Reflections on Sir Roger Bannister and his autobiography, *Twin Tracks*

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The four-minute mile had become rather like an Everest, a challenge to the human spirit. It was a barrier that seemed to defy all attempts to break it, an irksome reminder that man's striving might be in vain (1).

On May 6, 1954, I was walking through the department store in my Wisconsin hometown of 5000 when I heard an important announcement on the radio: an English medical student had finally broken the seemingly insurmountable 4-minute barrier in the 1-mile run (*Figure 1*). He accomplished this despite a busy medical schedule. Bannister would typically take off his white medical coat, rush from St. Mary's Hospital to the metro, and squeeze in a 30-minute workout during his lunch break.

I wish I could have been there that day to hear the announcer, Norris McWhirter, in typical British-controlled understatement, give the results:

First, number 41, RG Bannister of the AAU and formerly of Exeter and Merton Colleges, with a time which is a new meeting and track record, and which, subject to ratification, will be a new English native, British National, British all-comers, European, British Empire and world record. The time is 3... (the crowd erupted!) (1).

In 1995, I had the occasion to meet that former medical student, now Sir Roger Bannister, a neurologist (*Figure 2*). I was greatly impressed by his intellect. He deflected praise and comments about himself and seemed vitally interested in learning all that he could about the person he was visiting with—who you were, what you did, what you knew. He was given an enthusiastic introduction before his brief speech, followed by a video of his record-breaking mile run and a recording of “God Save the Queen.” He smiled and introduced his wife, Moyra (a talented artist), indicating that she knew nothing about athletics when they were dating, only that she had heard he had run 4 miles in under a minute. “No, no,” he corrected her, “it was only 1 mile in less than 4 minutes.” She wasn't impressed. He added that he had gotten much faster as the years progressed, hearing his 5-year-old grandson brag to a friend that “My grandpa can run a mile in under 4 seconds.”

Dr. Bannister was interested in attending the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta. As the chief medical officer for the games,

Figure 1. Roger Bannister, *Sports Illustrated* Sportsman of the Year.

I indicated that I could probably add him to my medical staff. As the paperwork was progressing, he was quoted in *Sports Illustrated* as saying that “black athletes in general all seem to have certain anatomical advantages.” He noted a “relative lack of subcutaneous fatty insulating tissue in the skin” and “the length of the Achilles tendon” (2). The racially hypersensitive Atlanta

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Figure 2. The author (left) with Sir Roger Bannister.

Organizing Committee vetoed his addition to our medical staff. I was too embarrassed to tell him the reason why, only that I couldn't work things out. It was our loss.

In 1999, I was on vacation in Oxford. I wandered over to the famous Iffley Road track, where Bannister set the record (*Figure 3*). Only one other person was in sight, appropriately a medical student, training to get his mile time down to that magic sub-4 number. A custodian appeared from underneath the stands and asked who I was and why I was there. I explained that I had met Sir Roger once, had remembered the day when he set the record, and just wanted to see the special place for myself. The custodian excused himself, went back under the stands, and returned with a little sack of cinders. When a synthetic running track had been installed several years previously, the custodian asked if he could have the cinders from the finish line so he could give them to people like me. I appreciated his kind gesture and thanked him profusely. When I returned to Atlanta, I divided the cinders into multiple little bottles and gave them to some friends, who were also runners and track and field aficionados and had an appreciation for the historical significance the cinders represented.

Like Sir Roger Bannister, I am no longer able to run, but I did so for nearly 40 years, long enough to appreciate what he wrote about his own experience:

As a child I ran barefoot along damp, fresh sand by the seashore. The air there had a special quality. . . . The sound of breakers shut out all others, and I was startled, almost frightened, by the tremendous excitement a few steps could create. It was an intense moment of discovery of a source of power and beauty that one previously hardly dreamt existed (1).

In his recently published autobiography, *Twin Tracks* (1), Sir Roger stated that "sport and medicine have a vital and expanding role in improving the lives of individuals across the world. These are the twin tracks that have run through my life." He summarized aspects of his productive life.

