

CHARIOTS OF FIRE

Directed by Hugh Hudson
Produced by David Puttnam
Distributed by The Ladd Company
Released in 1981

Does it matter? Really, there's no inherent value in the ability to run fast. Someone who shoots well can hunt. That's important since everyone needs to eat. And someone who is adept at woodworking can build a house. Everyone needs shelter.

Nowadays a man who is very fast may be of use on the football field, as a wide receiver. In the same way, a man who has great vision might find employment as a professional baseballer, or a very tall man could become a basketball center. But all these skills or attributes yield a benefit for their bearer because there is money to be made. Just below shelter and food, people (seem to) need entertainment.

The runners in *Chariots of Fire* aren't providing entertainment. They're not getting paid. So what good are their skills? What's the point of being fast?

According to *Chariots of Fire*, it's all about inspiration—what drives the runners, and how their efforts inspire those who bear witness. Indeed, sports have the impressive ability to reduce a man's value to a single chance; a game, a match, a race. It's a closed system where the rules are clear, where competition is more fair. Sports provide comfort, and invite participation, because they are ordered.

In this film all the contests are but a prelude to a pair of races. We have two main characters—Harold Abrahams and Eric Liddell, and their races are the 100M and 400M, respectively. The film does a great job engendering sympathy for these nuanced and fascinating characters. We think they will face each other in the 100M for a climactic showdown. Since we want them both to succeed, this tests our loyalties and increases the tension. We wonder how it will play out. After all, Liddell has beat Abrahams already, and we've seen that Liddell doesn't covet the prospect of victory. For him it's all about the journey. But with Abrahams, winning is a must. We know from Sam Mossabini that Liddell isn't cut out for sprinting. If Abrahams does his best, he will beat Liddell. And with Mossabini's help, Abrahams will certainly do better. Will it be enough?

Then, with an inspired plot point, Liddell must confront a headlong collision of his faith and his sport. The qualifying heat for the 100M dash is on a Sunday. God made him fast for a purpose. But if he can't run (lest he violate the Sabbath) then why did God make him fast?

God made him fast so he would be on the Olympic team and be an example to his country that God comes first. Then, in another great development, Lord Lindsay, who has already won a Gold, gives Liddell his spot on the 400M. Now Liddell must win (in a switch nicely highlighted by a handwritten note courtesy of Jackson Scholz [following a pattern in the film where the people most inspired by a runner are the other runners]). He must show the world a muscular Christian, who, by his willingness to forego a chance to compete, proves that he runs for God's glory and not his own.

Abrahams runs for himself. But the film doesn't condemn him. Like Liddell, he is accused of arrogance. But he represents the grievances of minorities, Jews like himself and others (like the Italian-Arab Mossabini). Unlike Liddell, who tries to balance his missionary and training duties, Abrahams devotes everything to running, to the consternation of those who believe a proper Englishman should display nothing but reserved insouciance.

But because Abrahams has dedicated everything to running, the quest for Gold is his life. What will he do if he wins? What else is there to strive for?

After the shock of victory wears off, he marries his sweetheart and eases into the role of elder statesman for British athletics. We never know if he found satisfaction. But who among us ever does?

Eric, because he doesn't run for his own sake, but to please God, has no problem making the transition back to full-time missionary work. His training was but a phase in his life's race, to the glory of God.

The film refuses to take sides. It empowers the audience to draw its own conclusions. The only moral is *be inspired*; there's so much more we can do.

So even though *Chariots of Fire* is lionized by Christian film critics (because it's the only major, acclaimed film [since *Ben-Hur*(?)] that offers an explicitly Christian hero), any message in the film endorsing Christianity is imposed upon the film by viewers ecstatic at seeing a high-quality moral film. That's what they get out of it. That's not what was put into it.

Christians are so used to seeing their faith trashed at the movies that for a major film to present Christianity without slamming the religion seems, by contrast, to be an endorsement!

If there was an impetus to making the movie it was probably the Harold Abrahams story. After all, the movie starts with his death in 1978, and the executive producer (in this case meaning the guy who emptied his wallet) was Dodi Fayed, the man who died with Princess Diana in Paris. Fayed's father was an immigrant from Egypt, a financier who eventually bought Harrods department store. Like Harold Abrahams, Dodi Fayed surely hoped to be accepted as, first and foremost, an Englishman. When he died, there was plenty to say about Princess Diana, but little to say about her lover. This movie was his legacy to the world.