

THE
STORY OF
ERIC
LIDDELL

THE FINAL RACE

The Incredible World War II Story
of the Olympian Who Inspired
CHARIOTS OF FIRE



ERIC T. EICHINGER
with EVA MARIE EVERSON

PRAISE FOR *THE FINAL RACE*

Many know the story of the Flying Scot, Eric Liddell, whose Christian conscience would not let him run in the 1924 Paris Olympics on a Sunday. Though he had trained for the 100-meter event, he had to switch to the 400-meter instead—and won the gold! It was all told in the book and movie *Chariots of Fire*.

What more is there to say? Plenty! Another Eric (named Eichinger) now tells the *rest* of the story in his fascinating book *The Final Race*. With gifted pen, he tells of Liddell's subsequent career as a missionary teacher in China and how his efforts there became a powerful witness to Christianity and culture in the Far East. As a celebrity, doors were open to him, and he faithfully used them to do the work of the Lord in remarkable fashion.

What happened *after* the Olympics was by far the most significant part of Liddell's life, and Eichinger nobly rescues it from oblivion, offering a true account, brimming with triumphs, tragedies, love, and violence—all set against the brutality of the Japanese invasion of China at the start of World War II. In these pages, Eric Eichinger has given us the genuine sequel in Liddell's life, providing a true tale that will grip readers and fire their spirits.

PAUL L. MAIER

Bestselling author of *A Skeleton in God's Closet*

The Final Race is a gripping read of the rest of the Eric Liddell story. This chariot of fire of God's grace didn't merely bask in Olympic glory but sacrificed it all to run the race of his life and to share the gospel of Jesus in China. Author Eric Eichinger does a wonderful job showing Liddell's humanity, his struggles, his tenacity, and above all his persevering faith. It's a riveting story of the love of Christ leading the way amidst the hurdles of culture and resources, as well as the

overwhelming atrocities of war, concentration camps, poverty, and false ideologies. In the midst of it all, Liddell's life is a compelling story of the love of Christ, a race that he ran to win so that others would be blessed, to give God glory. Truth be told, his service was just a reflection of his Savior, the one he always wants you to meet through it all. Eichinger compellingly brings to life this story that will have you turning the pages in anticipation. It's a story that surely will bless all who read it.

GREGORY P. SELTZ, PHD

Executive director of the Lutheran Center for Religious Liberty, Washington, DC,
and speaker emeritus of *The Lutheran Hour*

The story of Eric Liddell after his *Chariots of Fire* Olympic glory is both inspiring and challenging. Pastor Eichinger takes us on a thrilling yet heartbreaking journey of courage and self-sacrifice. He digs deeper into not only what made Liddell an all-time great on the track but also the difficulties of balancing God's calling with the demands of responsibility to family. Set in World War II China, *The Final Race* is a timely reminder that true faithfulness often leads to great sacrifice, but also great reward.

JIM STINTZI

Director of track and field and cross-country, Charleston Southern University;
seven time All-American; and head coach of thirty years in the Big Ten

Pastor Eric Eichinger has done a masterful job of introducing us to Eric Liddell's life after *Chariots of Fire*. Since he both served as a missionary to China and ran track in college, Rev. Eichinger is able to capture Liddell's story in a unique and engaging way. Far from picturing the Christian life as one of pure glory and victory, *The Final Race* reminds us that following Christ means bearing a cross, having to sacrifice what we love at times and even living in uncertainty. Yet in all of this, Liddell's life points to the reality

that God's grace always prevails and that the blood of Christ offers the only true hope there is. *The Final Race* is sure to inspire and encourage all of us who have to bear a cross.

REV. BOB HILLER

Senior pastor, Community Lutheran Church, Escondido, CA

The Final Race recounts the heroic story of Eric Liddell with passion and grit. Author Eric Eichinger shares how Liddell finished the ultimate race of life with commitment, determination, and self-sacrifice. Faith, family, war, romance, struggle, and victory combine to show that Eric Liddell was much more than an Olympic hero. He was a hero who changed lives for eternity.

MICHAEL NEWMAN

Author of *Hope When Your Heart Breaks* and *The Life You Crave*

Eric Liddell's life of loving service is a testimony to his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. His story is worthy of remembrance and celebration, and *The Final Race* is an enriching and rewarding testament. Like the Apostle Paul before him, Eric Liddell has "run the race," entering the joy of his Master. This book will help you enter into that race as well. I encourage you to read and be refreshed.

DR. JORDAN J. BALLOR

Research fellow, Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty

The Final Race offers a refreshing, compelling reminder of someone who lived by his principles regardless of circumstance. With this engaging account of Olympic hero Eric Liddell's life story, Eric Eichinger has given a solid example that should be considered by all endeavoring to live a life of virtue today.

