

Eric Liddell:
Faith Above Fame

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Historical Paper

Word Length: 1734

Thesis

Eric Liddell can be considered the most influential Olympian in the history of the Olympics, because he had a conflict and lack of compromise in the 1924 Olympics, due to the fact that the 100-meter race was on a Sunday. He believed that Sunday was a Sabbath day a holy day set aside to honor God through rest and worship.¹ Eric would choose not to run the 100-meter race and instead run the 400-meter race which was on Thursday. He crushed the original record and won gold for the event. Eric Liddell's act of faith carved a path for other believers in the future to stand up for their Christian beliefs.

Second Opium War and the Christian Religion

In the Second Opium War², which lasted from 1850 to 1864, the French and the British armies joined forces against the Chinese over the murder of a French missionary and trading rights in China. This mass army first attacked the city of Canton, which was a fight they quickly won. Then the army headed for the city of Tianjin, which they captured and forced the Chinese government to sign a treaty. The treaty allowed Western trading centers and ports to be opened, but most importantly, allowed Christian missionaries to come there. These missionaries shared the Christian faith and helped change people's lives. Eric Liddell's parents joined the London Missionary Society in 1898³ and visited China as missionaries, which carved a path for Eric's future.

¹ "NLT Parallel Study Bible page 2597"

² "Second Opium War." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Opium-Wars>.

³ "London Missionary Society." Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/London-Missionary-Society>.

The Christian religion is based on the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ who is the son of God⁴. The Christian religion is based on one God, who created the heavens and the earth. This Godhead is made up of three parts: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. God sent his only son, Jesus, to save the world from sin. Jesus was crucified on the cross to offer us forgiveness for our sins, He rose from the dead 3 days later. The day of his Resurrection is celebrated annually today on the first Sunday of April called Easter. The Christian religion believes that Jesus will come back again, which is known as the Second Coming. The Holy Bible is the book of this religion and it has important scriptures, parables, teachings of major prophets and disciples, and also has an outline of how a Christian should live. Eric Liddell believed Jesus came down and died on the cross for our sins.

Eric Liddell's Early Life

Eric Liddell was born in the city of Tientsin in Northern China where his parents were missionaries. Eric also had an older brother and a younger sister. Eric was born during the time of the Boxer Rebellion which was when Chinese Nationalists wanted all foreign influence to be eliminated.⁵ The Nationalists murdered thousands of Chinese Christians, Westerners, and missionaries. Eric's parents felt a calling from God to stay in China and they did. They lived in a newly built house within a camp with the London Missionary Society. The Liddells taught about the gospel during their time in China and when Eric was five years old they moved back to Scotland. In Scotland, Mr. Liddell enrolled his sons into Eltham College which was called School for the Sons of Missionaries. During these years Eric enjoyed the sports of cricket, rugby,

⁴ "Christianity." History.com. <http://www.history.com/topics/history-of-christianity>

⁵ "Boxer Rebellion." History.com. <http://www.history.com/topics/boxer-rebellion>.

and track and field. Eric excelled in track and field the most of because of his staggering speed. When he was sixteen, he competed in the school track and field championships and won. He kept on competing in races throughout his school year. Eric's fame grew throughout the country in 1923 because of him winning in track and field races. This led to his first invitation to speak publicly about his faith. He talked about his faith to coal miners and this moved them deeply. After speaking to the miners, Eric joined an evangelism speaking group. Eric Liddell had fully put his faith above his fame.

Conflict in the 1924 Olympics

Eric Liddell's faith was in front at all times and because of this Eric he would miss the 100-meter race, which was on a Sunday. Eric knew that Sunday was a Sabbath day and it was meant to be kept holy. Once the British Olympic Committee found out that Eric was not racing they were outraged, because they did not want an "over religious"⁶ man to ruin Scotland's chance of winning gold. The British Committee decided to convince Eric that there would not be a problem running on a Sunday. They said that the heat is in the afternoon, which means you could have plenty of time to go to church. The British Committee also said that the continental sabbath lasted until noon, and Eric responded: "Mine lasts all day"⁷. The British Committee tried another tactic, they asked the Olympic Committee to move the 100-meter race to another day so that participants with religious beliefs could participate. The Olympic Committee denied this offer and the British Committee had given up. The British Committee was not the only one who was angry at Eric's decision, The Scots were angry too. The Scots felt like Eric had betrayed them because he was a world-class sprinter and was highly favored to win. He did not compromise

⁶ Metaxas, Eric. *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, n.d.

