

Who was John Mark?

By David Thurlow

The tradition of using one of your all-time greats to light the Olympic flame at the start of the Games was introduced by Finland for the 1952 Helsinki celebration with Paavo Nurmi, then 55, and Hannes Kolehmainen, 62, carrying out the ceremony

Four years earlier, for the first post-WW2 Games, the British picked an anonymous Adonis as far as the public were concerned, following the Germans at the 1936 Berlin Games, who were the first to have the torch carried in relay from Olympia to Berlin and finally handed to a handsome but unknown athlete (Fritz Schilgen) to light the flame.

The British decision to choose someone for his looks rather than athletic ability caused a certain amount of controversy because there were certainly two if not three British athletes at the time whose international pedigree qualified them for the task: 110m hurdler Donald Finlay, the best European from 1932 to 1939, bronze medallist in 1932, silver medallist in 1936, European champion 1938, a handsome multi-decorated wartime fighter ace and in the team for the 110m yet again; Godfrey Brown, bespectacled schoolmaster and Olympic silver medallist in the 1936 400ms individual race, gold medallist in the relay, best European 400m runner from 1935 to 1939, and European champion in 1938; and little 5'6" Sydney Wooderson, world record holder (1.49.2 in 1938) for the 880y until 1953, past world record holder at the mile (1937), the ½ mile (1939), and winner of the European 1500ms in 1939 and 5,000ms in 1946. He was the man to beat from 1935 until his retirement in 1946 and his only failure was the 1936 Olympics 1500ms when his great rival Jack Lovelock, won in world record 3.47.8 after Wooderson had defeated him at the British AAA championships.

Typically the little man who would never let the team down, ran in the heat with a chipped bone in his ankle, twisted in a rabbit hole while

out walking as part of his training, and limped in without qualifying. WW2 spoilt his chances of another attempt to win gold.

Just why the British officials did not pick any of the three (Donald Finlay took the oath) is a matter of conjecture and all involved are dead. It may be that with the British sense of fair play, they decided to pick none rather than one (Finlay looked the part: the bespectacled pair, Brown and Wooderson did not and in those days British sporting heroes were modest low-key chaps. Kept in their place) and go for a handsome, golden boy outsider. They did so, picking a medical student called John Mark, an international 400m runner but of very average ability and only known in Oxbridge running and rugby circles, who not only looked exceptional but was an extraordinarily nice man who, as a doctor for the rest of his life in a country practice in Hampshire, England, was a much loved medical man in the community who gave his life to his profession.

Again typically British, his life after the 1948 Games was practically unknown and how it came to light again, and the fact that he died ten years ago, is an interesting story:

When Sydney Wooderson finally received recognition with a Member of the British Empire award from the Queen for his services to athletics 55 years after his retirement from the sport, Daily Mail newspaper sports columnist Ian Wooldridge gave a great chunk of space to the event under the headline 'Recognition at last for Sydney, jewel of the mile.'

Among those who turned out for the occasion was 1956 OG 3000 m Steeple Chase champion Chris Brasher who sent his Rolls Royce to deepest Dorset to bring Sydney, wife Pamela and their family to Buckingham Palace to receive his medal from the Queen. They went on to a celebration lunch, and the first four minute miler Sir Roger Bannister, one of many inspired by the supreme running of the diminutive Blackheath

Harrier and solicitor in his piece on Wooldridge wrote: 'A wonderful story was told. It may be apocryphal but I hope it is not.

'When the first post-war Olympics were staged at Wembley in 1948, the torch was carried into the stadium by one John Mark, a dentist I believe, who was Adonis handsome but bereft of any athletic credentials.

"Dear me' the Queen – now the Queen Mum – is reckoned to have said 'what a pity they did not get that dear little Sydney to do it."

There are many (myself included) who would agree with her (unlikely) sentiments because it is apparent that those who made the choice did not think that the little weedy-looking but wonderful runner fitted their image of a Greek god to bring in the flame and probably felt that to pick any other athlete of his standing would cause disappointment or jealousy.

The point of the article I originally wrote for Track Stats, the quarterly magazine of the National Union of Track Statisticians, was to remove the slur on John Mark who was an inch or two over six feet, a doctor not a dentist and a full international.

