



Jack Lovelock after winning the gold medal for the 1500 metres at Berlin.

Come on, Jack!

The author of a new book on Jack Lovelock unveils the truth about the Olympian.

BY DAVID COLQUHOUN

It's Olympic year. Always a time to remember past sporting glories, and one of the best is Jack Lovelock's wonderful race for the gold medal, and his 1500 metres world record, at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

We are sure to hear again Harold Abrahams' famous commentary, and smile as his BBC poise disintegrates completely: "Lovelock leads! Lovelock! Lovelock! Cun-

ningham second, Beccali third. Come on, Jack! A hundred yards to go! Come on, Jack! My God, he's done it. Jack, come on! Lovelock wins! Five yards, six yards, he wins. He's won. Hooray!"

That race was the climax of a sporting career that has caught the New Zealand literary imagination in a way no other has. In addition to countless articles, three short biographies and television

documentaries, there have been plays, a film and a best-selling novel. But some of this has relied less on documentary evidence and more on fertile imagination, for no other sports star has been the subject of quite so many myths and legends.

The reasons are several. He left behind a remarkable series of journals and diaries that are a rich source for his sporting life, but tell us less about his life away from

running. He was a New Zealander living in interesting times, finding a place for himself in the distant world of pre-war Oxford and Cambridge, with all its resonances of *Chariots of Fire* and *Brideshead Revisited*. The harsh political backdrop of Hitler's 1936 Olympics gives added drama, as does Lovelock's strange death under a New York subway train in 1949, just a few days short of his 40th birthday. They all provide a lot of scope for dramatic invention.

Some of the Lovelock legends can be traced back to the English sports writers of the 1930s. With the popular press and the new media of radio and film fostering a mass interest in sport, Lovelock was a much-hyped sports star. Moreover, as an Oxbridge boy from the British Empire, he was almost one of their own, even if he did sometimes run in a black singlet.

The pressmen wrote enthusiastically about his effortless running style, his unbeatable tactical skills, his ability to peak for a big race, and his great victories

Lovelock's end-of-season burnout had nothing to do with any traumatic confrontation with the dark heart of Nazi Berlin.

in England, the Continent and the US.

After his Olympic victory, they embellished his reputation even more. To leading athletics coach FAM Webster, Lovelock was a model of what athletes needed to do if Britain was to recover its sporting reputation. He wrote of Lovelock's career as one concerted campaign towards the gold medal. It was a four-year plan in which he was prepared to lose races if it meant building his strength, experience and tactical skills for that one great race. That story still echoes in some modern writing about Lovelock.

But it was never quite like that. Winning at Berlin was always Lovelock's ambition, as it would be for any athlete whose final years of high performance coincided with an Olympic Games. Over the years, too, he learnt much about peaking for races that really counted.

But his journals show that his preoccupations in earlier seasons were very much to do with his next big race, and that he sometimes lost races he really wanted to win. He was far from confident about his tactics and form in the months before Berlin, and was seriously considering running the 5000 metres, where he thought he might have a better chance.

Later, writers became more interested in delving beneath the hagiography. Lovelock enjoyed life, but drove himself hard. The disarming smile could charm friends, including his several girlfriends, but was also a defence mechanism. Few people claimed to know him well. He often suffered from insomnia and at times the pressure got to him.

In his last two seasons of running he suffered severe end-of-year burnout. He called it "staleness" and was probably right when he wrote in his journal that the reasons were "too long intensive competition, late hours of work and parties, too much rushing around the world at higher speeds than the human body was made to withstand".

The contrast between the outward charm and the sometimes intense introspection was first commented on in Norman Harris' sporting biography, *The Legend of Lovelock* (1964), and it is central to the most widely read book about Lovelock, the "factional" novel *Lovelock*, by James McNeish. *Lovelock* is a skilfully written, widely researched, and very readable book but, as novels do, freely mixes fact with fiction. Some still read it as biography, though, despite having no way of telling which parts are made up and which are not.

McNeish's book effectively re-creates Lovelock's Oxbridge world, but it rather exaggerates the more brittle aspects of his personality. Sessions are invented, for example, with a psychiatrist; he goes on surreptitious night-time runs (which he never did - he always preferred training with others); and the Webster myth of a master plan becomes part of the novel, a secret obsession.

The book is at its most inventive in its central section, about Lovelock in Berlin. Early in the book, McNeish introduces the character of Otto Peltzer, the former 1500 metres world-record holder, who briefly visited New Zealand in 1930 and was later imprisoned in Nazi Germany for being homosexual. In the novel, Peltzer first meets Lovelock in Christchurch. At Berlin they meet up again. Peltzer takes Lovelock to a gay nightclub, which is brutally broken up by the Gestapo, leaving Lovelock very disturbed. It all serves the thematic and dramatic purposes of the novel very well, but Lovelock did not know Peltzer and none of it actually happened.

