

Alec Nelson and British
Athletics prior
to World War II

Alec Nelson and British Athletics prior to World War II:

A Professional amongst Gentlemen

By

Ian Stone

Foreword by Dave Day

**Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing**



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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-1382-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1382-2

Cover design: Danielle Stone

Cover illustration: Portrait (c1906) of Alec Nelson owned by author's family.

To Anna and Stuart

Lilian and Clara

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FOREWORD

In recent decades the professional coach has become an important figure in most British sports, but this was not always the case. In the late nineteenth century, and long into the twentieth, social constructions such as class established a coaching environment, shaped by a middle-class philosophy of amateurism, that rejected specialisation and emphasised moderation, especially in relation to training. As a result, from the start of the formal regulation of sport by public school and university men, there was a definite bias towards amateur or honorary coaches, rather than professionals. Even in those sports where professionals were grudgingly accepted, administrators ensured they were controlled by inculcating a master-servant relationship. By contrast, in America, amateurism was rapidly modified and, although the term “amateur” was retained, sport was approached through a highly systematic, coach-centred model, emphasising excellence and winning. Different attitudes towards class in America allowed professional coaches to become valued and powerful cultural icons, while their British counterparts remained subservient figures, working in an environment dictated by their social and economic superiors, obscured from view—and subsequently hidden from the historiography of sport.

Several British professionals emigrated to America during the late nineteenth century, to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the expansion of college and athletic club coaching positions. Biographies of men like James Robinson and swimming coach George Kistler were thus relatively easy to compile, from college records and newspaper reports. The historian’s task was much more difficult, however, with respect to those British professionals remaining at home, who were marginalised by amateur governing bodies and written out of the records of their sport. References to professional coaches and trainers tend only to occur as an aside, in works on prominent players and administrators, and the lives of most of these working-class men (and, very occasionally, women) remain largely unrecorded. Unsurprisingly, it has been the professionals associated with football and cricket—those coaches and trainers who had connections to upper-class Oxbridge alumni, or amateur coaches, particularly rowing coaches, with “acceptable” social and educational backgrounds—who left any noteworthy mark in historical records. This has led to sports historians

relying on the top-down accounts of prominent men and women, rather than exploring the under-currents of sporting practices and behaviours, beneath the veneer and rhetoric of amateur sport.

It is important, then, in understanding the impact and contribution made by professional coaches within the British sporting context, that researchers explore these individual lives in greater detail. While social history focuses on large-scale social strata or classes, the history of everyday life focuses on ordinary people as important historical actors. Within this micro-historical approach, collating individual stories about sports coaches helps to uncover patterns characteristic of coaching contexts and permits deeper understanding of aspects of sporting life, previously only dealt with in terms of the generalities of class. Biographies of coaches and trainers need to be constructed from a broad spectrum of primary sources—newspaper and periodical archives, photographs, trade directories, census material, governing body archives, and local and family histories—to highlight the continuities and changes in the roles of these individuals and expose their origins and economic class, together with their social networks and daily practice as they worked to improve athletes and make a living.

Ian Stone's exposition of the life of athletics coach Alec Nelson provides an excellent exemplar of the type of study needed to understand the life courses and experiences of British professional coaches prior to the Second World War. No-one could accuse the author of producing a biography lacking in detail, since he draws on an extensive range of sources, including those generated by his personal family connection to Nelson, to produce a detailed and insightful account of the career trajectory of one of Britain's most important coaches of the thirty-five years before 1940. In many ways, of course, Nelson was rare as a professional, in that his situation at Cambridge University connected him to many of the aristocratic and upper-class amateurs involved in the organisation and management of British sport. His amiable personality and willingness to play the role of servant, which permeate multiple aspects of the biography, made him acceptable to many of the amateurs he worked with. They responded by accepting his training advice and providing him with the kind of social and material support that someone of their class often gave to valued retainers. However, Nelson's privileged position does not detract from the biography's value as an addition to the historiography of coaching that provides a point of comparison for other contemporary coaching lives. It is to be hoped, for example, that someone will take on the biography of Nelson's counterpart at Oxford University, William (Bill)

Thomas, who appears to have had very different life experiences, despite accepting a similar role with the Oxford University Athletic Club.

