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**THE IDEA OF THE RECORD**  
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( *Sport in History, 2006*)

***Introduction***

This paper examines the idea of the sports record and its relation to our ideas of excellence, achievement and progress.

It begins by recovering and reviewing the work of Mandell, whose definition of the record emphasises three central ideas: statistic, athletic, and recognition. It then considers the work of Eichberg, Guttman and Mandell, from the 1970s onwards, on the genesis of the modern sports record, explaining and developing their ideas *via* a distinction between descriptive and emulative records, and between different kinds of emulative records. This then permits an analysis of contemporary athletic and sports records.

The idea of the Significant Record will also be advanced, offering the Four-Minute Mile as an example, alongside the Breaking of the Sound Barrier and the Ascent of Everest, in an attempt to explicate our continuing fascination with such exceptional achievements.

Since it has often been argued that the origins of our modern concern with records are rooted in the idea of modernity itself (rationalisation, standardised conditions, ever more sophisticated means of quantification, the role of applied science and, more generally, of the scientific world view), it then looks at the contribution of recent discussions of sport technologies and the logic of quantifiable progress (see especially Loland, 2000), considering the place and importance of relative emulation and of the qualitative evaluation of sporting performances.

Finally, in examining the ideas of excellence, progress and achievement the paper will try to put 'our obsession with records' (Guttman, 1998, p. 6) in perspective, as but one way in which we respond to and evaluate sporting performance.

***The Idea of the Record***

In his seminal paper *The Invention of the Sports Record* Mandell says:

*The idea of the record is young. The notion of the sports record is itself a refined product of a complex of ideas and practices unique to a democratic, industrial society ... (1976, p. 250).*

His initial definition is:

*... a generally acknowledged statistic indicating the unique nature of a supreme athletic performance of a recognized kind. (ibid.)*

Let us examine in turn the three central ideas of this definition: statistic, athletic, and recognized.

### ***1. A Statistic – an Abstract***

In Ancient Greek competition, for example, ‘...winners were always decided in proximate comparisons or contests; the victory was *over* someone else ...’ and so ‘... the victor lived in history; his performances did not (Mandell, 1976, pp. 251-2 – see also Golden, 1998, pp. 61-2). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Englishmen, he says, began to race against time or distance, and so began the “fascination for performance in the abstract” (p. 255), made possible only through the existence of more finely calibrated instruments for the measurement of time or distance. Universal records then depended upon the development of communications networks to assist the harmonization of standards, and the emergence of democracy and equality of opportunity.

So: ancient athletes ran in the present particular – their contests were against each other in the here and now - whereas modern athletes also run against the abstract, timeless standard that is the record.

### ***2. Athletic (not ‘Sporting’) Performance - Sports Records or Athletic Records?***

From pedestrianism (the walking and running feats and races of the 18<sup>th</sup> century), via the invention of the stop-watch, to the four-minute mile - the image at the forefront of the mind for authors such as Eichberg, Mandell and Guttman in the 1970s seems to have been that of the individual runner - of the athlete<sup>1</sup>, not the sportsman or the gymnast. The nature of the athlete’s interest in both the present and the abstract is produced by the kind of performance assessment possible – the actual performance being precisely measured and quantified in units.

By contrast, the footballer<sup>2</sup> is not primarily interested in the statistics of the game, or the quantification of his or his team’s performance. Rather he is interested in the qualities of the performances of the individuals and of the team as a whole. Such an interest is conditioned by the fact that such qualities produce the result.

Of course, the actual result involves quantification to the minimal extent of goal-counting; and there may be a further interest in the relation of that actual result to the accumulation of points in a league, or to progress to the next round of a knock-out competition. But this is quite different from athletic quantification, in which the athlete’s actual performance is quantified.

