

## Liverpool “Olympic Festivals” of the 1860s

### Arms banded with muscle, bound with tendons of steel

“The proceedings will, in point of interest and display, be such as have never before been witnessed in Liverpool”. The confident prediction made in the columns of the “Liverpool Mercury” newspaper on the morning of Saturday 14 June 1862 must have struck a note of both encouragement and anxiety for two of its readers, Charles Melly and John Hulley. Clearly, the sports meeting which they had organised for that day was being welcomed enthusiastically by the local press, but would it live up to such great expectations aroused by the vaunted title which had been devised for it – the “Liverpool Olympic Festival” ?



Messrs Melly and Hulley were respectively president and honorary secretary of Liverpool Athletic Club, which they had founded only the previous January. Both were prominent figures in Liverpool public life, and Melly came from a family which made an enormous contribution to 19th Century politics and commerce. He was the elder son of André Melly, who had been born in Geneva and had arrived in England in 1822 at the age of 20, becoming agent to the Viceroy of India and then to the Egyptian Government, and dying of fever while on a tour of the Nile valley in 1851. Charles was born in Tuebrook, in Liverpool, on 25 May 1829, in what was described as a “very pretty rural cottage” (there is

nothing “pretty” or “rural” about Tuebrook these days, and probably hasn’t been for at least the last 100 years).

He became a very successful cotton merchant but was deeply concerned with social issues and during his lifetime took an abiding interest in the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science, the Working Men’s Improvement Society, the “ragged schools”, the Unitarian Mission, and the provision of infirmaries, public parks, playgrounds, gymnasiums, benches and drinking fountains. He enlisted the support of the Earls of Derby and Sefton and Lord Stanley, among many others of the great and the good, in his philanthropic exercises, and the opening of one of his public playgrounds in Liverpool in 1858 was reported even in “The Times” and attracted 6,875 visitors in the first week.

André Melly’s other son, George, was described as the “evil genius of Liverpool liberalism” and became MP for Stoke-on-Trent. The various offspring of the two brothers (Charles and his wife had seven sons and a daughter) were to include a future Mayor of Nuneaton, two Lieutenant-Colonels, a lady member of the Liverpool Education Committee, a doctor, and the most eminent of the city’s wool-brokers and shipowners. High achievement remained a family trait into the 20th Century because numbered among later descendants were the singer, writer and art critic, George Melly, and his actress sister, Andrée. So broad were Charles Melly’s interests that when his obituary was published in the “Liverpool Daily Post” of 12 November 1888, no mention at all was made of his involvement with the “Liverpool Olympic Festivals”. Even Melly himself did not in hindsight consider the matter of great import because when his memoirs were published a year after his death his only reference to any of

the Festivals was a passing mention for the year 1862 that “in June the club held some fine sports”.

This first Olympic Festival was an ambitious venture to promote so early in the life of the Liverpool Athletic Club, but Melly was a visionary who had anticipated the growing popularity of athletic sports among the public. At the end of 1862 he was to state that “I believe this Athletic Club is only the beginning of a movement which will soon become general, not in Liverpool or Manchester only, but throughout the kingdom” – and, of course, he was proved right in his judgment. Melly had been sent to Rugby School in 1844, and as this was almost precisely the era in which “Tom Brown’s Schooldays” was set we can be confident that Melly shared the same views as the author, Thomas Hughes, regarding the value of sporting competition. In one scene Hughes has the captain of the house football team exhorting his 70 house-members by saying of the newly-arrived headmaster: “If I saw him stopping football, or cricket, or bathing, or sparring, I’d be as ready as any fellow to stand up about it. But he don’t. He encourages them. Didn’t you see him out today for half-an-hour watching us?” On his way by stage-coach to the school for the first time, the young hero of the book, Tom Brown, had looked on agog as two boys ran alongside from one milestone to the next and had been timed in 4min 56sec by one of the coachmen. Melly was certainly all too ready for the rest of his life to stand up in favour of such manly pursuits.

For the 1862 Festival he and Hulley devised a programme of running and walking events, high jump, long jump, pole leap, throwing the disc and the cricket ball, boxing, wrestling, fencing and gymnastics. In spirit, if not in content, memories were being stirred of the finer values of the Ancient Olympic Games in Greece which had finally collapsed into disrepute almost 1,500 years before. The list of events was also uncannily similar to what would become the mainstay of the Modern Olympics when they began in 1896. In the 1860s the concept already suited the Victorian middle-class regard for classicism, but would it bring in the crowds ?