While more detailed individual life-stories like that of Nelson's are needed if we are to begin to understand how professional coaches interacted with wider social structures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the writing of coaching lives is not an uncomplicated endeavour, and it needs to be recognised that biographies have often been treated with a degree of suspicion. Contemporary historians now appreciate that their ideological commitment will play a part in the way biographies are produced, and that it is a misconception to think that "the facts" in themselves will yield "truth". Thanks in part to rapid expansions in digital resources, modern historians often have innumerable facts at their disposal, making it comparatively easy to select some and ignore others to produce a one-sided history. The result is that some biographies turn into hagiographies, with negative commentary and evidence being set aside, while other accounts emphasise the negative side of their subject.

The final version of any biography, and the stance that it takes in evaluating the individual being studied, always reflects the writer's own biography. It is almost impossible for historians to re-create past events without viewing them through their own, personal frame of reference. No historian starts with a clean slate since, whatever the topic of study, meanings have already been attached to it. As Douglas Booth noted, all historians live and work in their own present, which will be evident in what gets written, leading them to "play creative roles in the production and presentation of history". It is appropriate, therefore, to see history as more about interpretations and the construction of meanings, rather than recreating the past as it was. These differences have led to a more pragmatic attitude to writing history, recognising that imagination and inventiveness are integral to creating an historical narrative and accepting that historical discourses are essentially subjective, because of the need to interpret the collected facts. The ideal result for any biographical work, therefore, is to create what Noël Carroll called a "narrative truth", within which historical facts are marshalled to construct an accurate representation of the past, while creating a story that remains open to interpretation. My reading of Ian Stone's text here is that he has worked hard to put his personal connections to Nelson aside, to create a "narrative truth" in a biography that avoids the dangers of turning into a hagiography. As E.H. Carr pointed out, however, historians always have their own "bees buzzing" in their head when they write, and it behoves the reader always

to “listen out for the buzzing. If you can detect none, either you are tone deaf or your historian is a dull dog”.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have assisted in the process of discovering and accessing the large body of material used in writing this book. Some key individuals are acknowledged early in Chapter 1 and others in footnotes. Below is a list (in alphabetic order) of all the individuals, and their affiliations at the time, who have contributed by helping to solve problems, resolve inconsistencies, uncover materials, identify copyright etc. Sincere thanks are due to each for generously giving of their time and expertise, none of whom have any responsibility for any errors or omissions, which reside with the author.

Nick Baldwin. Archivist, Great Ormond Street NHS Foundation Trust.
Emily Bamber. Cambridge University Library.
James Bissett. Bill Bryson Library, Durham University.
Keith and Jennifer Booth. Surrey CCC historians.
Eleanor Braida. Biblioteca Civica, San Giovanni al Natisone, Udine, Italy.
Sophie Bridges. Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.
Jason Burch. London Metropolitan Archives.
Mary Burgess. Cambridgeshire Collection, Cambridgeshire Central Library.
Emmanuel Clairmont. Information Officer, Malo les Bains, Dunkerque.
David Clark. Grandson of Alec Nelson, St Neots.
John Cleaver (Dr). Archivist, Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge.
Jacqueline Cox. Keeper of Archives, Cambridge University Library.
Adam Culling. Royal Army Physical Training Corps Museum.
Jon Culverhouse. Burghley House Preservation Trust.
Lynsey Darby. Archivist, St John's College, Cambridge.
Dave Day. Professor of Sports History, Manchester Metropolitan University.
Anita Deganutti (Prof.). Biblioteca Civica, San Giovanni al Natisone, Udine, Italy.
Keith Donkin. Army Sports Control Board, Aldershot.
Tabitha Driver. Friends' Library, London.
Matthew Dunne. Special Collection Team, Leeds University.
Mark Eccleston. Archivist, Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham University.
Will Fenton. Cambridgeshire Archives, Shire Hall, Cambridge.
Richard Fisher. Academic and Policy, IPG.
Hugo Fleming. President, Oxford University Athletic Club (2016).
Neil Foulkes. Editing technical advice, Sandbach.
Michelle Gait. Special Collections, Sir Duncan Rice Library, Aberdeen University.
Tom Gillmor. Head of Content, Mary Evans Picture Library.
Alexandra Giovenco. Archivist, British School in Rome.
Neil Gordon-Orr. Go-Feet blogger.