Brownell (in Eichberg, 1998, p. 29) acknowledges that, at least for Eichberg, the ‘quintessential’ modern sport was track and field athletics, which is a sport that lends itself to ‘easy’ measurement, standardization and comparison. Its salience in the ‘Eichberg/Guttman/Mandel hypothesis’ (see Carter and Kruger, 1990, p. 1) is an indicator that the nature and importance of other sports, equally as modern, might have been overlooked in virtue of the ‘nice fit’ of athletics. For other modern sports retain

other kinds of assessment or record-keeping than that identified by the EGM hypothesis as the quintessentially modern record.

For example, the concern of footballers with 'world records' is minimal. Scarcely any meaningful ones exist, because of the very different contexts and conditions within which contests take place, and the very different qualities exhibited on different occasions. 'Abstract' achievements at the world level don't make much sense, apart from the primitive counting of national victories in the World Cup. And yet football is the world's most popular sport. Codified in England in 1863, it meets all Guttman's criteria of modernity *except* for the obsession with records.

Not all sports keep world records, as the achievements in some events are too dependent on the layout of the course or venue, which may not be bounded by precise rules. Other sports or events do keep records, but do not regard them as particularly significant - for instance, marathon world records are regarded as far less important than on-track athletic events.

I think this shows that, whereas the origins and development of modern sports are indeed directly linked in many ways to the modernisation and civilising processes, the role and importance of quantification in those processes must be examined sport by sport.

And the *kind* of quantification observable as important in some of the most popular world sports (e.g. standardisation of playing areas, line markings, goals, etc.) is not the kind important for its records. Whereas athletic records are typically universal, some other sports records are typically not. This is an important observation, given the role and importance of quantification in relation to the record in the Eichberg/Mandell/Guttman hypothesis.

### ***The Problem of Recognition***

Mandell notes that, whilst descriptive records have been with us through the ages, he finds the first use of 'record' in a sporting context in 1868, and he credits Montague Shearman as

*... the first sports historian to use the term 'record' alone with the assurance that his audience would know that he was referring to sports performances (1976, p. 259).*

To become a record, a performance has to be recognised by some competent authority. For example, now that we have established International Federations in many sports, they are responsible for setting, maintaining and monitoring the conditions for record-setting.

Mandell further notes that,

*... since they were invented by Anglo-Saxons in the late nineteenth century, records have continued to improve – this providing irrefutable evidence for the dynamic idea of progress (1976, p. 260).*

The point here is that such an idea of progress is dependent upon the context it inhabits – and the context here is that of the competent authority, that has the power to determine the conditions of recognition of a particular performance as a record.

Peter Radford, a former British Olympic sprinter, has recently described a number of 18<sup>th</sup> century attempts to complete a sub-four-minute mile (2004). In his view, there is good evidence to suppose that ‘professionals’, running for wagers, were successful in their attempts, but that the Victorians who codified our sports were ‘ideologically driven to exclude large parts of society’ so as to eliminate ‘unfair’ competition from those who competed for money, or whose jobs gave them advantages. For a while, two sets of records were kept, but then the earlier ones were forgotten and a new era of amateur athletics began.

The Amateur Athletic Association was able to determine the conditions of acceptance of an athlete, a performance, a venue, and measuring instruments. Indeed, the earlier performances cannot be verified for accurate measurement of distance and time, a level track, the requisite conditions for a ‘race’ having been observed, and so on – and they were done by professionals.

Radford concludes:

*And so on 6 May 1954, almost exactly 184 years after James Parrott’s first four-minute mile, Roger Bannister became the first amateur to run a mile in four minutes on a flat, level 440-yard track<sup>3</sup>. It was an immense achievement ... It should not, however, overshadow the achievements of those pioneers who went before, men who dreamed of, and may well have achieved, the four-minute mile more than 150 years earlier, but who did it for money.*

If Radford is right, some pre-modern performances challenge those of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which should lead us to wonder just how good those athletes of yore would have been if they had been assisted by modern technologies (footwear, other equipment, track materials and preparation, sport science applications, nutritional analysis, food supplementation - even doping).

The problem of recognition, then, may be partly to do with the *difficulty* of recognising ‘pre-modern’ performances, because they were inadequately quantified or standardised. But it may also be to do with the *ideology* of recognition, according to which certain performances are excluded on social, political or moral grounds.

