

A World History of Sprint Racing

“The stellar events”: 100m, 200m and 4x100m relay – Men and Women (1850-2005)

by Roberto L. Quercetani

Since time immemorial, every kid has been tempted to test his speed against his playmates and running races over short distances have been part of the competitive sport in every civilization.

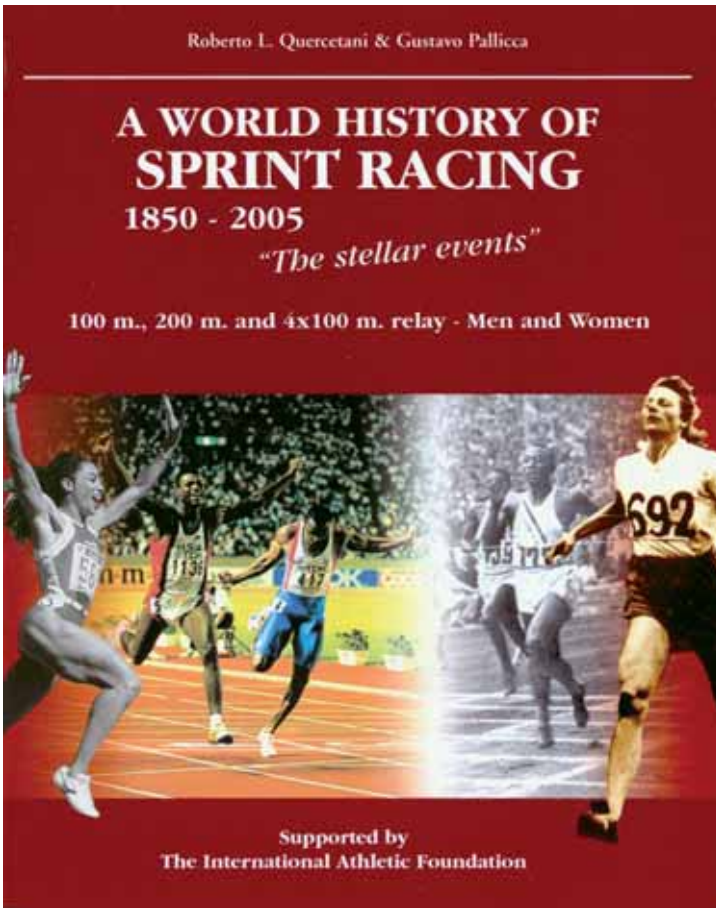
In formal athletics, the sprints – 100 metres, 200 metres and the 4x100 metres relay – may, according to Roberto Quercetani, author of *A World History of Sprint Racing*, even be described as the “stellar events”, those in which human beings express the maximum of velocity. In terms of popularity, the sprints are certainly the most talked of athletic events. “Who won the 100 metres in the Olympics?” is probably the question athletics enthusiasts are most frequently asked by outsiders.

The sprints lie entirely within the sphere of anaerobic running, which means that a properly trained athlete can go all out from start to finish. Quercetani holds that that is probably the main reason why a great sprinter can steal the show and conquer the heart of spectators.

Throughout modern history great sprinters have come from a variety of countries, yet the USA has been by far the most prolific producer of sprint talent – and not only in the 20th century. Even “the first of the great modern sprinters,” George Seward, was an American (born at New Haven, Connecticut of 16 October 1817, died at Birkenhead, England, on 10 April 1883). Seward was probably also the

first “dashman” to receive plaudits on both sides of the Atlantic. On his credit were such times as 9.25 sec for 100 yards (91.44m), 11.5 sec for 120 yards (109.72m) and 19.5 sec for 200 yards (182.88m). For 46 years, leading runners failed to approach Seward’s mark over 100 yard, set at Hammersmith, England on 30 September 1844, a few days before his 27th birthday.

However, as Quercetani points out, the least one can say about the times of early sprinters is that they must be taken with a grain of salt. Apart from the fact that the chronograph was patented by Adolphe Nicole of Switzerland only in 1862, the wind factor was completely ignored. Also, the fastest times were preferably recorded in “professional” races, where the financial terms involved made all tricks possible. By the end of the 19th century, this led William Pierce, a keen American observer of the sprinting scene, to look back to the early days of modern sprinting in the following terms: “Professional sprinting chroniclers have always been scarce and each has had his favourites. In most cases those we have read most about have not been in reality the fastest men There is conflicting testimony of the few men still living who can tell of sprinting events of 40 or 50 years ago, also of the various champions in the different localities then so far apart by the lack of our modern travelling conveniences. It has at times been next to impossible to decide in justice to



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whom the honour of champion belonged rightfully."