Caroline Hampton. Heritage Service, Isle of Wight.
Lesley Harrison. Librarian and Archive Manager, Bedford School.
Richard Hilton. Operations Director, Sacristy Press.
Richard Holt. Chief Coach, Kingston & Poly AC.
Oliver House. Bodleian Library, Oxford University.
Maxine Ulrich Houston. Senior Consultant, ERS, Newcastle.
Tom Hunt. Author and researcher in Irish sports history.
Geraldine Hunwick, Special Collections, Newcastle University Robinson Library.
David Jones. Archivist, Perse School, Cambridge.
Helen Keen. Surrey History Centre, Woking.
Joan Lasenby (Dr). President, Cambridge University Hare & Hounds.
Paul Logie. Special Collections, Sir Duncan Rice Library, Aberdeen University.
Dave McCall. Imperial War Museum, London.
Catherine Martin. Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham University.
Alice Measom. Special Collections, Goldsmith's College, University of London.
André Monpetit. Designer, CRM, Université de Montreal.
Jennifer Mulligan. Library of Religious Society of Friends, London.
Sue Martin. Cambridgeshire Collections, Shire Hall, Cambridge.
Irene Noel-Baker. Granddaughter of Philip Noel-Baker.
Suzanne North. Library Assistant, Historic Collections, Bromley Library.
Raynald le Page. Records Department, McGill University Library, Montreal.
Marie le Palme. Amateur historian and dramatist, Montreal.
Domniki Papadimitriou. Picture Library, Cambridge University Library.
Rob Phillips. Archivist, National Library of Wales.
Fiona Prince. Nelson family
Deborah Roberts. Library Administrator, Goldsmiths' Company, London.
Margaret Roberts. Family History Consultant/Manchester Metropolitan University.
Lesley Ruthven. Special Collections, Goldsmith's College, University of London.
Nancy Schooling. Local historian, Somerton, Isle of Wight.
Pierre-Marie Schrive. Centre Mémoire Urbaine d'Agglomération, Dunkerque.
Richard Solomons. Club Historian and Archivist, London Athletic Club.
Laurence Spring. Surrey History Centre, Woking.
Danielle Stone. Design Consultant, Sigma.
Ian Tempest. National Union of Track Statisticians (NUTS).
Christopher Thorne (Dr). St. Catharine's College, Cambridge/CUAC Historian.
Madelin Terrazas. Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge.
Alexander du Toit. Special Collections, Goldsmith's College, London University.
Johanna Ward. Picture Library, Cambridge University Library.
Jane Wells. Administrator, Saint Olave's School, Orpington.
Jane Wheelock. Professor Emeritus, Newcastle University.
Paul Willcox. Honorary Secretary and Archivist, Achilles AC.
Brian Young. Professor Emeritus, McGill University, Montreal.

ABBREVIATIONS

AAA	Amateur Athletic Association
AC	Athletic Club
APT	Army School of Physical Training
BAUI	British Ambulance Unit of Italy
BLOU	Bodleian Library, Oxford University
BOC/A	British Olympic Committee/Association
BWSA	British Workers' Sports Association
CAU	Counties Athletic Union
CCC	County Cricket Club
CCL	Churchill College Library, Cambridge University
CCRPT	Central Council of Recreative Physical Training
CRL	Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham University
CUAC	Cambridge University Athletics Club
CUHH	Cambridge University Hare & Hounds Club
CUL	Cambridge University Library
FAU	Friends' Ambulance Unit
GIAC	Goldsmiths' Institute Athletic Club
H	Harriers
H&H	Hare and Hounds
IAAF	International Amateur Athletic Federation
IOC	International Olympic Committee
IVAB	Inter-Varsity Athletics Board
LAC	London Athletic Club
LSS	Loughborough Summer School.
LUAU	London University Athletic Union
NACA	National Athletic & Cycling Association, Ireland
NBKR	Noel-Baker Papers
NCAA	National Collegiate Athletic Association, USA
NFC	National Fitness Council
NUS	National Union of Students
NUTS	National Union of Track Statisticians
OUAC	Oxford University Athletics Club
OTS	Olympic Training Scheme
UAU	University Athletic Union

