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For one day the fate of athletics lay in the hands of a single club

FIFTY years ago a secret meeting at the Chelmsford Athletics Club (CAC) saved track and field in the region from crumbling.

CAC historian Derek Cole, 80, made the startling discovery while researching the club's unwritten history.



He said: "An article by Remember When looking back on past triumphs of the club mentioned that they had no archives. This spurred me to put this right while its original and founder members were still alive."

Mr Cole has now given us an exclusive overview of the club's first written history.

During his delving he discovered that English athletics almost became ungovernable in January 1962 after national coach Geof Dyson resigned, accusing officials at the Amateur Athletic Association of England (AAA) of gross incompetence.

Dyson's supporters put down a vote of censure at the CAC annual general meeting, accusing officers of the AAA of "wild maladministration". But other members vociferously opposed these criticisms and a rift ensued.

"Those managing athletics were likely to end up not on speaking terms with each other and chaos loomed," said Mr Cole.

Fortunately, the highly respected but extremely worried Johnny Johnson of Hornchurch, coach to four-time marathon world record breaker Jim Peters, persuaded the SE Essex clubs to propose a compromise amendment.

Instead of a vote of censure they used a lesser expression of "alarm and dismay".



Chelmsford, as promoters of the league, were asked to submit the proposal to the AAA president, the Olympic gold medallist Lord Exeter.

Lord Exeter sent Harold Abrahams – the man immortalised in the film *Chariots of Fire* – to an all-Essex public protest meeting of athletes to investigate the concerns.

Afterwards, Abrahams discussed the proposal with the SE Essex officials and said he would advise the president to accept the amended complaint.

The SE Essex clubs at the AGM urged everybody to adopt the amendment so that "we can go united together into 1962".

Officials did not oppose it and it was carried by a large majority. If the censure had gone ahead, athletics may have never recovered.

Australian delegate Arthur Hodson, who visited Chelmsford in 1962, said he had been told by the AAA secretary at the International Athletic Congress in Belgrade that Chelmsford had saved the day.

Mr Cole said he also discovered other fascinating and unlikely events in the club's history.

Research done at the club as part of an Anglo-Australian project on pulse recovery rates attracted a visit from FBI agent, Olympic runner and super coach Fred Wilt, who has since mentioned it in his memoirs.

Because of poor competition in the States, Fred decided to send his top athlete, Buddy Edelen, to the club to face British competition.

The move resulted in Buddy breaking a spate of American records and a world record marathon, run from Windsor to Chiswick.

Fred gave a further boost to American distance running when he helped Bill Cornell of Chelmsford gain a Scholarship at Southern Illinois University (SIU).

Bill himself already had world fame after setting a world junior mile record.

In the 1960s Penny Gardner brought the ladies' junior mile world record to the club as well – an extraordinary double.

The winter of 1962 was the first when the new cinder track was open for training, and coincided with the arrival of Andy Davis, a USAF airman from Wethersfield.

Mr Cole said: "Records show that with segregation still publicly strong in the south of the USA he insisted that a black member would be accepted at the club. Today he is still remembered as a very popular and much-loved member."

Derek Cole says that his greatest pleasure has been hearing again from the oldest member, Ted Little, 95, who joined in 1935.

He has provided the only known photograph of inspirational founder president, Sydney Taylor, a mayor seven times.



Roy added Essex had always been very strong on the track.

"I competed in the same events as Derek Johnson (Woodford) and George Knight (Essex Beagles) who both became internationals – please take note I said the same events and not against them, for they were in a different class," he said.

"In my first season on a very cold day at the Friendship Cup meeting held at Chingford, I remember the late Ray Fullerton, Chelmsford AC secretary, suggesting that we tuck brown paper inside our running vests, which proved invaluable.

"In a Southern Championship held at Epsom I got carried away and set off at a lunatic pace to lead the likes of a number of internationals.

"Needless to say this did not last long and I was to finish in the 500s. In another event, North of Thames Championships, at Chigwell, our leading runner Ken Rogers, who was returning from injury, said he would be taking it easy and joined us.

"After about a mile he told us that we talked too much and pressed on without us – we enjoyed our sport."

Mr Meadowcroft first joined the CAC committee as Cross Country Secretary in 1953. A year later he launched the Essex Cross Country League.

"After this I took on various roles within the club – assistant sec, secretary, treasurer, meeting organiser, press secretary, bar manager – in fact anything we were unable to get others to do.

"Come 1975, and getting even slower in my running, I took on the role of women's team manager."

Mr Meadowcroft has been Essex Cross Country League secretary/treasurer for 12 years.

"Since the formation of the league I have indeed only missed three meetings in the 56 years," he said.

Club historian Derek Cole said: "Roy has always been there, diligently carrying out various essential duties.

