

## 'Play it Again Sam'. Mussabini and Wisdom: A Biographical Conundrum

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In December 1998, the National Coaching Foundation honoured Scipio Africanus (Sam) Mussabini by instituting the 'Mussabini Medal' awarded to British coaches who have coached outstanding elite athletes. The rationale for this award was based on an interpretation of Mussabini's life that has been repeated ad nauseum in both popular and scholarly literature, normally verbatim and without adequate reflection. When English Heritage erected a blue plaque to Mussabini in 2012 their justification followed the standard script in stating that Mussabini, one of the 'greatest ever' athletics coaches, had been involved in professional sprinting in the 1890s, was a cycling coach, an accomplished journalist, a billiards player, a keen cricketer and senior coach at the Polytechnic from 1912 to 1927. Despite being ostracised because he was a paid coach, Mussabini had coached a number of Olympians including, apparently, the 1908 sprint champion Reggie Walker, Willie Applegarth at Stockholm in 1912 and Albert Hill in 1920. His 'most famous' success, which had been portrayed in the 1981 Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*, was Abrahams' winning of the 100m in 1924. Journalists consistently repeat aspects of the Mussabini mantra. When Mussabini received recognition from the coaching awards scheme in 1992, *The Times* athletics correspondent referred to *Chariots of Fire*, noting that Mussabini's professional sprinting background made him unpopular and that he did not see Abrahams win his gold medal. Previewing Mussabini's induction into the National Coaching Foundation Hall of Fame in 1999, *Guardian* contributor Duncan Mackay observed this would 'right the wrong of more than seventy years ago when the establishment ignored his achievements because of his background in professional sprinting' and noted that Mussabini's relationship with Harold Abrahams had been immortalised in *Chariots of Fire*. Recent commentaries reinforce the power of this film to create myths and Ellis Cashmore described it as a figurative reconstruction, one which manufactured a piece of reality through mixing fact with fabrication. Citing Carnes's observation that films 'do not provide a substitute for history that has been painstakingly assembled from the best available evidence and analysis' David Dee argues that the film's portrayal of Abrahams was a 'falsification of historical reality' and he points to basic factual errors which have led to a 'significant distortion in the character portrayal of Abrahams'.

This analysis applies equally to the film's representation of Mussabini where the boundaries between fact and fiction have become blurred in the public imagination. These boundaries are further obscured by the paucity of detailed scholarly material on Mussabini which has left a number of questions unanswered concerning the activities of a man described as being 'the father of British coaching'. This paper considers two aspects in particular, the suggestion that Mussabini was prevented from watching Abrahams in Paris because professionals were not allowed into the stadium and, secondly, the oft-repeated notion that he coached South African Reggie Walker to become Olympic sprint champion in 1908. The authors conclude that a rigorous scholarly reinvestigation of the archives is a critical first step towards resolving the many anomalies that exist in the extant Mussabini literature and to correcting the misconceptions buried deep within the Mussabini legend.

### The Exclusion Myth

At the eighth modern Olympiad in Paris in 1924 Harold Abrahams won the 100 metres. According to legend, Mussabini was denied the opportunity of seeing the moment because, as a professional coach, he was banned from the stadium. In *Chariots of Fire* Mussabini, played by Ian Holm, waits nervously in a room near the stadium, learning of Abrahams' victory only when the national anthem is played. Tony Ward has suggested that Mussabini wrote the following to Abrahams before the final:

Dear Mr Abrahams

You must pardon my not coming to see you much as I would like to do so. However, I believe and hope that you will win the 100 metres. Go out determined to do your best and don't forget to go down at the first stride. A sponge and some cold or preferably iced water around the nape of the neck under the ears and at the wrists and elbows will brace you up. Get nicely warmed up and then react to the gun. I should use the springy old six-spiked shoes. All the best of luck from Yours truly S.S. Mussabini.

Arthur Porritt, who took the bronze medal behind Abrahams, believed 'that professional trainers were not allowed' into the stadium but this seems a little strange given that the British team had been accompanied by officially appointed paid trainers since Stockholm. The AAA had engaged four trainers in 1912, including William Cross, William James Parrish and 'Bill' Thomas, who became a trainer with Herne Hill Harriers in 1906 although he is best remembered for coaching Oxford University. Chief trainer Alec Nelson had been coaching at Cambridge University since at least 1908. He was widely regarded as an 'excellent and progressive coach', although Abrahams said of him that 'He was a good chap for jollying you on' but 'I knew far more about it than he did.' Given that both Nelson and Thomas had long careers as paid trainers at Oxford and Cambridge there was clearly an acceptance within the amateur athletic elite of the need for professional assistance well before Abrahams' victory.