VAD	Voluntary Aid Detachments (nursing staff)
WAAA	Women's Amateur Athletic Association
WIVAB	Women's Inter-Varsity Athletics Board

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Origin and objectives

This book “rediscovers” Alec Nelson, a leading—arguably *the* leading—British athletics coach in the decades leading up to the Second World War, forgotten with the passage of time. Nelson’s sporting life is presented through events in which he was involved and people with whom he interacted, set within the social context of the times. Important contextual aspects include the role of class relations, amateurism and professionalism in sport, competition and control within athletics, and coaching roles and practice. This study of his athletic role and contribution within athletics is intended to inform and entertain a range of readers, including amateur and professional sports historians, those involved in athletics, and people interested in topics such as coaching, and social and family history.

The research project developed out of an interest in family history, beginning in 2009 as a diversion from my day job as an economics professor. My information about Nelson was restricted to a few lines on a scrap of paper in my late father’s handwriting: Alec was my great-grandmother’s twin; he worked as a coach (“Cambridge, Jesus College in thirties”); and served with “Red Cross First Aid, mostly in Italy, during the Great War”. The note was accompanied by a photograph with Alec’s name scribbled on the reverse, depicting a middle-aged man, clearly well-to-do, standing next to a woman (to all appearances, his wife) beside a table set up in a field. The man is taking a salute from uniformed Red Cross ambulance men who are filing past. Everything in the photograph reinforced an impression that my grandmother Edith, and her sister, both studiedly middle-class in attitude, had always conveyed: “Uncle Alec” had been a person of substance.

I was subsequently to discover that Nelson was not the principal subject of the photograph; he was one of those *giving* the salute. Even so, just a few clicks into an online search indicated that he had been a significant figure in the sporting world. As an Oxford schools’ half-mile winner for Cheney at Iffley Road in the mid-1960s myself, I was intrigued to discover that he had

been the world professional champion at the same distance. Furthermore, he had not been merely a “college trainer” at Cambridge, but *the* university coach, and someone whose training schedule for the marathon was still considered worthy of the web. Most unexpected of all, there was a Pathé News clip from the 1930s featuring a brief interview with him. Half-an-hour’s search suggested that there was more, much more, to Uncle Alec than I had imagined, and subsequent research has confirmed that his was, indeed, a sporting life worthy of the telling, and one with wider significance for athletics.

In fact, Nelson had already attracted the interest of Dave Day, a sports historian at Manchester Metropolitan University, researching the development of coaching in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹ Much of his work on coaching history focuses on trainers of athletes; their background, how they entered the field and the ways in which they went about their work. The nature of contemporary sources used by historians, Day says, have rendered such men largely “invisible”.² Surviving contemporary sources, including books, club minutes and letters, were produced by former elite athletes and prominent officials from privileged backgrounds involved in the sport as amateurs. They were often ambivalent about the role of professionals, who emanated from a lower social class. It simply did not occur to these athletes and officials to share the credit for their own achievements with such men, hampering those seeking to understand the role of professionals within coaching.

For several reasons, Nelson was, in his time, more publicly “visible” than most of his professional peers. He was well esteemed, by virtue of his role as coach at leading amateur clubs and with Olympic teams. Moreover, sports correspondents of leading newspapers knew him through their own involvement in athletics, and frequently were able to discern his coaching

¹ I am very grateful to Professor Day for his invaluable advice and encouragement. An expert in the gamut of topics associated with athletics and coaching history, Dave has been particularly helpful in locating Nelson within his wider sporting context, and kindly wrote the Foreword. Margaret Roberts, family history specialist, has been very generous with her time and hugely helpful. Rare insights and material of great relevance have also come from Nelson’s grandson, David Clark (sadly, recently deceased), through his personal recollections and memorabilia. Dr Chris Thorne and Paul Willcox have both contributed valuable information and perspectives, based on their unique store of knowledge concerning university athletics. In the editing stages, Maxine Houston provided insightful comments and sound judgement, and an exchange with Richard Fisher helped in the choice of title. See Acknowledgements for a complete list of the many people to whom thanks are due.