McNeish has acknowledged the fiction, but in a string of later articles and interviews has argued for the essential truth of his interpretation. Something at Berlin, he later claimed, triggered in Lovelock "a steady disintegration of personality,



Jack Lovelock

- 1910** Born January 5, at Crushington on the West Coast, where his father was a mine manager. The family later moved to Temuka, then Fairlie.
- 1924-28** Attended Timaru Boys' High School as a boarder.
- 1928-31** At Otago University.
- 1931-34** A Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University.
- 1932** Broke the British mile record with a world-class 4 minutes 12 seconds, but faded to a distant seventh at the Olympics.
- 1933** Broke the world mile record in the US, with a time of 4 minutes 7.6 seconds.
- 1934-37** Continued his medical training at St Mary's Hospital in London, graduating as a doctor in 1937.
- 1934-36** Dominated mile racing in Europe and the US, but by the end of each season his form faded as he became mentally and physically exhausted.
- 1936** Won the Berlin Olympic Games 1500 metres in world-record time. Attempted one last race to try to regain his mile record, but failed.
- 1936-1941** Continued his medical studies while earning a living as a sports writer and broadcaster.
- 1940** Passed his Royal Colleges of Physicians examination. Later that year suffered a major and long-lasting head injury in a horse-riding accident.
- 1941** Joined the Royal Army Medical Corp for the duration of the war.
- 1945** Married his long-time girlfriend, Cynthia James. Their first daughter was born in 1946, their second in 1948.
- 1947** Ill health forced him to resign from a position in London. Moved to New York to work at the Hospital of Special Surgery.
- 1949** Died on December 28, when he fell in front of a New York subway train.

marked by a loss of pride in achievement, leading to a breakdown and in the end to a death that has never been explained".

It was actually rather different from that. In the days after his victory, Lovelock's preoccupation was his next race. Two days before he left Berlin, he ran a hard two-mile time trial and he was training again as soon as he arrived back in Britain. There was a big three-mile race in London the following weekend, and he wanted to prove his ability in the longer race that he had almost run at Berlin. He succeeded, in front of 60,000 local fans, beating his international opponents by the length of the finishing straight.

A little while later he wrote in his training diary that he had never felt better, and that he hoped to finish off his career by getting back his world mile record in one last race. He failed in that, as the pressure of a hard year finally caught up with him again. But that end-of-season burnout had nothing to do with any traumatic confrontation with the dark heart of Nazi Berlin.

Lovelock's later life, too, was not a simple story of decline, from sporting success to professional failure. The late 1930s were satisfying times for him as he enjoyed the financial and social opportunities of sporting fame while he completed advanced medical studies. The event that changed his life for the worse was a sickening horse riding accident in 1940, which left him with serious eyesight problems and lingering head-injury side-effects. His last years, as he resurrected his medical career in his wife's hometown of New York, might be best described as a time of determined recovery. No one will ever know for sure what happened that winter day on a New York subway, but the evidence suggests a tragic and freakish accident.

Other writers have created other myths. David Geary's successful play *Lovelock's Dream Run* has been performed several times since it premiered in 1993. Its central character is a rebellious gay boarding-school boy who idolises Lovelock, until he runs away to Wellington, reads Lovelock's journals and is disappointed to find him very conventional indeed.

Geary spent many hours at the Alexander Turnbull Library reading Lovelock's papers and much of the dialogue of the

"real" Lovelock is Lovelock's own words. Some of those attitudes show he was no radical thinker on social issues, but Geary is not so accurate when his Lovelock expresses sympathy with aspects of fascism, for his recorded comments about the fascist dictatorships were critical ones.

Other stories are more bizarre. In the late 1980s an ageing contemporary of Lovelock's, John Etheridge, claimed he had seen Lovelock run a four-minute mile in training. He didn't, of course. Neither Lovelock nor his great



Lovelock with his Olympic medal.

rivals were capable of going that fast. He never did mile time trials, and he carefully recorded all his training times in his training diaries.

Perhaps Etheridge remembered one of the three-quarter mile time trials Lovelock often did. Lovelock never broke three minutes for one of those, although he did get very close.

Surprisingly, the story was picked up by McNeish, who featured it in a 1994 *Listener* article about a new edition of his book. He thought Etheridge might have been right. In Britain, the *Sunday Times* ran it with the headline "New Zealander may have beaten Bannister to the four-minute mile", and quoted McNeish as

saying, "I believe the claims are true."

Anyone who has researched the evidence, however, will agree with the *Guardian* sports writer who wrote the following week that, although the *Sunday Times* and McNeish might believe it, "no one else does".

Still the legends grow. A few weeks ago, TV1 screened a new Lovelock documentary. One issue it discussed was the experimental vaccine injections Lovelock gave himself regularly, in an attempt to counteract ongoing knee and tendon soreness. It was enough to convince a *Dominion*

Post television reviewer that Lovelock was a "drug cheat", and no doubt others now think so, too. But, if Lovelock is a drug cheat because of such injections, then so, too, are the many thousands of us who get a flu vaccine each winter.

This year has also seen another new play about Lovelock: *The Man that Lovelock Couldn't Beat*, by left-wing playwright Dean Parker. It is a rollicking yarn, featuring the larger-than-life story of Tommy Morehu, Maori orphan from Timaru, working-class hero, natural athlete, who beat Lovelock three times, before he was killed fighting for the International Brigade in Spain against General Franco. Parker's Lovelock, in contrast, is a caricature of an upper-class twit, who, once again, sees a good side to fascism.

Morehu is, of course, completely made up. But not everyone seems to have realised that. After the play finished its Wellington run, the local *Capital Times* newspaper's regular quiz included a question about the forgotten New Zealanders who had died in the Spanish Civil War. It asked for the name of one of them, the "unsung hero" featured in Parker's play. So myths grow.

They are all great stories. But Lovelock's life was both less sensational and just as interesting as all that. He was a young New Zealander travelling the world, racing in front of huge crowds, having the time of his life and sometimes struggling to cope with the pressure of it all. It is fascinating enough without the fiction. ■

David Colquhoun is curator of manuscripts at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, where the Lovelock papers are held. His book As If Running on Air: The Journals of Jack Lovelock (Craig Potton Publishing) is released August 6.