



ERIC LIDDELL

A Champion for All Time

ERIC LIDDELL: A Champion for All Time?

The British film classic *Chariots of Fire* won four Academy Awards in 1981, including Best Picture. At the time, the story, set during the 1924 Olympics, ignited worldwide interest in Scottish runner Eric Liddell, "the man who wouldn't run on Sunday." Admiration for this incredible man and athlete is just as strong today as it was when he was at the height of his career.

As a student and runner at the University of Edinburgh, Liddell's consideration for others inspired respect from his teammates and opponents alike. A rival from Aberdeen University recalled sitting on the cold turf one blustery day, awaiting the start of his race. Eric noticed him and, without a word, covered the man's shoulders with his coat and walked on. At another competition a black runner wandered alone on the infield, ignored by the scores of other contestants. Eric approached, shook hands with him, and they talked together until the young man's event was called. Sportsmanship and genuine concern for others did not make headlines, but this behaviour won for Eric the admiration of his fellow competitors.

In July 1923 Liddell's actions during competition at Stoke-on-Trent were typical of his behaviour at every race. In the minutes leading up to the final of the 220 yard event, Eric Liddell walked from one opponent to another, offering the use of his small trowel to dig starting holes in the cinder track. With that completed, 'the Flying Scot', as he had been nicknamed, wandered down the line, smiling, shaking hands with each runner

and wishing him all the best. Some spectators remarked that Liddell was merely saying good-bye to his opponents because after the gun it was the last they would see of him. On this day, as on many others, that's exactly what happened as he raced to victory. Between the starter's pistol and the tape was the only time Eric did not intentionally put others ahead of himself.

After winning the 100 and 220 at Stoke, Eric had a chance to achieve a clean-sweep of the sprints with a victory in the 440 final. Yet he had taken scarcely three strides in the race when Gillis, an English runner, trying to move inside on the unmarked cinders, knocked Eric off the track, causing him to stumble onto the infield. Thinking himself disqualified, Liddell stood for a moment until a Scottish judge shouted for him to go on. He set off after the others, a good 20 yards behind the pack.

His trainer Tommy McKerchar watched in disbelief as Eric's spikes shredded the rain soaked track. His legs pumped furiously, gradually cutting the gap between himself and the leaders. McKerchar had trained hundreds of athletes to dig deep and summon all they had in a race, but he had never seen any man run like Eric ran then. Tommy threw his cigar on the ground and joined the crescendo of cheers that rolled like thunder from the stands.

Around the final turn Eric was in fourth place, only ten 10 yards behind Gillis. With 40 yards remaining Liddell strained past another runner and then threw his head back and ran with wild abandon. The crowd went into a frenzy as Eric broke the tape two yards ahead of Gillis and then collapsed into the arms of his Scottish teammates. They carried

him, gasping and heaving, to the pavilion where he summoned enough strength to refuse a sip of brandy, requesting instead only a drop of strong tea. For an hour Eric lay on the table as McKerchar massaged life back into his quivering muscles.

"You ran 51.2", Tommy said. "Scotland won by half a point."

Eric managed a smile. His time after being knocked off the track was only one second more than his record setting win a month before in the Scottish Inter-Varsity race.

Those who witnessed the race could not describe it without shaking their heads in wonder. There was no way a runner could make up that distance over 440 yards. Yet Liddell had done it; they had seen it; and they would never forget it. If Eric had never run another race, he would have been enshrined in Scottish hearts for his courage alone.

The Olympic Games in Paris were only a year away and everyone in Scotland now had their hopes pinned on Eric Liddell. They were dumbfounded a few months later when Eric announced that he would not run in the 100 metres, the race he was favourite to win.

Liddell himself had been stunned to learn that the heats for the Olympic 100 metres were scheduled on a Sunday. He went before the British Olympic Committee to say that he could not compete on a day he believed God had set apart for worship and rest. He did not want to cause problems, but this was the choice he felt he had to make because of his commitment to live his life for God. He was, however, quite willing to compete in other events that did not involve running on Sunday.

While some people praised Liddell for standing true to his convictions, others suggested that his duty to his country was a higher responsibility than his personal beliefs. Eric remained politely firm and began training for the 200m and 400m races, although he was not considered an Olympic contender at either distance.

Then, early in July 1924, he travelled to Paris to compete as a member of the British Olympic team. The rest, as they say, is history.