MEDICAL WORK

In his over 25 years of medical work, both at the National Hospital and at St. Mary's Hospital in London, his primary

Figure 3. The famous Iffley Road track, where the 4-minute barrier was broken.

focus was on syncope, autonomic disorders, and tilt testing. He established a laboratory at the National Hospital in 1968 to study these disorders, the only such center in Britain. He and his colleague, Dr. Chris Mathias (a former Rhodes Scholar), got an old motorized pediatric tilt table from the radiology department to do such studies and published 50 research papers. Of the autonomic disorders, Dr. Bannister wrote that they happened to be a disorder "that has held its fascination for half my life, representing 30 years of enjoyable work rather than the eight short years of my running life as a student."

For his medical work, Bannister was awarded the first Lifetime Achievement Award by the American Academy of Neurology. He revised Lord Brain's *Clinical Neurology* and carried it through several other editions (*Figure 4*). In doing so, he stated that "it has still been my aim to preserve Lord Brain's original intention of writing a textbook for physicians, general practitioners, and students which explains clearly how to diagnose and treat common neurological disorders" (3). The result was a tour de force.

THE SPORTS COUNCIL

This council was established "to galvanize the reluctant government and civil service into making better provisions for sports" in Britain. Sir Roger was chairman of the research and planning division of the council and later chair of an independent sports council. When he began, there were only four multipurpose sports facilities throughout Britain. In 1974, when he retired as chairman, there were 400. This may well have contributed to England's fine showing in the 2012 Olympic games. It was for his 10 years of service to the Sports Council that he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth.

His only regret had to do with drug testing of athletes. Dr. Bannister arranged for a chemist at a London hospital to develop a radioimmunoassay urinary test to detect anabolic steroids. It took 15 years for the test to be implemented.

ACADEMIC LIFE

In 1987, Sir Roger became Master of Pembroke College in Oxford, overseeing 40 teaching fellows and 120 students. He served in this capacity until 1993, fundraising for a new

Brain and Bannister's Clinical Neurology

Seventh Edition

Revised by
Sir Roger Bannister

With best wishes
from
Roger Bannister
- and good luck for the
Atlanta Olympics
25.5.94

Figure 4. Brain and Bannister's *Clinical Neurology* textbook.

building, developing the school's sports program (especially rowing), and adding women for fellowships and lectureships. He donated his athletic trophies to Pembroke. The school honored him by naming a graduate center after him.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Dr. Bannister served as a trustee to Leeds Castle from 1985 to 2010. His main responsibility was "organizing medical conferences to tackle various problems of the National Health Service."

Once, at the castle before a dinner honoring patron Princess Alexandra, Dr. Bannister experienced the sudden onset of dizziness and an irregular pulse. He was transported to a nearby hospital. His wife told the senior nurse in the emergency department, "He's a doctor and he knows what's the matter. He thinks he's fibrillating." The nurse replied, "That makes no difference. He'll have to wait his turn." (It seems that even socialized medicine has its limitations.) The next day, before a scheduled cardioversion, he converted spontaneously to normal rhythm.

Retirement has included ample time with his wife, four children (three of whom married Americans), 14 grandchildren, new hobbies like wood carving, and starting a book club and a walking club. He also chaired the Development Trust at National and St. Mary's Hospitals.

In 1994, on the 40th anniversary of Bannister's record-setting run, a reunion of 14 former mile record-holders was held. In his closing remarks to the group, Sir Roger stated,

We remember the good times, the sun on our backs, running through the beauty of the countryside, running thousands and thousands of miles. We remember laughter and friends. For us, no matter what life may bring, whatever subsequent shadows there may be, no one can strip us of these memories (3).

Confined to a wheelchair now due to the "subsequent shadow" of Parkinson's disease, Sir Roger's running and walking days are behind him. The cinders from the finish line still have a prominent place in my private office, and memories of this wonderful, racially unbiased man and his remarkable achievements in both sports and medicine will be with me forever.

Acknowledgment

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1. Bannister R. *Twin Tracks*. London: Robson Press, 2015.
2. Quoted in *Sports Illustrated*, 1994.
3. Bannister R. *Brain's Clinical Neurology*, 4th ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1973.