DAVID AND JASON BENHAM

Entrepreneurs and bestselling authors of *Whatever the Cost*

Like Eichinger and Everson's remarkable work, I have been captivated by Eric Liddell's story for over thirty years. It was immensely gratifying to discover that *The Final Race* holds true to the man's incredible legacy while crafting a beautiful tale. Highly recommended.

DAVIS BUNN

International bestselling author

THE FINAL RACE





THE FINAL RACE



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of the Olympian Who Inspired
CHARIOTS OF FIRE



ERIC T. EICHINGER
with EVA MARIE EVERSON



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AUTHORS' NOTE

THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK draws from a wide variety of research over a number of years, each experience more humbling than the last. Having been a competitive runner at a high level and a teacher in China, I already felt I had caught a glimpse of what it was like to stand in the shoes of Eric Liddell. While living in China, I decided to stride down that path a bit further to Weih sien, where Eric Liddell is buried and a memorial is dedicated to him. I sneaked into the condemned hospital structure where he died and surveyed the landscape as the familiar score from *Chariots of Fire* played in my mind. Somewhere on my return home from that pilgrimage, I knew I had to tell this story in a way that had not yet been done.

I am thankful for the numerous and dedicated biographers who came before me, including the primary source of D. P. Thomson's writing, as well as the Day of Discovery video documentary with David McCasland. The Eric Liddell Centre in Edinburgh, Scotland, is a trove of delight, and I warmly appreciate their hospitality. Having tea and dashing through the streets of Edinburgh to visit Eric's old haunts with his nieces, Joan and Sue, is a moment in time I will never forget. I am especially thankful for the audience granted to me by Eric's daughters Patricia and Heather; their open and continued

communication; and for the voluminous correspondence with Eric's youngest daughter, Maureen. It has also been an extreme pleasure working with Eva Marie Everson, a servant-leader in her craft, who made the manuscript flow with narrative quintessence.

Rev. Eric Eichinger

The first time I heard the name Eric Liddell, I sat in a movie theater, shortly after the birth of my daughter, Jessica, in 1981. My husband and I had been given free tickets in exchange for our opinion about a soon-to-be-released movie, *Chariots of Fire*. I clearly remember being stunned as the final words appeared across the screen, informing moviegoers that Eric had died in China during World War II. Years later, as I entered the world of publishing, one of the first books I came across at a booksellers' convention was a short biography about Eric. *Oh*, I remember thinking, *he was the runner who refused to run on Sunday and who died in China.*

In 2015, I received a call from Rebeca Seitz of SON Studios in Naples, Florida, asking if I would look over a few chapters by a pastor from Clearwater. "He's not a novelist," she said, "and this is a novelization. With your experience, I think you can give him some pointers." As soon as I opened the manuscript and saw that the story was about Eric Liddell, something inside me said, *See this through.* Over the next six months, the good reverend and I worked on his project, and a year later, my agent called one fine afternoon and said that "EE" (as I call him) had been offered a contract to write a biography on "EL," but that Tyndale wanted a fiction writer's influence. Enter "ee."

The opportunity to work again with EE, to sit across the desk

from him and pore over books and video notes and other research, to read the numerous accounts of EL's life, to speak on the phone with Eric Liddell's daughter, Patricia, on several occasions (oh, her patience in talking with me!), and to take the moments in Eric Liddell's life and weave my artistic thread through their fabric (and to do so from only his point of view) has been more than a project for me. *This* manuscript has changed my life. It has changed my walk with God.

This is a biography. We wanted to maintain the factual integrity of a traditional biography while also making the book readable and understandable. We wanted to make Eric Liddell's presence more immediate and relatable to readers. So each chapter begins with a fictionalized snapshot from Eric's life based on true history but told using the conventions of fiction. Obviously, when fictionalizing someone's life, writers don't know *exactly* what happened (Was it really raining? Did he really eat roast beef that night for dinner?), but I have tried to stay as close as possible to what we *do* know for certain and to enhance that part of the story to help draw readers into the life of a truly remarkable human being. My prayer is that, like EE and myself, you will come to feel that you actually *know* Eric Liddell . . . and that running this part of the race alongside him will make your journey with Christ that much more precious.

Eva Marie Everson

PROLOGUE

OUR RACE

ALMOST A FULL CENTURY HAS passed since Eric Liddell's running career began and his renown caught fire. Once he made his decision to withdraw from the 1924 Olympics 100-meter event due to religious observance, his iconic legacy was seared in time.

A prized favorite to win gold for Britain, his name was dragged through the homeland mud on the heels of his announcement. Yet Liddell navigated gold-medal glory via a different route, the 400 meters, a distance with which he had minimal experience.

Against all odds, he ran victoriously and in the process inspired millions. In so doing he preserved his routine commitment of honoring God by resting on the Sabbath and provided a rapturous reason for Britain to celebrate. The flame that had been lit beneath his celebrity exploded throughout the world.

