

# Harold Abrahams

1899 - 1978



# Running with Fire



- Beat Paddock and Scholtz to win 1924 Olympic 100 m
- but did not face his nemesis of the previous year, Eric Liddell
- Paddock, for four years the “world’s fastest human”, said afterwards:  
“We think your Harold Abrahams is one of the most wonderful sprinters in history –in fact we have never seen a better man in action”



# Abrahams the long jumper

- Set himself to keep par with his age – to achieve 22' in 1922 etc – and did so
- One month before the 1924 Olympics he set an English record of 24'2½" (7.38 m), which stood for the next 32 years
- As a student, he invented the “Abrahams Long Jump gauge”
- In 1925, his athletic career came to an excruciating end, when he broke his leg long jumping from an unsteady take-off board



# “Chariots” as fiction

- There was no “Lord Lindsay”
  - a mis-representation of Lord Burleigh (David Cecil, Marquess of Exeter)
  - who was the first, probably only, conqueror of the “Trinity Great Court Run”
- His girlfriend for a period while at Cambridge was Christina – for a time they were engaged, but he ended their relationship on the advice of brother Adolphe
- Only met opera singer Sybil in 1934 – and yes, she invited him over to her table at the Grosvenor Hotel. They married in 1936
- Only teamed up with Sam Mussabini in October 1923 – months after graduation
  - so the dressing-down from the college master was fictional
  - link up was not straight after defeat by Liddell (which was a 200 not 100)
  - and Mussabini showed no reluctance to coach Abrahams
- The Olympic 200 Metres event took place after the 100, not before
- The rubdown before 100 metres final: Abrahams had invited New Zealander Arthur Porritt into the hut, not Aubrey Montague. Porritt remained a lifelong friend

# “Chariots” as fact

- Love of Gilbert and Sullivan
- Abrahams’ devotion to Mussabini, and crediting him for the Olympic win  
“Mussabini was an absolute fanatic, a marvellous man. From the very first we plotted a plan of campaign. Sam told me that if I would put myself in his care and carry out his advice, he would make an Olympic sprint champion. I laughed at the idea.”
- Liddell did win their first meeting – though the AAA 200m semifinal, July 1923, not a 100m
- Scientific approach, especially trialling shorter, more rapid strides (in contrast to Paddock!)



# Early Years

- Born December 1899
- Father Isaac was a Lithuanian Jew who escaped to Britain to avoid persecution. Ran a stall in Bedford market but went on to found the Bedfordshire Loan Company, and called himself a financier.
- Brothers Adolphe and Sidney (aka Solomon) were successful athletes and were training him when he was 6 years old: “I was almost born sprinting”
- Parents separated during his adolescence
- Went to a Jewish prep school in Brighton to prepare for his bar mitzvah
- Sent to Repton boarding school in 1914, after attempting to board a troop carrier and go to war. In 1918 won 2 events at the Public School Games
- Went up to Cambridge in 1919 to study law. Was very successful athletically, had a heroic first university match, but by own admission wasn't universally liked. He was extravert and conceited

# Life after athletics

- He turned to athletics administration, journalism and commentating, saying that he derived more satisfaction from these than from his running, as he preferred team enterprises to individual ones
  - As a lawyer, he could draft regulations and present cases persuasively
  - Already in 1924 he was advocating and drafting sensible rule changes – specifically mooting entry standards for the national championships to avoid heats, semis and finals in a single day
  - In 1931, he negotiated the formation of the International Board, which later became the BAAB, to prevent the British team breaking up into individual national associations
  - In 1968 he was elected chairman of the BAAB, after 21 years as its treasurer
  - Member of AAA from 1926, made life vice-president in 1958, president in 1976
  - First president of NUTS
- In 1928 the British Olympic Association selected him as British Olympics team captain
- Was a qualified barrister, but did not practice
  - worked as secretary to the National Parks Commission, awarded CBE in 1957 for this work