Large crowds attend the Festival, but matters get out of hand

If anything, the festival turned out to be almost too popular for its own good. There were 10,000 spectators at the Mount Vernon military parade-ground venue despite cold and gloomy weather and threatening clouds, and yet the account in the next edition of the “Mercury” was double-edged: “The general arrangements for the meeting were exceedingly good, had the public allowed them to be carried out; but owing to an unfortunate oversight in not having a sufficient number of persons to keep the course, there was some interference with the competitors”. No doubt the eminent chief official at the meeting, Colonel Sir John Jones KCB, expressed his displeasure regarding the unseemly melee. The band of the volunteer Childwall Rifles, of which Charles Melly was Corps Captain, was in attendance to provide musical entertainment but was no doubt ill-equipped to deal with an unruly crowd.

The “Liverpool Daily Post” had printed a full list of entries for the athletics events on the day before the meeting, including 24 names for the 120 yards, 20 for the 300 yards, 16 for the 1½ miles and 15 for the four miles walk, though only four for the pole leap, three for the high jump and two for the disc throw. It would seem as if then, as for the best part of a century to follow, field events were of secondary interest in Britain. Reference to a “disc” is intriguing because the discus event was not to be properly regularised until after the 1896 Athens Olympics, though it seems very likely that on this occasion in Liverpool it was an exercise which was more akin to quoit-throwing. Among the various competitors, the “Daily Post”

correspondent particularly drew the attention of his readers to the presence of A.J. Eglen – “a sort of local celebrity as an amateur runner” – who would be easily spotted on the track in his white-and-blue hooped jersey and cap.

Eglen duly fulfilled expectations by winning the 300 yards and a 1,200 yards steeplechase which included “several leaps and a hurdle and water jump”. The “Mercury” added that the latter event “excited much interest, and some little business was done upon it in the betting line”. Presumably, the reporter was exercising typically English under-statement and was really saying that rather a large amount of business, indeed, was done by the bookmakers. There is no evidence that any competitors from further afield than Manchester took part in the meeting, and it was a Mancunian named A. Fairweather who won the “champion medal”, with victories in the Indian club exercises and sabre-v-bayonet contest and 2nd places in boxing, vaulting and disc throwing. In later years he was to return to the Festival as an official on behalf of Manchester Athletic Club.

Certainly, the overall standard of competition was in no way exceptional, and it would be fair to say that this first meeting perhaps achieved “Olympian” heights only in the minds of its creators. The one athlete of note to figure among the winners was W.D. Hogarth, from the host club, in the 880 yards, who was to place 2nd at the same distance at the Amateur Athletic Club Championships of 1867. However, the intentions of the organisers would seem to have been rather more high-flown than those of merely providing a setting for record-breaking. The following Monday’s “Daily Post” complained that the meeting had been far too long and that no detailed list of results was available, which “rendered it exceedingly difficult for the reporters to obtain a correct list of those who gained prizes”, but the patriotic hearts of Colonel Jones, Captain Melly and their retinue, who had pronounced their watchword for the promotion as being “Mens sana in copore sano” (“A healthy mind in a healthy body”), would surely have been warmed by the newspaper’s resounding editorial endorsement of their philosophy:

“That physical exercise is necessary to health is a lesson nature daily teaches. Men whose gymnasium is, as it were, the World – the soldier, the sailor, the open air labourer – are those who, generally speaking, enjoy the luxury of good bodily condition, and upon whose manly power the safety of a nation in times of emergency must mainly depend”.

The fraught atmosphere of the era, and its influence on sporting endeavour, was vividly described by Peter Lovesey in his centenary history of the Amateur Athletic Association, published in 1979: “The volunteer movement had been revitalised in 1859 when it was feared that Napoleon III had plans to invade Britain. Hundreds of thousands up and down the country had joined part-time defence units, parading for drill each weekend. Sport was included in the training”.