***The Eichberg/Guttman/Mandell Hypothesis:***

Let's back up a little and review: the Eichberg/Guttman/Mandell hypothesis says that modern sports are different from the games, pastimes and sports played before the Industrial Revolution. Modern sports emerged along with industrial society, and both are characterized by an emphasis on achievement, rationalization and quantification (see Brownell, 1998, pp. 28-29). Guttman (1978 and 1998 pp. 5-6) suggests seven interrelated characteristics of modern sports: secularism, equality, bureaucratization, specialization, rationalization, quantification and (the obsession with) records. This is not to say that pre-modern sports had none of these characteristics, or that all modern sports have them all - just that modern sports each involve a systematic interaction of some or all of them, and to a greater degree.

For example, there is a dispute as to whether ancient sports were quantified. Did ancient Egyptian archers seek to shoot arrows through thicker metallic targets than each other? Did Greeks seek to surpass rivals by winning a series of events? Did medieval heralds keep score at tournaments?

The exchange of letters between Carter and Guttman (both 1979) clarify what is at issue here. Carter asserts that 'surely medieval "athletes" kept records, even if only in their heads', and equates both 'lusting to unhorse' the opponent and 'the desire to outperform' him with 'breaking the record' (p. 87). Guttman's response is that noting something down, or seeking to out-perform the opponent, or counting outcomes - none of these counts as even close to the modern conception of the record (p. 90).

Kruger and Ito also dispute the claim that quantification of physical performance specifically characterizes and spreads from modern industrial society. Offering an account of the Japanese chikaraishi (rock lifting competition), primarily from 1664 to the Meiji era, the authors claim a 'natural' desire to win and to quantify and record performances among various elements of the Japanese population; thus, they argue that the process of measuring and recording performance output was neither unique to nor entirely dependent upon western culture, and may even be a cultural universal.

Here we must simply repeat a point previously made: the claim of the Eichberg/Guttman/Mandell hypothesis is not that pre-modern sports had none of the characteristics they identify, nor that all modern sports have them all - just that modern sports each involve a systematic interaction of some or all of them, and to a greater degree. Chikaraishi may have elements of measuring and recording, but these elements are not integral parts of a structured world-view.

Guttman's mature view (2001, p. 7) is that the emergence of modern sport coheres with the spirit of the age, representing '... the slow development of an empirical, experimental, mathematical Weltanschauung', and Eichberg emphasises '... the process of rationalization and achievement orientation'. Despite their theoretical differences, they agree that there is something different and special about modern sport, which such analyses seek to capture.

## ***Kinds of Record***

In the foregoing I have mentioned in passing several ways of noticing a sports record. Now we should attempt a conceptual review. We may begin by noting the distinction between descriptive and emulative records:

### ***Descriptive Records***

Early usage of the word 'record' referred to the 'attestation or testimony of a fact' that appeared 'noteworthy to a chronicler'. Key ideas captured here include:

- the preservation of some event or fact (which suggests some assessment of relative importance, or noteworthiness)
- the affirmation, confirmation or recognition of it as knowledge (which suggests some claim as to truth)

We see these ideas represented in common phrases such as:

- It is a matter of record
- To go on the record
- To keep to the record
- As God is my record

This usage is best illustrated in the legal context, where it means something like: 'the fact of having been committed to writing as authentic evidence of a matter having legal importance'.

In the sports context, any data thought to be worth recording relating to any sports events worthy of note constitute sports records. It is in this sense that Cashman says:

*The records of an Olympic Games consist of archival files, books, reports, videos, photographs, art work, plans, memorabilia, and even internet sites: they constitute a valuable educational and cultural asset and resource. However, until recently, the value of records has not been fully appreciated. Records are the central component of legacy ... (Cashman, 2000, p. 207).*

We call these 'descriptive' records because they simply record data<sup>4</sup>. However, this does not mean that they are value-free, or that they are unimportant. They have been thought to be noteworthy, whereas others have not. The concept of recognition has been especially important in establishing what does and does not count as worthy of record.