# Abrahams as sports commentator

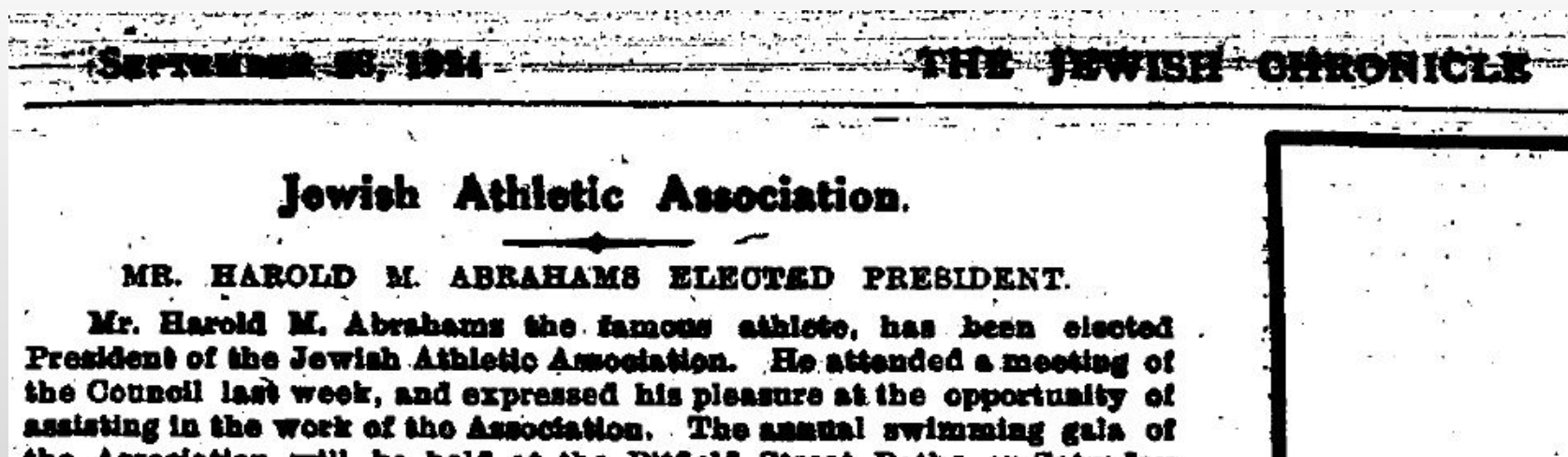
- He pioneered athletics commentary. First broadcast for BBC in March 1924
- Gave the first ever live outside sports broadcast, the Varsity Sports March 1927
- Norris McWhirter: "Harold possessed one of the finest speaking voices in the country. Those wonderful articulated and modulated words of his and his meticulous statistical preparation set the standard...on which the BBC reputation as the world's premier sports service can justly be said to have been founded“.





# Abrahams the Jew

- Joked, "I lost my Jewishness the first time I smelt bacon and eggs at Repton"
- In 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Cambridge he met Christina Innes. Led to a Christian religious phase, preaching in the streets, raising money for Russian famine relief and Dr Barnardo's.
- By the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> year at Cambridge he was engaged to Christina Innes, but broke it off under pressure from Adolphe that it would affect his athletics. Adolphe possibly suggested that his father would cut Harold out of will if he married a non-Jewess.
- He accepted the presidency of the Jewish Athletic Association, later renamed the AJY, and took a keen interest in the AJY and Brady clubs
- He was buried at St John the Baptist Churchyard, Gt Amwell, Herts, in January 1978, next to his wife Sybil Evers (died 1963)



# Anti-Semitism – real and perceived

- Referring to Repton he said, “There was quite a deal of anti-Semitism at schools in those days and I had to find something where I could score off people. And by running of course you can do it, you can get first and you can win and I was determined to do so.”
- "I think that being Jewish has played a very big part. There wasn't a lot of anti-Semitism when I was young and of course one imagines that a lot of things you don't get because you're Jewish. You can distort it quite easily. And I was determined I was going to show myself superior in something where there could be no argument about it and I was good at athletics. And this was a method of self-expression.”
- "There was some anti-Semitism at University, in my early days as a Cambridge athlete, but I think I had a bit of a chip on my shoulder about it.”
- Looked at objectively, some of the unpopularity he experienced at University would be owing to his brashness rather than anti-Semitism
  - After a triumphant first Varsity match, he wasn't elected to the Hawks Club
  - Oxford team-mate in O&C vs Princeton and Cornell: “I don't care a damn who wins the sprint so long as the blighter from Cambridge doesn't

# Berlin 1936

- In summer 1935 he advocated that the BOA or IOC write to Hitler diplomatically requesting the reduction of racial and religious discrimination.
- For Berlin 1936, Abrahams was the obvious choice as BBC lead commentator
  - except that he was Jewish in Nazi eyes
- He considered himself Christian, but described himself as "of Jewish origin"
- He opposed an Olympic boycott, but was determined to make some gesture to register his disgust at the Nazi treatment of the Jews
- With conflicting signals from the Germans, and fence-sitting at the BBC, he was brought in sparingly as a commentator.
- His commentary on the 1500m was his slap to the face of the Nazi regime
  - broke every rule of BBC broadcasting . People wrote to the BBC complaining of blasphemy!
  - Sebastian Coe: "the least objective athletics commentary by an Englishman that can ever have been recorded for posterity"



## CHARIOTS OF FIRE RUNNER FINALLY COMES HOME



More than 80 years after Harold Abrahams became an Olympic gold medallist at the 1924 Games — immortalised in the film *Chariots of Fire* — he has won an English Heritage blue plaque in Hodford Road, Golders Green, in North-West London. He lived in the house when he took part in the games. At the unveiling were (left) Abrahams' nephew Tony Abrahams; his daughter, Sue Pottle; and John James, from the British Olympic Foundation

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Abrahams lived at 2 Hodford Road, Golders Green from 1923 to 1930