

## 4.

# AN EXCITING PROSPECT

Eric Liddell clearly possessed great natural athletic ability. He had begun to show that on the sports field of Eltham College. He was slow, however, to take up sports after he went up to Edinburgh University in the autumn of 1920. He did not compete on the track at all in 1920. Nor did he play rugby that winter (1920–21). Truth to tell, he did not have a great build, standing just five feet nine inches (1 metre 75) and weighing at his peak around eleven stones (154 lbs).

It is not clear whether Eric intended to run competitively at university. In the event it came about almost accidentally. Eric left his own graphic account of how his track career began:

I had only been in the University a few months before the Athletic Sports came on. Six weeks before this event, a friend, hearing that I had done a little running at school, came round to try to persuade me to enter. I told him I was busy. I had a lot of work to get through and no time for that sort of thing. The very words I used seemed to startle me. Busy? Work? Yes, I had been working for about five months, and most of that time I had also been busy. These two words were new to me; they seemed to be strangers, trying to settle down in a home that wasn't their own. Needless to say, they were soon dislodged, and I was out in the open air practising once again what I had started at school. I was only a novice then, and a novice was my trainer. Both of us knowing very little or nothing about it, we got on extremely well together for the first week. Then came the holidays. I had made arrangements for a week's cycling tour. My novice friend said that that was the very worst thing for training. But all that he said slid off my back like water off

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a duck's, for, after all, at that stage we were both novices, and I was quite sure that I knew as much about it as he did. Leaving him with his thoughts, I went off with four other friends for a cycle run to Ben Nevis. It took us exactly six days, from a Monday morning to late on Saturday night. All of us agreed that it was a great success, despite the fact that when we reached the top of Ben Nevis at six o'clock one morning, and waited for the sun to rise, we found that that was one of the days on which the sun did not rise.

Arriving back, I went to see if I would be able to run, but, alas! what I had been told was only too true. I was stiff, there was no spring in my muscles. Only three or four more weeks before I was to make my first appearance in public as a runner. Gradually the springiness came back, and that May I entered for the 'Varsity Sports.<sup>1</sup>

Such were the beginnings of one of the most illustrious track careers of any Scottish athlete. It is thus that Eric Liddell made his way to the Edinburgh University Sports Ground at Craiglockhart on Saturday, 28 May 1921, to pit himself against the best sprinters at the university. One of the best that year was the 1920 champion G. Innes Stewart. The tussle between this raw novice, Liddell, and the more seasoned man, Stewart, has gone down in the folklore of Scottish athletics, though the event in itself was of only slight significance. But this was Eric Liddell's first track event in Scotland. It was his first sortie into competitive running since 1919. There was no weight of expectation on his shoulders. He might compete just the once and disappear into the obscurity from which he had come.

How Eric came to take part has already been noted in his own words. Innes Stewart also left an account of that particular track meeting. This is what he remembered:

I had been in strict training and had been running well, hoping again to be sprint champion. Shortly before the Sports, Dick Grace warned me that there was a young Arts student, Eric Liddell, whom I would require to watch. The last Saturday in May arrived, and we were soon trotting out for the 100 yards heats. Liddell was on my right, dressed in longish black pants and a white vest. Evan Hunter got us off to a good start and I could see that I was not going to have it all my own way, for

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Liddell was running me very close indeed, and I reached the tape only a few inches in front of him. In the final the reverse occurred, Liddell reached the tape an inch or two in front of me. The time was 10.4 secs.

Stewart had won the heat by half a yard in 10.6 seconds. Liddell won the final by much the same distance.

Then there was the 220 yards. Again, let Stewart describe how he saw events unfold:

My self-esteem was to get another rude shock in the furlong, generally considered my best distance. Liddell got off to a slightly better start and soon gained two yards on me. When we came to the last 80 yards, I had narrowed the gap to about a yard, and finally got home by a matter of inches. The time, 23.4 secs., was not remarkable, but, on a slightly uphill grass track with little wind, it was probably better than it looks. After that I realized that a new power in Scottish athletics had arrived.<sup>2</sup>

Eric Liddell also left an account of these events:

There was there one who was greatly fancied as a coming champion of Scotland, and I was down to meet him in the first heat. The pistol went and within the first thirty yards he gained a short head; then for the rest of the journey we seemed to travel at the same rate; thus he won. But that was only a heat, and the first three were chosen to compete in the final, and when we met then the order was reversed.

In the next race that I took part in that afternoon I was second to G. I. Stewart, the above mentioned. This is the only time in the five years that, at the 'Varsity, Inter-'Varsity or Scottish Championship, I won a second prize.

Leaving aside the loss of the 100 yards heat, it is a remarkable fact that this defeat at the hands of Innes Stewart was one of only two that Liddell suffered in any scratch (i.e. non-handicap) sprint race at the hands of a Scot in distances of 100 yards to 440 yards between 1921 and 1925. But this was where it all began. It was the start of one of the most wonderful chapters in Scottish amateur athletics history.