Descriptive records also express the value of simple participation. For some participants, to have been recorded as present at an event, even if finishing last, is extremely significant (see the example of George Dole, who finished sixth and last in the Bannister mile, in Turnbull, 2004).

### ***Emulative Records***

Whereas descriptive records simply recognise and keep a record of noteworthy facts or events (and all records are records in at least this sense), emulative records keep note of the best comparative performance in its category.

However, there are three kinds of emulation.

*a. Relative emulation:* Out-performing others in particular contests in the here and now (this game, this season, this competition – resulting in wins, placings, etc).

*b. Absolute emulation:* Doing something that has not been done before (reaching the North Pole, breaking the Sound Barrier, or climbing Everest). However, this is tricky – for example, what are we to say about the second climbing of Everest? This is emulative (meaning that it equals or betters the first performance), or it may seek absolute emulation in climbing Everest by a different (more difficult) route, or under other conditions, such as in winter. There is clearly room for some dispute here, as people strive for the recognition of their achievements as noteworthy.

One thing to notice, though, is that absolute emulation has been with us since pre-modern times, since circumnavigating the globe would also count.

*c. Universal emulation:* Equalling or surpassing the best quantified performance in its category on record, across time and space, as kept by a properly constituted and accepted recognising authority.

The central insight of the historians is that modern sport was created in the image of modern society, which produced the necessary conditions for the emergence of ‘universal emulative’ records. Without the standardisation of conditions, the means for accurate measurement, etc, there is no possibility for the kind of comparisons necessary for universal emulation.

In addition, we might distinguish between in-contest and accumulative records.

*In-contest records* refer to the times, distances or scores in a particular competition or context. For example, in the Football Association Challenge Cup competition the record score is Preston 26 Hyde United 0 (1886) – but this is for rounds proper – not the many qualifying rounds. In the context of the final, however, the record is Bury 6 Derby County 0 (1903).

*Accumulative records* refer to a series of performances in a particular competition or context (most FA Cup final wins or appearances, e.g. Lord Kinnaird’s nine appearances and five winner’s medals). They might also be called ‘historical’ records, or ‘career’ records.

The Eichberg/Guttman/Mandell hypothesis argues that the origins of our modern concern with records are rooted in the idea of modernity itself. However, we are now in a position

to note that it is only universal emulation that is specifically linked to modernity, whilst modern sporting records may take any of the above forms. They may simply note performances (e.g. give the results and other details of all fixtures for the season), or they may keep track of the best performances (in this race, this year, ever, in this country, or Europe, or the world, at this level, for men or women, etc). Many of the most important records in our most important modern sports are not of the universal emulative kind. So it looks as though the 'modern' record has been over-emphasised as characterizing modern sport.

Mandell, for one, sometimes writes as if modern sports records were all of the absolute emulative kind, whereas they are a mixture of the descriptive and of the three kinds of emulative. The truth in the EGM hypothesis lies in its emphasis of the emergence of the universal emulative as the uniquely modern. And in this it is surely correct, since it is only modern conditions that permit the universal emulative. Nevertheless, we must insist that all kinds of records are with us and around us. Modern conditions do not push one way only.

### ***An Example: Football, the FA Cup and the Premier League***

The descriptive records of the FA Cup are extensive, all scores having been recorded since the competition began in 1871<sup>5</sup>. As we have noted, the record score in the FA Cup rounds proper is 26-0. But, when playing in some round of the FA Cup, teams are not trying to beat that score. Rather, they are simply trying to win *this game now* - to beat the other team, with a view to progressing to the next round. 1-0 will suffice<sup>6</sup>. Thus, football matches are usually to be seen in terms of relative emulation.

