

Foreword

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The single lap was for long regarded as the principal event of the track and field programme, the meeting point for the sprinter and the middle distance runner, requiring the best qualities of both. Originally it was run without strings or lanes and involved tactics unknown to the modern 400m specialist. There would be a dash for the pole position and then, usually, a waiting game until the final stretch when the runners who had saved something for the sprint finish would prevail. In the Olympic Games this form of running led to the notorious incident of 1908 when Wyndham Halswelle (GBR) was allegedly forced to run wide by his US opponents ganging up on him. The race was ordered to be re-run the next day and only Halswelle came to the line to earn his anticlimactic gold medal. In 1912, the Olympic rules were changed and the race was run in strings. However, it wasn't until the 1930s that the event was modernised everywhere. As late as 1931 the AAA turned down a proposal to introduce lane-running for their Championships.

The "waiting game" tactics meant that for years runners didn't perform efficiently and reach their potential in speed. The most successful had the ability to change pace when required. Having something in reserve must have helped Edward Colbeck in 1868 in a famous race on the Beaufort House track when he collided with a stray sheep on the final turn and still recovered well enough to win the AAC 440y Championship in 50.4, a world best for an amateur. It is generally accepted that the visit to the UK of the American Lon Myers in 1881 revolutionised 440y running. His sheer pace over the distance astonished the British specialists. From that time sub 50 second runs became the ideal.

The event kept its special kudos even after lane-running was introduced. Legends were created around personalities such as Eric Liddell at the 1924 Olympics; Ben Eastman, who knocked a full second off the world record; Archie Williams, the first of the great black Olympic winners; Herb McKenley, who started the Jamaican tradition; Arthur Wint, surprise winner in 1948; and the powerful Cuban Juantorena. Great runners all, they helped to sustain the aura of the event before the glamour shifted in recent decades to the 100m.

So it is specially pleasing that Ari Törmä has compiled the most complete statistical history of the stars of this event. He is a dedicated enthusiast who has already been working on the project for some ten years. As a true historian, he has a sense of proportion, knowing that the steady improvement in times is not the whole story. The quickest are not necessarily the best. Pioneers like H.A.Reed and Colbeck have as much right to our attention as runners six or seven seconds faster.

This is the third of Ari's books. His studies of the 100 and 200m are already published and he plans to give all standard events the same meticulous attention. There is every prospect that he will complete this huge assignment. As a recent member of the ATFS, he is a young man among statisticians, most of whom can remember watching many of the twentieth century stars mentioned above. Of course such a project can never reach perfection. New marks are forever coming to light, especially now that so many newspaper archives can be accessed online. We have toiled for more years than we would care to reveal over a compilation of UK year lists from 1866-80 for all events, and it has still to be published, so we can only applaud and admire this endeavour.