Eric's incredible display of faith during the Olympics was just the beginning. He had another race in his life yet to run—a more important one, with a much greater prize. This final race of faith was not marked out using the familiar lines of a track. He did not know where it would end. He could not have imagined how his world would be torn apart before it was all over. And he certainly couldn't have fathomed the magnificent extent of how God would continue

to use him in the generations that would follow. All Eric could do was prepare day by day and by faith run his race to the best of his abilities. He ran in his own unique theological lane as he persevered through hardships and ultimately achieved the everlasting crown of righteousness.

Many glowing embers of Eric Liddell's example remain today. They serve as luminaries for the race we have yet to run, and indeed are running—the race of faith in Christ Jesus. The baton of Christian faith has been passed to us. We don't know what our next century will bring or what tumult lurks around dark cultural turns. We can't know for certain what we will be asked to do. But we can prepare, as Eric did, in the days of comfort. Then when our days of hardship come, we'll be ready to meet them—so that we, too, might not run aimlessly but in order to win the prize.

Eric Liddell was prepared to run his final race of faith. Are we prepared for ours?

CHAPTER 1

ANOTHER RACE

*A man's pride will bring him low, but
a humble spirit will obtain honor.*

Proverbs 29:23, NASB

July 19, 1924

Journalists crowded London's King's Cross railway station platform like hunters in midstalk. They milled around, searching the faces of passengers urgently headed toward their respective train compartments. Their office-issued pads and nubby No. 2 pencils were poised to jot down the perfect quote, which by morning's print—and with the right framing—would become the next sports page headline. Cameramen, not to be outdone, vied from equal vantage points. They readied their flashbulbs in hope of seizing their unsuspecting victim and, in doing so, capturing their prize—an exclusive photograph of the nation's most recently crowned hero.

They had not been so lucky earlier that warm Saturday afternoon at the Stamford Bridge track, where a special relays meet between the British Empire and the United States of America had been held. Eric Liddell, the newly minted 400-meter gold-medal champion, was to run in the relay, only a week into his Olympic

glory. Because his medal still had not arrived by mail, the sheen of his athleticism had yet to hang around his neck.

In the whirlwind seven days since breaking the world record in the 400 meters, Eric had received his bachelor of science from the University of Edinburgh, had been capped ceremoniously by Sir Alfred Ewing with a crown of oleaster sprigs, and had been carried out of McEwan Hall by his fellow classmates. He had given speeches, been honored at a dinner, and then made his way by train to London and Stamford Bridge. There, surrounded by a stadium built to hold more than forty thousand spectators, he and Horatio Fitch (Britain's and the United States' best sprinters, respectively) waited for their teammates to hand them the baton for the final 400-meter leg of the mile relay.

This race was the last event of the meet, and Britain was starved for some homeland firepower near the end of a disappointing race day. They were down to the last leg. Fitch got his baton first and took off.

Liddell—dubbed “the Flying Scot” on sports pages across his country—received his baton four yards behind in chase.

During the Olympic Games held in Paris the week previous, these same two men had dueled during the heats, quarterfinals, semifinals, and finals of the Olympic 400 meters. Fitch had run in the first semifinal, breaking an Olympic record to come in first place at 47.8 seconds. Eric had run in the second semifinal, coming in first at 48.2 seconds. The odds had been in Fitch's favor.

But Eric Liddell had something to prove—something beyond the Olympics. His was another race. His, a greater prize.

Much to Fitch's shock—and the world's—in 47.6 seconds, Eric Liddell had trounced all competitors and odds, crossing the finish line with a first-place win and in world-record time.

A week later, at Stamford Bridge, Fitch had retaliation in mind. The win should have come easily—Eric Liddell had spent the past week at graduation and banquets, leaving him no time for practice. The man's muscles would be practically atrophied, surely.

At two hundred yards, Liddell had made up two of the four yards between the men. Then, as they rounded the last turn, Liddell's head went back, a sure sign. Often it had been said that when the Flying Scotsman's "heid went back," he "culdna' lose."

Eric Liddell took over in the last straightaway, outrunning Fitch by a commanding four yards. His split time equaled his gold standard from the Olympics, and the hunger of the London crowd had been satisfied once again, but without compromise from Liddell.

With the race over, and in his typical fashion, Liddell shook hands with Fitch and the others, quietly gathered his belongings, waved to the crowd, and left the limelight as swiftly as he could.

No gloating. No interviews.

Since his boyhood, Eric's nature—to ward off pride and avoid attention when at all possible—had always been contrary to many self-promoting athletes and fame-seeking performers. Aware of his ascent in the public's eye, he had been careful to not allow success to go to his head. Over the course of the past week, he had realized that winning gold for his nation—in the way he had won—had catapulted him into a new stratosphere of unanticipated celebrity.

