

## Our part in four-minute mile history

*Bruce McAvaney addressed a dinner in Melbourne recently, to commemorate Australian John Landy's first sub-four-minute mile and world record, run 50 years ago, six weeks after Roger Bannister first went under four. This is the transcript of his speech.*

"Here is the result of event No.9, the one mile: No. 41, R G Bannister, of the Amateur Athletic Association and formerly of Exeter and Merton Colleges, with a time that is a new meeting and track record, and which, subject to ratification, will be a new English native, British National, British all-comers, European, British Empire and World Record. The time is 3...."

That's arguably the most famous cue, let alone understated announcement in athletics history...3 Minutes, 59.4 seconds!

He was a formidable character, the announcer. Norris McWhirter died earlier this year, unfortunately just before the 50th anniversary of the first sub-four minute mile.

McWhirter apparently had rehearsed assiduously the night before, in his bath, and it was through him that the BBC, the newsreel camera and most of the print media were present that day. McWhirter, and his twin Ross, who was gunned down in 1975 by the IRA, were joint founders and editors of the Guinness Book of Records.

McWhirter had a sense of humour. Here in Melbourne at the 1956 Olympics, he told the story of a middle-aged Australian woman who, observing distressing scenes at the finish of the marathon exclaimed, "Cripes, how many qualify for the final?"...

Back to Bannister, and the race: is it the sport's finest achievement? How does the 3.59.4 stack up with other athletic landmarks? Classics such as our own Ron Clarke's 27:39.4 in Oslo in 1965, a 35 second improvement on the previous mark.

Or Bob Beamon's famous Olympic leap at the 1968 Games in Mexico City, one jump taking the world record from 27 to 29 feet.

And then there's his fellow American, Michael Johnson's equally outrageous performance over 200m in Atlanta in 1996.

Bannister's performance contains one flaw. Runners know it: obvious pace making, a practice contrary to the rules at the time. Just 11 months earlier, Bannister had broken the British mile record only for it to be disallowed for the same infringement, albeit in more blatant circumstances...

Why did the record escape scrutiny? Perhaps it had something to do with national pride; the much-needed boost for Britain after her hardships following World War II, the fact that Bannister had been a student at Oxford; it was a class-conscious era; or even the inclusion in the six-man field of Tom Hulatt, the odd man out.

Hulatt was the northern counties champion. On that day he ran for the AAA along with Bannister, Brasher and Chataway against George Dole and Alan Gordon from the Oxford University Athletic Club.

Critically, Hulett wasn't a part of the pacemaking team. He finished third in 4:16, behind Bannister's 3:59.4, Chataway's 4:07.2 but in front of Brasher who was not timed, and the non-finishers Gordon and Dole.

Tom Hulatt differed from the other competitors off the track as well. Bannister became a distinguished neurologist and master of Pembroke College, Chataway an ITV newsreader and cabinet minister; Brasher a journalist, businessman and founder of the London Marathon; George Dole a reverend and Alan Gordon an economist.

Tom Hulatt had left school at 14, worked variously in a woodyard, as a railway labourer and shovelling coal, eventually having his own business - rat-catching.

Back to Bannister. No, I don't think it was the greatest performance ever but it was outstanding. Definitely the most famous record in my mind and therefore a contender for the greatest achievement. Pacemaking aside, it was a mighty effort and Roger Bannister was a superb athlete.

Different and determined, no formal coach, Bannister set himself a highly criticised training and racing programme. He was an athlete who refused to conform. What's impressive is his courage to rise above the disappointment of the 1952 Olympics in Helsinki where he finished fourth and then was hammered by the press. One journalist penned the headline: "I feel like suing British Athletics for a breach of promise."

And then there's his character, to absorb the "Cathy Freeman" scale of pressure in the race to be the first to break the four minute barrier. Bannister almost irrelevantly had taken two seconds of the previous world record of 4:01.4 set by the Swede Gunder Hagg nine years earlier.

What a pair Hagg and his fellow Swede Arne Anderson proved to be. Aided by Sweden's neutrality in World War II, these fierce rivals set the stage for the assault on the four-minute mile. History shows Hagg to have been slightly superior, but between them they broke the world record no fewer than six times in the three years 1942 to 1945, taking the mark down from Sydney Wooderson's 4:06.4 to 4:01.4.

Now 85 years of age and confined to a wheelchair, Hagg still has attitude. In 1946, he and Andersson were declared professionals for receiving appearance money. And therefore they missed out on the London Olympics in 1948. (Sweden still provided the gold and silver medallist in the 1500m.) Ten years ago, Hagg was offered reinstatement by the Swedish Athletics Union but declined, declaring "Once a professional, always a professional."

Incidentally, Hagg was picked up for speeding (in his car) the day Bannister broke his world record, and that's how he heard the news: the police told him and let him off without a fine.

I'm not sure where the American star miler Wes Santee was that day, but our own champion John Landy was in Finland preparing for a series of races and heard the news while relaxing in a Finnish restaurant.

John must have had mixed feelings when he received the news; it was his friend and rival Denis Johansson who dashed into the restaurant, cable in hand. Landy's reaction: "Santee will be the next."

Hagg's record had proved elusive. That 4:01.4 had survived despite Landy's great efforts from December 1952.

It should be recognised that in the 18 months prior to Bannister's 3:59.4, there had been nine races won in 4:02. Belgian Gaston Rieff (first in the Olympic 5000m in 1948) was the first in 4:02.8,

Santee and Bannister (not ratified) once each and John Landy the other six - his first at 4:02.1 in Melbourne in December 1952.

Turku was 50 years ago, 46 days after Iffley road in Oxford. Chataway was there, a pacemaker was offered, but Landy declined. John had run 4:01.6 off a too-quick first half at the end of May, and was sharp following a series of time-trials. The field of six featured two Finns: John's mate Denis Johansson and the up and coming Aulis Kallio. It was Kallio who took on the role as pacemaker.

The sports ground was packed - 8000 fans. Kallio led the first lap 58.0, Landy followed in 58.5. The Australian took the lead after 600m and reached half way in 1:57.9. At the bell it was 2:57 but Chataway was close. Unlike Oxford, Chataway was here to win, and Landy knew it. So with 300m to go, he took off.

The Finnish fans, sensing something special was on, roared their appreciation: "Landy, Landy, Landy..." echoed around the ground. The timekeepers were in the right spot and when John when through 1500m, he had registered a new world record: 3:41.8.

The sprint continued all the way up the straight and when he hit the line, there was no immediate celebration. But when John looked back and saw Chataway was 40 yards behind, he must have known it was fast.

(Chataway finished with a personal best 4:04.4.)

The announcement was in Finnish but I doubt in the same fashion as Norris McWhirter. Not immediately understanding, John got the message from Johansson: "It's a new world record - 3:58..."

Pandemonium broke out as the fans grabbed hold of the Aussie and threw him up into the air. Landy asked Chataway to join him in a lap of honour, but the Brit refused: it was John's day.

After two years of training and racing, the world record was his. He was to hold it for the next three years.

It may not have been as famous, but I reckon if you asked Chataway to compare Landy in Turku with Bannister at Oxford, you'd be able to pick his answer.

Vancouver and the Empire Games were now in waiting. The race of the century was touted, and that's what Bannister and Landy produced. The classic clash between the front runner and kicker, Bannister winning the gold in 3:58.8; Landy silver, 3:59.6.

Can you imagine that happening in Athens? That's the equivalent of [Hicham] El Guerrouj running 3:44 (using the mile standard) holding off [Medhi] Baala in 3:45. We can only hope.

Let's leave the definitive appraisal of that mile in Vancouver to Chataway. His role and second place finishes in both Oxford and Turku gave him a unique insight: "It was Roger's best race, superbly judged and also the best duel on the track that I have ever seen."

The legendary Czech distance runner Emil Zatopek once said: "It is not enough just to run in a race. You must make a contribution to the contest." And that's what John did so brilliantly that day in Vancouver.

So what has been Landy and Bannister's legacy? Let's see what followed:

In 1955, young Australian Herb Elliott clocked 4.22 for the mile. The equally famous Percy Cerutti was there that day and declared: "That boy can be coached to break the world record in

1958." He did.