The AAA application to the BOA for funding prior to Paris in 1924 included £500 for trainers which incorporated payments to Harry Andrews, appointed as coach for the southern region at Crystal Palace between January and June 1924. The field events coach, Sergeant Instructor Starkey, was stationed at Aldershot. The British team in Paris was supported by three masseurs, a medical advisor and six coaches, including Parrish who had also accompanied the team in 1912 and 1920. All these men appeared together on a photograph in the BOA report following the Games and there is no obvious evidence that they would have been barred from the stadium.

### **The First 'Sam' - Spencer Wisdom**

Another general assumption in the Mussabini literature is that he coached the 1908 100m Olympic champion Reggie Walker of South Africa. He supposedly worked so effectively on Walker's start that he improved from second place in the AAA Championships to victory in the Olympics. A 1909 photograph is sometimes interpreted as evidence for this relationship, even though the caption refers to Sam Wisdom. Mark Ryan is explicit in stating that Wisdom and Mussabini were one and the same although this is contradicted by the archival evidence.

In actual fact, commentators of the period were clear that Walker had 'one of the best trainers' in Sam Wisdom who had competed in Sheffield handicaps in 1877 and that 'the old Sheffield sprinter, Sam Wisdom' had 'made a runner of Reggie Walker in 1908'. Spencer 'Sam' Wisdom, born circa 1850, seventeen years before Mussabini, was living with his family and working as a plumber in London in 1871. He was also competing in local sprint events normally under 'S. Wisdom' but occasionally as 'S. Wisden', which became his racing moniker when he moved onto the premier sprinting circuit in Sheffield in the early seventies. At Hyde Park in May 1873 Sam won a half mile handicap heat 'cleverly by five yards' and he came second in the final a week later. At a 207 yards handicap in November 1875 at the Queen's Grounds, 10,000 spectators watched the 'metropolitan representative' win again. The 'cockney' Wisden came second in the 1876 Shrovetide 204 yards handicap at Hyde Park and he appeared at all the major Sheffield events that year and again in 1877. Sam also raced regularly in London and the South. The 'fine Sheffield runner' Sam Wisden was accompanied by his backer, Cash, the metalician, when he appeared at Canterbury in June 1878 and Sam had returned to London

virtually fulltime by late 1880. Between 1881 and 1884 he was competing regularly across London, concentrating on distances of under 150 yards.

Like other Sheffield events the Easter handicap at Hyde Park in April 1878 had attracted American, Australian and Canadian competitors plus most of the noted British sprinters, including Harry Hutchens and Sam Wisden. These men met regularly in London handicaps and they formed a professional relationship. Sam, in his role as Hutchens' trainer, left England for Australia with Harry in October 1886, accompanied by Hutchens' backer, Arthur Markham. During December 1886 and January 1887 Hutchens, looked after by Wisdom, made appearances, competed in handicaps and ran challenges for substantial wagers. When he broke the world 50 yards record on 12 January 1887 Wisdom acted as his pacemaker and entries for local handicaps included both Hutchens and Wisdom.

Sam left Australia in February 1887 and when he married in 1894 Wisdom gave his occupation as a trainer, which he repeated in the 1901 and 1911 censuses. Given his reputation as trainer of Hutchens, it is no surprise that Walker turned to this 'practiced hand at preparing athletes' prior to his Olympic victory in 1908. After he arrived home Walker said that he had been delighted with his experiences in England, and his praise of his trainer, Sam Wisdom, 'would make that veteran blush'. When plans were being made for Walker to visit America and Australasia in 1909 he was to be accompanied by his trainer, Sam Wisdom, 'who prepared him for the Olympic meeting and who was with Hutchens in Australia'. Before he left for England Walker reinforced that his previous coach, Sam Wisdom, would take him in hand on arrival before visiting the States with him and later reports repeated that Walker had been trained by this 'famous trainer of the great Harry Hutchens'. After Wisdom's death in 1912 obituaries recalled that the sixty-two-year old 'Athletic Trainer' had trained Walker for the 1908 Olympics and 'there is no doubt he considerably helped the Natal crack'. It was also noted that he had been looking after Willie Applegarth since the 1912 Games.

