Day, D. (2016). *'We have every reason for failure but not a single excuse': British Field Athletics in the early Twentieth Century*, British Society of Sports History annual conference, Edinburgh, Scotland, September 1-2.

The aristocratic and educated middle-class men involved in the formation of the British Olympic Association (BOA) in 1905 typified the class of man administering British sport in this period.[1] They were wedded to the concept of amateurism and their class attitudes were reflected in the way in which the athletic body was presented. The amateur's emphasis on elegance and style, and a suspicion of training methods that produced muscular, specialized sporting bodies, rather than all-rounders, were important principles of an ethos that drew some of its rationale from the classical world. Amateurism normalized and standardized a bodily performance as the middle-class amateur athlete selectively used classical precedents, science and clothing to reinforce the distinctions between their own bodies and those of the professionals. Although historians have discussed the English amateur body,[2] there has been little consideration of the impact of this aesthetic on athletic preferences and this paper links amateur views of the athletic body to ongoing weaknesses in British field events. As Table 1 shows, this has been a feature of British Olympic performances since 1896 despite occasional efforts to resolve the problem. Using press reports, family records and organisational archives, the paper uncovers some of these initiatives immediately prior to and following the First World War.

The 'University Athlete'

Initially, amateur contests took on many of the characteristics of professional events,[3] but the educated classes gradually formed separate organizations to direct and control their athletic activity. When the Amateur Athletic Club (AAC) was created by former Oxbridge athletes in 1865, it was so they could compete, 'without being compelled to mix with professional runners'.[4] The subsequent formation of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA) in 1880 centralized the organization of athletics and excluded professionals. The public school and university men who created these clubs and associations prided themselves on their social and educational backgrounds, integral to which was their familiarity with the Classical world, and this was reflected in an athletic discourse that manifested itself in the way they drew clear distinctions between their own bodies and those of the working-class professionals. Ancient Greek intellectuals had criticized athletes for their over-specialization, to the detriment of a balanced development of the body, and argued for moderation.[5] Nineteenth-century amateurs formulated their sporting ethos based on these principles[6] and the notions of elegance of style and effortless achievement became an ideal while the functional trained bodies of specialist athletes were considered unable to display the same degree of sophistication and élan.

These aesthetic preferences, combined with scientific arguments, evolutionary theory and statistics, revived a classical ideal of human proportion, 'balancing height, weight, muscle development and mobility' resulting in the ideal of a symmetrical body.[7] For Hoole, the university ideal of a perfect athlete was '70 inches high and 168 lbs. in weight',[8] an athletic body that avoided any outward show of specialization or excessive muscularity, and this 'university athlete' became a reference point through which middle-class amateurs, university-educated or not, differentiated themselves from other sportsmen. Working-class bodies invariably lay outside the 'university athlete' norms, as did other freakish or unusual bodies such as those displayed by throwers, distance swimmers and weightlifters. Given this body aesthetic, it is unsurprising that the athletic events preferred were middle distance rather than long distance events, which required extensive training, while throwing events were to be avoided, partly because the body type required was more akin to that of a muscular working-class labourer, and partly because technical events needed specialist coaching.[9] As a result, British international athletic teams struggled to find suitable competitors in field events, even before the first Olympics in 1896. In 1895, when London Athletic Club (LAC) were whitewashed by New York Athletic Club (NYAC), Watson, representing Cambridge and London, did not understand the 'first rudiments' of

the shot put while Robertson of Oxford University and London had failed to learn the American hammer throwing rules and behaved as if he did not want to be there.[10] These difficulties extended into the twentieth century and when LAC was defeated easily by a Swedish team 1913 no English athlete competed in the pole vault.[11]

Athletes and officials of the period were aware of the problem and there were sporadic, although ultimately unsuccessful, attempts to improve the situation in the pre-War period.

