

The World According to Lydiard

In the 1960 Rome Olympics a truly extraordinary situation presented itself. New Zealand's Peter Snell won gold in the 800, Murray Halberg won gold in the 5,000 and Barry Magee captured bronze in the marathon. "That's when we first heard of Arthur Lydiard," said coach Bill Squires, who would later employ Lydiard's training methods with Rodgers, Salazar, Hodge, Meyers et al. "Here was this little island beating the world's largest countries at a variety of distances. It was just ungodly."

Based on his success at the 1960 & 1964 Olympics, Lydiard went from coaching individuals to instructing the coaching staffs of Mexico and Finland. Before he arrived in Finland, no national distance records had been broken for seven years. Four years after he left, Finns competing at the 1972 Munich Olympics mined gold in the 1500-5,000-10,000 and captured bronze in the steeple.

On a national 'Last Hurrah' tour of sorts, Lydiard, 82, spoke at MIT in November. The morning of his talk he graced the NER and USATF-NE offices during a media breakfast. The following viewpoints were gleaned from a two-hour exposition by the father of modern distance running.

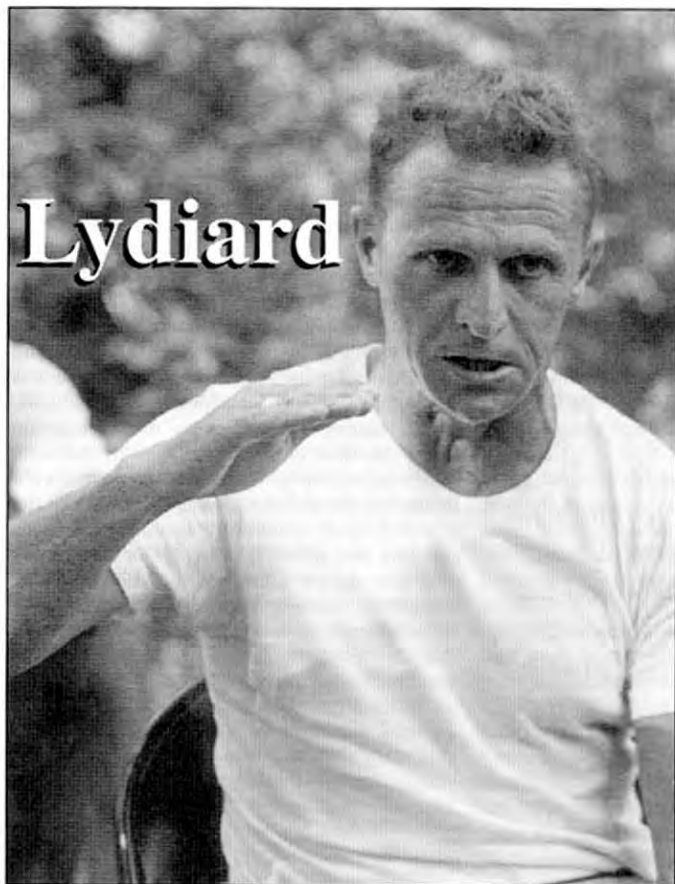
Losing the Early Edge

What people don't seem to realize is that before young people go through their fast growth rate, their ability to use oxygen in comparison to their body weight is greater than adults. Therefore an 8 or 9-year-old boy or girl can run 5, 10, even 20 miles easily. Just leave them alone and they'll do it very comfortably.

Years ago there was a great Swedish coach who made a statement I always agreed with. He said that if you can get a teenager to train and not race until he's mature then you've laid the foundation for a future Olympic champion. This is exactly what's happening in Africa. Kids are walking and running everywhere—barefoot too, so they're building powerful ankle flexors. So here we have these young [African] people with powerful, flexible ankles, they bound along, they have a high oxygen uptake level and low bodyweight.

Here, if you had a high school coach send the kids out for an hour, hour-and-a-half, he'd most likely have all the parents on his back. Education on a different way of life is needed. We've got to make parents understand that if kids go on a long run it's not going to hurt them. They don't understand the physiological reaction of the exercise being done.

I was in San Francisco recently watching a high school gridiron game. I've never seen such unfit young men in my life...Fat all around their bellies and backsides this wide.



Lydiard once ran 250 miles a week in his search for the best possible training ingredients. His balanced combination of aerobic and anaerobic running was arrived at in the mid-1950s "through practical experience and common sense." Never having attended college, it was only years later—after consultation with physiology and sports medicine experts—that Lydiard was able to explain the scientific reasons for his successful methods.

Photo by Rick Levy

That's not what I call physical education. Those guys are heading toward heart attacks in their 40s.

Pass the Multi's

The Africans also have better food than we do. The trace elements are still in the soil. We go to a supermarket, buy a fresh cabbage and think we have something wholesome. It's probably grown in soil where there's no zinc, no chromium, nothing. We have to take vitamin tablets to compensate or we're in trouble. Back home in New Zealand everyone had these lovely organic gardens in their backyards. Now they have barbecues.

The Problem is the System

There is a difference between an educated coach and a good coach. There are good coaches in your university system that know what to do but they're being pressured by the school to get points; otherwise, they lose their job. OK, so you're a good runner. They're going to make you run two or three times instead of once to get points. Points are scored for the school and in the process potential is ruined.

Young people, before they go through that fast growth stage, have highly sensitive nervous systems. They can't stand a lot of pressure—which comes from anaerobic work—which is exactly what is being done in the US and the opposite of what the Africans are doing—the Kenyans, Ethiopians, Moroccans.

You [Americans] use a lot of anaerobic training without understanding anaerobic training and this is your problem. You think that by putting a kid on the track and running 20 400-meters fast that you're going to make a

champion. In the long run, you destroy them. I've always said that if there was an Olympic medal for running 20 400-meters no one could beat the Americans.