### **Yet Another 'Sam' - Sam Fritty**

Wisdom was not the only 'Sam' involved with Applegarth. In March 1912, Fred Parker, the AAA Chief Athletic Advisor, recommended a number of official trainers for London and suggested that Sam Fritty, 'one of our best trainers', should be appointed at Reading. Fritty, who had been a professional sprinter in the mid-1880s, had later turned to training and before his four mile race with Bacon for £200 in September 1896 Anstead trained for seven weeks under Sam at Sandhurst. When E.C. Bredin turned professional in 1896 he said 'I have engaged a professional trainer, Sam Fritty, who...has had a lot of experience and I am quite satisfied with the improvement I have made during the short time he has been attending to me'. Fritty also trained Applegarth and when he won the 200 yards at the AAA Championships in June 1912 his victory was credited to the judgement of Sam Fritty, who 'has done well by his charge'. If Applegarth wintered well and Fritty continued to take charge of his training 'long standing' amateur records would be broken. By June 1913 Applegarth had left Sam to be looked after by Fred Clark, the 'official trainer of the Polytechnic Harriers', which is puzzling given suggestions that Mussabini was the Poly senior coach by 1913. It seems, then, that retrospectives crediting Mussabini with Applegarth's medal-winning performances at the 1912 Olympics may be incorrect and that Mussabini became involved later on. When Mussabini noted Applegarth's improvement in his book in 1913 he did not directly claim the credit and it was later observed that it was in 1914 that Mussabini was 'repolishing' sprinter Applegarth for the next Olympics.

### **Other Coaching Conundrums**

In October 1913 *The Times* advertised *The Complete Athletic Trainer* by S. A. Mussabini written in collaboration with Charles Ranson. In the preface Mussabini wrote 'I cheerfully

acknowledge the hints and suggestions that I have received from my old friends, Charles Ransom and Harry Perry, in the preparation of this work'. Ransom was a professional sprinter who had twice won the Sheffield handicap and had been trainer to several athletes at Oxford and Cambridge. Perry, a 'most conscientious trainer' had trained Hefferon for the 1908 marathon and McArthur, the Stockholm champion. One book review noted that the author 'pins his faith to the teaching of the old school of England's professional athletes' and references to the world of professional running permeate the work. Whose book actually was it?

There is solid evidence that Mussabini coached Albert Hill before his 1920 Olympic double. Interestingly, there are suggestions that Walter George was recruited to assist in looking after Hill. After Antwerp, Mussabini and Walter drew up plans for an attack on Walter's 1886 mile record and, 'continuing to be advised by Walter', Hill then moved into coaching. How much input did George have?

### **Concluding Comments**

Moon reflects contemporary views when describing Mussabini as the doyen of all British coaches and the leading athletic instructor of his time, a man ahead of his generation, with 'an analytical brain...and the genius of the scientist or psychiatrist for analysing what was going on the body of an athlete'. Not all is as it seems, however, and the Mussabini biography needs much more examination before we arrive at what Bale calls a 'narrative truth'. In 1999 leading athletics coach Tom McNab, who had acted as technical adviser to *Chariots of Fire*, observed that he felt a responsibility for some of the Mussabini myths. Although he had been an effective practical coach, with strengths in conditioning and psychology, Mussabini was essentially of the nineteenth century and in his attempts to analyse athletic movement he invariably drew the wrong conclusions. McNab concluded that 'It's a little sad to see that the history of coaching has been distorted by a work of fiction in which I was so heavily involved'. Not all the blame can be placed on *Chariots of Fire*. When researching Albert Hill, Moon found a 'large number of discrepancies, which necessitated much cross-referencing and return to source information'. Past authors had 'often copied a respected writer without checking the original source which sometimes led to other generations following the same incorrect path'. As a result Moon presented a complete list of his references 'for the sake of future historians' and it behoves everyone interested in uncovering Mussabini's life course to be equally diligent. The photographs, family papers, interviews, newspapers, census records and organisational archives, need to be revisited, collated and analysed with care and attention. As in every biography it is unrealistic to expect that the 'real truth', whatever that might be, will be uncovered but that is no reason for perpetuating errors and legends that are clearly incorrect and for accepting a fictional image as a kind of reality. To continue to support the Mussabini myth without taking the time and trouble to explore the sources and triangulate the material is to do a disservice to those men who may have a greater claim than he to be the 'father of British coaching'.