The Festivals continue and set a pattern for organised athletics in England

The Liverpool Olympic Festival was held again in 1863, 1864, 1865 and 1867 and it forms a significant part of the early history of organised athletics in Victorian England. The Inter-Varsity matches between Oxford and Cambridge did not begin until 1864 and the London-based Amateur Athletic Club Championships, which were a forerunner of the AAA Championships, started in 1866. During the 1860s, and even into the 1870s, the thriving industrial cities of Liverpool and Manchester were major centres for both amateur and professional track and field competition, and the eventual formation of the AAA in 1880 was

largely as a response to the challenge being offered to London as the administrative centre of the sport in England.

In 1863 an even larger crowd estimated at 12,000-to-15,000 was attracted to the second Liverpool "Olympics", with 140 police officers in attendance to ensure that the proceedings went off smoothly, but despite these precautions the meeting still dragged on until after 10 p.m, "long before which time the majority of the spectators were wearied with novelty and excitement, and the stands had been deserted by their occupants". W.G. McDowell won the 120 yards in 12sec, presumably with some handicap start, and J. Roberts the 440 yards in 58sec. Hogarth again won the half-mile, in 2min 18sec, and it was in all probability his presence which caused only four of the 15 entrants to start the race. The versatile A.J. Eglon turned his attentions to the two miles but lost by six yards to R.H.Merry, whose time was recorded as 11min 16sec. The contemporary best amateur performances on record for these latter two events were 2min 3sec and 10min 25sec, and so the Liverpool achievements were of no small consequence.

Yet by far the outstanding feat of the day may well have come from William Mitchell, who won the 200 yards hurdles in 26sec and the long jump with "19½ft". The first authenticated 220 hurdles time is 30sec by J. Brindley, also in Liverpool the following year, and the best long jump until then had been 20ft 11in (6.375m) by Charles Buller earlier in 1863. The reports of the Liverpool Festival give no clue to the circumstances in which Mitchell gained his wins – though the following year's 200 yards hurdles event was contested over five hurdles topped with furze – and it may be that he benefited from a handicap allowance in either or both events, but his credentials would soon to be seen to be beyond reproof. He came from a family which was to make an immeasurable contribution to athletics at national level in the years to follow.

Later in 1863 the Mount Vernon grounds were put up for sale. Undeterred, and now describing themselves imposingly as "The Athletic Society of Great Britain", Hulley and Melly devised an even more elevated title of "Grand Olympic Festival" and arranged for their 1864 celebration to be moved to the Zoological Gardens, where a grass track had been laid out with hoardings, barriers and ropes to keep the spectators in check. The "Daily Post" for Monday 11 July painted a marvellously graphic picture of the previous Saturday's scenes as the hour drew near for the meeting to begin:

"Between half-past two and three o'clock London-road, Brunswick-road and West Derby-road were literally thronged with cabs, carriages and pedestrians moving towards the scene of the festival; and every omnibus running in the same direction was overloaded with passengers. Outside the gardens the state of affairs was remarkably lively. All the ingenuity of the police, and the good temper of coachmen, cab-drivers and conductors, was required to convey each vehicle, as it arrived, safely to the gates and back again into a clearer portion of the road. Flags flaunting from the walls invited all who were outside to venture nearer the centre of interest; and an insatiable crowd indulged with the utmost gusto in sarcastic observation on the dress and personnel of the favoured holders of tickets".

The Mitchell brothers begin to make their presence felt

The meeting, which had been postponed by a week because of adverse weather, opened with a parade of the athletes led by the brothers, William and Thomas Mitchell, whose demeanour excited the "Daily Post" correspondent to a fervent pitch: "Having made a circuit of the

ground, they took up a position in front of the grandstand, and from the expression on their countenances it was easy to see that they were all men prepared to bear either victory or defeat without presumption and without despondence. In short, true-born Englishmen carrying a healthy mind in a healthy body. If anyone present had before doubted the advantages of an athletic training, the sight of this body of men – their arms banded with muscle and bound with tendons of steel – must have carried conviction to his mind”.

The well-to-do Mitchell family lived at Fearn Hall, on the outskirts of Liverpool, and William and another brother, George, were among the 16 runners entered in the 100 yards. Both qualified for the final (described as the “final heat”), of which the imperturbable “Mercury” reporter observed, “It was generally expected that W. Mitchell would be the winner, but after a smart race Trevor won the first prize, Mitchell following close at his heels. This heat was run in  $9\frac{3}{4}$ sec”. It would seem that John Trevor, who came from Chester, more likely ran 10sec that day, as had William Mitchell in the qualifying round, and both these times have appeared as such in successive recent editions of the IAAF’s list of progressive World records and World best performances. The two men had thus become the 15th and 16th amateur athletes (all of them British) to have recorded “even time” since 1855, and no amateur would be credited with faster until 26 years later, when John Owen ran  $9\frac{4}{5}$  in the USA. Trevor also beat William Mitchell at 200 yards, having “got off with a good lead at the beginning”. C.W. Beardsall, from Huddersfield, was 3rd, as he had been at 100 yards.

There was also, apparently, some confusion regarding the result of the two miles. In the list of results printed in the “Mercury”, the time for the winner, Richard Garnett, who came from the village of Stoke, near Nantwich, in Cheshire, was given as 11min 25sec. This was another case of misleading information being given to the press, as had happened in previous years, because Garnett, who led the race all the way, actually set a new amateur best time of 10:15½, beating the 10:25 by William Smelter in the previous year’s Cambridge University Sports. Born on 18 February 1843, Garnett was to win the four miles at the 1866 Amateur Athletic Club Championships in an inaugural amateur best of 21:42.0. His brother, George, was also a very capable runner and was to win a fraternal contest in the one mile steeplechase event at the next year’s Liverpool Festival, completing a course containing 16 barriers in a commendable time of 5min 15sec.

William Mitchell also appeared in the high jump, as did his brother, Thomas, and the impression which they made was a contrasting one. According to the “Mercury”, William and another competitor, H. Simpson, of Seaforth, were “very graceful leapers and each time they cleared they were awarded with hearty applause. On the other hand, Mr Thomas Mitchell (a considerably heavier man than either of the other two) had a most awkward style, throwing his legs over the pole very clumsily, yet dextrously enough to avoid touching it. He got well laughed at every time, but he bore this with so much good humour, and showed such a generous spirit towards his opponents in this as well as other contests, that he soon became a favourite with the spectators”. Thomas Mitchell had the last laugh that day because he won the high jump with another amateur best of 5ft  $7\frac{1}{4}$  (1.705m).

The Mitchell brothers are in fine form – but a 16ft standing jump seems unlikely !

The 1865 Festival was dominated by the prolific Mitchell family, as the youngest of the four brothers, Robert, made his first appearance shortly before his 18th birthday. Among other events, William won the 200 yards, the 200 yards hurdles and the “standing wide jump”; Thomas took the “running wide jump” at 19-3 (5.86), with William 2nd at “almost the same

distance”; and George was successful in the broad-sword fencing. Robert took part in the youths’ 880 yards, though beaten by Cromwell Stuart, of Elm House, Seaforth, in 2min 30sec, and also appeared in a pole jumping competition won by Gracchus Hall, of Stockport, at 9ft (2.85). Somewhat improbably, the “Mercury” reported of William’s “standing wide jump” that “the length of the leap was not mentioned, but we were informed it was something over 16ft” !

As Peter Lovesey relates in his AAA history, John Hulley was the chairman at a meeting in November of 1865 at which a “National Olympian Society” was formed with the support of representatives of the North of England, the Midlands and the South, including William Penny Brookes, who had set up an Olympian Society as early as 1850 in Shropshire and had staged his famed Much Wenlock Games, together with E.G. Ravenstein, president of the German Gymnastic Society in London, and Ambrose Lee, a vigorous promoter of amateur sport in Manchester. In the same month the opening took place of a new Liverpool Gymnasium which had been the brainchild of Hulley and Charles Melly and was described as “one of the most perfect and complete establishments of the kind as yet existing in Europe”.

The Mayor of Liverpool agreed to be chairman of the gymnasium board of directors, and Hulley was appointed managing director, or gymnasiarch, with the renowned boxing Champion of England, Jem Mace, as one of the team of instructors. The inaugural ceremonies were conducted with much pomp and circumstance, and in his keynote speech Lord Stanley MP paid fulsome tribute to Charles Melly, saying of him that “it was mainly by his exertions, aided by those of a few supporters nearly as zealous as himself, that the requisite sum of £10,000 was obtained for this construction”. Melly responded modestly that “no single individual could have started the institution on the firm basis on which it now stood”.

