

Comparisons with Today's Scene

What similarities and differences can be drawn from the epoch that saw the birth of permanently organised athletics in Blackpool and today's scene? How much has been learnt and how has the Club and the sport progressed? Below are a few areas worth consideration but there are many others.

Women and Children

When athletics was germinating in the region the whole set-up was discriminative. No women, no children and often no one other than the middle-class could join. Thank goodness Blackpool and Fylde A.C. is different today. Women have free access to the Club today, as do children. Children perhaps play the biggest part, but women are not as prominent as many would like to see. Women's participation in sport generally is sadly lower than it could be throughout all of Britain and the world, and there are various sociological reasons for this that we won't go into here. It would be easy to blame the societal status-quo for the lack of women in Blackpool and Fylde A.C., but we must resist doing so. Does the Club cater fully for women? Do they set the right environment for women to join and partake in their activities? What does aerobics have that athletics does not? A forward and progressive Club will always be looking at ways it can increase its membership from all sections of the community.

Merely by saying women can join, are we fulfilling our equal opportunity obligation. Access does not always mean equal opportunity.

The Middle-Class

The Club was, from the beginning biased towards the middle-class. It wasn't as class ridden as some sports, but it was bad enough. The organized Clubs tried

to exclude the peds who were often artisans. Has Blackpool and Fylde A.C. and athletics moved away from that slur today? Research could be justified here, but it is probably a fairly accurate assumption to say that the Club is still biased towards the middle-class. The whole sport of athletics is. Why doesn't athletics at Club level attract the same number of participants as football? The answers are varied, but importantly are we trying to attack the situation?

The Club does today have a more varied membership make-up. The club of 1894 failed in many areas in this respect, but the gut feeling in the Club still fails in one or two areas, 100 years on. Blackpool and Fylde will probably never reach a position of perfect community representation, but what is important is that people in the Club work towards that utopia, hand in hand.

Clubs vs Clubs

In 1894 Blackpool Harriers came into existence. A few months later Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club appeared. Why two clubs materialised in the same period is strange. Neither had a massive membership and the sport of athletics wasn't nearly as popular as football. Travel wasn't as easy as it is today, but since both clubs catered for the same town, this reason is negated. This reason could be used however, to explain the existence of Lytham Amateur Athletic Club that is highlighted in the Gazette in 1906. (At this stage little else is known about this Club). In 1929 when an athletic club re-formed in the town, they said that there was not not the room for two clubs in the area. That call can still and is heard today in Blackpool. For the town and the general success of the sport in the area, two clubs are potentially divisive. The athletic talent instead of working together for the the honour of the region is competing with each other.

Today we have Blackpool and Fylde, North Fylde (quickly emerging), Vaughan Road Club and in the small Fleetwood Municipal Athletic Club (which boasted a considerable membership in the late 1800s) all competing for talent? What a club Blackpool and Fylde could be if they combined forces with the competing clubs. So, why is the situation no different from a hundred years ago? If athletes want to go their own way and set up a club, are people asking why? Does the Club want to know why, or if they do know why, are they trying to correct it? Is the Club learning from its history?

Peds vs Gents

We talked earlier about how the athletic scene in the 1800s was divided between the gents and the peds. Professionalisation has been contested in athletics throughout the twentieth century and is still far from a comfortable acceptance for many today. Many athletes are openly professional today, just as they were in the nineteenth century.

"On the track its just like going to work, I'm as a company, he's a company (Linford Christie). The objective is my company to out perform his company - it's not any different from the oil business or anything else"

Carl Lewis, 1993, before the 196s 'Lewis v Christie' race.

Despite the clear division then, there was still many 'grey' athletes. If there was a prize available and they had a chance of winning it they would take it. These athletes became somewhat resented by the more purist of athletes, who believed sport should never involve money or material gain. Have we rid

ourselves of such issues today? Can road runners not be considered the peds, while the track athletes the gents? Why not, at the level Blackpool and Fylde performs at as a Club, one can earn some money while the other never has the chance to gain financially. Is there still some bitterness when road runners put a road race before a track meet? Once again, are we still wrangling with similar issues as those in 1894?

There are many areas where the Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club - 1995 has changed little since its creation in 1894. We have just seen how comparisons can still easily be drawn. At the same time changes can be seen. The Club has a wider selection of the community in its membership, has the use of vastly improved facilities and enjoys a higher profile through modern media than was the case in earlier years.

Mission

Does the Club still have a mission, wider than the being a provider of athletics for the Fylde region. When Blackpool Harriers was established its mission was,

"...induce the residents to take an interest in those pleasurable exercises which contribute to the development of the body."

It wasn't to just provide a Club for athletes. What is the Club's mission today? What is the Club trying to achieve? More importantly what is the mission for the next 100 years? Is the Club prepared to look at the past, observe and learn and then set new challenging targets for the years ahead. The Club has a civic role in the region. It is not just another sports Club, it is one of the principle clubs. Just as Blackpool Football Club is 'the' football club in the

region, so Blackpool and Fylde is 'the' athletic club. Is there a need within the Club to define a mission for the next century? Should members in 1995 be working towards the drawing up of a new mission that will guide the Club in the next 100 years? Importantly, will the members offer the effort to set in place work that will see the Club ultimately achieve those goals. Mission statements are easier to write than to achieve, so it should be well thought out and applicable for the environment ahead which the Club will find itself in.

If the Club is to remain at the forefront it must go about its business of organising the Club in a manner that is fitting of its tradition and standing within the Fylde and national population.

Figure 10.

Significant Events in the Early Years

- 1879 The first mention of an athletics club in the Fleetwood Chronicle.
- 1875 First athletic meeting in the area was held at Hafkiss Hall. Entrance was 1s. The first prize for the 100yrd handicap was £3 3s.
- 1893 Local business men formed the 'Blackpool Athletic Grounds Company' and the first track was built at Whitegate Lane
- 1894 In March of this year the National Cross-Country Championships were staged at the Athletic Grounds. 1,500 spectators turned up to watch 83 competitors.
- 1894 Blackpool Harriers were formed in March
- 1894 Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club were formed in April.
- 1894 A woman was taken aback by seeing some cross-country runners. She thought they looked exhausted and offered them some tea, which they accepted.
- 1894 The Harriers struggled to keep attendances high at their club runs. Runners were distracted with other sports (often boxing and football).
- 1894 The Harriers held their first Club Championships on Christmas Day! It began at 10.30 and was 5 miles in length.
- 1895 Blackpool and Fylde Athletic Club appear to have ceased existence.
- 1895 The Blackpool Athletic Grounds Company went into liquidation.
- 1896 Blackpool Harriers reported their Christmas Handicap. It was 5 miles in length and after it members had hot-pot, sang songs and had a jolly good evening.
- 1900 At the Paris Olympic Games J.E. Tyce won the gold medal in the 3/4 mile (600 metres). He was an active member of the Harriers prior to the Games, but it appears that when he won this he was only residing in Blackpool, while being a member of Salford Harriers.
- 1929 Blackpool and Fylde Harriers Athletic Club was formed after a meeting at the library