However, sometimes the context is important. More than the immediate win may be at issue in the context of the competition of which the present game forms a part. To be sure, if I want simply to win the Cup Final, 1-0 will do. But consider the case where I want to win the League, and I need to win the last match against the league leaders by 3 clear goals to achieve equal points and a better goal difference than them and thus win the league. Here I need better than 1-0, but still I need only 3 more goals than them, and no more, to achieve my aim – that is to say, I still don't need to beat (or to have in mind) some record winning performance.

Indeed, in football, record performances seem to be by-products of the activities of players and teams over time. There is some point in collecting and recalling data such as the highest number of appearances for a club, the highest scoring total for a season or a career, and so on. Some of these accumulative records may indeed be cherished as personal milestones or achievements. But they are not related to 'absolute', recognised achievement in the way that world athletics records are. In track and field, athletes compete relatively for victories, medals and championships, but they may also and simultaneously compete universally to hold a record. For the former, they must necessarily compete against the others in their particular and immediate contest – but for

the latter they are competing against the abstracted performance of all athletes in all contests of the same kind.

### ***Another Example: Did the Better Team Win?***

In athletics, the best athlete on the day wins, barring injuries and excuses. But in football and other game-sports we can legitimately and interestingly ask whether the better team won, barring injuries and excuses. The very possibility of this question (the idea that the result is not everything) illustrates the difference between athletics and game-sports.

One way of bringing out this difference more clearly is by using Gilbert Ryle's distinction between task verbs and achievement verbs. Achievement verbs are 'episodic', meaning that the incidents they describe occur at a particular moment. An athlete can run for quite a while, but wins only in an instant (1963, p. 143). The task of the race is to run, and the achievement is to win. It looks like we have two things here – but we don't. For the winning athlete, there is no second act after the running that constitutes the winning.

Running is his performance task, but in saying that he achieves a win we 'are asserting that some state of affairs exists over and above that which consists in the performance ...' (ibid.). It isn't that he *does* one thing (runs the race) and then he *does* one more thing (wins it). He wins *by* running. Just by the running. Achievements, says Ryle, '... are not acts ... but ... the fact that certain acts ... have had certain results' (p. 144).

Ryle was not the first to notice this. It says in I Corinthians 9:24:

*Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize?*

In football and other game-sports it is different, because the task/achievement descriptions are a bit more complicated. There are many different kinds of actions, from particular actions such as shooting/scoring to the most general such as playing/winning. The task is to play well, and the achievement is to win. But in game-sports it is quite possible to execute a task to the highest standard, and still not be successful. Opponents can impede one's own performance, or counteract it, no matter how good it might be. Others in the team can under-perform, or team cohesion can fail even when individual performances are good. Then there is the role of luck or chance.

The task/achievement analysis shows that in athletic sports the aim, purpose or end cannot be specified independently of the manner of achieving it. For the athlete, his quantified result is constituted by his actual performance.

In game-sports, however, the aim, purpose or end *can* be specified independently of the manner of achieving it as long as it conforms to the limits set down by the rules or norms - for example, scoring a goal. For the footballer, the result is 'supervenient' on his performance, so that the qualities of his actual performance may or may not contribute to the production of the result<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, we should notice the difference between individual and team sports. Obviously, in the former my performance constitutes the whole performance and I alone am responsible for it, whereas in the latter my own performance merely contributes to the whole performance and the players are jointly responsible.

These points have consequences for our view of what constitutes excellence in a sporting performance. In athletic sports, excellence is necessarily connected to winning, but in the case of game-sports, excellence may be exhibited which does not produce a win.

For excellence in game-sports may be characterised in terms of style or success – the ‘better’ team may lose. One team may do all the ‘right’ things, look ‘good’ for most of the game, dominate play and yet fail to score and be beaten by a late scrappy goal. The fact that the aim of the activity can be specified independently of the manner of achieving it means that claims to excellence are ambiguous. They could refer either to success in terms of victory or to quality of style or to both, and this raises the interesting question of the relationship between the two.

Let me explore this by way of an example from football. Since it isn’t simply winning that always defines excellence in game-sports, we should not be surprised to encounter the following sort of dispute:

A thinks that X are a marvellous side to watch - an example of all that is best in football - even though they were nearly relegated last season. He thinks that team Y, despite their consistent success, are not only a dull side, but also represent all those insidious influences which have destroyed English football both as a spectacle and as a serious claimant to European, let alone world, eminence.