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In the remainder of that 1921 season Eric Liddell more or less swept all before him. The success at the Edinburgh University Sports meant that he would compete in the Scottish Intervarsity Sports to be held that year at University Park, St Andrews, on Saturday, 18 June. Liddell himself sets the scene:

I was next chosen to run for the University in the Inter-'Varsity Sports against Glasgow, St Andrews and Aberdeen. That meant a little strenuous training. I was taken to a place called Powderhall. It was the first time in my life I had ever seen a cinder track. Many who trained there were professionals. Up to then I thought all professional runners would be first-class runners. They danced about on their toes as if they were stepping on hot bricks. Whenever they started to run, they dug big holes for their toes to go into, as if they were preparing for the time when their toes would dance no more. Surely they did not expect me to make such a fool of myself as all that? Yes, I found that they did.

It is of interest to note in passing that though sprinters then used 'crouch' starts, there were as yet no such things as starting blocks. What is more, it was only on the cinder tracks that holes would be made for sprinters at the start of the races. That did not happen on the grass tracks. There was no such thing then as an 'all-weather' surface! In truth there were precious few cinder tracks in those days. Invariably the cinder tracks were quicker than the grass – always provided the weather was fine and they had been well rolled. Naturally, both these surfaces were vulnerable to adverse weather conditions – the grass tracks often becoming soft and spongy and the cinder tracks liable to be flooded and be muddy. This has to be borne in mind in assessing the merit of performances in those days. Weather also had a greater impact at that time, for there were no fields or stadia which were entirely enclosed by stands. Most were perfectly open to all the elements.

Another point to be made has to do with time-keeping. In those days all performances were expressed in fifths of a second. That is to say, two-fifths of a second was 0.4 second. Stopwatches that recorded in tenths of a second would always be rounded up to the nearest fifth. Thus, in his competitive days in Scotland, Eric Liddell was frequently

recorded at 10.0 seconds over 100 yards. It is very likely that a more accurate time, as measured by hand-held watches, would often have been 9.9 seconds. It was not until 1934 in Scotland that times were given in tenths of a second for races of up to 220 yards. The corresponding English Amateur Athletic Association, however, changed their rule in 1923 so that sprint races would be taken with 1/100th watches, with readings rounded up to the nearest tenth of a second.

At any rate, if Eric was going to be serious about his athletics, he would have to do what he saw among the professionals at Powderhall. It is important to recognise just how seriously, relatively speaking, Eric took this right from the start. Notwithstanding his renowned modesty, it is clear that he was conscious of having some native ability as a runner. He was therefore prepared for some hard work:

At first I felt that every eye was turned on me, when, as a matter of fact, there was nobody watching me at all. Still, even when no one is watching at all, it is rather difficult to do things like working your shoulders, dancing about on your toes, doing short ten-yard dashes, and in general doing everything but run. The exercises seemed unimportant at first, but later one finds how useful they have been. It was at this time that I got to know the trainer who trained me during my five seasons on the running track. He took me in hand, pounded me about like a piece of putty, pushed this muscle this way and that muscle the other way, in order, as he said, to get me into shape.

The trainer in question was Thomas McKerchar.<sup>3</sup> Tom was employed in a printing establishment in the city, but he was passionately interested in track running. By the time he took on the young university sprinter he was forty-four and an astute and knowledgeable trainer who had worked among the professionals at Powderhall, not far from his home in Leith.

In *Chariots of Fire* the impression is given that Eric's approach to his training was somewhat rustic and carried out under the eye of a well-meaning, but amateurish mentor. In the film Eric's training is portrayed as relatively informal, by contrast to the 'professional' approach of Harold Abrahams. Eric is pictured running across



*Eric with his trainer,  
Tom McKerchar.*

highland hills and sandy beaches under the eye of his ‘novice’ trainer, whereas Abrahams is depicted as going through ‘scientific’ training at the hands of the ‘professional’ trainer Sam Mussabini. That is not how it was. The truth is that Eric’s training from the start was worked at very positively, to bring out the best in him.

Many years ago the author received a personal note from David Jamieson (1879–1972) that highlighted Eric Liddell’s approach: ‘My personal recollection of Eric was the tremendous verve he put into his training. Two

sessions and occasionally three at Powderhall, and his mentor Tommy McKerchar usually laid down his routine of practice.’

The sport, for Eric Liddell, was not an all-consuming interest. He always held it in balance with his other interests, educational and Christian. But when he did train or run he certainly put everything into it – and it showed. Eric, again, gave insight into what Tom McKerchar did with him:

He told me that my muscles were all far too hard and that they needed to be softened by massage. He added that if they were not softened soon, some day when I tried to start, one of the muscles would snap. He took me out and told me to do a short run. After finishing the run I stopped much quicker than any of the others. When I asked him what he thought of it, he answered that if I wanted a breakdown I was going about it in the best possible manner, for it appears that one must never stop abruptly on reaching the tape.

Thus, being thoroughly humiliated, feeling that my reputation had been dragged through the mud, that my self-respect was still wallowing in the mire, and that if I didn’t get into the clutches of a trainer soon, every muscle in my body would give way and I should remain a physical