British hopes soared straight away when Eric won a bronze medal in the 200 metres. Also, despite the critics doubting his ability to win the 400, Eric advanced through the early heats and reached the finals on July 11. That morning, as he left his quarters, one of the British team masseurs pressed a folded note into his hand. Eric thanked him, and added, "I'll read it when I get to the stadium." Later, during a quiet moment in the dressing room at Colombes, Eric unfolded the paper and read: "It says in the Old Book, 'Him that honours me, I will honour.' Wishing you the best of success always." Eric had never doubted his decision not to run on Sunday, but the public comments about his disloyalty and selfishness in putting his personal religious beliefs above the national interest had always hurt. It came as a great encouragement to know that someone shared his view that, win or lose, pleasing God was the most important thing.

At 6:30 p.m. the summer sun still shone as the athletes gathered for the 400 metre final. At the crack of the starter's pistol, Eric was off like a shot, running the first 200 metres in 22.2 seconds, with American Horatio Fitch three yards behind him. There seemed no way he could continue that

pace for the entire race. Down the final stretch, Fitch strained to close the gap only to see Liddell throw his head back and put on a burst of speed that carried him to victory by five metres. When his time of 47.6 seconds was announced as a new Olympic and world record, the crowd went wild.

The next year, at the 1925 Scottish Amateur Athletic Championships in Glasgow, Eric again won first place in the 100, 220, and 440 yards. The crowd's cheers for Eric were tinged with the sadness of knowing these were likely the last races he would run in Scotland. A few days later he embarked on a journey across Asia on the Trans-Siberian Railroad. His destination? China.

His decision to go to China might not have been surprising, since Eric had been born there, the son of missionary parents. Yet many couldn't understand why, at the peak of his athletic career, he would leave it all to become a missionary teacher.

Months before the Olympics, Eric had decided to go to China to teach science and help with sports at the Tientsin Anglo-Chinese College, supported by the London Missionary Society. He believed that God had given him health and knowledge and that these were to be used unselfishly to help bring a better life to others. So Eric made a four year commitment to serve the Chinese people he loved.

In China, Eric met and married Florence MacKenzie, and together they made their life there and began raising a family. Then, in 1941, with the threat of world war looming, Eric sent his pregnant wife and their two daughters to safety in Canada, promising to join them as soon as he could. Instead he found

himself with 1,500 others in a Japanese internment camp in occupied China. As he always had, even in these harsh circumstances, Eric helped those in need around him, carrying water and coal for the elderly, organising games and teaching science to teenagers in the camp. As 'Uncle Eric', he was beloved by all.

It was in this camp at Weihsien that Eric Liddell, aged 43, died of a brain tumour on 21 February 1945.

ERIC LIDDELL:

'Pressing On To Win the Prize'

With the world at his feet, 23 year old Eric Liddell had left the track and gone to China to teach. To those swept along with his achievements, it must have seemed a bizarre decision to throw away what was already an explosive career, not to mention the fame, adoration and wealth that came with it—but his actions showed these weren't his priority.

God was Eric's priority. That's why he didn't want to race on that Sunday in Paris. That's why he was willing to give up all so that he could serve God in China. That's why he was willing to help others right up to the end of his life in the camp at Weihsien.

Centuries before, Paul, a writer in the Bible, used an image from athletic competition when he wrote: "I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us" (Philippians 3:14).

Eric ran his race of life, not for a gold medal or the things associated with it, but for God. Eric strained

to follow the Bible passage given him as he set off for the stadium in Paris: "Him that honours me, I will honour." He tried to honour God in everything he did, knowing that God would honour him with the prize that Paul talked about: an unending life lived with God.

Eric's love for God motivated and influenced everything he did. Even when Eric ended up in an internment camp in China, he knew God would be right there with him. He also knew that God had a place for him in heaven when the time came.

How could he be so sure? Paul tells us that we receive "the heavenly prize for which God, *through Christ Jesus*, is calling us" (Philippians 3:14). John, another writer in the Bible, tells us: "For God loved the world so much that He gave His one and only Son [Jesus], so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). So it was only by 'believing in' Jesus and dedicating his life to Him that Eric could be certain of receiving the heavenly prize Paul talked about. God wasn't some distant figure to Eric Liddell—He was real and close—and that's why his life was radically different.

We can only dream of Olympic Gold, and most of us will never achieve it. Yet we can all receive the much more valuable prize that Eric Liddell treasured by living for God.

He was talented, hardworking and conscientious, which is why he won so many races and so much admiration. He was also a man who enjoyed life with God and knew his place in heaven was guaranteed. He ran well and finished strong in his race for the prize that will last forever. We

encourage you to join the 'race' and win the 'prize' of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

If you would like to know more about having a personal relationship with God, please contact your nearest RBC office (address on the back of this booklet), and we will send you an explanatory booklet.

Eric Liddell: Pure Gold by David McCasland, a more detailed account of the Eric Liddell story, is also available for purchase from bookstores or the Discovery House Publishers website.

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