Herb was unbeaten in the 1500 and mile from 1954 when the serious training commenced, to 1961 when he retired.

The year 1958 was a watershed one. He ran 3:59.9, then went to the United States in May and improved that time to 3:57.8. Herb cleaned up at the Cardiff Empire Games but his greatness really came to light 11 days later at the Santry Stadium in Dublin. He smashed a world-class field and the world record for the mile, reducing it from 3:57.2 to 3:54.5.

Later that season he did something similar in Gothenburg to the 1500m mark, taking it from 3:38.1 to 3:36.0.

Herb was quiet in 1959, studying in England, though Cerutti declared him lazy. Prior to the 1960 Rome Olympics his fastest time for the year was a modest 3:59.2. But Rome would prove to be his masterpiece.

The Frenchman Michael Bernard set the race up with a very fast first half. And then Herb took over at 600m. In customary Elliott style, it was brutal. The third lap 56 seconds, the last 800 1:52.8. The final time 3:35.6. The winning margin, 2.8 seconds and a new world record. Another Frenchman finished second; Michel Jazy was 20m away and he would eventually go on to break Peter Snell's mile record.

Snell, I guess, was to New Zealand what Elliott was to Australia at that time: a winner. In Rome, when Herb was winning the 1500, Peter was taking gold in the 800. Two years later, on a grass track in Wanganui, the Kiwi set a new world mile mark of 3:54.4.

On to Tokyo, and the '64 Olympics, and there he became the first man in 44 years to win the classic middle distance double: the 800/1500m. Ironically, it was the first time he had actually run over 1500m and in that final, he ran the fastest ever last lap for the time: 52.6.

The next Olympic champion at 1500m, the metric mile, was the father of Kenyan athletics, Kip Keino. He was extraordinary. Early in that 1968 year, Keino clocked the third fastest 10,000m. He was one of the favourites for the 10km in Mexico, but with two and a half laps remaining he dropped out of the final with stomach cramps. His recovery was impressive because two days later he won a heat of the 5,000m and then two days after that took the silver.

Far from finished, on successive days Keino then won a heat of the 1500, was placed in the semi-final, and then ran one of the most famous races ever, taking gold in the final.

The overwhelming favourite was the American Jim Ryun. Unbeaten for three years and the world record holder in the 880 yard, 1500m and mile, Ryun held back, fearful of the altitude factor. Keino, aided by his compatriot, Ben Jipcho, set off at a ridiculous pace: the first lap 56 seconds. By the time they had a lap to run, Keino was more than 30m clear of the American.

Ryun made up some ground and was actually happy with his time: 3:37.89. But that was only good enough for silver. Keino's gold was almost overshadowed by his winning time of 3:34.91.

Ryun, a long-time senator in the United States, remains a complex character. But there's no doubt he's the greatest high school miler that country's ever produced, and one of the greatest talents the sport has ever seen.

To give you an idea of the fame he enjoyed or perhaps endured, I'll use the Sports Illustrated

cover - a cultural icon in America - as an example: In the world of American sports you make it when you're on the front cover of that magazine...they even keep count.

Michael Jordan holds the record with 49, followed by Muhammad Ali on 37, with three other legends - Magic Johnson, Jack Nicklaus, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar - on 22. Ryun finished with seven - more than any other track and field athlete, including Carl Lewis - and the same number as John McEnroe.

During the last months of the 50th anniversary celebrations, one British journalist urged all mile devotees to pay homage not to what happened at Oxford in 1954, but what transpired in Christchurch 20 years later.

John Walker was Chataway that day; a very competitive Chataway, second behind Filbert Bayi. Was this the race of the century? John and the three Aussies in that Commonwealth Games final - Graham Crouch, Dave Fitzsimons and Randell Markey - might say yes.

There was no pacemaker for the Tanzanian. From the front his lap times tell the tale: 54.9, 57.3, 58.6; the last 400 - 55.4 (Walker 54.4). His 1.52.2 was almost four seconds up on Ryan's 800 split when he had set the world record 3.33.1 in Los Angeles seven years earlier.