The times achieved by the American sprinter Bernard Wefers (born 19 February 1873, died in 1925) between 1895 and 1897 were of a more official character. In these three years Wefers ran 9 4/5 sec over 100 yards each year, and for the 220 yards he ran 21 1/5 sec. All of these times were ratified as US records by the AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) and American commentators saluted Wefers as "the fastest human in the world."

Quercetani's book includes 11 chapters:

1. From famous athletes of Antiquity to Bernard Wefers, the greatest of 19th Century sprinters
2. Duffey's bad luck – the "pro" circus
3. The incomparable J. C. Owens
4. An American sky (with scattered European clouds)
5. Speed demons galore. Bob Hayes, the brightest star
6. Carl Lewis superstar, MJ and his record of records – 19.32

7. The battle goes on: Greene, Gatlin and Powell
8. From the Vassar pioneers to Helen Stephens, the "Missouri Tornado"
9. The first queen comes from Holland
10. German dynasty, Ashford, the Hurricane "Flo-Jo"
11. Waiting for M.Ile Godot?

As per Quercetani's tradition, the book has a large statistical section (almost 150 pages of world year lists and all-time world lists of both the men's and the women's sprint performances).

The greatest part of the book deals with men's sprinting (almost 150 pages), while the presentation of the history of women's sprinting takes only 50 pages (chapters 8-11). This is mainly because the earliest organised women's meet of modern times took place only on 9 November 1895 at Vassar College (USA) with the 100 yards race being won by Miss Elizabeth Forbes Vassar, a niece of the college's founder, in 16.0 sec. Only in 1928 did women's events become part of the Olympic programme.

Today, world records for men and women are no longer as far apart as they used to be. As recently as in 1992 *Nature* magazine went so far as to predict that women would soon excel men even in terms of records. This conclusion was arrived at on the basis of a conception that seems to be arguable at best: In recent years women's records were bettered more often and more rapidly than those of the other sex. Quercetani refutes this view by saying that, instead of limiting themselves to the study of statistical data, the scientists should have paid more attention to the fact that the mechanisms producing energy are less developed in women, the same as muscular power in general.

But the prognosis of the *Nature* article is really proven wrong by the fact that the first years of the 21st century have been characterised by a persistent standstill in women's sprinting. For example, there was not a single sub-22 sec mark in the 200m throughout this period, and only one sub-10.80 in the 100m.

The world records set by Florence Griffith-Joyner (USA) in 1988 (10.49 and 21.34) look like a most distant cry. According to Quercetani, one of the reasons for such an impoverishment may be found in the present and more severe policy of the IAAF in enforcing its anti-doping campaign. It was only in 1989 that the international body began to conduct out-of-competition doping controls (random tests). Until then the athletes were subjected to doping controls only in connection with major international meets such as the Olympics, World and European Championships. Consequently, Quercetani assumes that before 1989 quite a few athletes were able to circumvent anti-doping rules by discontinuing the "treatment" shortly before such major dates, i. e. once or twice a year.

Also, there were rather strong reasons to doubt the wind reading officially released in connection with Flo-Jo's 100m record. Her next best marks, run under surely correct conditions, were 10.61 and 10.62. Second best in the all-time list is Marion Jones (USA) with 10.65 achieved at high altitude in 1998. Griffith-Joyner's superiority remains even more striking in the 200m. Her 21.34 in winning the 1988 Olympic title in Seoul is far superior to anything her successors have been able to achieve. Next bests are Jones with 21.62 (also at high altitude) in 1998 and Merlene Ottey (JAM) with 21.64 (1991) at sea level.

Quercetani's book is not only about sprinters but also about sprint rules, facilities, and apparatus. The text is interspersed with boxes bearing titles such as "Measuring Time", "Pegs and Ropes", "About the Start", "The Advent of Electric Timing", "Tracks and Circles – from Cinder to Tartan", "About Lanes", "Marble Stones, Holes and Starting Blocks", "False Start Control Apparatus", "Starters and Guns" all of which are very informative reading.

In summary, Quercetani's *World History of Sprint Racing* is very much in line with the author's other books. Readers interested in the history of athletics can only benefit from the expanded horizon it offers.

Reviewed by Jürgen Schiffer