Ironically, it may well be that the gymnasium project – for all its good intentions of bringing the opportunity for physical exercise to the thronging middle-class masses of Liverpool – was largely responsible for the eventual demise of the Olympic Festivals, which had depended so much on Hulley and Melly as their driving-forces. Both men had now moved on to something different, and with all their other commercial and philanthropic interests they would not have unlimited time to devote to sporting interests. It has also been suggested in one of the first published studies of the Liverpool Olympics, written by Roy Rees, then Director of Physical Education at the University College of North Wales, and published in 1977, that the change of venue for the Festivals had been a mistake because the Zoological Gardens had a poor reputation as a haunt for prostitution, drinking and gambling, and that the support of respectable society in Liverpool was lost. The 1866 Festival took place in Llandudno, where Robert Mitchell set the best long jump of the year in Britain at 20ft 6in (6.25m), and there was one further Festival at Shiel Park, in Liverpool, in 1867, at which John Stone set a shot-putt record of 37ft 7in (11.45m)

### The Amateur Athletic Club begins its Championships in London

Within a month of the announcement of the National Olympian Society in 1865, the Amateur Athletic Club in London, fearing a provincial takeover of the sport, had set a date for its first annual championships the following year. That meeting took place at Beaufort House, West Brompton, on 23 March 1866 and the results show that at least three of the competitors there had also figured in past Liverpool Festival meetings – Richard Garnett, as previously noted, won the AAC four miles; M.E. Jobling, who was a civil servant and a member of London

Athletic Club, Northumberland Cricket Club and Nautilus Rowing Club, ran in the 100 yards and 120 yards hurdles; C.W. Beardsall, whose affiliation was now listed as that of Lincoln's Inn, competed at 440 yards. At the 1867 AAC Championships the winner of the shot, John Stone, and of the seven miles walk, T.H.Farnworth, were both members of the Liverpool Gymnasium club formed by the enterprising Hulley and Melly, who maybe took some wry satisfaction from the fact that for his title Farnworth beat one of the founders of the AAC, John Graham Chambers, by a margin of six inches.

John Stone improved the amateur best for the shot on four occasions from 36-6 (11.12) to 40-9<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> (12.44) between 1867 and 1870, but the greatest honours were achieved by the Mitchell dynasty which had been so successful at the Liverpool Olympic Festivals. William, at 100 yards, and Thomas, in the high jump, had recorded the best performances ever by amateurs. Robert, born on 14 July 1847, was to exceed them both with a pole vault of 10-6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> (3.21) at the AAC Championships of 1868 and high jumps of 5-9 (1.75) and 5-9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> (1.765) at the same meeting in 1870 and 1871 which were all amateur best performances. In total, Robert Mitchell won 11 national titles at four different events. [Note: more detail about the Mitchell brothers is to be found in an article by Peter Lovesey in the July 2000 edition of "Track Stats".]

All of the Mitchell family's feats were assuredly accomplished in the unashamed spirit of dedicated amateurism and with the inbred conviction of their generation that the English were naturally superior in all walks of life. The same sentiment was expressed in suitably belligerent terms by Colonel Sir John Jones in his introductory speech one year at the Liverpool Festival. "I can only say that, if the men of the British army combine physical strength and power with the indomitable spirit which has characterised them, you may rest assured that you will not have to find fault with the successors of those who never disgraced themselves or the English flag in any part of the World". The crowd cheered long and hard.

When the eminent German sports historian, Dr Joachim Ruhl, and his colleague, Annette Keuser, presented their study of the Liverpool Olympics more than 120 years later they had no doubts of the contribution which John Hulley and Charles Melly, together with William Penny Brookes had made to the development of sport:

"19th Century England was pregnant with Olympic festivals of all sorts. Through personal contacts between Brookes and Melly of Liverpool, the Liverpool Olympics and their programme influenced Brookes, who was eagerly corresponding with Baron Pierre de Coubertin in the 1890s, trying to help Coubertin in his international endeavours in Greece up to 1895. The field of Olympism, and serious scholars investigating its history, should turn their eyes more readily towards the antecedents of Coubertin's achievements and to those pioneers who had paved the way for him. The Liverpool Olympics have so far been one of the many missing links to be analysed in the future".

Footnote: A future issue of "Track Stats" will include a detailed account of John Levett's World record for the one-hour run which was set in the grounds of a Merseyside hotel in 1854.

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