

## **Bob Birrell**

Bob was brought up in a sporting family in the village of Roose, on the outskirts of Barrow-in-Furness, and followed his brother in dominating the hurdles event for nearly a decade both in the North and nationally. He appeared in all the major Games and held the UK and Commonwealth record. He clocked 14.0secs in the 120 yards Hurdles, 14.2secs for 110metres Hurdles, and 24.0secs in the 220 yards Hurdles.

Born on the 6th of March 1938, he was first educated at Roose Junior School before passing the scholarship to go to Barrow Grammar School, where his eldest brother was the PE teacher. He started running at about the age of six. His brother Joe won the AAA 120yds Hurdles in 1948 and ran in the London Olympic Games that year. Another brother was also an outstanding athlete, but chose to play team sports (rugby football and cricket), and his young sister played for Lancashire and England at hockey!

Bob became a member of his local club, Barrow AC, and continued his studies at Manchester University where he competed for them at athletics. Starting as a sprinter, racing up to 440 yards, he then progressed to not only follow Joe at the Hurdles, but also to be successful in other field events. He won medals at area and county level in the Discus and competed in the Long and Triple Jump and the Shot.

But the sprint Hurdles was Bob's key event. He won the Northern Counties Junior 120 yards Hurdles title, and went on to win the senior title seven times. He also represented Lancashire, the North, England and Great Britain. In 1958 he represented England at the Empire Games in Cardiff in the 120 yards Hurdles, and qualified for the semi final in 15secs, but didn't make the final.

This big, lean man accomplished his dream in 1960, when selected for Great Britain in the 110m Hurdles at the Rome Olympic Games, and the following year won the 'City of Hull' trophy as the best performer at the Northern Counties championships. Also in 1961, he set a Commonwealth record of 14.0 seconds.

The following year was a memorable one for Bob: competing in the European Games for Great Britain in Belgrade, and (for the second time) making the England team for the Commonwealth Games, this time in Perth, Australia. He certainly earned his trip to Perth, finishing second in his heat, but losing out on a place in the final. In the same year, 1962, he set a new the UK and Commonwealth record for the 120yards Hurdles at 14.0 seconds.

When Bob represented Lancashire, Tom O'Mahoney was the team manager, and he also knew Charlie Rice well. So when he qualified as a PE and Chemistry teacher in 1962, and took an appointment at Wirral Secondary School, it was natural that he would eventually join Liverpool Harriers, which he did in 1965. He went on to become a valuable member and to set a Club record for the sprint hurdles which still stands today. The circumstances behind that run, of 14.2 seconds, set in 1968, were hardly normal. He was representing Buganda (an area of Uganda) at a meeting in Kampala, and the race was run on grass! Perhaps most interesting was that the third-placer was a young John Akii-Bua, who went on to win Gold (and set a world record in the process) in the 400m Hurdles at the 1972 Munich Olympics.

Bob says he retired from competition in 1966, but we note that he still won the Northern sprint hurdles title in 1966/7/8/9! He went on to a successful career in coaching and officialdom, reaching Referee level as a field judge, and he became the UK junior track and field Team Manager (see photo). In this latter capacity, those under his wing included Steve Smith and Curtis Robb, plus Diane Allahgreen, the Club's first female Olympian, who also benefited from having Bob as coach and adviser: she ran in the 2000 Sydney Olympics, finished third in the World Junior Championships, and still holds the UK Junior 100m Hurdles record.

After competing at the highest level, Bob has put back a lot into the sport he loves for the last forty five years, with many highlights: the Olympics, his UK Commonwealth record, President and Secretary of the old Lancashire Men's AA and, in 2003, he was elected for a term as President of Liverpool Harriers AC. A fine servant of the club, and an example to up and coming Club members.



February 2010