



## Chariots of Fire

The mood of the film carries with it all the beauty, intensity, pain, laughter, and joy of reality. It can do this because it is rooted in reality — the two main characters are historical figures who both ran for Great Britain in the 1924 Paris Olympics. The beauty shimmers across the screen as we look across the heathered hill of Scotland in the morning mist. The beauty continues as we see the smooth strides of the Olympic track team beating out their paces along the shores where breakers meet beach. And the beauty merges with intensity as we enter into two lives that are reaching, and straining every nerve and muscle for victory. One, because he demanded it of himself. The other, because he knew that when he did his very best, he would feel God's pleasure.

The story accurately portrays the atmosphere of Great Britain in the 1920's — her steamships, her national pride, and her Cambridge, with its traditions, stuffed-shirt professors, and dimly lit chapels. The story is also accurate in portraying its main character, Eric Liddell, as a committed Christian. Eric Henry Liddell was born at Tientsin, in North China, on January 16, 1902, the second son of missionary parents. His parents returned to China, and left Eric in the homeland hills of Scotland. There Eric distinguished himself as a rugby player for the team that represented Scotland in international games, and as a world class sprinter. His specialties were the 100 meter and 100 yard dashes and the 225 yard dash. (And yes, the movie is accurate to the "T" in its depiction of Eric's race at the Scottish championships when he is knocked on the ground and is 20 yards behind!) When he was not involved in track meets, Eric was training for the Olympics. When he was not training for the Olympics, he was involved in evangelistic preaching. As a "muscular Christian" and front-page athlete, there was a category of hard-hats, miners, and students with whom he had a ready audience that many others did not have.

The other runner is Harold M. Abrahams, the captain of the British team. His father was a Lithuanian Jew, who had worked to give his son every opportunity to achieve wealth, happiness, and success. But, Harold feels put down. He feels keenly the prejudices expressed against him — whether by a stare, a glance, or a word. Set against an Anglo Saxon culture with its long heritage of tradition, Harold is bent on penetrating through and violating tradition in order that he might gain success. Thus, he acquires his own personal coach, the colorful Italian-Arab Sam Mussaybini, who shaves every unrefined edge off his running style and seconds off his times. The contrast in motives between Harold and Eric is vivid, persuasive, and intense, yet accomplished with sympathy and sensitivity. The review in *Christianity Today* states this point well.

*Empathy is generated for both characters through their races. The audience can experience through slow-motion photography, precise camera angles, and superb use of the synthesizer the pain and joy they might otherwise miss. They understand what a race really means to these runners. We feel their intense desires, both on the track and in their personal lives. When Abrahams sits alone in the stands and the audience flashes back with him to his moments of defeat, in so doing, this becomes more than a mere sports film. Running effects those runners' entire lives...*

(*Christianity Today*, Jan. 22, 1982)

The climax in the film is certainly the confrontation of Eric by Great Britain's Olympic committee, including the Crown Prince of Wales, and Eric's subsequent race. The Olympics' preliminary heats in the 100 meters were scheduled for Sunday, the Christian's Sabbath. When Eric had found this out, he had stated with simplicity the convictions of his conscience grounded in the Word of God, "I'm not running." The 100 meters was his best event, and the event in which he had the best chance of bringing home Olympic gold and glory for his nation. All the pressure of his nation and its

royal authority seek to persuade him to run the Sunday race. But Eric serves a higher authority. Here is Christian conviction, integrity, and humility portrayed and lived at its best.

Eric does, however, begin to train for another race, the 400 meters, which will not be run on Sunday. That race was, on film and in the record books, unforgettable. As Harold Abrahams himself stated years later,

*"In that race, drawn in the outside position, Liddell ran from start to finish with an inspired and passionate intensity, which gave him a decisive victory in the world's record time of 47.6 seconds."*

(Sunday Times, May 20, 1945)

Are there any points at which the film can be faulted? There are several. After the brave win from 20 yards behind, Eric was actually unconscious for one-half hour. The movie pictures him up and about, although exhausted, after a few minutes. This is one of a number of short-falls from historical accuracy. Our other criticism centers on the shallowness of the Christian message depicted as coming from Eric's lips. If it is a non-Christian producer which has influenced this shallowness, we can understand their offense at the cross. If any Christians involved watered it down so as not to offend, then they should be ashamed for such timidity. In the movie Eric's message does not transcend that of the power-of-positive-thinking message of Norman Vincent Peale or Robert Schuller. In the movie the message consists of "The Kingdom of God is Within You." "Christ Loves You." "The Power is Within You." In reality, it is doubtful that this was Eric's message. Eric Liddell was a Christian who knew and proclaimed unashamedly the cross of Christ and His power to save sinners. Here we have a real hero for our children. Here is the real story of a Christian whose life typifies that of many ordinary Christians who will never have a movie made about them, who have stood for their convictions, who have set apart the Lord's Day entirely for Him. Here is a story the ordinary person feels, because, though not flawless the story is conveyed in a personal unforgettable way, that primarily because Liddell himself is unforgettable.

*"Eric Liddell," said Harold Abrahams, "was a man whose intense spiritual convictions contributed largely to his athletic triumphs. While his ability must have been great, but for his profound intensity of spirit, he surely could not have achieved so much."*

(Sunday Times, May 20, 1945)

As Liddell's biographer and fellow evangelistic campaigner, David Thomson has gone on to comment,

*"Abrahams is right. The whole secret of Liddell's life — and of the personal influence and character which meant so much more than all his speaking and all his athletic triumphs — was the relationship in which he stood to Jesus Christ. He was a living exemplification of that saying of his Master — "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." From first to last he was a Christian — clear, convinced, consecrated. The background of his early home, the strength and beauty of his parent's Christian life, the decision (to serve Christ and His gospel) to which he came in early manhood, the resolution that marked him all the way through, to learn from everyone who had anything to teach him as to how the life of Christian discipleship might be made more vital and more effective — all these played their part. He was Christ's man — first and last — and whatever he put his hand to he did with all his might."*

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