

A World History of Long Distance Running (1880-2002) Track Events – Men and Women

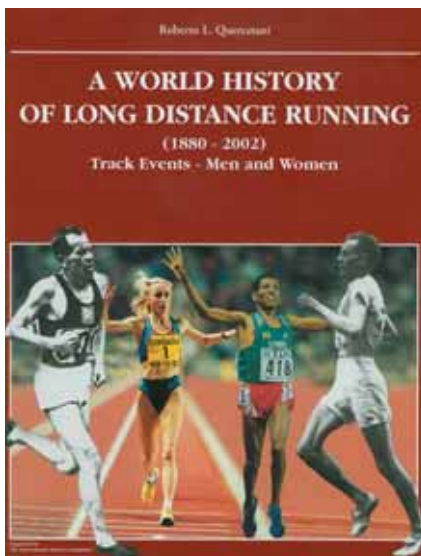
By Roberto L. Quercetani

This history concentrates on the longest track events on the Olympic programme – the 5,000 and 10,000 metres. It traces the story of these two distance races from the pioneer days of English distance runners – who used to run over the somewhat shorter 3 and 6 miles (= 4,828.04m and 9,656.07m, respectively) – through to the present-day African record breakers. It pays particular attention to the runners who made history through both their competitive deeds and the times they achieved.

From this point of view, the first really great distance man was Alfred Shrubbs of Great Britain most of whose records withstood all assaults for many years. His 10-mile mark of 50:40 $\frac{3}{5}$, for example, which he set in 1904, was broken only in 1928.

These facts and the stories around Shrubbs and those runners who have followed right up to Haile Gebreselassie are recounted by Roberto L. Quercetani. Quercetani is also author of "A World History of Track and Field Athletics", a book first published in 1964 by Oxford University Press, London and since printed in Finnish, Italian, Japanese and Spanish with the latest English edition appearing in 2000. In addition to being a famous athletics historian, he is one of the sport's best-known journalists, covering

most of the world's major meetings for over half a century. He has been a regular contributor to the Milan daily "La Gazzetta dello Sport" and is the European Editor of the US magazine "Track & Field News". In 1950, he was one of the founders of the Association of Track and Field Statisticians (ATFS), the most authoritative reference point for all those interested in the facts and figures of athletics.



"A World History of Long Distance Running (1880-2002)" is divided into two two sections, the first of which is devoted to men's distance running while the second deals with great women distance runners. The men's section includes the following nine chapters:

- 1 From prehistory to Alfred Shrubbs, standard-bearer of 20th century greats
- 2 The Finnish era: Kohlemainen, the immortal Nurmi and his heirs
- 3 Zátópek – the halcyon days of the human locomotive
- 4 Vladimir Kuts, the first czar of USSR
- 5 Ron Clarke, magnanimous king without a crown
- 6 Lasse Viren, a lone wolf from Finland
- 7 Yifter, an ageless blitz

- 8 Rise of the African wave: Said Aouita et altera
- 9 The all-conquering Gebreselassie.

the world top twenty—Mohammed Mourhit of Belgium and Ismail Sghyr of France, were Moroccan by birth.

The women's section contains three chapters:

- 10 From early whispers to Kazankina and Kristiansen
- 11 The march of progress: Chinese high-water marks in 1993 and 1997
- 12 Highlights of the 2002 season.

When studying the official lists of world records, one is tempted to compare records from different epochs. However, this is an absurd game, considering how many factors have changed through the years. Modern running surfaces are much faster than those on which Nurmi or even Zatopek used to compete. Present-day scientific training methods cannot be compared with the empiric ones prevailing fifty or more years ago. Moreover, international competition is far more intense now than it was at any previous time in the past and economic incentives introduced in recent years have altered the philosophy of the sport in several ways. As a result of all this, one of the most important messages conveyed by Quercetani's book is that champions should only be measured by the yardstick of their time.

The book is rounded off with 74 pages of statistics on both men's and the women's distance running: all time world lists of best performers, world all time lists of best performances, and world year lists.

The advances of women distance runners during the last years have been truly amazing: present-day world records (14:28.9 over the 5,000m and 29:31.78 over 10,000m) compare favourably with some of the record marks made by male runners in the first half of the 20th century.

When browsing through Quercetani's book, one sees how considerably the map of long distance running has changed, particularly since the 1980s. Throughout the first half of the 20th century most of the great distance runners came from the British Isles and Scandinavia, chiefly from Finland. In the 1960s runners from New Zealand and Australia entered the scene. The African runners came later, chiefly because of political and economic factors, which delayed the continent's development even in the domain of sport. But champions like the Kenyan Kipchoge Keino acted as trail blazers and gave rise to what Quercetani calls "The African Wave". Today's seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of Kenyan distance talents reminds one of the equally strong impact Finnish runners made in the years between World Wars I and II. Add to this Ethiopia and Morocco, which may not have had the same overflow of talent but have produced excellent performers on several occasions. Europe, meanwhile, has gradually but inexorably been outshone. In 1940 the first nineteen of the top twenty men in both the 5,000 and 10,000 came from Europe. But by 2001 eighteen of the top twenty in the 5,000 and fifteen of the top twenty in the 10,000 represented African countries. As if this were not enough, the two European 5,000 metres runners among

To sum it up then, Quercetani's book is a most informative and inspiring read for distance running enthusiasts. It is easy to browse through and contains some fascinating stories that readers will be unfamiliar with and some that will refresh the memory. The book can be thoroughly recommended to everybody interested in athletics history!

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Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer