

*The Greatest Half-mile Race**D. M. Harris**880 yards, Cook's Gardens, Wanganui
25 January, 1947*

THIS WAS GOING TO BE Rose and Hahn all over again, and 10,000 people packed the Olympic Stadium at Auckland on 18 January 1947. This time it was the half-mile. The New Zealander was Douglas Harris and the American was Johnny Fulton—Harris unrivalled in his own country, and Fulton ranked as the finest half-miler in the world.

Everyone had read the publicity about the great Fulton and studied the photos of him. There he was now, moving around quietly—see how he held his left arm, permanently bent.

Now what of Harris? From high up on the concrete terraces the crowd searched the track for the man of mystery, who trained in secrecy at Waiouru. No one knew him. He spoke little and kept to himself. Many saw him as a self-disciplined Spartan; to some he was haughty; to others the lonely introvert. They watched as Harris emerged and was introduced to Fulton. The two could not have exchanged more than ten words. Then Harris was walking away to run the 100 yards as a preliminary. He won the 100.

Not much longer and then the two men were standing down at the start of the half-mile, offering each other a choice of lanes, while a thirteen-mile-an-hour wind blew down the straight and the handicap runners were put on their marks. Harris, on the inside, led for 110 yards from the gun. Then, coming off the first bend, Fulton went past like an arrow. He bolted ten yards clear, more, and Harris let him, watching as Fulton raced up through the handicap runners and went through the first lap. Harris was obviously gambling on Fulton's tiring from the strong pace. And then everyone saw that the gamble was paying off. Fulton began to fade. In the back straight for the last time Harris came very

suddenly. He caught Fulton at 220 yards, looked up to find that Grierson still held his start of fifteen yards. He put his head back and swept down the straight, moving like the wind, now the rampant Harris. He failed by a yard and a half to catch Grierson, but he led Fulton in by nearly twenty yards. Grierson's winning time of 1m 51 $\frac{3}{8}$ s meant that Harris must have run faster than his New Zealand record.

Applause for Grierson from the huge terrace crowd, but most eyes were on Fulton and Harris. Fulton muttered a few disappointed words to a Press reporter and promptly threw himself on the ground, one hand over his eyes, Hamlet-like. It was Harris's day, time for him to receive his congratulations. But where was he? Harris had already left the ground; in another hour he was returning to Waiouru—there to await the next race against Fulton.

Douglas Harris was not a man who mixed socially, largely because of deafness. A live artillery shot in 1941 had left him with only faint hearing in his right ear. Conversation was a struggle when he missed most of what was said to him. He didn't want the embarrassment, so he kept to himself, and got the reputation for avoiding people. He just went along to the stadium to run. Little wonder that he was misunderstood, censured as often as he was exalted.

Eighteen months before, he had been transferred from the Auckland Army pay office to the desolate Waiouru Camp. Poor Harris, said the observers. What a handicap for him, and what a blow for athletics.

Harris, however, had not been ordered south. He had asked to go to Waiouru. He wanted freedom from the needle matches and personal bickering of city athletics. At Waiouru he was to find that freedom. It was on the windy tussock plateau and in the mountain bush, striding along in a pair of shorts, impervious to the cold, that Harris was to find contentment and prepare himself as a champion. It was not hard for Harris to spend hours on end by himself—not since he had been that small boy in the Rotorua hospital, a boy of five years old with a bone graft on a shattered arm, lying for six months in a bed with nothing to do but fashion endless toy wheelbarrows from pieces of wire.

Now the brave small boy had become a strong-willed young man of 26. He was also a lover of the out-of-doors. He walked for days through the hills, sleeping-bag and pup tent strapped to his back, marvelling at the golden sand in the streams, the purple heather and the green of the bush. He wrote of "breaking into a clearing in the bush, where everything is still, green, silent, like the beginning of the world". He found that "there is a secret in a nutshell, seashell, and all that is enclosed. But the greatest secret of all is an open, windy space."

Harris had always had an adventurous spirit and an ambition for speed. At the Waipawa District High School in Hawke's Bay he won every event on the athletic programme; as a junior in Auckland he had won the Old Grammarians' Club junior 440- and 880-yards championships and then the senior mile title in the same afternoon. As a young senior he would take the lead in road races and try to run the leaders off their feet before having to drop out within half a mile. When he eyed a 1942 programme with a long list of advertised stars that did not include his name, he titled it, in red ink, "Roll of Honour" and added "P.S.—D. M. Harris will also be running—or trying to—but he ain't worth seeing—yet!" By the time he was worth seeing, his ambition and versatility had gained him championship titles from the 100 yards through to six-mile crosscountry.

He sought his record time with the most amazing physical equipment—a pulse rate of thirty-nine after all his long walking and sprinting; a high level of haemoglobin in his blood; a lung capacity which enabled him to swim under water the length of a long pool; and above all, his splendid style, for which everyone who saw him used the same word—effortless. It had been taught to him in Auckland by Tom McIntyre, who believed that as man had to learn to swim, so he had to be taught how to run, with poise and balance. The head was erect, the chest out, the knees lifted rhythmically, each stride started with a spring off the toes and ended with the feet landing perfectly flat. Harris knew the style by the name of "Big Chief". In full stride he reminded some of a racing trotter, others of an endlessly rolling train.

At Waiouru, where the hills had given him his strength, Harris sought a track where he might perfect his style and train for speed. On part of the parade ground which was used only as a hay-paddock, he pegged out a circuit through the waist-high ryegrass, cut a three-foot wide swathe with a motor scythe, and rolled the bumpy ground until the surface was hard and the grass bleached white. This path through the hayfield was as good as any training track. At night it was better—under the bright Waiouru moonlight the track stood out as clear as a highway. This was where he had to perfect his style, establish it to such a degree that it would not break, would not cause him to strain, when put to the test. It must not break if Fulton was going to be at his throat on Saturday night.

Harris ran on his track in the moonlight, wearing battledress and heavy boots. He watched the shadows of his legs out in front, his twelve stone ten pounds being carried along by a stride measuring eight feet six inches on every footfall. Off the track, then, to the road where he ran with exhilaration, hearing nothing else apart from the very faint smack, smack, smack of his boots on the bitumen.

On the track he was watched by John Beamish, the QM, a man who knew the form of a good racehorse and could tell Harris if he was straining. Every day when Harris trained for time on the track Beamish was there holding a stopwatch. One week Harris did threequarter-mile trials in 3m 2s and 3m 3s. The next day he ran to the threequarter-mile mark again, and then went around another lap like a black rabbit. Beamish's watch that day read 4m 8s for the mile. The quest for time was becoming exciting.

All that week before the trip to Wanganui Harris trained on his track. He trained to his own schedules, but every man in the camp was behind him. No one asked for his services when it was time for him to train. Beamish, in the quartermaster's store, saw to it that Harris's planned diet included prunes at breakfast, oysters at lunchtime, a great pile of beans at dinner. When he went to bed at 7.30 to harbour his strength and energy, no one disturbed him.

Friends as well as athletic enthusiasts travelled in army trucks

along with the pay-master to Wanganui on Friday, 24 January. No one chatted to Harris, who was now thinking of only two things—Cook's Garden ground, and Johnny Fulton. This was the ground that he thought so wonderful—the ground where the season before he had run so close to the New Zealand record with a time of 1m 54 $\frac{3}{4}$ s, and then later won the New Zealand title on the same track by half the length of the straight; the ground where the overhead lights followed all the way along the track and the crowd was only yards away. And now, on the same track, there was Fulton to race against. Fulton in Auckland had been just a visiting athlete—but during the week he stated that he considered Harris not the finest prospect in New Zealand. Harris, at 26, was, he said, an "ageing athlete". Harris, stung, gained a new determination. He also remembered the way that Fulton had jumped past him in Auckland. He had never been passed like that in a race before. He had frozen, his mind had gone blank. It would not happen again. He wouldn't let Fulton past, he'd lead all the way. He'd aim at each lap in fifty-four seconds—even if it was faster than the world record.

That afternoon he received treatment for a slight muscle worry at Wanganui Hospital. The masseur who attended him said that Fulton had been in for electrical treatment only an hour before. Harris was instantly boosted. He knew something about Fulton that Fulton did not know about him. It had been the same at Auckland. An anonymous caller had phoned him on the morning of the race to tell him that Fulton, in his anxiety, had not been able to sleep for the noise of the trams, and at midnight had asked to be moved from the Waverley Hotel.

He didn't know how Fulton slept that night in Wanganui. All he knew was that when they went to their marks on a warm, windless night, before a crowd of 5,000, Fulton seemed more confident. Harris offered the choice of lanes to Fulton.

"Naw, naw," said Fulton, "you keep it. It won't make any difference to me."

So Harris took the inside, Fulton the outer. Ahead of them four handicap runners were going to their marks. The tall local man,

McKenzie, had a chance to take the race. But everyone was looking at Fulton and Harris crouching together, Fulton with his disabled left arm bent on his hip, and Harris who could hardly hear the word of command. This time, however, the starter, George Benson, had told him: "I'll be standing on your right, so you'll hear me."

When the gun fired Harris heard it in his right ear. He leapt forward to start his race for time and victory. Fulton was not going to come past. Harris had rocketed from the mark, Fulton behind him. There was no slackening as they came around the first bend, and already the crowd had begun to shout. When they moved out of the bend and came to the place where Fulton had made his move at Auckland, the crowd suddenly roared. Fulton was doing it again. Harris, ready, held him off this time. From that first roar the crowd never quietened. Harris could hear them shouting for him, and felt them all around him. He kept on hard, and Fulton did not come again that lap. He kept on so fast that when he reached the bell the four handicap men had been caught. He heard the time called at fifty-four seconds. Dead on.

Into the second lap, the last lap, and now Fulton started coming at him. Harris saw the shadow in front of him accelerate. He moved with it, and held it off. So it went on, no one in front and no sound of the footsteps behind. Just the shadow, surging, he drifting away from the surge, and each time the crowd roaring. At 220 yards from home he felt himself moving away. But the shadow came up again. Fulton's countryman, Al Hershey the shot-putter, had raced across and shouted "Go now, Johnny!" Fulton had heard, only Fulton. He got up behind Harris, clung all around the bend, and then, coming off it, he swung out to make his run. The others had been faint attacks prior to this last effort. Now this was it. He sank his teeth in. Harris saw him coming on the right, come level. Then he saw Fulton ahead by half a shoulder, no more . . . he couldn't see the backs of his elbows. With only twenty yards to the tape Harris managed to close again. For one second they were together, over against the inside of the track. Their shoulders touched, bumped. And they swayed apart.

Cook's Gardens was a soundshell of bedlam, the cheering making dust rise off the arc lamps. Of the other runners only McKenzie kept on in third place. The others had stopped, spell-bound, to watch the finish.

Harris, on the inside, was still moving with the same unflinching stride. He gathered himself for the last thrust to the tape, just ten yards away. Some force pulled him. He was through the tape, the ribbon fluttering away. Then he saw Fulton's head and shoulders crashing down at his feet, and he knew that he had won. He completed a full circuit in front of the standing crowd while Fulton was lifted from the track by the giant Hershey. Finally they met, and rested on the shoulders of the starter, Benson, while the crowd still cheered.

"That's the fastest I've ever run," gasped Fulton. "I don't care what the time is."

A time of 1m 49 $\frac{3}{8}$ s. Harris had beaten his own New Zealand record by three seconds, and missed breaking Wooderson's world record by only one-fifth of a second—one click of the stopwatch.

The five watches were shown to him. They read:

1m 49 $\frac{1}{8}$ s
 1m 49 $\frac{3}{8}$ s
 1m 49 $\frac{5}{8}$ s
 1m 49 $\frac{7}{8}$ s
 1m 49 $\frac{1}{2}$ s

When they measured the track they found that it was more than 880 yards—it was two feet over the distance. Two feet less, one click less on each stopwatch—and that fifth of a second would have equalled the world record.

But Harris was able to forget his quest for time. As he glided the next day on the Wanganui River, eating a whole roast fowl, he was a satisfied man. He had won the race of a lifetime, the greatest half-mile race in New Zealand history. A race which, even by his own artistic standards, was classical.

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*Yvette**Yvette Williams*

*Olympic long jump, Helsinki
 23 July, 1952*

THE DAY DAWNED GREY and cold over Helsinki. The crowd had not yet filled the Olympic Stadium but already a solid core of New Zealand athletes and supporters stood together in the stands at the bottom of the field, looking straight down the line of the run-up to the long jump pit. They waited for the women long jumpers to appear in the arena, especially for the tall, well-built figure in the black track suit. Her name was Yvette and her progress in the qualifying round of the Olympic long jump was followed also by many hundreds of people sitting beside radios in the New Zealand night.

Amongst them, in Auckland, was a former Dunedin man, J. C. Bellwood, who sat waiting with his Estonian-born wife, Emmy. Tonight he would know if the efforts of the last four years had been worth while. Sometimes he had wondered . . . It was not so long before that in Dunedin, with his wife in hospital, he had stopped working for a year. So every day he had wrapped the children in warm clothing and taken them with him to meet Yvette for training on St Clair Beach. He remembered how hard she had worked—in one session a run along the beach for four miles, half an hour of exercises on the sand, then jumps from the top of sand dunes. This taught her the hitch kick—the knack of revolving her legs to pull her body upright and enable the legs to reach forward the maximum distance on landing. On every one of the hundreds of times she went sailing high into the air Jim Bellwood was standing down beneath watching and analysing.

He remembered how the girl had worked harder than any New Zealand woman athlete before her, with these Olympics her goal.