

HELSINKI, 1952

I gasped at the American in front of me casually helped himself to four steaks. Of course, he was a very big chap, it was true. And now I looked around again I could see that the vast marquee was in fact full of very big chaps. All seemed bronzed, fit, and rather well developed. One felt like a new boy who had gone down to games and found himself in the Pavilion with the 1st XV. But it was my turn to collect food. Behind the counter was a row of very good looking Finnish girls, and on it a great variety and quantity of British and American type dishes. I helped myself to about twice as much as I could eat and carried my tray to a table. The gentle looking negro oppose was, somebody told me, the world's weightlifting champion [John Henry Davis]. Any smallish car blocking the road in front did not, I gather, provide much of a problem for him. The dapper little man at the next table was Sammy Lee, who had won the high diving competition at the last Olympics. And in the other corner I could see and hear a boisterous group of Jamaicans. At the end of the week they were to beat the assembled strength of the United States at 4 x 400 metres in the most exciting race of all, winning by a foot to beat the world record by more than 5 seconds.

This was my first impression. And on looking back I think that the general atmosphere was well captured by the scene that greeted one in the dining room. The hospitality and kindness of the Finns, the faultless organisation, the number of competitors, reporters, photographers, and hangers on, the size of everything – the marquee itself in which we ate must have been 150 yards long – all this was immediately apparent. Of course, the air of excitement was there too; close to the minds of most was the prospect of ruthless all out competition, when friends, coaches, advisers would no longer be of any help; when the athlete would really have the chance to discover the limit of his ability. The competent and confident appearance of one's opponents was, I thought, alarming. But at the same time there was no mistaking the genuine spirit of friendship that did exist between competitors. People who have not seen an Olympic Games from the inside do not believe this, and start taking about "incidents". All I can say is that I got to know and like a great number of athletes from different countries, one or two of them from behind the Iron Curtain. I did not come across any cases of fouling or unfairness. And I came to the conclusion that where "incidents" do occur, and there were none in the athletics this time, they are generally caused by the Press.

There is little that one can write of the actual races that has not been written of *ad nauseam* already. Tony Fox (Abbey House 1942-46) performed magnificently in the sculling. It was a fine achievement to reach the final. In a heat he beat Mervyn Wood of Australia, the winner of the Diamond Sculls at Henley this year, and a really great performer. In the final Fox met with one of those unforeseeable misfortunes, against which there is no guarding. A hopelessly bad start gave him no chance of recovering.

Of the athletes I remember first, and first by a long way, Zatopek, his great sense of humour, the extraordinary way in which he managed to persuade himself before each race that he had not really a chance of finishing in the first three, and the impudent ease with which he inevitably won. I remember too Wint's great race. At the age of 32, after a severe muscle injury, and a little more than a fortnight's training, he came within inches of beating the firm favourite, Whitefield of America. And I remember the 100 metres, where the difference between the first and the fourth man was perhaps six inches.

But there is a great deal that one remembers. For anyone interested in athletics, the Helsinki Games probably produced more seemingly impossible performances than any previous Olympiad. On the subject of the athletics, however, there is one thing that must be said. The team was most certainly not a failure. The howl that went up in the papers at the time was frankly due to the ignorance of the majority of the British press. Knowing no better, they had been wildly optimistic beforehand, predicting anything up to twelve gold medals. When, somewhat unfortunately, the team failed to produce one, scapegoats had to be found. In fact the winning of the gold medals involves a good deal of luck, and provides no suitable criterion of success at an Olympic Games. Russia, France, and Germany all failed to win gold medals. On the points system of places in the first six, Britain was third behind the USA and Russia. Considering the respective populations of the three countries, I doubt if we shall ever do better. But whatever the verdict, there were few signs of gloom among the team. Those of us who finished early in the week had the longer to enjoy

Helsinki, and to take advantage of the Finns' hospitality. This proved a far greater test of stamina than any race; and by the time we landed in England again, I for one felt very tired.

The Olympic Games provide a pitch of sustained excitement that one does not reach very often. One could hardly doubt that they are now the world's greatest sporting event, and to be a part of them, however small, was a great experience. And when all is said and done, you don't very often get the chance at helping yourself to two steaks.

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The Shirburnian, Michaelmas 1952.