Amateur Field Events Association (AFEA)

In 1908, after England's poor display in the field events, winning only the tug-or-war and the triple jump, a few devotees sat down to talk things over and came up with the idea of forming the AFEA. Captain F.A.M. Webster agreed to see what he could do to get athletes together and Sidney Abrahams, the Cambridge long jump Blue, subsequently agreed to act as co-hon sec with Webster. They travelled the country to generate interest and a series of meetings were held in the Districts to form a National Association affiliated to the AAA,[12] [13] the first annual meeting of which was held in 1911, when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was elected President.[14]

Webster pointed out that although field events were a major part of the Olympic programme, British participants got little chance to compete. In the triple jump, for example, there were professional matches in the North and Midlands but no opportunities for amateurs.[15] The AEFA proposed to keep public school and university men informed of meetings in which their particular events were included. Others would be encouraged to take up these events by an advisory board of men who would be willing to go to different clubs and coach proficiency in field events.[16] Championships in events that the AAA did not include would be held at local athletic meetings and the AEFA advertised for clubs willing to host these meets. Standard medals were to be awarded to identify those worthy of consideration for Olympic training and, since field events were often neglected by the 'humbler class' of athletes because of the cost of impediments, a firm of athletic outfitters had been persuaded to supply all Olympic sports requisites at a reduced price. The club was also asking anyone associated with young men's sport to report promising performers to the club[17] and it held a large stock of photographs and cinematographs of high jumping, javelin, discus and hammer and shot putting for use by aspiring athletes.[18] In addition, there were plans to send representatives to America and Sweden to learn about the methods employed in each country.[19] Thanks chiefly to the efforts of the AEFA some progress was made in throwing events[20] but the Association did not attract much support and its work was hampered by a lack of funds and operational difficulties.[21] Sports promoters had no room for field events on their programme because they did not attract the paying public[22] and Abrahams noted that the overall response had been poor with only four clubs taking up the offer of help.[23]

Athletes' Advisory Club

In 1911, amateur enthusiasts, led by A.B. George, formed an Athletes' Advisory Club (AAC) to discover new athletic talent, hold meetings to discuss diet, technique and training programmes, and to appoint experienced amateur athletes to act as coaches and advisers.[24] Interviewed by the Decies Commission in 1923, George said that the impetus for the formation of the AAC from his perspective had been the athletics match in 1895.[25] The AAC was looking to assist both the AFEA and the AAA in raising the standard of athletics[26] and the club was dominated by Oxbridge graduates with every influential member of the committee being 'a university man.' The *Observer* was optimistic about the AAC's potential, remarking that the 'right men' were on the committee.[27] Inevitably, however, the AAC adhered to the accepted amateur discourse on coaching, with one committee member suggesting that 'a gentleman athlete could only hope to be properly coached by a man who was also a gentleman.'[28] George himself believed that the innovations and inventions of competitive sport had come from the amateurs. All the professionals had ever done was to listen to the talk of amateurs and then try to make use of the 'wrinkle'.[29] The AAC had secured the help of dozens of coaches including GB representatives

and Oxford and Cambridge Blues, experiences which signified they were qualified to coach.[30] On the other hand, professionals often insisted that in many cases amateur coaching was 'worse than useless'.[31] The funds of the club were devoted to the purchase of shots, hammers, jumping standards, vaulting poles, javelins, the discus etc. to be available to district advisers for the use of potential athletes[32] and the AAC arranged a series of lectures and lantern slides from a series of photographs taken at the 1912 Olympics by Dr Adolphe Abrahams.[33] However, the AAC met with a lack of enthusiasm from public and athletes[34] and the War ended its activities.[35] George denied that the AAC had not been a success,[36] although Abrahams, a fellow founder member, said the AAC had been a 'distinct failure' because of the lack of support. They had a number of excellent members but they had never been properly appreciated. In addition, although members were specialists in particular branches of sport and happy to impart their experience, they never attracted the right people. Even if they had been an officially recognised body, they would not have been successful and he did not think the idea would take on in Britain.[37]

For one contemporary observer, both the AFEA and the AAC had suffered because of a lack of support,[38] including from the AAA. Their members had given up time and money and put in a lot of spadework in an effort to bring about an improvement but, instead of being praised, their efforts were 'coldly received, in some cases cruelly assailed, and misrepresented'. Several other enthusiastic 'varsity men would gladly be involved but they were not inclined to have their motives 'misstated by socialistic critics who are openly hostile to the Empire'.[39]

Stockholm and Berlin

The elitism of the British Olympic movement was reflected by the large number of Oxbridge athletes included in the 1912 Stockholm team.[40] The chief athletic trainer was Alec Nelson,[41] Cambridge University coach, and his appointment was well received, although there were reservations about the extent of his knowledge.[42] In the end, Stockholm proved to be something of a disaster and the AAC called a meeting soon after the Games to develop a 'scheme to restore British prestige.' Tensions over coaching emerged immediately between those who wanted to import an American trainer and those who argued that English training methods could match the Americans.[43] The AAA subsequently committed itself to what, for the time, was a revolutionary training initiative, the appointment of their first full time national coach in W.R. Knox, Canadian coach at the 1912 Games, and a Scottish-Canadian professional Highland Games all-rounder who specialized in field events. This represented an acceptable compromise since he was familiar with American methods but had a strong Empire and British heritage. Knox had been prominent in Canadian and American athletics for sixteen years achieving a host of good performances in a range of events and on June 25, 1913, he won the All-round Professional Championship of America.[44] In the end, the onset of War ended his involvement and he had little impact on the standard of British field athletics although high jumper Baker later noted that he had found Knox's advice useful.

