

Chariots of Fire (1981)

The movie is based on the true story of two British athletes competing in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris. Englishman Harold Abrahams (Ben Cross), who is Jewish, overcomes anti-Semitism and class prejudice in order to compete against the "Flying Scotsman", Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson), in the 100 metre race.

Opening in 1919 England, Harold Abrahams enters Cambridge University, where he meets with anti-Semitism from the staff, but enjoys participating in the Gilbert and Sullivan club. He becomes the first person to ever complete the Trinity Great Court run: running around the court in the time it takes for the clock to strike 12. Abrahams achieves an undefeated string of victories in various national running competitions. Although focused on his running, he falls in love with a famous Gilbert and Sullivan soprano, Sybil (Alice Krige).

Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson), born in China of Scottish missionary parents, is in Scotland. His devout sister Jennie (Cheryl Campbell) disapproves of Liddell's plans to pursue competitive running. But Liddell sees running as a way of glorifying God before returning to China to work as a missionary.

When they first race against each other, Liddell beats Abrahams. Abrahams takes it extremely badly, but Sam Mussabini (Ian Holm), a professional trainer whom Abrahams had approached earlier, offers to take him on to improve his technique. This attracts criticism from the Cambridge college masters (played by John Gielgud and Lindsay Anderson). They allege it is ungentlemanly for an amateur to "play the tradesman" by employing a professional coach. Abrahams realizes this is a cover for their anti-Semitism and class entitlement, and dismisses their concern.

When Eric Liddell accidentally misses a church prayer meeting because of his running, his sister Jennie upbraids him and accuses him of no longer caring about God. But Eric tells her that though he intends to eventually return to the China mission, he feels divinely inspired when running, and that not to run would be to dishonour God: "I believe that God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure."

The two athletes, after five years of training and racing, are accepted to represent Great Britain in the 1924 Summer Olympics in Paris, France. Also accepted are Abrahams' Cambridge buddies, Lord Andrew Lindsay (Nigel Havers), Aubrey Montague (Nicholas Farrell), and Henry Stallard (Daniel Gerroll) whom join the UK team.

While boarding the boat to Paris for the Olympics, Eric Liddell learns the news that the event for his 100 metre race will be on a Sunday. Liddell refuses to run the race despite strong pressure from the Prince of Wales (David Yelland) as well as the head of the British Olympic committee, Lord Cadogan (Patrick Magee) because Liddell's Christian convictions prevent him from running on the Christian Sabbath (Sunday).

Hope appears in the form of Liddell's teammate Lord Andrew Lindsay. Having already won a silver medal in the 400 metre hurdles, Lindsay proposes to yield his place in the 400 metre race on the following Tuesday to Liddell. Liddell gratefully agrees. His religious convictions in the face of national athletic pride make headlines around the world.

Liddell delivers a sermon at the Paris Church of Scotland that Sunday, and quotes from Isaiah 40, verse 31: "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and be not weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Abrahams is badly beaten by the heavily favoured and more experienced United States runner Charles Paddock (Dennis Christopher) in the 200 metre race. He knows his last chance for a gold medal will be the 100 metres. He competes in the 100 metre sprint, and wins.

Before Liddell's race, the American coach remarks to his runners that Liddell has little chance

of doing well in his now far longer 400 metre race. But one of the American runners, Jackson Scholz (Brad Davis), hands Liddell a note of support for his convictions. Liddell defeats the American favourites and wins the gold medal.

The British team returns home triumphant. As the film ends, an onscreen text explains that Abrahams married Sybil, and became the elder statesman of British athletics. He died in 1978. The eulogy at Abrahams' funeral is delivered by the elderly Lord Andrew Lindsay, the last surviving member of the 1924 UK Olympic Team. Eric Liddell went on to his missionary work back in China where he was killed by Japanese troops in 1945.

Cast

Nicholas Farrell ... Aubrey Montague
Nigel Havers ... Lord Andrew Lindsay
Ian Charleson ... Eric Liddell
Ben Cross ... Harold Abrahams
Daniel Gerroll ... Henry Stallard
Ian Holm ... Sam Mussabini
John Gielgud ... Master of Trinity (as Sir John Gielgud)
Lindsay Anderson ... Master of Caius
Nigel Davenport ... Lord Birkenhead
Cheryl Campbell ... Jennie Liddell
Alice Krige ... Sybil Gordon
Dennis Christopher ... Charles Paddock
Brad Davis ... Jackson Scholz
Patrick Magee ... Lord Cadogan
Peter Egan ... Duke of Sutherland

Selected memorable quotes (with notes on difficult vocabulary)

Sam Mussabini: Eric Liddell? He's no real problem...

Harold M. Abrahams: [*Eric has already beaten Harold once*] You could have fooled me.