² Dave Day, “Massaging the Amateur Ethos: British Professional Trainers at the 1912 Olympic Games, *Sport in History* (32:2, 2012), 17.

contribution to performances on which they reported. Most important, however, Nelson enjoyed the “guardianship” of a leading public figure, Philip Noel-Baker, an athlete and distinguished politician to whom it was second nature to always give credit where it was due. Nonetheless, consistent with Day’s contention, there are examples of athletes, helped by Nelson to improve their technique or overcome a weakness, who still left him out of their accounts in writing about their subsequent successes.

The present work, therefore, in examining an individual’s life, addresses wider and under-explored areas of sports history. Much of Nelson’s story is conditioned by the amateur-professional tension in athletics that was so prominent in the half-century leading up to World War II. His case throws light upon: (a) the role of professional trainers and their interaction with amateur athletes, clubs and officials; (b) the nature and development of athletics coaching; and (c) the wider role played by professionals arising from their need to make a living. Special interest is attached to Nelson’s experience for two main reasons, both of which connect with important themes within this account. First, he was a prominent athlete of his day, both as an amateur and professional, and detailed exploration of his running career offers not only insights into the nature of contemporary athletic competition, but also the role of that experience in facilitating entry to—and achieving success at—coaching. Second, Nelson’s involvement with athletics was significantly affected by his relationship with the influential, and later public figure, Philip Noel-Baker. His engagement with athletics as a coach centred upon Cambridge University, where he first encountered the student (then Philip Baker) who was to become his lifelong mentor. At the time, Oxford and Cambridge were synonymous with the highest level of the sport, producing the country’s leading athletes. Examining the environment within which Nelson had to operate, the nature of the contests in which his teams engaged, and the individuals, institutions and networks involved, provides insights into, not only the athletic, but also the social and administrative aspects of the sport in Britain prior to 1939.

This book only exists because of the vastly improved accessibility of records which has facilitated the current level of interest in ancestry, and the telling of so many individuals’ stories. Digital technology has enabled studies of many previously little-known figures, expanding our knowledge of their roles in events and movements; in Tom Dowling’s words, “the margins of British history are stacked with figures that, arguably, warrant a more central place in our collective national story”.³ Figures at the forefront

³ Dr Dowling, an historian at Sheffield University, has referred to British “reticence” with respect to recognising contributions of individuals. This is not just because history is written by the “victors”—or, more prosaically, types of middle-class man—

of history derive their position from specific ideas, achievements or actions. Yet, their position is usually the outcome of *collective* effort, involving a “supporting cast”. This book collects and weighs digital evidence to understand Nelson and his role, and thus position him more accurately within the sporting landscape of “footnote figures”⁴

As will be shown, Nelson did not develop a distinctive new technique or practice that was identifiable as such, and capable of being passed on to future generations of coaches. His strength was as a master practitioner, directly deploying his knowledge, judgement, psychological insights and personal experience to help his athletes to identify and achieve goals as individuals and teams. At the same time, he had an important role, both conceptually and practically, in initiatives by Noel-Baker to modernise key aspects of British athletics and realise its athletic potential across this period. The refusal on the part of the sport’s administration to take on board the ideas for reform of Noel-Baker and Nelson, and to fully utilise the coach’s professional skills, undoubtedly contributed to the steady decline of the country’s athletic competitiveness.

Sources and methodology

Many have discovered that to dabble in family history is to embark upon a journey of indeterminate length and uncertain destination. An initial paper on Nelson in 2010 presented findings relating to his years as an amateur athlete, professional foot runner (“pedestrian”) and professional coach at Cambridge University.⁵ That work both proposed an explanatory model for his life and career and established the framework for a bigger project exploring his full career in its wider social and sporting context. Accomplishing that task, in between the routines and demands of work and life, has occupied more than a decade. This, however, is nothing compared with Robert Caro’s *The Years of Lyndon Johnson*, taking nearly five times as long. Caro recently took time out from completing the fifth and final LBJ

but is more generally related to factors linked with social class, gender, familial bias, race, political convenience or professional rivalry. (Lara Keay, interview reported in *Mail Online*, 18 May 2018.)

⁴ The term is from Willard Randall, *Forgotten Americans: Footnote Figures who changed American History* (Boston: De Capo Press, 1999).