⁷Ibid.

and did not fall into temptation, which allowed him to be strong in his faith. Eric Liddell had a desire to glorify God and to obey him, so six months before the 1924 Summer Olympics instead of training for the 100-meter race he began to train for the 400-meter race. Before the Olympics though, Eric took place in the Amateur Athletic Association Championships in London. This competition was very important because this determined if you would make the Olympic team. Many Scots had doubts on Eric Liddell, but he did very good and made it onto the Olympic team. Two weeks later, the Olympic opening ceremonies for the 1924 Paris Summer Olympic Games started and two thousand athletes were attending. The next day the 100-meter race was held and Eric was at church. During the next four days Eric's events were taking place, and the first one he was competing in was on Wednesday, July 9th. Eric was racing in the 200-meter race⁸, which Harold Abrahams⁹ (another British athlete) and four others were competing. In that event Eric finished 3rd and took the bronze medal for Scotland, but this achievement was overlooked because Harold Adams was highly favored and got last place. The 400-meter was the very next day Thursday, July 10th. This race was a race Eric was very unlikely to win because he was a sprinter. Another thing that was a disadvantage for Eric was that he drew the outside lane, which was the worst lane because you could not see the other runners. Eric, however, did not complain for his goal was to give glory to God. On the morning of the race, as he was about to leave his hotel, a British masseur gave him a folded note. Eric thanked the masseur and told him that he would read the message later. In the stadium, Eric unfolded the note and it read "It says in

⁸ "Eric Henry Liddell (1902-1945) Olympic Athlete and Christian Missionary." Gallery of Benefactors - Edinburgh University Library. <http://www.docs.is.ed.ac.uk/docs/lib-archive/bgallery/Gallery/records/nineteen2/liddell.html>

⁹ "Harold Abrahams." Runners World.

<https://www.runnersworld.co.uk/health/olympic-moment-harold-abrahams-100m-gold>.

the Old Book, Him that honors me, I will honor.” Wishing you the best of success always.¹⁰ The Old book referred to the Bible and the verse is from 1 Samuel 2:30. This sparked courage in Eric and he described it as “*The finest thing I experienced in Paris*”¹¹ Eric went down to the track as the was about to begin. The competitors shook hands and they lined up, and then moments later the pistol fired and the race was off. Eric sprinted and started the race way too fast, which was do to the fact that he could not see the other runners. He somehow kept this pace, but the other runners were catching up. It went down to the final 100 meters and Eric went into his ugly running style, which was head back, mouth open, and arms pumping hard thru the air. Seconds later Eric had somehow crossed the finish line first, Not only did he win he beat the nearest competitor by 5 meters. When the crowd saw Eric cross the finish line they exploded with joy and excitement! Then they saw his time of 47.6 seconds and again they exploded! Eric’s time had set a new world record.¹² After Eric’s stunning victory he said: “*In the dust of defeat as well as the laurels of victory there is a glory to be found if one has done his best.*”¹³

Affect Today

Eric Liddell used his athletic talent to spread his faith and put God above everything. Lord Sands from the University of Edinburgh, where Eric went to school said this, “*This young man put his whole career as a runner in the balance, and deemed it as small dust, compared to*

¹⁰ "Eric Liddell: Muscular Disciple and Olympic Champion." C.S Lewis Institute.
http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/1386.

¹¹ Metaxas, Eric. *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson n.d.

¹² *Evening Star* (Washington D.C.).
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045462/1924-07-14/ed-1/seq-25/#date1=1789&index=5&rows=20&words=Eric+Liddell&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1943&proxtext=Eric+Liddell&y=18&x=10&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

¹³"Eric Liddell: Muscular Disciple and Olympic Champion." C.S Lewis Institute.
http://www.cslewisinstitute.org/webfm_send/1386.

remaining true to his principles. There are greater issues in life than sport, and the greatest of these is loyalty to the great laws of the soul."¹⁴ Eric used his Olympic platform to help carve a path for other believers in the future. An example of this today is the Philadelphia Eagles NFL team, which said that they are using the Super Bowl as a platform to make disciples of Christ. In the Super Bowl, the Eagles gave glory to God and won, beating the New England Patriots 41-33. Doug Peterson the Eagles coach said, *"I can only give the praise to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for giving me this opportunity."*¹⁵ Nick Foles the quarterback of the Eagles put his faith above football fame and gave glory to God about his victories, just like Eric Liddell when he had a chance to win a gold medal and have world fame. Eric Liddell has a living testimony of the verse 1 Samuel 2:30 which is *"for those who honor me I will honor."*¹⁶

Conclusion

Eric Liddell overcame his conflict with a lack of compromise in the 1924 Olympics when his 100-meter race was on a Sunday. Eric's faith helped him overcome all the obstacles in his life. Eric's choice in the Olympic games carved a path for athletes with the same faith to stand up and make a difference. Eric Liddell was unwilling to compromise on his faith and chose to put his faith above fame.

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ "NIV Zondervan Holy Bible page 147"

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“Eric Liddell – the Olympic champion who chose not to run on Sundays.”

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Evening Star (Washington D.C.).

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Evening Star (Washington D.C.).

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