Post-World War I

By the end of the war, Britain had lost a large contingent of its promising sportsmen and this had a negative effect on athletics,[45] even though leading figures from Oxford and Cambridge combined to create the Achilles Club in an effort to persuade ex-Oxbridge athletes back into the sport.[46] Many amateur administrators returned nostalgically to a world in which amateurism provided a philosophical direction for sport.[47] Arrangements for the Antwerp Games were rushed and pre-war differences over coaching and training re-emerged.[48] Following Antwerp, where Britain's fifteen gold medals placed them well behind the forty-one won by the Americans, the coaching debate intensified. While American 'scientific training' clearly produced results, many amateurs still believed it better to lose 'rather than to risk the stigma of semiprofessionalism' through coaching,[49] and the *Manchester Guardian* observed that, although Americans were more successful, English sportsmen, without 'such strict training methods and, without the autocratic coach,' had more enjoyment.[50]

Decies Commission and Field Events

The dichotomy between traditionalists and progressives over coaching presaged a British Olympic Association (BOA) special commission, appointed to take 'evidence on matters of far-reaching importance to the athletic future of the country,' in late 1923. The constitution of the committee, which took evidence from coaches, athletes and administrators daily for a fortnight, reflected the core membership of the BOA.[51] The Commission addressed a number of questions relating the organisation of athletics, including the state of British field events.

The commission interviewed a number of professional coaches starting with the sixty-year-old Ernest Hjertberg, Swedish by birth but a naturalized American, who had coached both the Swedish and Dutch national teams. For Hjertberg, England's inferiority in field events was due to a complete lack of efficient instruction, a lack of encouragement in the matter of competition and inferior impediments. Hjertberg outlined a proposed programme for field event athletes although the commission struggled to see how this was compatible with their own perspectives on amateurism. For the next month, he would have athletes concentrate on their techniques, before taking a month-and-a-half of rest. They would recommence work on 15 January, doing the same sort of preparatory work on about three days a week, and easy work would be carried on for about two months before starting intensive training. This would give at least one month for preparation before the County and District championships. He had previously produced good performers in field events in five months from men who had had some training in other sports and the Commission suggested that he might be able to take advantage of the GB tug of war team, policemen or weightlifters.[52]

British professional coach Alec Nelson said there was not enough competition and, since it took five years to make a good field events man, many Cambridge students, finding it could take a great deal of study and hard work over so many years, would drop it and go on to something else. Given proper instruction, it would take until the 1928 Games to develop a Field Events man.[53] Bill Thomas, coach to the Royal Air Force, said that servicemen were not big enough, although they might be encouraged if there were more events available,[54] and Sam Mussabini was sure that the lack of competition was the major issue although there was also a lack of expert instruction and training facilities.[55] Mussabini would only listen to another coach's views on field events 'If he were a gentleman.'[56] Albert Hill thought Olympic performances in field events had been a 'wash-out' due to the lack of competition and the lack of coaching. There had been no encouragement from the AAA and there was no Englishman qualified to teach field events.[57]

In other evidence, A.B. George thought the British physique good enough for any of the field events but they were not encouraged and there was a lack of good instruction and opportunity. The period necessary for the production of a consistently good field events performer depended on the man and on the event. With a good coach and a man with an aptitude for sport he might get to be a world's champion in a short time, say a few months, but that was an exception since it usually took around three years.[58] The traditional amateur perspective was articulated by Adolphe Abrahams who sympathized with those not willing to try field events since 'that sort of specialisation is a most tedious and uninteresting.' The performance of any field events man could be improved by sticking with it for four or five years but this was a 'laborious business'.[59] Joe Binks, ex-Mile Record Holder, after blaming the AAA for not taking sufficient interest, observed that there was no one in England, including Alec Nelson, who could teach field events,[60] and Eckersley was another who thought that someone other than Nelson should be considered as director of athletics because it was necessary to have someone who knew all the theory of jumping and throwing.[61] Alexander, from Birchfield Harriers, thought that there was no point engaging a field events coach for the 1924 Games because developing a champion could take seven years. The responsibility for the disappearance of field events from the programmes in Birmingham lay with the AAA and if there were more open competitions there would be more entries.[62] Howard Baker, Champion High Jumper, thought it would take three to four years to produce a first class

