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Report:

Cross-Country Running in the Olympics: New Debate Has a Long Legacy

Original Content by Andrew Boyd Hutchinson

In January of 2015, I.A.A.F. presidential hopeful Lord Sebastian Coe was quoted as saying “I would love to see cross country back in the Olympic program.”¹ What many don’t realize is that the Olympics and the sport of cross-country have a connection dating back to the 19th century. Here’s a closer look at this fascinating history.

The First International Competitions

At the turn of the 20th century, athletic associations in the home nations of the United Kingdom, and especially England, began to place a newfound importance on the sport of cross-country running, a sport that had only recently seen wider international exposure. In March of 1898 the French Athletic Federation challenged England in the "Cross des Nations", the first time organized teams from England and France raced over varied terrain.²

In March of 1903 England’s “Little Wonder”, Alfred Shrubbs, ran away with the first International Cross Country Championship title (a precursor to the modern *World Cross Country Championship* held by the I.A.A.F.)³. The Home Countries, England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales, were the only four nations represented.

It’s not widely known that a week prior to this inaugural championship that Shrubbs—the top runner of his day—had met club teams representing French, Belgian and Swiss cross-country runners in Paris⁴—only the

¹ Scott Douglas, *Runner’s World*, January 2015

<http://www.runnersworld.com/olympics/seb-coe-advocates-for-cross-country-to-return-as-olympic-sport>

² *Press*, March 16, 1898 - <http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&d=CHP18980516.2.53>

³ Results for the inaugural International Cross Country Championship

http://web.archive.org/web/20070614022453/http://mypage.bluewin.ch/tomtytom/iccu/wxc_SM1903S.html

⁴ Page 75 of "The Little Wonder, the untold story of Alfred Shrubbs, World Championship Runner" by Rob Hadgraft (2004) http://www.alfieshrubb.ca/index.php/photo_album/image_full/78/ - A picture of a medal won by Alfred Shrubbs against the Racing Club de France in 1903, featuring a short description of the club cross-country meeting that same year.

second international cross-country meeting away from English soil. The first International Championship ended up a week later due to his absence.⁵

France first appeared at the International in 1907 and became a permanent member, hosting the event for the first time the following year.

Olympic Origins

While a Frenchman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, is credited with establishing the modern Olympics, it was England that first revived the ancient Greek games, and it was in the English Midlands (a perennial hub of cross-country running since the 1850s) where de Coubertin was introduced to the idea.⁶

As early as 1612, a man named Robert Dover established an English athletics contest known as "The Olympicks" at Chipping Camden, Gloucestershire, which involved running, jumping, throwing the hammer and pitching the bar.

More significant was an annual festival at Much Wenlock, Shropshire, started in 1850 by Dr. William Penny Brookes. Events here were not much different from today's sports. De Coubertin visited England several times (he was also enthralled with one of the earliest accounts of cross-country running at Rugby School in England, featured in *Tom Brown's Schooldays*). In 1889, after a visit to Dr. Brookes and the Wenlock Olympian Society, de Coubertin organized the *Congress of Physical Education* in Paris.⁷ And from there came the Summer Olympic Games.

In October of 1910, at a meeting of the Amateur Athletic Association (the governing body for English amateur athletics), a gentleman by the name of Percy Fischer—himself a member of the Olympic track and field committee—was able to announce that "Thanks to the good offices of the British representatives in the International Olympic Committee, the 800 meters, the 10,000 meter run, and a cross country race of five miles were added to the program of the Games of Stockholm 1912."⁸

By the summer of 1912, the best distance runners of the world came not from France or England, but from the Nordic nations of Sweden and Finland. And while the Swedes and Finns had been excluded from the International Cross Country Championship, the athletic prowess of runners from these nations was on full

⁵ "Due to Shrubbs' absence..." Gordon Stevenson - <http://www.heraldsotland.com/sport/other-sports/taking-to-the-hills-with-shrubbs-on-their-mind.115885775>

⁶ Page 18, "Fleet and Free, a History of the Birchfield Harriers Athletics Club" by Gareth Rogers (2005)

⁷ "Randonneurs Ontario, Profile of Pierre Giffard" <http://www.randonneursontario.ca/history/giff.html>

⁸ Giorgio Reineri, *The Italian Encyclopedia of Sports "Enciclopedia dello Sport"* (2004)

http://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=it&u=http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/atletica-le-specialita-il-cross-country_%28Enciclopedia_dello_Sport%29/

display when a *Cross Country Individual and Team Championship* debuted in the summer Olympics at the fifth Olympiad in 1912. This particular race was set to be a showdown between France's Jean Bouin (the International Cross Country Champion in 1911 and 1912) and Hannes Kolehmainen, the man who had already won the 5,000 and 10,000 meter titles at the games defeating Bouin in a hair-raising 5,000 meter final. The cross-country race wasn't close. The Finnish Kolehmainen led a duo of Swedes, Hjalmar Andersson and John Eke through the 12 kilometer course, and Swedish or Finnish runners occupied ten of the first eleven finishing places. Bouin never made it to the finish line.⁹