⁵ “Alec Nelson: Professional Runner and Athletics Coach”, presentation, “Sporting Lives” Symposium, Manchester Metropolitan University, Wychwood Park, Cheshire, 4 December 2010.

volume—a change, after all, is as good as a rest—to write about his method.⁶ Several of his reflections on the relationship between writing method and outcomes resonate with this work.

The first is the importance for true understanding of creating a sense of place, so readers can visualise what is being described and feel they are present contemporaneously. Descriptions (supplemented by photographs) of the sporting venues, match routines, weather conditions, spectators and competitors' attire are provided to help achieve an appreciation of the nature of Nelson's connection to athletics, the sport, and clubs (especially that of Cambridge University). The second insight is that there is no shortcut to the search process that avoids compromising insight and veracity. Caro, as a "rookie" journalist, was advised by his editor to "turn every goddamned page". This would reveal secrets: "the more facts you collect the closer you come to whatever the truth is".⁷ It must be admitted that several initial interpretations of events relating to Nelson were significantly modified—even completely turned about—as additional evidence was uncovered. Turning the pages of contemporary documents, letters and press reports brings one closer to what Caro calls "genuineness". Close familiarity with sources leads to an informed perspective on the material and a better sense of its accuracy. Thirdly, though concerned with a particular person, biographies are always about a complex of people, relationships and institutions, forming the wider context of (in this case) athletics and society. The more the subject's context is investigated and laid out, the greater the understanding that results.

A key source for this work is the contemporary press. Digitised sources, especially *British Newspaper Archive*, have been critical; the task would have been impossible using pre-digital search methods. Complementary sources of irreplaceable value are the surviving letters and documents of Noel-Baker, both those referring to Nelson and those exchanged directly with him. The latter cover just a half-dozen of Nelson's 25 years as coach at Cambridge and are incomplete even for those years. Noel-Baker was patron to Nelson and there was plainly a high degree of trust between the two men. In his letters, Nelson reported on his coaching activities, raising concerns regarding the team and floating various ideas. Noel-Baker's opinion was consistently valued, and his assistance frequently sought. The subjects covered, and the language of those letters, tell us much about the

⁶ Robert Caro, *Working: Researching, Interviewing, Writing* (London: Bodley Head, 2019). Caro on Johnson currently consists of four volumes: *The Path to Power*; *Means of Ascent*; *Master of the Senate*; and *The Passage of Power* (New York: Random, 1992-2012).

⁷ Rachel Cooke, online "Culture" feature on Caro, *Guardian*, 21 April 2019.

deference implicit in the relationship and nature of their cross-class friendship. The public interviews Nelson gave, and his articles in newspapers, called for careful interpretation. While his status as a professional meant trying to project an image and use words that would not antagonise the amateurs in control of the sport, his frustrations with the hierarchy increasingly gave rise to more forthright statements of his views.

All those concerned with biographies must guard against becoming “captives” of their subject and this doubly applies where there is a family connection. The approach deployed has thus been one of taking account of *all* evidence deemed to have veracity. Historical data is, after all, invariably either partial or “soft” in nature, leaving considerable scope for interpretation. In assessing Nelson’s coaching and the contributions that he made in various settings, no evidence has been ignored, nor any relevant information deliberately overlooked in discussion. The usual historical method has been followed: weigh all sources of evidence, bearing in mind its origin and context, and deploy it appropriately to achieve a measured view.

Coaching versus training

Given the technical difference between the roles of “coach” and “trainer”, there is a need to clarify the meaning of each term and establish how they are used here. The distinction between the two has long been recognised, at least in some quarters. For example, one contemporary figure, Sam Mussabini, always insisted on being called a coach, describing a trainer as “someone who comes on with a bag and a little sponge”. However, this term was often deployed in contemporary sources to refer to anyone looking after athletes. Thus, Nelson’s official job title was sometimes “trainer”, but his work with athletes corresponds closely to what would now be referred to as “coaching”, as defined in Table 1-1.