B thinks that X present no threat to a well-organised and determined team, although when they ‘click’ they can play some very good football. He thinks that what makes Y the best team is simply that they win matches and competitions; that they seem to be able to win or draw even when they do not play particularly well.

A appeals to considerations of style, even though its manifestations are sporadic, whereas B appeals to the more objective measure of games and trophies won. I think that there is something to be said for both points of view, but that, as they stand, both are faulty.

B is right about winning. Since the point of playing football as a serious sport is to win points as a means to winning the championship or ending the season as high in the league table as possible, a team which consistently fails to do this cannot be one of the better ones. However, B might be taking a short-sighted view. Performance in this season’s competition is not the be all and end all. If he is really concerned about winning, and about Y’s being able to win things not only now, but in the future, and not only here, but elsewhere in the world, he must also be concerned with the way in which winning the league influences the way in which his team plays. If current policies aimed at winning Premiership points result in the suffocation of reserve talent or the inability of individual

players to cope with vastly differing situations, then winning now might be to sacrifice winning later.

A, however, is right to stress the importance of style. For, even though excellence of style will never guarantee victory, there must be some relationship between what counts as good style and the likelihood of success, and in addition to this, emphasis on style demonstrates a less parochial and short-term regard for winning.

Whilst B simply wants Y to win, A wants X to exhibit good style, thinking that, in the long run, it will be better for X (in domestic and foreign competition) for his country and for football. It isn't enough to say that excellence is embodied in Y because they won the Premiership. But, against A, it must be said that criteria of 'good style' can only be developed by reflecting on those qualities which are likely to bring success. If X consistently fail to succeed, we must re-examine the claim that they exhibit good style.

Excellence in game-sports, then, has to do not only with winning, but also with the way in which winning is achieved.

### ***Records and Excellence***

As we have seen, it has often been argued that the origins of our modern concern with records are rooted in the idea of modernity itself (rationalisation, standardised conditions, ever more sophisticated means of quantification, the role of applied science and, more generally, of the scientific world view). But this does not mean that our concern with excellence is limited to our concern with records – for there are different kinds of excellence.

I believe that we can apply the concept of excellence to the whole range of achievement, since we can distinguish the following conceptions:

- (a) absolute excellence, achieved only by those who reach standards higher than all others.
- (b) distributional excellence, achieved by all those who reach standards previously reached only by some
- (c) relative excellence, achieved by all those who reach standards higher than some others
- (d) personal excellence, achieved by all those who reach standards higher than their previous best

(a) is what all advocates of excellence seem to be after, above all and eventually; (b) may either be seen as instrumental to (a) or not really very important; (c) may be regarded by some as hardly a case of excellence at all and (d) may or may not be also (a), (b) or (c).

My own view is that excellence is not simply a concern of those who have already achieved or expect to achieve the dizzy heights - it is (and should be) the concern of us

all. Excellence does not just extend to absolute excellence, which may simply amount to a relatively few isolated individuals, admired by the rest of us for their ability and dedication, winning trophies and setting records. It extends also to the wider distribution of higher standards of achievement, thus widening the base and raising overall quality.

And it also extends to as many people who find it worthwhile to achieve something themselves, for then their *concern* for standards, whatever the absolute status of their own achievements, will provide the context and support for those who are able to achieve what the rest of us cannot achieve. As Gardner says:

*... we cannot have islands of excellence in a sea of indifference to standards ... those who achieve excellence will be few at best ... But many more can achieve it than now do. Many, many more can try to achieve it than do now. And the society is bettered not only by those who achieve it but by those who are trying* (1961, p 133).

That is to say: society is bettered by absolute excellence, but also by a better *distribution* of excellences, and also by the *concern* for and *appreciation* of absolute excellence which is likely to follow.