The Games of the sixth Olympiad in 1920 (a full eight years later due to World War I), saw much the same story, with different names. Finland's Paavo Nurmi was expected to have a close battle with France's Joseph Guillemot. Instead Nurmi easily pulled away from Sweden's Eric Backman over the eight kilometer course, while Guillemot sprained an ankle with just under two miles left to go.¹⁰

1924 in Paris was the final year that cross-country was contested as a team or individual standalone sport in the Summer Olympics, and for good reason. The course along the banks of the river Seine was reasonably flat, but the temperature was unbearable: 97 degrees in the shade, more than 120 degrees in the sun. As far as is known, there has never been a hotter day in Olympic history. With a nearby factory spewing toxic fumes into the air along the course, only 15 runners were able to finish out of a field of 39 starters. At the time, sufficient hydration was not the constant concern it is now, and the combination of conditions produced bouts of sun-stroke, unconsciousness, disorientation, vomiting, and exhaustion for a majority of the athletes. Eight athletes were taken away on stretchers and two were pronounced dead from heat exhaustion—prematurely, as it turned out. Both runners recovered. The 10,650-meter race was marked by flags along a course of rough grass, dirt roads and a few measurable obstacles. Competitors fought through heavy dust, thick weeds, and the noxious fumes.¹¹ For defending champion Paavo Nurmi, however, it was almost a walk in the park: he won easily, appearing unfazed by the many challenges. Of his competition he simply said, "They trained poorly."¹²

Fear for the safety of the athletes led to elimination of cross-country from subsequent Olympics, and cross-country fans were left with only the International Cross-Country Championship to satisfy their interests.

⁹ <http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/summer/1912/ATH/mens-cross-country-individual.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.sports-reference.com/olympics/summer/1920/ATH/mens-cross-country-individual.html>

¹¹ Pages 18-21 "From paper chase to steeplechase: A Short History of Cross Country Running" *Athletics Weekly*, Jason Henderson (2001)

¹² "Faster, Higher, Stronger: Stories of the Olympic Games: 1500 Metres" BBC2 Media (2012)

The Discussion Continues

In his book *Jubilee History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953*, author L. N. Richardson refers to discussions in 1937 as to “the advisability of making representation to the Olympic Association to include a cross-country event in their winter program.”¹³

Referring to his own role in the discussion, he says that one year later “The honorary secretary of the English Cross-Country Union, Mr. L. N. Richardson, after explaining that he was speaking as an individual and not on behalf of his country—admitting that his own Union was opposed to the proposal—made an eloquent and passionate appeal in support of the inclusion of cross-country running in the Olympic Games program. After a lengthy discussion, it was agreed to refer the whole matter back to the member countries with an instruction that they should be prepared to vote on the subject at the next meeting of the board.”¹⁴

Further details are shared under the heading for the year of 1939. “At the council meeting held on the morning of the race, further consideration was given to cross-country running being given Olympic status. The subject was discussed at length and on being voted upon the whole of the member countries favored the idea with the exception of England, whose representatives were forbidden by their Union to participate in the voting. The honorary secretary was asked to convey the decision of the council to the honorary secretary of the International Amateur Athletic Federation.”¹⁵ It is unknown whether the result of this vote ever got delivered to the I.A.A.F., or whether further action was made at the time. Less than six months later, in September 1939, Germany invaded Poland and World War II was underway.

Cross-Country and the Olympics: A Postwar Summary

But, despite the war, the issue never went away. In 1947, the *Jubilee History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953* picks up the story: “At the council meeting in 1939, reference was made to the proposal that each member country should communicate with the I.A.A.F. asking them to consider the inclusion of a cross-country race in future Olympic Games. Belgium and Eire complied with this request. The following is an extract from the minutes of the I.A.A.F. dealing with this proposal:

"Ritter Von Halt said that the arranging of such a race could not be made because of the present rules of the International Olympic Committee. The council decided to recommend the congress *not* to accept the proposal. The various members of the council being of the opinion that cross-country racing was a fine sport, well deserving encouragement, empowered the honorary secretary to study the question in order to find out if international intercourse in this event could be promoted in some other way."

¹³ Page 53 "Jubilee History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953" By L.N. Richardson (1954)

¹⁴ Page 55 "Jubilee History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953" By L.N. Richardson (1954)

¹⁵ Page 57 "Jubilee History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953" By L.N. Richardson (1954)

The subject was given very careful consideration; the difficulty in proceeding with the proposal was appreciated, and although the council considered they had a righteous claim for the inclusion of a cross-country race in the Olympic Games, they decided to withdraw the item from the agenda.”¹⁶ It would be more than 20 years before the subject of cross-country running and the Olympics would appear again for discussion.