Dave Day has discussed the use of the terms both before and during Nelson’s time.⁸ The concept of coaching first emerged in relation to university cricket and rowing, specifically with respect to preparing individuals and teams for competition, while among professional runners (and boxers) the term “trainer” was still used. There was a tendency for trainers to be associated with the more working-class sports, placing greater emphasis upon physical fitness than technique and style. Trainers, consequently, were also more likely to use massage, which was regarded as

⁸ Day, “Massaging the Amateur Ethos”, 8-9; and Dave Day, “Coaching as a Craft: A Forgotten Legacy”, British Society of Sports History Conference, Wellcome, London (10-11 September 2010).

integral to the training process. Harry Andrews (who referred to himself as a trainer) and Alfred Shrubbs, both of whom feature in the book, were great believers in the value of massage. Nelson also administered massage, but not as a central part of his role in preparing an athlete physically. As a coach committed to more than the purely physical fitness aspect of athletics, he viewed massage as a means of forming a relationship and building trust with his athletes (encapsulated within the “informal, conversational” aspect of coaching in Table 1-1). The important point is that, while Nelson’s activities correspond to many of the features in the “trainer” column (particularly in *team* settings, e.g., dealing with an annual influx of new recruits at Cambridge), his considerable success with athletes *as individuals* relied upon activities appearing in the “coach” column, focused on development.

Table 1-1. Distinguishing between coaching and training

<i>Coaching</i>	<i>Training</i>
Enhancing knowledge or skills	Transferring knowledge
Typically, one-on-one	Often used in group setting
Usually “on-the-job”	Often off-site or special facility
More often experienced athletes	Often used for beginners
Typically, unstructured	Usually structured
Informal, conversational	Formal
Two-way, interaction	More one-way instructional
Development focused	Learning focused

Source: Modified version of table compiled by the Endurance Sports Institute, <https://www.endurancesportsinstitute.com/training-plans-vs-coaching>, accessed 22 December 2016.

Throughout the book, therefore, where it is clear the person or activity being referred to is primarily associated with coaching—consistent with the above division of functions—that term will generally be preferred. Given, however, that contemporary commentary uses the term “trainer” as shorthand for anyone involved with athletes, then that term is frequently used as a generic category. The label “coach” is never used, however, in referring to training functions not primarily developmental in nature.

Structure

The book is broadly chronological, although accommodating thematic elements has meant using separate chronologies within some chapters. A broad time framework is established in the following section, which outlines Nelson's family origins, structure and dynamics and how these connect to his athletic involvement, occupational history and residential mobility. His modest socio-economic roots are traced back to nineteenth century rural Scotland, from where the family migrated to the London area in the mid-1850s, where they made a living mainly through self-employment. Alec advanced his career, as an athlete and then coach, by dint of characteristics (hard work, flexibility, enterprise and mobility) with which he was imbued during his upbringing. Crucially, he was supported in meeting family income needs by the efforts of his wife and daughters. His son's education, at independent school and university—and Nelson's eventual status as a homeowner—signalled the social advancement of the family, in line with his aspirations. Son Stanley's success in both athletics and education led to his unlikely involvement with his father's athletics team, and, in turn, to an instance of class prejudice directed against the two of them that is starkly illustrative of the social context in which professional coaches operated.

Nelson's experience as an athlete, both as an amateur and pedestrian, importantly underpinned his subsequent career as a coach. Chapters 2 and 3 painstakingly reconstruct his competing career. The first charts his development as a leading amateur runner of his day, noted for his versatility but strongest at middle distances. Over six years, he raced as an amateur, most as team captain of Goldsmiths' Institute Athletic Club. The account given here is rare, being a near comprehensive profile of his meetings and events, including principal opponents, handicapping arrangements and performances. The revealed record sets out the nature of amateur competition in the 1890s, especially the ubiquitous practice of handicapping and how it impacted upon the better runners. Nelson's participation at the national championships and in other open title events is described, along with his involvement with different clubs and eventual steps towards pedestrianism. Chapter 3 explores Nelson's years as a professional foot racer, why he chose to relinquish his amateur status and the types of contests involved. It details his various races, including his professional world championship, in the process illustrating the difficulty in making a living as a "pedestrian" in the early 1900s. The value of the experience for his coaching career—learning about all aspects of running, including "how to win"—is highlighted.