The finishing times were as follows: Bayi 3:2.2, Walker 3:2.5, Jipcho 3:3.1, Dixon 3:3.9, Crouch 3:4.2...

Remember it was 1974. 30 years ago... I would think that's about as good as it gets. Although second to Bayi that day, Walker had made his mark and the next year his fame spread from New Zealand to the rest of the world.

Fittingly, it was Bayi's three-month-old world record John shattered, but like Hagg's mark, that was the cameo; it was the mountain he climbed: that was even more significant. He was the first to break a mile in under 3:50.

He did it on August 12, 1975, in the Swedish city of Gothenberg. And it did it the typically tough Walker way. Four fast strong laps: the first 55.8, the last 56.4.

There were two Australians in the field that night: Ken Hall, who finished second in his personal best of 3:55.2, and the remarkably consistent Graeme Crouch. Crouchy would be in that final when John went on to win the gold medal in Montreal the next year, becoming the third Kiwi to win the Olympic 1500m title. (Lovelock 1936, Snell 1964.)

His longevity is legendary. John was the first to run under the four-minute mark on 100 occasions. That was in Auckland on February 17th, 1985.

Speaking to him recently, it was that mile in Gothenberg and not the Olympic gold medal, he cherishes most, explaining that evening he broke the 3:50 was the one and only night he actually set out to break a world record.

That night must have been special. The bath was full of champagne when he returned to his hotel room. His phone rang non-stop for a week.

His first interview was with Time magazine and the reporter's first question was: "Well done Mr Walker, but I have to ask you, how many laps are there to a mile?" Luckily for her, it wasn't Daley Thompson she was talking to...he would have bitten her head off.

History proves all things must pass and John's number one ranking probably went to the next

wave at the World Cup in 1977. John wasn't at his best in Dusseldorf that night, but Steve Ovett's surge at 200m out must have been a definitive statement.

In my working time, the most hyped race has been the Ben Johnson/Carl Lewis final in Seoul. But Steve Ovett versus Seb Coe in Moscow in 1980 is a close second. The media publicity and speculation was understandable.

Their only previous clash had been in 1978 at the European Championships over 800m. On that occasion Coe went out too fast, getting to 400 in 49.32.

He was a sitting duck for Ovett, who actually broke the UK record with 1:44.09. But he too was overrun by a German outsider, Olaf Beyer.

In 1979, Coe was a sensation. He set three world records (800m, mile, 1500m) in 41 days. But Ovett timed his record-breaking efforts for the Olympics year.

July 1st, 1980, must have been one of those unforgettable nights in Oslo - and they've had a few. Coe added the 1000m world record to his long list but by the end of the night that list had been reduced.

Ovett shaved two tenths of a second off his British rival's mile world record with 3:48.8.

In Moscow, first up was the 800m: Coe the hot favourite, but he ran a badly-judged race and Ovett, lucky not to be disqualified after pushing through a gap, took the gold medal. The British press didn't let Coe off. The next day he went jogging. They took a photo and captioned it: "Coe's trail of shame". But Seb had the last laugh and displayed his first sign of true greatness at those games in Moscow, with his famous comeback victory in the 1500m.

The early to mid-eighties were remarkable times for middle distance fans, dominated by Coe, Ovett, Cram and Aouita.

As a broadcaster, the 1984 Olympic final is my favourite 1500m. What a field, and what a race it turned out to be: the American star Steve Scott going out hard, making it fast...Ovett stepping off the track in the last lap, the victim of a viral heart condition and then Coe daring to go first, holding Cram and finally running away to earn his unique place in Olympic history.

On the same day Coe was winning an unprecedented second 1500m gold medal, we were given a long look at what in many ways has become the force in the mile. I'm speaking of North Africa, in this case, Said Aouita of Morocco. Aouita seemingly strolled around the Coliseum in LA on his way to an Olympic record in the 5000m. At that moment in 1984 I'd never heard of [Noureddine] Morceli from Algeria, or El Guerrouj of Morocco. But it wouldn't be long. Cram's big years were '82 to '86. His defeat in Rome at the World Championships in 1987 were the first sign he had come back to the field.