He was also an extremely well loved Hampshire GP (general practitioner) and among his athletics credentials was his cap against France in the 400ms in Paris in 1947 after finishing fourth in the AAA 440y that year. He was also twice a AAA relay silver medalist.

The desire to find out more came in a roundabout way. I was talking to Peter Lovesey who told me that he had been asked by Tony Bijkerk in The Netherlands if he knew where John Mark was. He didn't but he was approaching the subject via Chris Thorne, the authority on Cambridge University athletic history, knowing that Mark had won for Cambridge against Oxford. Chris in turn put him in touch with Dr JDJ (known as Claude) Havard, Mark's predecessor as President of Cambridge University Athletic Club (the Oxford v Cambridge match, the oldest in athletics history, started in 1864).

He told Peter (and later me) that in fact Dr Mark had died on 8 December 1991 after a stroke, aged 66 (born 16.8.1925).

I joined Peter in tracking down the details and obtained a copy of Dr Mark's obituary in the British Medical Journal, written by Dr Havard who was at that time the Secretary of the British Medical Association.

He told me that Mark was a natural athlete at Cranleigh School, an outstanding runner and rugby



forward at Cambridge (not quite getting his blue because of injury) and at St Mary's College, London, where he obtained his degree and then became a GP in Liss, a small county town in Hampshire.

He was picked for his looks to carry the heavy Olympic torch on the day the Games opened in London, 29 July 1948, and it was all arranged before Christmas 1947 when he was already on the Olympic Possible list for 400ms (a rugby injury kept him out of running from time to time and he never ran well after 1947).

His looks were certainly outstanding and he had the girls swooning and swarming around. He was also a member of the Achilles Club, membership only open to Oxford and Cambridge athletes, who in those days, were

the elite in British athletic circles and thus would be known to those picking the torch bearer who had strong Oxbridge connections, particularly the Chairman of the British Olympic Association Council Lord Burghley (1928 OG 400m) and assistant team manager Harold Abrahams (1924 OG 100m Olympic champion).

The Rt Hon Philip Noel-Baker, the British Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, former captain of the British Olympic team who had finished 6th in 1912 and second in 1920 in the OG 1500ms and three times winner of the Oxford v Cambridge 880y (1910-2), wrote in the preface to the official 1948 report:

"Twelve days after it was lit in Greece a British runner carried the torch into the Olympic Stadium. No one who saw it will forget that thrilling spectacle. The Stadium, perfect in proportion, its green turf encircled by the smooth red track; its rising tiers gay with the suffused colours of then 80,000 people in their summer clothes; the teams in white, red, green and blue, lined up across the centre; the massed bands in scarlet, the choirs in white behind; 7,000 pigeons filling the great arena with the beating of their wings and the flickering of their shadows on the ground....it was to this moving scene that the torch bearer came.

"Tall and handsome like a young Greek god, he stood for a moment in the sunshine, then ran in perfect rhythm round the track, saluted again and lit the Flame in the bowl where, day and night, it burned until the Games were done."

That was how it was. I was there and can still see it – and most moments of the wonderful days that followed.

How Mark came to be picked when you know what the officials led by Lord Burghley wanted, is obvious under oath.

It was a very well kept secret. It was never mentioned in the minutes of the BOA nor in its official report. Havard, an Achilles club member, knew but no one else that he knew did.

Indeed the secret was so well kept that on certain days when Mark was studying at St Mary's, a medical school, a white Rolls Royce was sent along to the College to pick up the immensely proud young medical student and

drive him to Wembley Stadium to practice his lap of glory.

Dr Havard said: The actual torch was pretty heavy and he had to practice carrying it at arm's length around the track. A white Rolls began to turn up at St Mary's and he would come off and come back later. He wouldn't tell anyone what was going on but when it happened and the other students found out they were livid.

"When they saw him they used to light their cigarette lighter and run round him in a circle.

'When they said he looked like a Greek god it was right. He did.'

In Mark's obituary he wrote: 'The torch used was exceptionally heavy and to carry it round a 400 metre track with outstretched arm represented a considerable feat, the more so because the competitors broke ranks when he entered the stadium and he had to thread his way through them at the beginning of the final lap.'

Mark went up to Cambridge in 1945, combining serious rugby with athletics, and ran a 2.01.5 half in the Seniors v Freshmen match in the autumn term and then took the 880y in 1.59.8 and was joint second in the 440y behind John Fairgrieve, a fine sprinter who ran in the 1948 OG (reaching the second round of the 200ms) and later became a surgeon, in 50.3,

In the Oxford v Cambridge match in the biting cold of March he led all the way in the 880y from GDC Tudor (1948 OG 3000 m StCh) but was beaten by inches on the run-in by JPS Gibson of Oxford 2.00.6.

He however turned the tables on Fairgrieve in the 440y, beating him by three yards in 51.8.

Dr Havard who was President that year and finished a yard down on Fairgrieve in the 100ys remembers how Mark's father, a businessman, came up with a great idea to enable the two Universities to hold their annual contest (dates back to 1864) at the White City in their first meeting after WW2. The Universities had no money to hire the stadium for their important match and it looked as though it would have to be held at either one as it had been over the last three years of WW2.

He knew that the White City, home of the AAA championships, and Wembley were after the Olympic Games. Both stadiums had the capacity and could easily cope. So Mr Mark senior suggested Havard went to the White City and suggest they staged it, to show the BOC what they could do and put one over Wembley. It worked.

After the match watched by 6,000, the Cambridge team went to Paris [unknowingly not seeking permission from the redoubtable team manager Jack Crump (who was also British athletics team manager at the 1948 Olympics) which undoubtedly would have been refused!] and Mark did the 400/800m double.

He also went on a Scottish tour with Achilles and finished fourth behind Doug Wilson in the Waddilove trophy before qualifying for the AAA 880y final in 2.01.2 behind Tom White (5th 1946 European 800ms, 5th 880y and mile BEG 1950) but fading right away as Arthur Wint (1948 400m gold, 1948/52 800ms silver, 1952 4x400 gold) won comfortably in 1.54.8.

Mark mixed running, rugby and studying at Cambridge and regular hard training produced his best season in 1947 – starting with a disappointing second to the South African Oxford man, PFD Wallis who did a 51.6 and 2.01.6 double, but after heavy exams finishing fourth in the AAA behind the Irishman John Reardon, Wallis and O. Hardmeir of Switzerland in under 50s.

Athletics Weekly said: 'Mark showed that he is getting stronger and outing in a fighting finish instead of tending to fade at the end of a race. We should see some better performances from this well-built athlete.'

They did – a strong leg in Achilles second-placing 4x440y AAA relay team and a good third in a personal best

of 49.5 against France at the White City with Tom Collier of Small Heath fourth. A Sigonney of France won in 48.3. a sub-50 in third behind Derek Pugh (European 400m gold 1946) in the CS v BAAB match.

Mark was in the Possibles list at the end of the year and kept up his training although rugby was the priority. The problem was that Mark, a back row forward who nearly got a Blue, kept dislocating his shoulder which helped neither rugby nor running. Fellow students and players had to keep putting it back, a problem that lasted until he stopped playing in his late thirties.

He was now studying medicine in London but kept running without the spark of the previous year, finishing 6th in the Kinnaird's 440y to Derek Pugh but being running out in the heats of the AAA despite a standard time (under 51) and losing all chance of selection.

Athletics Weekly said: 'He was an unexpected failure with a recurrence of his old trouble, fading over the last 20 yards.' However he picked up a second AAA silver in the 4x440y relay (with Godfrey Brown in the team, his last major race) and was in the winning mile medley team at the Waddilove Trophy with the McWhirter twins.

He had one last season in 1949 when he was fourth and under 50s for AAA v Oxford and Cambridge at Fenner's, fifth in the Kinnaird 440y but not qualifying in the AAA.

He went to practise in Liss, Hampshire, where he was well loved and respected. He had tragedy when his first wife died prematurely, leaving him with three children, but later remarried and lived happily until his sudden death in 1991 from a stroke following a holiday in the USA where he had complained of headaches.