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James Curran: Ethereal Scottish Athlete and American Coaching Legend

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The Halswelle-Curran Conundrum

James Michael ‘Jimmy’ Curran is known in Britain for his purported association with Wyndham Halswelle, the gold medallist of the controversial 400 metres in the 1908 Olympic Games. Halswelle “was commissioned into the Highland light infantry and served in South Africa in 1902. There his athletic ability was noticed by Jimmy Curran, a former professional athlete and later coach” (Pottle, 2012). On their return to Britain, Curran convinced Halswelle to join the Edinburgh Harriers and to take running seriously. Over the next few years Curran, along with Jock Dalziel and Jimmy Wilson, coached Halswelle to becoming the Scottish 440 yards champion, the AAA 440 champion and to Olympic silver and bronze in 1906 and gold in 1908 (Bryant, 2008, Halswelle retires with great record, 1909). However, in Halswelle’s diaries and letters home, “there is nowhere a mention of Jimmy Curran” (Stewart, 2006, p. 10).

The Highland Light Infantry

Curran was born in Galashiels, Scotland, in 1880 and as he matured he developed a reputation as having a desire “to beat *everybody* at *everything*” (Statham, 2015, 21). In 1898 he joined the army and, on completing training, was posted to the Highland Light Infantry (HLI) in South Africa (WO/97-4626, n.d., 3 October 1898). Whilst awaiting embarkation he gained his first experience of competitive athletics winning the quarter-mile, the mile and the “hop, step and jump” at the Devonport garrison games in September 1899 (Meredith’s work due to Curran’s coaching, 1912, 12).

The Boer War was raging when he arrived in South Africa and he found there were lots of opportunities for fighting but few for running. At the war’s conclusion in May 1902, the

HLI moved to Port Elizabeth and weekly athletic competitions were organised. On 16 November, Curran came first in a long distance race over the veldt winning 10 shillings (HLI Chronicle, 1903, p. 805). This marked the beginning of regular success in battalion athletics. At the Port Elizabeth Scottish Association annual New Year's Day sports in 1903, Curran won the 220 yards for members of the uniformed services and the 220 yards run in uniform for soldiers and sailors (HLI Chronicle, 1903, pp. 812-814).

Halswelle, after service with the Mounted Infantry in the war arrived at the HLI just in time for these games. "On the 1st of January (1903) there were to be held great sports under the auspices of the Port Elizabeth Scottish Association for which I entered, being made to by Colonel Kelham." Halswelle won the 100 and 200 yards as well as the half-mile, the principle event of the evening with a Challenge Cup (Stewart, 2006). As Curran and Halswelle were in different companies in the regiment, perhaps this event is where they met. Days later the HLI transferred to Cairo where Curran won the garrison championships' quarter and half-mile titles before being posted to the 11 Hussars who were going to the Curragh in Ireland. The Hussars arrived in time for the garrison games and Curran won the mile and was second in the half-mile (HLI Chronicle, 1904, p. 107). In October, his five years completed Curran left the army (WO/97-4626, n.d., 2 October 1903).

The Civilian Athlete

Arriving home, Curran joined the Gala Harriers and developing into one of their early elite runners, becoming club captain. By the summer of 1904 his achievements led to him being a favourite for the prestigious Scottish Borders AAA annual border mile race. *The Hawick News* of 29 July proclaimed that "spectators have a grand treat in store, as it is likely to prove a grand race between J.B. Cowe, Scotland's four mile international representative and James Curran, Galashiels, who has been carrying all before him lately." On 13 August, *The Weekly Scotsman* published a photograph of him with the Strang-Steel Challenge Cup

presented to the winner of the Borders mile. On 15 June 1905, the *Southern Reporter* recounted that “James Curran and William Torrie, both members of the Gala Harriers’ Club, have become professionals. Both are well known on the Borders as long-distance runners. Curran, who was captain of the Harriers’ Club last year, joined the ranks of the professionals at Hawick Common-Riding games last week, when he raced under the name of G. Gordon.” In another section, it noted that G. Gordon won the One Mile Handicap. In many rural areas of Scotland and northern England at this time these local games were often the highlights of the calendar. For young men in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations money was scarce and those who were talented enough often chose to supplement their income through athletics.

The professional circuit was tough and required dedication, at home in Galashiels, Curran was possibly training under James Lee and when in Edinburgh with Jock Dalziel at Powderhall (Galashiels Sportsman’s Death, 1939; Mason & Stewart, 2014). Concerning this period of time Curran reminisced that “for some time I lost track of Halswelle but met him later in Scotland, and induced him to enter the Scottish championship quarter mile” (Halswelle retires with great record, 1909, p. 11). Curran may have introduced Halswelle to Dalziel as Halswelle mentions in his diary training with him at Powderhall.