I believe that the educative and coaching task is not simply to promote absolute excellence, but also to promote that broad base of understanding and concern for standards and achievement in which all kinds of excellence can flourish. In this regard it is perhaps worth pointing out that the Olympic motto *Citius, Altius, Fortius* means Faster, Higher, Stronger (and not Fastest, Highest, Strongest) indicating a commitment not just to absolute excellence, but to other kinds of excellence, too.

### ***The Logic of Quantifiable Progress and the Limits of Human Performance***

What, then, is the place and importance of relative emulation and of the qualitative evaluation of sporting performances?

Loland points out the logical difference between activities such as athletics and football. The former are governed by the logic of quantifiable progress, whose values include measurement, standardisation, objectivity, specialisation and record-setting (2000, pp. 40-44). The latter, including the great team games of the world, are governed by the logic of qualitative progress, whose values are quite different. Here, points won and goals scored are not precisely quantified, nor quite so tightly related to a measured quality of performance. (I score one goal, and only one, no matter how excellent or lucky the strike.) Standardisation (that all pitches and conditions be as nearly as possible exactly the same) is foregone in favour of equality of opportunity (that the conditions on the day be the same for both teams). Instead of particular and specialised abilities, these activities require learned skills and techniques, and interaction with others, and present an opponent who has the opportunity to frustrate one's best efforts - all contributing to a focus on the particular qualities of *this* match, here and now.

Those who consider the logic of quantifiable progress to be at the heart of modern sport – the idea that ‘record sport’ is the quintessentially modern kind of sport - commit themselves to a view of sport that is vulnerable to what Loland calls ‘the impossible demand for unlimited progress within limited systems.’ That is to say, the internal logic of record sport carries the seeds of its own destruction, since the demand for unlimited quantitative progress comes up against the finite limits of human performance (p.44).

This is a grave limitation, and also spawns moral dangers, since the ceaseless quest for records is fed by over-training, fanaticism, doping and cheating. It also promotes excessive technologization, overemphasising the role of science in augmenting human performance and in expanding our perceptions of human limits – altering the conditions of performance (tartan track, fibre-glass pole), personal equipment (shoes, clothing), training regimes, recovery times, nutrition, and so on.

As Brownell says (1998, p. 30), Eichberg calls modern sport ‘the ritual of records’, a kind of dehumanising treadmill, contrasting it with the kind of sport that exists within the ‘culture of laughter’. Loland’s comparable conclusion is that we have a duty to cultivate the ‘joy’ of sports, by maximising qualitative progress, because this is what makes sport most meaningful to us as human beings. Basic physical qualities such as strength, speed and endurance, are seen not as ends in themselves, but as only a means to qualitative goods, which are based on techniques, tactics and practice. The logic of qualitative progress offers the possibility of ‘unlimited growth in unlimited systems’ (p. 48), which have the capacity for the endless provision and satisfaction of the joys of sport.

### ***The Significant Record***

Finally, we should note that some records are of more significance than others. They are remarked upon not just because they are noteworthy, but because they are exceptionally so – they come to be seen for some reason in some way (perhaps somewhat arbitrarily) as exceptionally significant markers.

To be a record, a performance has to be recognised by some competent authority. For example, now that we have established International Federations in many sports, they are responsible for setting, maintaining and monitoring the conditions for record-setting. Before that, however, there was no such mechanism. Even in athletics, established world records are, surprisingly to some, less than a hundred years old:

*After the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912, when the International Amateur Athletic Federation officially declared all the results obtained by the winners as the first world records ... (Balas-Soeter, 1969, p. 219)*

To be a significant record, however, it has to be recognised more widely in society, to take on a kind of noteworthiness that exceeds its meaning within its immediate context, to capture the imagination of the people (see Bannister, 1955, p. 157). This requires

something greater than relative emulation, so we are in the realm of the absolute and/or the universal. One such target was the Four Minute Mile, but why did it assume such a significance?