In July 1985, Cram was close to perfection: three world records in 20 days, from 1500m to 2000. They were each impressive.

The 2000 had been Walker's, and it was a benchmark. The 1500 was in Nice, against Aouita and it was thrilling. The mile was in Oslo against Coe.

Today's world record holder, Hicham El Guerrouj says that's the greatest mile race of his lifetime.

Herb Elliott at one stage thought Morceli was the best he'd ever seen. I'm not sure if El Guerrouj has supplanted the Algerian in Herb's mind but if you had been in Tokyo in 1991 the night

Morceli won the first of his three 1500m titles, you would be loath to argue with his assessment.

Morceli demoralised a first class final field containing Kirochi, Herold, Aouita and Simon Doyle, winning by an ever-increasing 15m; running irresistible splits 1.50.1 last 800, 51.5 last 400, 38.7 - 300, and 25.9 final 200.

I often think Morceli's reputation has suffered because of El Guerrouj's brilliance. The Algerian was on occasions awesome, great for many seasons, very good for nearly a decade. A big race winner and a big record breaker, his mile mark 3:44.39 took nearly two seconds off Cram's Oslo extravaganza.

After under-performing in Barcelona behind Cacho, he won 53 consecutive 1500/mile races prior to the final in Atlanta.

Morceli won that final. It was a just reward, but the victory felt incomplete.

El Guerrouj fell at the bell, Cacho had to high jump him and Morcelli suffered some spiking. I'm still uncertain how strong he would have been had El Guerrouj stayed on his feet.

We've arrived at today's man, Hicham El Guerrouj: at the start of 2004, 81 wins in his last 84 races. Those wins include four world titles, but the defeats include two Olympic finals. At times he's breathtaking.

When he won in Seville in 1999 at the World Championships, his finishing time was five seconds quicker than anybody had ever run at a major title. I called that night with Coe, who at the completion of the procession, gasped, "This guy is incredible."

The all-time list backs him up. At the start of 2004, El Guerrouj has eight of the fastest 10, and 15 of the fastest 23 times on the combined 1500/mile list.

His mile record stands at 3:43.13. His 3:26.00 for the 1500 equates to an even faster 3:42.48.

But he looked mortal in Sydney, a victim he believes, of overtraining in the Olympic year, and probably an over-reliance on a pacemaking team mate, let alone nerves and pressure. They won't go away in Athens.

Mehdi Baala of France was fourth in Sydney and pushed El Guerrouj in Paris last year at the worlds. He's a danger. It's a race I'm looking forward to calling in Athens as much as any other. The stakes are high...

A great champion has to overcome his demons in a contest which will go a long way towards determining his place in the history of the mile.

#### **What a history.**

That four-minute barrier was a holy grail, as described by McWhirter: "The phrase, the four minute mile, had a beauty in it, a symmetry, there was magic in it".

He also went on to say: "It was something that we felt ought to be accomplished by a Briton, because it was our measurement, our distance, our imperial mile."

So perhaps it was fate that it was Bannister, and not Landy.

John Landy, when asked would his life have changed had he been the first to break the four

minutes replied, "I don't know. I've had an extraordinarily interesting life and I just leave it at that."

So who can claim to have run the greatest race over the mile? Who's the best ever? Tough question. This is my answer:

In 1924, Parvo Nurmi won a gold medal at the Olympics over 1500m and then 5000m in the space of 45 minutes.

Bannister in 1954 followed by Landy and then Elliott in 1960; Walker in 1975; Ovett, Coe, Cram and Aouita in the eighties; Morceli in the nineties, with El Guerrouj, have on one day and in some cases more than one, been the very best the world has ever seen.

But let's finish with the anniversary. Great athletes inspire lasting memories. Think of Sydney, think of Cathy. Think of Melbourne, think of Betty.

Iffley Road has Bannister, Gothenberg Walker, and Turku in Finland - well Turku's lucky, because they have Nurmi. That's where he grew up.

But they also have Landy, forever Landy, 50 years to the day.