On 3 January 1906, G. Gordon was second in the 880 yards handicap at the Royal Patent Gymnasium grounds in Edinburgh (Jamieson, 1943). A week later, attracted by the fabled riches of the professional circuit, Curran sailed to America.

Over the next few years Curran made annual trips across the Atlantic. He was a regular competitor during the New Year period in Edinburgh training with James Lee. In 1908 G. Gordon was scratch for the Powderhall New Year mile handicap and on 16 January Curran was racing at the Park Square Coliseum, Boston, as the fourth man of a five man relay team against Alfie Shrubbs over ten miles (Hadgraft, 2004). Curran ran against Shrubbs on at least two other occasions in 1908 and performed well in numerous mile and half-mile events

(Schrubb (sic) defeated four-man relay, 1908; Shrubbs beats four men, 1908). By the end of 1908 Curran was recognised as an elite professional in America; “Longboat was heralded as a possible vanquisher of Dorando. His performances in Boston in the famous Marathon ... placed him in a class with Shrubbs, Hayes and Curran” (Longboat’s defeat by Smallwood, 1908, p. 10). Meanwhile in London, Halswelle had won the controversial 400 metres gold, but the circumstances angered the principled athlete, and, at age of 26 years with the Olympic record and his times still improving, he left athletics.

Coach Curran

In America, professional runners such as Shrubbs and Curran found that despite making good money when racing they needed to consider more consistent work for the long term and coaching was an attractive proposition (Runner Shrubbs to return, 1908). Shrubbs was hired as the Harvard cross-country coach in 1908 and the same year Curran found a job as an assistant to Mike Murphy, the University of Pennsylvania coach. There are several versions of how Curran got the job; one account has Curran attending a track meet at Philadelphia’s Franklin Field where he met a groundsman from Galashiels who introduced him to Murphy. Curran asked for a job and Murphy asked him if he knew anything about rubbing down athletes; “I said no. Murphy said ‘Always say yes when asked if you can do something. The worst that can happen is they’ll fire you. I got the job’” (Spotlight on Sports, 1959, p. 44). It is likely that Curran sought Murphy out because Murphy was “recognized, even by his rival coaches, as the dean of his profession” ... with a “rare genius for discovering new and improving old methods of promoting athletic efficiency” (Bushnell, 1914, p. v). Although Murphy had completed a two year medical course at the University of Pennsylvania he believed his methods were based on observation (Park, 1992). Murphy wrote of the method by which Curran would have been mentored; “the system I have taught has been developed by the experiments I have made upon myself, the experiences of the athletes I have trained, my

observation of athletics in various European countries, and the results achieved by my associates in this country” (Murphy, 1914, p. xvii).

Whilst working for Murphy, Curran ran when possible. On 5 March 1909 he earned \$100 by winning a five mile race in New York and three days later was competing for a share of the \$5000 prize money in a six-day-go-as-you-please event at Madison Square Garden (Maloney beats White, 1909; Swedish runner wins, 1909). Curran obviously impressed Murphy and he was rapidly promoted from ‘rubber’ to the freshman track and field coach. No doubt his professional experiences and the inputs of Dalziel and Lee had taught him that there was “no room for the Corinthian spirit” in competition which helped him assimilate Murphy’s ideas and acclimatise to the American university sports’ environment (Mason & Stewart, 2014, p. 29).

In 1910 Murphy was asked to recommend a new coach for Mercersburg Academy, Pennsylvania (Sporting Editor’s Notes, 1910). On 13 August at a meeting of the Scottish Border Club of Philadelphia, the secretary announced that their Chairman, Jimmy Curran, was leaving to take up the post of coach at Mercersburg Academy from 1 October 1910 on a salary of \$700 a season with a house provided (Borderers in America, 1910). Curran quickly established his reputation by spotting the potential of schoolboy Ted Meredith at the Penn State Relays of 1911 and introducing the idea of a ‘working scholarship’ which enabled Meredith to pay the Mercersburg fees. After success in the 1912 Penn State Relays, Curran remarked “Meredith does not seem to know how fast he can run, but I know he is the fastest runner the world has ever seen, and, if he goes after any record from 600 yards to cross-country, he will lower every one” (Wilson, 2008, p. 17). Curran entered Meredith into the 800 metre Olympic trials for experience but he qualified for the Stockholm games where he won gold in a world record 1: 51.9 and further gold in the 4 by 400 metres relay.