Sam Mussabini: Yeah, he's fast! But he won't go any faster. He's a gut runner, digs deep! But a short sprint is run on nerves. It's tailor-made for neurotics.

You could have fooled me = quasi quasi me la facevi; **gut runner** = uno che corre d'istinto; **run on nerves** = (qui) questione di nervi; **it's tailor-made for neurotics** = è fatta apposta per i nevrotici

Sam Mussabini: Do you want to know why you lost today?

[*Harold nods*]

Sam Mussabini: You're over striding.

[*Sets coins in a row*]

Sam Mussabini: Now these coins represent the steps in your sprint.

[*Pushes coins together*]

Sam Mussabini: Can you find me another two coins, Mr. Abraham?

[*Harold looks up*]

Sam Mussabini: Remember, over striding. Death for the sprinter

[*shakes his head*]

Sam Mussabini: . Knocks you back.

[*Slaps Harold across the cheek. Harold winces*]

Sam Mussabini: Like that!

[Slaps Harold again]

Sam Mussabini: And that!

[Sam laughs and grabs Harold by the arm]

Sam Mussabini: .

to nod = annuire; **to over stride** = fare passi troppo lunghi; to knock one's back = distruggersi la schiena

Henry Stallard: [*the athletes are playing cricket in the ballroom of their hotel. Henry Stallard is the umpire; Aubrey Montague bowls a delivery to Eric Liddell, batting*] No ball!

Harold M. Abrahams: [*desperate to get into bat*] Come on, Aubrey, the old leg-break!

Harold M. Abrahams: [*Aubrey bowls another delivery, which deceptively appears to have gotten Eric out*] HowZAT!

Henry Stallard: Not out!

Harold M. Abrahams: What do you mean, not out? You could've heard it from bloody Bournemouth! Come on, Liddell, my innings.

Eric Liddell: I didn't touch it, I swear it, must've been the crack of my wrist!

Harold M. Abrahams: He's out I tell you, you're all deaf - deaf and bloody blind! Aubrey I ask you, for God's sake!

Harold M. Abrahams: [*No response from Aubrey, dramatic pause*]

[*punching the air*]

Harold M. Abrahams: It's not FAIR!

[*the athletes break into laughter, Abrahams eventually joining them*]

to bat = battere; **legbreak** = in bocca al lupo; **innings** = (nel cricket) turno di battuta; **the crack of my wrist** = il mio polso che si rompeva

Lord Birkenhead: Ah, Liddell! I was afraid you weren't here.

Eric Liddell: I'm afraid I am, sir.

Lord Cadogan: Don't be impertinent, Liddell!

Eric Liddell: The impertinence lies, sir, with those who seek to influence a man to deny his beliefs!

to seek = tentare, **to deny** = negare

HRH Edward, Prince of Wales: There are times when we are asked to make sacrifices in the name of that loyalty. And without them our allegiance is worthless. As I see it, for you, this is such a time.

Eric Liddell: Sir, God knows I love my country. But I can't make that sacrifice.

allegiance = lealtà

Duke of Sutherland: A sticky moment, George.

Lord Birkenhead: Thank God for Lindsay. I thought the lad had us beaten.

Duke of Sutherland: He did have us beaten, and thank God he did.

Lord Birkenhead: I don't quite follow you.

Duke of Sutherland: The "lad", as you call him, is a true man of principles and a true athlete. His speed is a mere extension of his life, its force. We sought to sever his running from himself.

Lord Birkenhead: For his country's sake, yes.

Lord Birkenhead: No sake is worth that, least of all a guilty national pride.

sticky moment = momento difficile; **lad** = ragazzo; **to sever** = distaccare

Sybil Gordon: [*about running*] Do you love it?

Harold M. Abrahams: I'm more of an addict. It's a compulsion with me, a weapon I can use.

Sybil Gordon: Against what?

Harold M. Abrahams: Being Jewish I suppose.

Sybil Gordon: [*laughs incredulously*] You're not serious! People aren't like that, people don't care. Can it be as bad as all that?

Harold M. Abrahams: You're not Jewish, or you wouldn't have had to ask.

compulsion = impulso

[*first lines*]

Lord Andrew Lindsay: Let us praise famous men and our fathers that begat us. All these men were honoured in their generations and were a glory in their days. We are here today to give thanks for the life of Harold Abrahams. To honour the legend. Now there are just two of us - young Aubrey Montague and myself - who can close our eyes and remember those few young men with hope in our hearts and wings on our heels.

to beget = generare, procreare; **on our heels** = (qui) ai piedi

Reverend. J.D. Liddell: You can praise God by peeling a spud if you peel it to perfection. Don't compromise. Compromise is a language of the devil. Run in God's name and let the world stand back and in wonder.

to peel = sbucciare; **spud** = (informale) patata

Sources: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0082158>