The Varied World of Cross-Country, published by *Runner's World* in 1971, referred to the state of the sport and the goal of getting it back in the Olympics under the heading “Cross-Country's Future”. Publisher Bob Anderson wrote: “The main problem is that runners have to work through athletic politicians to get things changed. And unfortunately many of the politicians in power employ thinking that is firmly rooted in the 19th century. Take the example of the Olympics readmitting cross-country. A few years ago, there was a small flurry of support for such an idea. The Road Runners Club of America and some Australians were the prime backers of the proposal. It seemed to make good sense considering it would admit a new group of distance runners to the Games and even the poorest countries could be represented by a few cross-country runners. The proposal died a quiet death at the hands of the politicians who call themselves the International Amateur Athletic Federation. In fact, the Australians withdrew the proposal before it came to a vote.”¹⁷

But nearly 40 years later, in 2008, prodigious cross-country champions Kenenisa Bekele, Haile Gebrselassie, and Paul Tergat, wrote an open letter to the International Olympic Committee President Jacques Rogge and I.A.A.F. President Lamine Diack, urging the I.O.C. to consider cross-country running once again for the ballot for the summer or winter Olympic Games. Coming from the champions themselves, the message had weight. Each of them represented an African nation not featured at the Winter Olympics: “We the undersigned global champions and record breakers would like to invite your two highly esteemed federations to consider the re-introduction of cross country running into the Olympic Games program, either as a summer or a winter sport.”¹⁸

Lamine Diack, the President of the International Association of Athletics Federations, and member of the International Olympic Committee, backed the campaign started by the three distance running legends, and wrote to Olympic President Rogge personally about the matter.¹⁹

In August of 2010 the I.A.A.F. revealed during a meeting of its ruling council in Kiev that they had prepared and submitted a questionnaire concerning the Review of the 2018 Winter Olympic Program to

¹⁶ Page 65 "Jubilee History of the International Cross-Country Union 1903-1953" By L.N. Richardson (1954)

¹⁷ Pages 10 and 11 "The Varied World of Cross-Country" By Bob Anderson and Joe Henderson, *Runner's World* (1971)

¹⁸ "Will cross country racing return to the Olympics?" by Blaine Moore <http://news.runtowin.com/2008/09/12/will-cross-country-racing-return-to-the-olympics.html>

¹⁹ <http://www.insidethegames.biz/component/content/article/81-archive-news/4326-diack-supports-inclusion-of-cross-country-in-the-olympics> (Accessed January 2015)

include cross country: "The I.O.C. Program Commission will study the document in August 2010 and come back to the I.A.A.F., if necessary, for further clarifications before submitting it to the I.O.C. Executive Board, for decision," an I.A.A.F. statement said following the meeting. The event was attended by several I.O.C. members, including I.A.A.F. President Lamine Diack and Sergey Bubka, the former world record holder for the pole vault.²⁰

This decision was good news. In early 2009, the I.A.A.F. failed in an attempt to get the IOC to include cross-country on the program for the Winter Games. The I.O.C. replied that it was not possible because the Winter Olympic program must be practiced on "snow or ice"²¹.

Yet progress continued to be made. In December 2013, following the *I.A.A.F. Global Seminar on Cross Country Running*, federation member Nick Davies had this to say: "The I.A.A.F. Cross Country Committee is studying options. The I.O.C. has never said that cross country could not be part of an Olympic athletics program, but were against having it as a new event added to the Winter Olympics, which had been the original proposal a few years ago."²² To further the issue, in February 2014 *Athletics Weekly* printed "10 Reasons Why Cross Country Running Should Have Been in the Sochi 2014 Program". Their reasons included "Staging cross-country races in the Winter Olympics would be a great way for the International Olympic Committee to get Africa involved in the Winter Games," and that "Lamine Diack, the president of the International Association of Athletics Federations, has backed cross country's bid to make the Winter Olympics." Diack had said: "The I.O.C. has written to us to ask our advice and we have told them that we are in favor of it. We are prepared to organize cross country in the Winter Olympics. It would be a good move for our sport."²³

As far as fans of cross-country are concerned, nobody can disagree – and despite cross-country's long and sometimes tortuous relationship with the Olympics, reinstating cross-country may be something that I.A.A.F. president hopeful Sebastian Coe will accomplish if he's elected.

²⁰ <http://www.insidethegames.biz/olympics/winter-olympics/2018/10253-plan-to-include-cross-country-running-in-2018-winter-olympics-set-to-be-discussed> (Accessed January 2015)

²¹ <http://www.insidethegames.biz/component/content/article/81-archive-news/4326-diack-supports-inclusion-of-cross-country-in-the-olympics> (Accessed January 2015)

²² <http://www.insidethegames.biz/sports/summer/athletics/1017367-olympic-target-for-cross-country-still-the-aim-say-iaaf-after-top-level-summit-led-by-coe> (Accessed January 2015)

²³ "Cross country for the Winter Olympics: 10 reasons why cross country running should have been in the Sochi 2014 programme" By Jason Henderson (February 12, 2014) <http://www.athleticsweekly.com/0/admin/blog/cross-country-for-the-winter-olympics/> (Accessed January 2015)