

A Short Biography of Eric H. Liddell (1902 – 1945)

Flying Scot Refuses To Run On Sunday

Most of us only think about Eric Liddell as ‘the man who wouldn’t run on Sunday’, about whom the Oscar winning movie ‘Chariots of Fire’ was made, and who owes much of his fame more to a race he didn’t run than any he did.

He was born on 16 Jan. 1902 in North China, the second son of missionaries. In 1920, after 12 years at Eltham College boarding school in Blackheath, Surrey, Eric joined his elder brother Rob at Edinburgh to study for a BSc in Pure Science.

However, science was never to provide anything like the stimulus that pulled the young Eric in two differing directions - a missionary zeal and an intense talent for sport.

Athletics and rugby played a large part in Eric’s University life. He ran in the 100 and the 220 yards for Edinburgh University and later for Scotland.

He played rugby for Edinburgh University and between 1921 and 1923 played in seven Scottish Internationals. However, his life was to follow a different pattern, as, realising there was not time enough in the day for both sports, he chose to concentrate on running. In 1923 he won the AAA Championships in athletics in the 100 (setting a British record of 9.7 seconds that would not be equalled for 23 years) and 220 yards (21.6 seconds).



‘Chariots of Fire’ is the 1981 fact-based story of two athletes in the 1924 Olympics: Eric Liddell, a devout Scottish Christian who runs for the glory of God, and Harold Abrahams, a Jew who runs to overcome prejudice. The film's title was inspired by the line, "Bring me my chariot of fire," from the William Blake poem adapted into the popular British hymn ‘Jerusalem’; the hymn is heard at the end of the film. The original phrase "chariot(s) of fire" is from 2 Kings 2:11 and 6:17 in the Bible. The film is also notable for its memorable theme by Greek composer, Vangelis, who won an Academy Award for Best Original Score.

One inaccuracy surrounds Liddell's refusal to race in the 100-metre event at the 1924 Paris Summer Olympics. The film portrays Liddell as finding out that one of the heats was to be held on a Sunday as he boards the boat that will take the British Olympic team across the English Channel to Paris. In reality, the schedule and Liddell's decision were both known several months in advance, though his refusal to participate remains significant. (Liddell had also been selected to run as a member of the 4×100 and 4×400 relay teams at the Olympics but also declined these spots as the finals were to be run on a Sunday.)

Due to his religious principles, Liddell refused to run in the 100m heats, which were held on a Sunday. Instead, the Scot elected to run in 400m, a distance in which he was a good performer, but which was certainly not his forte. Eric ran in the 200m race, and finished third, behind Paddock and Scholz. He faced a strong field in the 400m, in particular from Scholz, and had also to contend with some negative press, who could not understand his placing God above winning a medal for the King. Liddell, however, was ready for the challenge, and, after sportingly shaking the hands of each of his competitors, the "Flying Scotsman" was off. An impeccable run saw the Scot not only collecting gold by a margin of some six metres, but also setting a world record of 47.6 seconds in the process.

After graduating, he threw himself headlong into missionary work, returning to China in 1925, to Tientsin, where he was ordained a minister in 1932. He married Florence Mackenzie two years later, with whom he had three daughters, Patricia, Heather and Maureen. In 1941, life in China had become so dangerous because of Japanese aggression, that the British government advised British nationals to leave. Florence and the children left for Canada to stay with her family when Liddell accepted a position at a rural mission station. He joined his brother, Rob, who was a doctor there and Eric arrived at the station in time to relieve his brother, who was ill and needing to go on furlough.

In 1943, Liddell was interned by the Japanese authorities in a camp at Weishien. On February 21, 1945, he began coughing uncontrollably, and as friends came to his aid, he lay back and uttered the words "It is surrender". An autopsy later revealed that Liddell had a large tumour on the left side of his brain. He died never having seen his third child, Maureen Liddell. He had the opportunity to leave China but he chose to stay. In 2008, just before the Beijing Olympics, Chinese authorities revealed that Liddell had refused an opportunity to leave the camp, and instead gave his place to a pregnant woman. Apparently, the Japanese and British, with Churchill's approval, had agreed upon a prisoner exchange. News of this final act of sacrifice surprised even his family members.

Clearly a man who followed his missionary zeal and service to others rather than follow a life of celebrity.

Sandy Nellies