Now, as the late-afternoon sun beat down on King's Cross, Eric caught wind of the reporters awaiting him. The attention did not appear to be ending anytime in the near future. But what he wanted—what he needed—was to retreat into a solitary bed compartment and sleep in peace for his ride home. He hoped to find a way to circumvent the onslaught of questions, which would invariably add volume to his own vanity. And if he didn't answer correctly, his responses could easily be misconstrued. He looked around for a solution, but all entrances to his train were blocked.

Eric sighed, realizing he had little choice but to endure the questions and the blinding flashes of camera bulbs.

As he accepted his unusual defeat, Eric spied a baggage porter. Head bent under his trademarked hat, the older man nimbly pushed a luggage rack through the sea of travelers. Eric ducked his chin and, weaving through the crowd, made his way to the porter.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, keeping his voice low. "I wonder if you might do me a favor."

The porter listened as Eric explained the situation. "Would you be so kind as to loan me your cap and luggage rack?"

The porter's eyes scanned the crowd, whose voices had risen in the rush of the usual good-byes. He smiled at the conspiracy, then removed his hat and handed it to Eric. "My pleasure, Mr. Liddell," he said, smoothing back his disheveled hair. "Just add your bags to the rack here and make your way to that car over there."

Eric dipped into his pocket and slipped a sizable tip into the porter's hand. "Thank you, my good man," he said before shrewdly pushing the luggage rack. As the porter had done, Eric kept his head down, but he cast his eyes to the train cars and walked straight through the unsuspecting media.

After loading the luggage, he boarded the train undetected while the porter watched from the outskirts, a smile curling his lips.

THE PUBLIC AND LOCAL MEDIA could not recognize or appreciate the extraordinary pressures Eric Liddell was under. Questions of when to conclude his running career, when to leave for China, whether or not to enter seminary, how long to be apart from his family, the ever-closing window of opportunity to secure a wife—all were methodical drips increasing a dull pound in his thoughts. No matter which avenue he chose, all ultimately meant what seemed unthinkable to most—he would turn his back on fame.

For good.

And he was not about to open his heart to prying journalists as he mulled over his decisions. Had he indulged their inquiries, they could not have come to terms with the seriousness of the dilemma and the magnitude of the situation. The choice to leave his full life

in Britain—to trade it for the obscurity of the Far East—seemed senseless to them.

To everyone. Nearly.

The public knew of Liddell's missionary lineage and had caught wind that he might possibly join in the efforts of his family eventually. But capitalizing solely on the potential of his success kept their interest. The Flying Scotsman had achieved so much, and so much more lay at his fingertips. Fanning the flame of stardom was a necessary act. They simply would not understand why he—or anyone, for that matter—would willingly walk away from the admiration and celebrity status they continued to lavish upon him.

To sacrifice everything earned and live a life of practical anonymity seemed more drastic than necessary. If he made the choice for China, he would walk into a place and time where no one knew him and where British citizens were despised.

Besides, couldn't he stay in England and do more for Christ there than in China? He already drew huge crowds of people—people who came to listen as he shared his Christian faith. A tremendous platform had already been set up for him.

How could he top that?

But journalists and fans alike could not know the depths of their newly crowned gold medalist. Where most people would give anything for the attention, Eric had learned to avoid it when possible. This was no feigned avoidance. At only twenty-two, he already recognized that these had been his “days of comfort,” and that temptations befall a man when narcissism comes into play.

Not only was Eric the most famous Brit of his time, he was also an eligible bachelor. It wasn't easy getting to know a young lady who didn't recognize him or who already had high expectations of what he was like. Genuine seriousness was hard enough to identify for any young man seeking someone to marry, let alone for the most popular

individual in the country. Still, he reasoned, the probability of finding the love of his life in China seemed astronomically low.

For Eric, the crossroads of life had never been dull. This one was no exception.



Once safe and unrecognized in his train compartment, Eric looked through the window dotted with a child's recent nose prints and chuckled at the reporters who realized, as the crowd thinned out, that they had missed their chance. Again. He situated his belongings, then stretched out, closed his eyes, and let out a long breath, releasing the tension his body had held unconsciously since stepping onto the platform.

Pride cometh before the fall.

The words danced about in his head. Oh, yes. He knew the line well, and he had no intention of dooming himself to its clarion prophecy. But uncertainties abounded, and how he would navigate the waters that lay directly ahead of him had to be determined soon.

But soon would come quickly enough. For now, what he really needed was to rest.

The whistle blew, and with a jerk, the train pulled away from the station, heading toward Edinburgh. With any luck, he'd make it home in time to get a little sleep in his own bed before morning. Before another set of responsibilities lay before him.

After all, the following day was a Sunday.

PART ONE

The First 100

Prepare for the Day