"He joined a mere 58 years ago and by founding the cross country league, one of the very first in the country, he helped inspire major athletes such as Chelmsford's first international Brian Hill-Cottingham, our world junior mile record holder Bill Cornell and our American star Buddy Edelen."



CHELMSFORD ATHLETE DIES AFTER ROAD ACCIDENT

By John Chaplin, Essex Chronicle

ONE of Chelmsford Athletic Club's leading members, MR. ANTHONY (TONY) JOHNSON, aged 20, of Scarles Cross, East Hanningfield, was fatally injured on Saturday night after having been involved in a collision with a car while cycling in Baddow Road, Chelmsford.

He was rushed by ambulance to hospital, where an emergency operation was performed, but Johnson died later on Sunday. His skull was fractured.

Ilford match cancelled

THE tragic death in a road accident of 20-year-old Tony Johnson, of East Hanningfield, in the midst of his most impressive athletic season has overshadowed everything athletically.



Tony Johnson

Only last week he ran his best-ever race. It was at an inter-club match at Woodford, when the Chelmsford A.C., of which Johnson was one of its most prominent members, achieved a remarkable win in the one mile medley with a club best-ever of 3min. 38sec.

A report of the match, written only just before Johnson's death, says this:

"After a fast quarter-mile by John Capers, Roy Sheppard gained the lead for Chelmsford on his 220 yards stage, which Doug. Minett maintained....."

"Over the last half-mile Tony Johnson ran undoubtedly his greatest race to defeat by 20 yards the county record-holder, Cyril Meadows, of Ilford, international Michael Maynard (Herne Hill), and former county champion Alan Murray-Carter (Essex Beagles), and at the same time bettered by one second the elusive two minutes . . ."

Depleted by holidays, the Chelmsford team was not successful in the other events, although Peter Skingsley was a good third in the junior mile with 4min. 44.8sec., and newcomer John Butt showed considerable promise to take third place in the junior shot with 38ft. 11in.

To-morrow's match at Ilford, because of the tragic circumstances, has been cancelled.

It is a sad thought to the party of twenty-six from the Chelmsford A.C. who are going over to see the European Games in Switzerland on August 20, that Tony Johnson will not be there.

J.C.C.

THE FUNERAL

The funeral took place at the Church of the Immaculate Conception, London Road, Chelmsford, yesterday. The service was conducted by the Rev. Canon M. J. V. Wilson. Many members of the Chelmsford Athletic Club were in the congregation, which numbered about 50.

The mourners were: Mrs. B. Johnson, mother; Mr. R. Parmenter, Mrs. M. Chaplin, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Dewhirst, Mr. F. Parmenter, Mr. H. Parmenter, Mr. E. Parmenter, Mrs. K. Martineile, Mr. C. Wolton, uncle and aunts; Mrs. P. Chaplin, Mr. E. Martineile, Mr. C. Parmenter, cousins; Mr. R. Crampin, Mr. W. Smith, Mr. and Mrs. R. Sparrow. Mrs. W. Parmenter, grandmother, was unable to attend.

Among those representing the Chelmsford Athletic Club at the service were: Messrs. R. Fullerton, Michael Ransom (track secretary), E. G. Daley, G. Orrin, A. Orrin, L. Garner, R. Sheppard, N. Skingley, G. Harris, D. Minnett, W. Cole, R. Meadowcroft, and S. Meadowcroft. Mr. L. Durrant represented Brentwood Athletic Club.

Beautiful floral tributes were sent by: His Loving Mother; Grandmother; Aunt Marjorie, Peter, Barbara, Joan, and Paul; Aunt Connie, Uncle Norman, Will, and Hugh; Aunts and Uncles; Uncle Mervyn, Aunt Jean Angela and Susan Thorton; Friends and Neighbours, Crescent Road; Mr. and Mrs. Hunt, Doreen and Joan; Bob and Jack; Vera and Joan; Mr. and Mrs. Cobby and Family; Gerald Clark (Broomfield); Bert; Delia; Maureen; Tony and Family; Mr. and Mrs. Carter; Rhoda, Harry, and Boys; Mr. and Mrs. David Allen; Mr. and Mrs. G. T. Castle; Win.; Ethel; Mr. and Mrs. Edward Ollett; Basil and Kath.; Gillian and Doug.; Mr. and Mrs. Ransom and Michael; Mr. and Mrs. Cocker; Brentwood Athletic Club; Geoffrey and Peter; Joan and Les.; Dick (Bristol); Staff, Argentine Southern Land Co.; Chairman, Committee, and Members, Chelmsford A.C.; Derek and Ann Cole; John Capers.

Funeral arrangements were entrusted to Wards Funeral Directors, Ltd., 149 Springfield Road, Chelmsford.