field events athlete and he raised the issue non-varsity athletes who needed to fit training around work. To produce an Olympic Field Events team would require at least four years but Britain did not have a suitable coach although Commission representative, General Kentish, suggested Starkey who was just leaving the Army. He would have been selected for Paris had he not been a professional.[63] A. Fattorini was another who suggested Starkey and that good material might be found in the Police Force.[6465]

Bert Ives, of the Middlesex County Athletic Association pointed to a lack of competent instruction and a lack of competition in field events, noting that at that time there were only about three long jump competitions a year.[66] P.J. Baker believed that if there were more competitions there would be more entrants but it was 'much more amusing to run a race for the sake of the race than to go in for field events for the sake of showing what you can do'.[67] David Scott Duncan, hon. Secretary of the Scottish AAA, observed that the lack of encouragement and facilities for training and instruction in Scotland meant that men who were 'good amateurs at heart' were driven into the professional ranks in order to get competition at the Highland gatherings.[68]

The Aftermath

The work of the Decies commission came to an abrupt conclusion after it learnt with 'surprise and regret' that its status had been questioned,[69] possibility by an AAA uneasy with their sport being publically discussed by an organization other than their own.[70] The AAA subsequently used BOA funding to provide trainers and support staff for the 1924 team, headed up by professional Harry Andrews and managed by A.B. George. Both men had been active as coaches in the period leading into the Games and they had been supplemented through the appointment of a field events coach in the shape of Sergeant Starkey, champion weight putter and hammer thrower of Scotland.[71] For some reason the AAA were not keen on allowing Webster to take on this role despite having purchased 50 copies of his books on Throwing, Jumping and Steeplechasing for distribution to the Districts in 1922.[72] He declined their request to act as honorary field events coach at the White City and Crystal Palace although he was prepared to act as honorary coach for the whole of the country, provided his expenses were paid.[73] When he subsequently asked to be appointed honorary field events coach for the British team the committee were 'unable to entertain his proposal.'[74]

Before the start of the Games, the *Observer* devoted several column inches to Britain's athletic weakness in the field events and quoted Rudyard Kipling in that, 'we have every reason for failure but not a single excuse'. Britain was so woefully ignorant and hopelessly outclassed it would not be a national disgrace to employ a foreigner to coach jumping, pole vaulting, shot put, or the arts of throwing the hammer, javelin, and discus. Alternatively, professionals should be sent abroad to learn their business.[75] Nevertheless, the die was cast and the AAA team to Paris was accompanied by trainers Andrews, Claydon, McKerchar, Parrish, Starkey, and Wright and masseurs Battley, Johannson, and Smith. A.B. George and J.F. Wadmore went as team manager and assistant team manager respectively.[76]

In Paris, Britain finished fourth in the medal standings and had only nine Olympic champions as compared to fifteen at Antwerp.[77] Dire warnings about field event performances were justified by the results, with only two top six finishes, thereby continuing a line of constant failure in these events, a line that stretched out into the future and contributed to further Olympic failures in 1928. It also transmuted into women's athletics. In the 1930 Germany against Britain match the British girls were completely outclassed in the javelin, being more than 30ft behind, and although Miss Fawcett threw a new English record of over 105ft she was still 14ft behind her opponent while the best English shot putter was 17ft behind the winner.[78]

In the end, the efforts of the Decies Commission, like those of the AAC and the AFEA, to change attitudes towards field events both inside and outside the athletic community were doomed to failure. Addressing the Manchester branch of the Young Men's Christian Association in 1924, Harold Abrahams deplored the increasing tendency to emphasise the importance at the Olympic Games of field rather than track events. Field athletics were much more in the nature of a juggling trick than track athletics.[79]

Aversion to field events in general and throwing events in particular was rooted in late nineteenth century amateurism and rejection of specialisation, both in terms of the need for extensive coaching and in the production of particular body types, retained a powerful presence within British athletics for much of the twentieth century. Indeed, as British field event performances at Rio 2016 demonstrated, it still resonates today.

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