Chapter 4 interrupts the chronology of Nelson's story to introduce Philip Noel-Baker. His central role, as mentor, in Nelson's whole coaching career, only uncovered during this research, justifies the substantial chapter devoted to this impressive individual. An influential figure in Cambridge University athletics just prior to the First World War, Noel-Baker—an Olympic athlete from a Quaker industrial family—was a vocal, if constructive, critic of the British athletics establishment. In the chapter it is argued that he used his networks and influence to pursue a strategy of modernisation. He initiated changes at Cambridge (also affecting Oxford), as well as London and the provincial universities, and was also pivotal in the formation of the Achilles Club, members of which constituted the backbone of the interwar British Olympic teams. Through his involvement with athletic administrators, including as a senior politician, Noel-Baker worked to expand sports facilities, deliver training and improve access for people from working class backgrounds. He identified Nelson as key resource in the delivery of his initiatives for change. As Nelson's "patron", he assumed responsibility for ensuring that his "client" had access to an adequate income and supported him and his family throughout his career. The chapter contributes new perspectives on Noel-Baker's role in athletics beyond his well-recognised activities supporting the Olympics, as well as helping to explain numerous aspects of Nelson's role within athletics.

The source and strength of the relationship between the two men is illustrated in Chapter 5. With the outbreak of war in 1914, Noel-Baker formed the Friends Ambulance Unit, to provide medical support at the battlefield in Flanders, and subsequently organised similar support for allied troops on the Italian northeast front. Although not a Quaker, and well past conscription age, Nelson demonstrated solidarity with his patron by joining the ventures and sharing its associated dangers and deprivations. There was, of course, no coaching in Cambridge during those years, the city being largely empty of able-bodied undergraduates. The stories, in relation to both the Western Front and Italian ambulance services, are absorbing in themselves and bring to light new material concerning these activities and the individuals involved. From Nelson's perspective, the experience cemented the bond with his patron, while also providing an opportunity for him to observe and better understand the class context of his coaching role.

Nelson's position as Cambridge athletic coach anchored his entire career in the field. Chapter 6 provides the context, outlining the development of athletics at the University, including the fixtures against Oxford and its relation to the wider structure and processes of amateur athletics. It explores how the institutions, traditions, attitudes and facilities of Cambridge University Athletic Club (CUAC) constrained and shaped the way Nelson

could go about his task. The highly specific context of Oxbridge athletics is illustrated through the controversy over Nelson's appointment (as a professional coach), the conditions of service under which he worked, and practical coaching challenges arising out of the relationship of a "university servant" with socially elite athletes—including the "amateur" attitudes of the latter towards training and motivation. Focusing upon Nelson's role at CUAC, Chapter 7 provides descriptions and analysis of athletic contests against rivals Oxford, the club's principal focus. It captures their very nature through narratives on meetings, athletes and events, supplemented by guided links to contemporary film clips of the action (see Appendix B). The chapter documents CUAC's ascendancy over its traditional rival, despite Oxford's advantage in its ability to recruit leading overseas athletes through the Rhodes scholarship programme. The role of Nelson and the "Fenner's effect" within this outcome is discussed.

The Achilles Club, formed in 1920, functioned to provide continuity for those Oxbridge athletes wishing to train and compete after graduating. Chapter 8 describes how Noel-Baker helped to bring about the club's formation, and its developmental role within athletics in the interwar period. As part of its objective of encouraging international competition, Achilles supported a programme of matches between combined Oxford & Cambridge and Ivy League university teams in America. The social, political and sporting dimensions of such fixtures are drawn out through descriptions of tours and individual meetings, while attention is also given to contrasts in the respective athletic systems regarding facilities, administration, financial support and—importantly—the role of professional trainers. Nelson's role as coach for the Achilles Club is traced, including his involvement in its international contests, and coaching of former CUAC members to athletic maturity.

Chapter 9 focuses upon a group of Nelson's athletes, selected after an overview of the athletic achievements of all those he coached at CUAC. The profiles of these nationally and internationally known "crack" performers, most of them Olympians, provide insights into their backgrounds, outlooks and athletic (and other) achievements, while also illuminating their relationship with Nelson. This chapter further fleshes out the context of Nelson's engagement with athletes, including the challenges he faced in working across class barriers with the different individuals, and the way in which he was able to make a tangible contribution to their success. Exploration of these relationships also helps in explaining the nature and strength of Nelson's commitment to CUAC.

Having a portfolio of jobs, varying both within and between years, was the typical experience of contemporary professional coaches. Chapter 10