It Gets Worse

What happens to Americans who've left university? There is no club system in the US so a potential talent out of university can run and starve or quit running and work. The club system should have been instituted long ago. The AAU let you people down very badly in that time. It would have been easy to institute a club structure. Instead, they relied upon the university and the university coaches to produce the champions.

I was in Stuttgart one year the Americans were running against the West Germans. Here were these wonderful American athletes I knew with coaches I'd never heard of. These weren't the coaches who'd trained the athletes but AAU coaches there to take the glory. It was not good.

Over where I come from in New Zealand I was in a club with all these Olympic champions and we were proud to wear the uniform. Then one of the shoe companies took over. Now the club's no longer a club. It's now amalgamated with some other organization. All the records we had displayed, all the lovely photos on the walls were taken down. I've been to a lot of big races and had a few beers with guys who finished out of the top 10 and no one knew what shoes were being worn.

You had a great club here in Boston, but we've done exactly what you've done, destroyed what little club structure we had and

all for a few dollars. The East Coast Bay Club was one of our strongest clubs in New Zealand. Rod Dixon phoned me the other day and said the coaches they have now don't know what they are doing.

Communication is very important. The athletes need to be prepared physiologically and mechanically and have a clear mind why they're doing the training. Not just 'what to do' and 'how to do' but why they're doing it. If an American kid has 15 400s to do and hits the wall at 12, he's got three more to do. Why? because it's written on a piece of paper. In my case the athlete would stop because he knows why he's doing this workout. You can't go by what's mapped out on paper. I've yet to see an exercise physiologist produce an Olympic champion and I never will.

A Muddled Media Message

First off, parents need to be educated to the fact that their kids are much better off in individual sports where they can be on their own and not leaning on someone else. Tennis, soccer, triathlon, these are the sports that will help. Soccer is a good sport. Those two Williams girls [tennis-Serena, Venus] are like panthers and beautiful athletes to watch. [Lance] Armstrong, what a guy he is, I watched him in the Tour de France.

Americans and the media emphasize the wrong sports, I say. Gridiron and baseball—there's nothing wrong with them. They're good team sports but the point is as individuals they're not fit. Now, your professional basketball players are probably the fittest men in the world [in team sports]. They're wonderful athletes. They spring, jump, bound around and they run so much, they're very quick. But [for example] you pick up a newspaper and you've got eight, nine pages on gridiron, always the same thing, and I don't think it's a very good sport for fitness.

Forget 2000 Olympics, Invest in Coaches and Build Toward 2004

Americans want it to happen quickly. As far as middle to long distance goes, forget about this Olympics. The same with us [NZ]. You've got to think of 2004. The people at the top can't see potential. All the money goes to the athletes who have already reached the top rung.

You have to go to the coaches. These are the people who can train, who can motivate and who can develop the athlete. They're the ones who can see potential. Pour the money in

there. Let the athletes compete around the world with experienced people, then you're on your way. We have champions like John Walker who could take a team around the world. You've got great coaches right here, Bill Squires, Sev [Bob Sevens], but you don't use them.

In 1967 when I was in Finland, it was too late for change before the Mexican Olympics. There was a young guy called Pekka Vasala. When they picked the Olympic team I said, 'You never picked Pekka Vasala,' and they said, 'He can't win.' I told them he needed the experience. When you step out in the Olympic stadium in front of 80,000 people, some people just tighten up. Anyway, they send him on my say-so and he finishes last in the slowest heat.

Four years later [in Munich], he won the 1500 meter Olympic gold.

I was asked why Finland did better than Britain in the Olympics and I said, 'Finland had seven coaches and one manager. Britain had seven managers and one coach.'

Anyone Can Coach A Kenyan

When I coached the Finnish coaches their athletes went from the worst in the world to the best. Now they don't use these coaches. They have a Kenyan coach now. They can't succeed. Anyone can coach a Kenyan because all the conditioning is done. All you have to do is put them on a track and put a stopwatch on them and they'll run fast.

When I went to Finland I had to get [the Finns] out running. I took up cross country skiing, a novelty for me, and I almost froze. I had heard about the historic Finns running on their skis, but they weren't doing it. They were sitting in front of the television watching ice hockey. Then when the good weather came, they got on the track and ran their guts out. That's why they weren't succeeding. They

always had champions there, just like you have in this country.

You have the athletes in this country that can beat the Africans if you train them properly. No question about that.

On Recent Marathon World Records

Times were bound to get faster. There are a lot more people running now and a lot more money that encourages them to train. You don't have to be from Africa training at altitude. Khannouchi was training right in New York. In 1960 when I wrote *Running to the Top* we plotted out how fast a male could go aerobically before entering an anaerobic state. I said then the possibility is 2:05. They'll never run under two hours, it's not humanly possible. But who knows...with the evolution of man, maybe, but I'll never see it...I don't see any reason why women can't run 2:18.

Up & Coming Countries?

Spain. In every sport they're participating in they're doing well. They have very fine runners, golfers, tennis players. The Spaniards seem to be on the ball, they're doing something right.

Remember some years ago there weren't many Swedish tennis players. All of a sudden we have all these Swedish tennis champions. It's because someone got in there and trained them properly.

I've heard the Moroccans are using my system but they've lengthened it, taking even longer recovery between repetitions. They take up to eight minute recoveries between long repetitions. You people shorten it. You keep the pressure on and you don't get the low arterial pH level you can get with taking longer intervals [of recovery] and doing longer repetitions. That's the way to do it.

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Arthur Lydiard conducts a running seminar for the Cambridge Sports Union in June of 1971.

Photo by Rick Levy