s
Olympic adventure and that of Harold Abrahams who won the 100m.

"I read on and I realised that Harold Abrahams had won that year. We started working with Harold but went for the third meeting with him and met the coffin. Harold had died, and that is why the film begins with the memorial service. Colin went to the memorial service and that is where he had the idea of starting the film in that way."

Puttnam reveals an approach was made to Douglas Lowe who won gold at 800m in those games.

"Douglas Lowe in our first draft was quite an important figure, he won the 800m that year and in 1928 and we wrote to him. I got a letter back from what was now His Honour Judge Lowe saying how much money do we pay? I wrote him what I thought was rather a nice letter saying we are going to make an honorarium of 500 guineas to all involved. He wrote back to say he wanted nothing to do with it. By this time we had created a character Stallard and omitted the fact that he (Lowe) had won which would have been nice but that was that. The day the film came out, the obituary of Judge Lowe who had died the previous week came out in The Times. Half of it is about how proud he would have been to have seen the exploits of his compatriots celebrated. So this man who wouldn’t let us use his name or have anything to do with us ended up having half his obituary in The Times usurped by the movie."

With the help of the British Olympic Association, Puttnam borrowed three scrapbook albums in brown cardboard with details of the games. Then scriptwriter Colin Welland took out a newspaper ad and back came the correspondence from Aubrey Montague.

"I sent it to a number of people a draft including Lord Burghley. He was very helpful said he was very happy to involve himself, but didn’t want us to use his name which is why Nigel (Havers) became Lord Lindsay in the film. We held an open audition in Hyde Park with Athletics coach Tom McNab, we’d decided right at the beginning we were going to work with actors but we needed to find actors who would run and thank god Ben Cross and Ian Charleson could run."

The people who we worked with on the film were Jenny (Eric’s sister) and Jackson Scholz both of whom were hugely helpful. The family I got to know after the film, and there was a lovely moment one of my favourites we ran the movie for them. it so happened that it was also the first time Ben Cross (actor who played Abrahams) saw the movie. He was sitting behind them – the lights came up Eric’s widow saw Ben. "Mr Abrahams my husband was always talking about you, she started to talk as though Ben was Harold Abrahams which was really extraordinary. Then there was this other lovely thing, I said Mrs Liddell, What did you think? ‘You gave him a voice’, she said. Eric was never a good speaker and he knew it – he never could preach the way he would have loved to – but you got one thing wrong. Eric was a beautiful runner. In fact because we had footage of him, we knew we got right was the one thing she thought we’d got wrong."

He admits that other details of the film were given poetic licence. The practice of awarding medals on the podium had not yet been introduced in 1924 for example.

"People would have been upset if we hadn’t given
them that moment. The interesting thing you have to make these judgements, where is the greater truth, the greater truth is the importance that they got that medal. I have never felt for one moment that any of the liberties that we took were wrong. I never felt there were any distortions in the story and the reason that Jacques Rogge loves the film is because of the greater truth it conveys."

Puttnam took the film to China and showed it after a ceremony to honour Eric Liddell:

"I wasn’t sure what was going on – what sort of reaction any way the film was half way through and I looked around to find the Chinese crying their eyes out. There are things that transcend politics. We didn’t know what was going on because none of them spoke English. The Chinese were crying their eyes out and that led me to believe that there are things that transcend politics, that somehow the games are about us and what we can achieve."

Philip Barker

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