Curran quickly picked up the ethos of American collegiate sport in that “while winning was important, Jimmy put as much, if not more, stock in building character in his athletes” (Statham, 2015, p. 21). He instilled the ethos of hard work, an inherent desire to succeed, and to strive for greatness. Educational attainment was more important than athletic achievement and he was willing to sacrifice team success to ensure these principles were upheld. ‘Al’ Robinson was Curran’s main sprinter in 1912, not losing a race, and Curran believed he was faster than Meredith at any distance from 50 to 440 yards. In 1913 Robinson ran a 9.6 100 yards and a 20.8 220 yards but the records were not ratified as nobody believed a schoolboy could run that fast (School Lad is Promising, 1913, p. 61). However if any boys thought their athletic ability would provide immunity from rules, Curran soon removed the idea. In late 1913, Robinson stayed out beyond curfew with two others and all three were thrown off the team, Curran lost ‘three stars’ in one go (Jimmy Curran Trained Olympians, 1961).

Figure 1. Curran coaches sprint starts of the wooden Mercersburg track in winter (Courtesy Mercersburg Academy)



By 1915, Mercersburg was recognised across the USA as a powerhouse of high school athletics; “to Jimmy Curran, the coach, belongs a bit of credit for turning out this team. His coaching has brought him to the eyes of the college world” (Mercersburg Academy has a fast track team, 1915, p. 4). However, he continued crossing the Atlantic to compete and in his 1913 trip he won thirteen races including the esteemed Lothian Handicap 800 yards at the Jedburgh games (Border Games Archives: 1900-1914, n.d.). One of his last races as a professional was in 1921 when he again won the Lothian Handicap 800 yards (The Jedburgh Border Games Archives: 1919-1939, n.d.). Notably his description of his occupation had evolved over the years on the shipping passenger lists, from ‘athlete’ in 1913 through ‘trainer’ in 1921 to ‘athletic coach’ in 1924 (Passenger lists, n.d.). In 1913 Sam Mussabini (cited in Day, 2012, p. 249) had insisted that he was a coach and not a trainer, and an ideal coach would be middle aged, experienced and intelligent, having “gone through the mill himself,” and his aptitude would be backed by a common sense that came with years of practice in his craft. Such a coach would be able to select the right raw material and properly train it, grafting his own theories onto the man in training while subsuming personal motives in the interests of his athlete. By 1948 when “Curran was considered by many as the best scholastic track coach in the United States” he certainly met these criteria (Mercersburg Academy proud of work of alumni in Olympic Games, 1948, p. 13). In 1961, Curran retired and the alumni journal outlined his achievements before concluding:

His wit, his practical philosophy, his loyalty to Mercersburg for 51 years have earned the gratitude of all those who have benefited either directly or indirectly from his presence as a member of the Mercersburg family ... Jimmy plans to spend his retirement in Mercersburg ... to criticize his successor. (Jimmy Curran Trained Olympians, 1961, p. 174).

Conclusion

During his time at Mercersburg, Curran had influenced hundreds of students and helped produce thirteen Olympic athletes who won six gold's, a silver and a bronze between them. Several of his students continued to influence sport beyond their competitive days amongst them being Ted Meredith who coached the Czechoslovakian team for the 1936 Olympics; Barney Berlinger who was voted 'coach of coaches' in 1947 by the US Army and Charlie Moore Jr. who became the Director of Athletics at Cornell before joining the President's Council of Physical Fitness.

Curran's introduction into amateur and professional running coincided with the first running boom in America. Like Shrubbs he would have seen that athletes in America were better organised and had better attitudes to training than their British counterparts (Hadgraft, 2004). The Corinthian attitudes of British athletic administrators, and possibly Halswelle, helped drive highly motivated and ambitious men like Shrubbs and Curran to the USA. Here the intercollegiate programmes supported by professional coaches and administrators with excellent facilities appealed to them especially as it allowed them to continue running professionally as well (Park, 1992). Curran was initiated into a culture of coaching through running and training in the tightly connected community of Scottish border athletics and at Powderhall and the Royal Patent Gymnasium grounds with Jock Dalziel, Jimmy Wilson and James Lee. Also, he ran against and associated with like-minded athletes who looked towards coaching careers, men such as Alf Shrubbs and Bill Struth. Once in America, somehow good fortune smiled on him and his craft knowledge was enhanced through becoming immersed in the professional coaching culture of Murphy.

On his death in 1963, Curran's wife received a tribute from the actor Jimmy Stewart who had been a high jumper at Mercersburg; former students remembered Curran "with a

fondness that is usually reserved for family members” (Statham, 2015, p. 21). Jimmy Curran had become one of sport’s grand old men.

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