One kind of answer is to be found in the social significance of the ideas of excellence, achievement and progress in the post-war optimism of the 1950s. Was the ascent of Everest humanly possible? Could a manned aircraft break the sound barrier without breaking itself into pieces? Would the mile ever be run in under four minutes? It is difficult now to appreciate the extent to which these were real questions for people at the time - it genuinely seemed to many that these things were impossible, perhaps dangerously so. One is reminded of the critics of rail travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> century who genuinely feared that, if humans travelled through the air much faster than a horse could run, their breath would be snatched away and they would suffocate.

It is similarly difficult, now that they have been done, to appreciate the significance of those achievements at the time. People marvelled at the rapidity of progress and the apparently ever-increasing standards of excellence, as a string of the most significant human achievements followed each other in a period of less than ten years, from the breaking of the sound barrier in 1947 to the first satellite to orbit the earth in 1957.

Another kind of answer is to be found in the uniqueness of a certain performance in its class. Of course, all emulative records are unique when set, but significant records are unique even amongst the emulative records in their class. For example, the world air speed (or land speed) record may be broken continually, but the one time when the sound barrier was broken was unique in its class. It constituted a kind of milestone, or landmark.

Yet another kind of answer is to be found in the fortuitousness of convention, and how our attention is drawn to some focus. The Four Minute Mile was and remains a significant record, but part of its attraction lies in the conventions of measurement that describe it. Four laps, four minutes, one mile - a kind of perfectly described task, that sets it apart from equally significant performances that could not be so symmetrically described.

For example, there is no metric equivalent: whilst for Bannister 3.59.4 dips under 4.00, no-one ever got so excited about the 2 minutes 30 kilometre, or the 3 minutes 40 1500 metres, neither of which quite has the same ring to it as the four minute mile. Or, again, no-one much noticed the women's five minute mile (see Stuart, 2004). Doubtless there is a gender issue here, but the one-minute lap also has an appeal lost to the 1 minute 15 lap.

Maybe these three factors - the socially produced focus on excellence, the landmark achievement, and the serendipitous description - go some way towards illuminating our continuing fascination with the various kinds of exceptional performance. Whether or not it is the definitive marker of modern sport, the record is here to stay.

## **Footnotes**

1. *Here I use the idea of 'athletics' as used in British (but not American) English. In England, 'athletics' is usually taken to mean track and field events, whereas in America the term has wider application.*
2. *Again I use the British meaning, to distinguish football from American football, in which quantification is required both for game progression and for the assessment of player performance.*
3. *We should note here in passing that in fact Derek Ibbotson was the first modern man to run a mile in four minutes (4.00 exactly). Bannister was the first to run it in under four minutes.*
4. *There is a further descriptive use of the term 'record' which we might mention even though it is not relevant to us here: the idea of a trace, or series of marks or remains, made or discovered in a medium. This usage includes, for example, written records, archaeological evidence, 'the fossil record' or a 'gramophone record'.*
5. *This is not quite true. All results in the FA Cup have been recorded since 1871, but some of the actual scores have been lost, e.g. in 1871-2 and 1873-4 when three ties are recorded as draws, with no scores, and 1883-4, when all scores for the Second Round are absent (see Green, 1949, pp. 182 and 194).*
6. *Of course, this itself is rule-dependent. Not always has a win been a necessary condition of progress to the next round. In 1871 Crystal Palace and Hitchin drew 0-0 in the First Round of the first FA Challenge Cup competition, but both proceeded to the next round to play other teams. This was in accordance with Rule 8 of the competition: 'In the case of a drawn match the Clubs shall be drawn in the next ties or shall compete again, at the discretion of the Committee.' The same procedure was followed in the progress of Wanderers and Crystal Palace, who drew in the Third Round, into the Semi-Final. In fact, The Wanderers played only two games in four rounds, winning only one of them, in order to reach the Final, which they won. Two games were 'walk-overs' (see Green, 1949, pp. 11 and 182).*
7. *This way of characterising the distinction was suggested to me by the distinction between purposive and aesthetic sports made in another context by David Best (see Best, 1975, p. 43).*

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