

A World History of the One-Lap Race “The killer sprint”: 400m and 4x400m relay, – Men and Women (1850-2004)

by Roberto L. Quercetani

In this book, the well-known athletics historian Roberto L. Quercetani describes the evolution of the 400m race (and the 440 yards or quarter-mile), which, although once classified among middle distance events, is now regarded as a “prolonged sprint”. This term appears to be well justified if one considers that Michael Johnson’s one-lap record of 43.18 (1999) is the equivalent of four consecutive 100 metres in 10.795. Sometimes the 400m is also referred to as the “killer sprint” because, being just beyond the limit through which a well-trained runner can maintain his maximum speed, it requires excruciating labour, especially in the closing stage. As early as 1888, Montague Shearman, the most famous observer of track athletics of the 19th century, alluded to quarter-milers as “runners who run themselves blind before reaching the tape”.

Quercetani chronicles and comments on the evolution of the event from Lon Myers, the 19th century marvel, to Michael Johnson, holder of the current world record. Attention is also devoted to the parallel evolution of the 4x400m relay.

Quercetani’s book comprises two sections and eleven chapters. The first section is devoted to men’s 400m running and includes the following chapters:

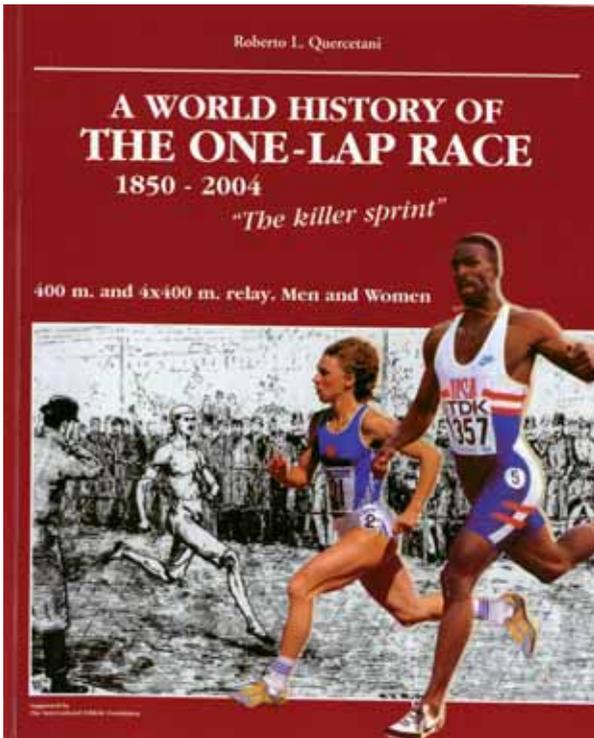
- 1 From Leonidas, the most famous athlete of antiquity, to Lon Myers, the greatest of 19th century runners

- 2 Furious Olympic battles in St. Louis and London – Meredith, a bright star in the middle of World War I
- 3 Liddell’s inspired running – The Carr vs. Eastman classic – The America vs. Europe feud up to Harbig’s 46.0
- 4 Jamaican symphony, then USA is back on top
- 5 Mexico City summit: a record for the ages
- 6 MJ, one-lap runner nonpareil: global titles galore and a supreme world record
- 7 MJ’s successors desert sub-44 territory – Wariner is the best

- The women’s section contains four chapters:
- 8 Learning to survive after one long breathless thrill
 - 9 Maria Itkina, Betty Cuthbert and the “mysterious” Shin Geum-Dan
 - 10 Irena Szewinska breaks the 50 seconds barrier. Marita Koch reaches the summit
 - 11 Putting back the clock of history?

The book is rounded off by 100 pages of statistics (world year lists and all-time world lists) of both the men’s and the women’s 400m performances.

When browsing through Quercetani’s book, it becomes obvious that, historically speaking, the 400m may well be described as one of the most “American” of all events because that country’s athletes have won 41 of the 77 medals so far awarded in the



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modern Olympic Games. Their harvest in the World Championships in Athletics is equally impressive: 14 of 27 medals at stake. And their share of gold medals is even higher: 19 out of 26 at stake in the Olympics and 6 out of 9 in the World Championships. Great Britain was for a long period of time the most serious challenger, and Jamaica had its vintage seasons. In recent years the coming of age of Africa in running events touched the 400m too, albeit not to such a great extent as in the middle and long distances.

Although the history of the women's 400m is far shorter – it was in fact added to the Olympic programme as late as 1964 – it is more variegated. The current world record,

47.60 sec by Marita Koch of the former GDR, dating from 1985, appears to be unreachable for today's elite runners. The possible reasons for such a long recess, which of course are strongly connected with the 1980s as the "Golden Age" of doping, are analysed in this book. This means that the book is not a mere compilation of historical facts and data but that it also contains a lot of background information that make it most interesting and entertaining reading.

All in all, Quercetani's book is as informative and inspiring as his earlier books. It is therefore a must for all readers interested in the history of athletics.

Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer