

5000 MILES TO LIFT AGAINST SOUTH AFRICA: A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF THE OLYMPIC EXPERIENCES OF RON ELAND

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A NEW SOUTH AFRICAN WEIGHTLIFTING HISTORY

Standard works on physical culture, the predecessor of weightlifting, exclude weightlifting history in South Africa's black communities.¹ This is compounded by the fact that there is a paucity of formal and informal literature on South African Olympic weightlifting history (SAOWH). There are, however, limited research-based and informal works that connect South Africa's general Olympic history with weightlifting. These works include a government-sanctioned report by the Human Sciences Research Council, a book, namely *Olympic Dream*, and a PhD dissertation about South Africa's general (white) Olympic history.² Other sources, largely of an informal nature, such as mainstream media articles and interviews, generally exclude black weightlifting experiences. Formal archives are of limited use as a corrective since "records of government, expected to be far more extensive than of most organizations, are extremely partial."³ This holds true for historians of SAOWH. Hence, although statistical records of competitions, personal bests, and rankings are integral to the sport and culture of weightlifting, the limited statistical documentation of black weightlifters in formal archives downplays their role and significance in SAOWH. A further limitation for historians is the fact that no formal research exists on South African black weightlifters who have been excluded from international competition. The historical representation of the South African 1948 Olympic team, as in *Olympic Dream*, serves as an example of the incomplete representation of black weightlifting history in the country.

The authors of this article subscribe to the principles of nonracialism and use references to racial categories cautiously.⁴ Such references are either direct quotations, or the references are used with the purpose of bringing greater historical accuracy to the narrative. The authors,

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however, distance themselves from any racial connotations attached to any race labelling.

RON ELAND

William Ronald Eland, commonly known as Ron Eland, was a South African weightlifter born on 28 September 1923 in Port Elizabeth. He died on 12 February 2003 in Cape Town. His exclusion from the South African 1948 Olympic team was due to socio-political circumstances and not performance-based decisions.⁵ This exclusion resulted in absences in subsequent narratives, sympathetic to the apartheid order, concerning South Africa's participation in the 1948 Olympic weightlifting competition. Eland, the country's best lightweight weightlifter, could (or *should*) have represented South Africa in the lightweight class in the same competition in which Piet Taljaard (heavyweight class) and Issy Bloomberg (middleweight class), two white South African lifters, competed. As reported in a newspaper article from 1965 titled "Sports for All – In South Africa Except the Blacks," Eland became British lightweight champion, qualifying him for the 1948 Olympic Games where he indirectly competed against his country of birth as no South African was appointed for the lightweight class.⁶ The fact that *Drum* magazine recognized Eland as a historically significant weightlifter under the title "And Here is the Man who Dodged the Colour-bar," makes him an important figure in South African sport history.⁷ *Drum* was one of the primary news carriers of black culture and social and political life during the 1950s in South Africa.⁸

This article seeks to provide greater insight into Eland's experiences and participation at the 1948 Olympic Games by means of a sociohistorical analysis of his private archival collection.

PRIVATE ARCHIVES

Because state archive records are incomplete, the sport historian must resort to additional archival forms that aid in retelling SAOWH with greater accuracy. Hence, there is a need to turn to private archives. Private archives are "defined as materials that are formed in the special activity process of private persons and institutions and in private property" that form an important part of cultural heritage.⁹ Private archives are important complements to public archives because they contribute to the preservation of socio-historical and political developments



Humble beginnings on the journey to the cover of *Health and Strength* and the Olympic Games – Ron Eland in his backyard in Port Elizabeth.

of societies.¹⁰ In the case of SAOWH, private archives give insight into the personal experiences and socio-political circumstances surrounding the exclusion of black athletes, their undocumented accomplishments, and their contributions to the sport. However, the collections only gain importance if they are exposed and used. Hence, an examination of Eland's private archives adds to the growing body of literature and the importance of considering such collections.¹¹ In light of missing black South African weightlifting history, we pose the question, "Can Olympic weightlifting's historical distortions be sufficiently rectified through a historical examination of private archives?" We say yes because such an examination may allow us to understand what transpired and led Eland to travel five thousand miles to lift against his home country, as reported in *Health & Strength*, and the social and political consequences thereof.¹²

THE BEST, BUT ...

The Executive Committee meeting of the South African Olympic and British Empire Games Association (SAOBEGA) held on 13 January 1947 in Johannesburg recognized the receipt of a letter by Milo Pillay, Eland's coach and secretary of the Milo Academy of Health and Strength.¹³ In this letter, Pillay stated the Milo Academy's intention to

send 'non-European' athletes, amongst them Ron Eland, to the 1948 Olympic Games and requested the procedures to adopt for successful nomination. Milo Pillay, an Indian-born South African retired weightlifter, is considered a pioneer in South African weightlifting. He contributed to the shift of physical culture to weightlifting in South Africa by performing lifts and feats of strength on stage.¹⁴ The *Cape Standard* reported on Pillay's sport-political activism when he attended a (white) national weightlifting conference in the Transvaal in an attempt to have the color bar that prevented black athletes from competing in national tournaments lifted.¹⁵ The response to Pillay's letter by the General Secretary, Ira G. Emery, was that the SAOBEGA would not accept any nomination unless officially sent by the governing body of the particular sport and bearing the signature of the General Secretary.¹⁶ The response further stated that the SAOBEGA had no jurisdiction over non-European sport and suggested that Pillay might contact the South African governing bodies regarding control of non-European sport.

The minutes of a SAOBEGA Council meeting held on 27 May 1948 indicated that no official nomination for Eland was made.¹⁷ Three nominations were received to represent South Africa at the Olympic Games, namely Piet Taljaard (heavyweight), Issy Bloomberg (middleweight) and James van Rensburg (featherweight). No South African representative was nominated for Eland's lightweight class. The *Rand Daily Mail* confirmed that the Olympic trial results from the South African Weightlifting Championships resulted in the nomination of Taljaard, Bloomberg, and Van Rensburg.¹⁸ By the time of the South African qualifiers, Eland was already in Britain, winning the British lightweight championship on 8 May 1948 in London. It remains unclear what transpired between the non-European weightlifting association and the governing (white) South African weightlifting body regarding attempts to nominate Eland for the official Olympic trials, as suggested in Emery's response letter to Milo Pillay. However, it is clear that no official nomination for Eland was made.

The response to Pillay's request regarding attempts to send black athletes overseas was not uncommon. Following a Springbok rugby tour to Great Britain and France in 1906, the South African Coloured Rugby Football Board approached the Northern Rugby Football Union with a proposal for a similar tour to New Zealand. The New Zealand Rugby Union responded that "all communication regarding tours must be made through the [white] South African Rugby Football Board [SARFB]." The SARFB responded that it had "no jurisdiction over and no dealings with the body making the proposal."¹⁹ Hence, it was impossible for the Coloured Rugby Football Board to send a team overseas without representation by the white Rugby Football Board.

In the SAOBEGA report of 13 January 1947,

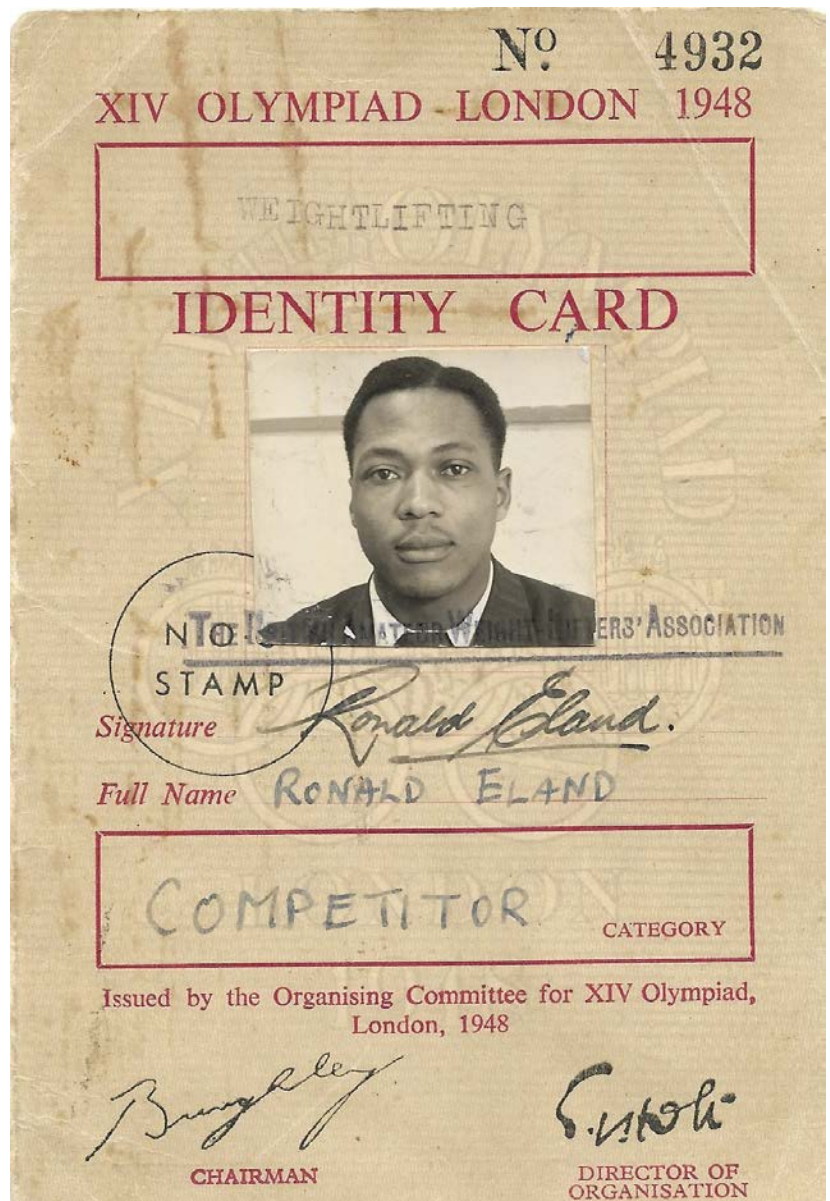
chairman R. Honey did, however, state that the non-European South African Amateur Weightlifting Association (SAAWA) had been accepted to be officially affiliated with the SAOBEGA. The SAAWA allowed both white and nonwhite athletes to compete. Honey further emphasized that the affiliation helped to make the SAOBEGA “all the more fully representative of amateur sport in South Africa,” and stressed that “tremendous effort” was required from all national sporting bodies and athletes “to ensure that South Africa gets the chance to send the best possible team” to the 1948 Olympic Games.²⁰ As evident in the response letter to Pillay’s request to send Eland to London, the SAAWA affiliation to the SAOBEGA did not result in a “fuller representation of amateur sport in South Africa” and also did not result in South Africa’s sending the “best possible team” to the Olympic Games since Eland was excluded.²¹

During the 1940s, two championships were annually held with black only and white only divisions. Eland could not participate in the white division, governed by the SAAWA, only in the amateur championships of the Eastern Province Non-European Weightlifting Association. Port Elizabeth, Eland’s city of birth, is situated in the Eastern Province of South Africa. The *News Times* reported on 6 June 1947 that Eland’s lifts were “in excess of South African records, but because he is non-European, he is not allowed to compete for these championships.”²² A “tremendous effort,” as mentioned earlier, should have therefore been made by the SAOBEGA to ensure that Eland formed part of the South African weightlifting team, especially since no lightweight representative was sent to London.

This highlights how non-European governing bodies (i.e. the SAAWA) were portrayed erroneously by the SAOBEGA as a helping hand to “fully represent” amateur sport while lacking actual support for black athletes to be included in the national team. If Eland had been included in the 1948 Olympic Team, South Africa would have sent “the best possible team” to the Olympic Games.

Several newspaper articles, interview transcripts, and reports by Eland himself from after 1948 indicate that Eland beat the unnamed white runner-up at the pre-Olympic trials but was not selected to represent South Africa.²³ Eland reportedly lifted a total of 715 pounds compared to the 680 pounds of the runner-up but was not named for the South African team “because of the colour of his skin.”²⁴ It is unknown to which event these results refer to, and they are only described as “pre-Olympic trials” as recorded in a telephonic interview transcript with Eland in 1992.²⁵ Eland did not participate at the official South African championships that resulted in

the official nomination of Taljaard, Bloomberg, and Van Rensburg, of whom only Taljaard and Bloomberg ended up competing in London. Eland was already in Britain at the time and became British lightweight champion on 8 May 1948 in London.²⁶ Although we could not identify comparative statistics between Eland’s lifts and those of official events held by the SAAWA, it is reasonable to assume that he indeed was South Africa’s best lightweight lifter; otherwise, it would have been impossible for him to qualify in Britain. By 1948, Great Britain had an established weightlifting heritage and a professional division, the British Professional Weight-lifters Association, founded in 1922.²⁷ South Africa had no such heritage, making Eland’s success in Britain more remarkable.



Ron Eland’s original competitor identity card from the 1948 Olympic Games, found in his private archives. Olympic identity cards were first issued at the 1924 Paris Games. In some cases, such as the 1932 Los Angeles Games, these cards could be used in lieu of passports or other official government documents.

ROAD TO BRITISH CHAMPION AND THE OLYMPIC GAMES

South Africa was under British administration in 1948, which allowed Britain first choice when selecting athletes for the Olympic Games. An unidentified and undated newspaper article found in Eland's archives suggests that Oscar State, the British Olympic weightlifting manager, invited Eland to the British Olympic trials as State was convinced that he had found "the next lightweight gold medalist." The trip to England was made possible through the financial help of the Eastern Province Non-European Weightlifting Association, with fundraising by Milo Pillay, his brother-in-law, G.K. Rangsam, and shows hosted at the Milo Academy.²⁸ Tromp van Diggelen, a strongman and pioneer of physical culture, was instrumental in arranging for Eland to be coached by William A. Pullum, a British weightlifting icon, who became the British weightlifting team coach at the 1948 Olympic Games.²⁹

Eland's participation at the Olympic trials drew significant attention from the media, and he was featured on the front cover of *Health & Strength* on 6 May 1948, described as "making a bid for a place in the Olympic Weightlifting Team on May 8th."³⁰ An original diploma cer-

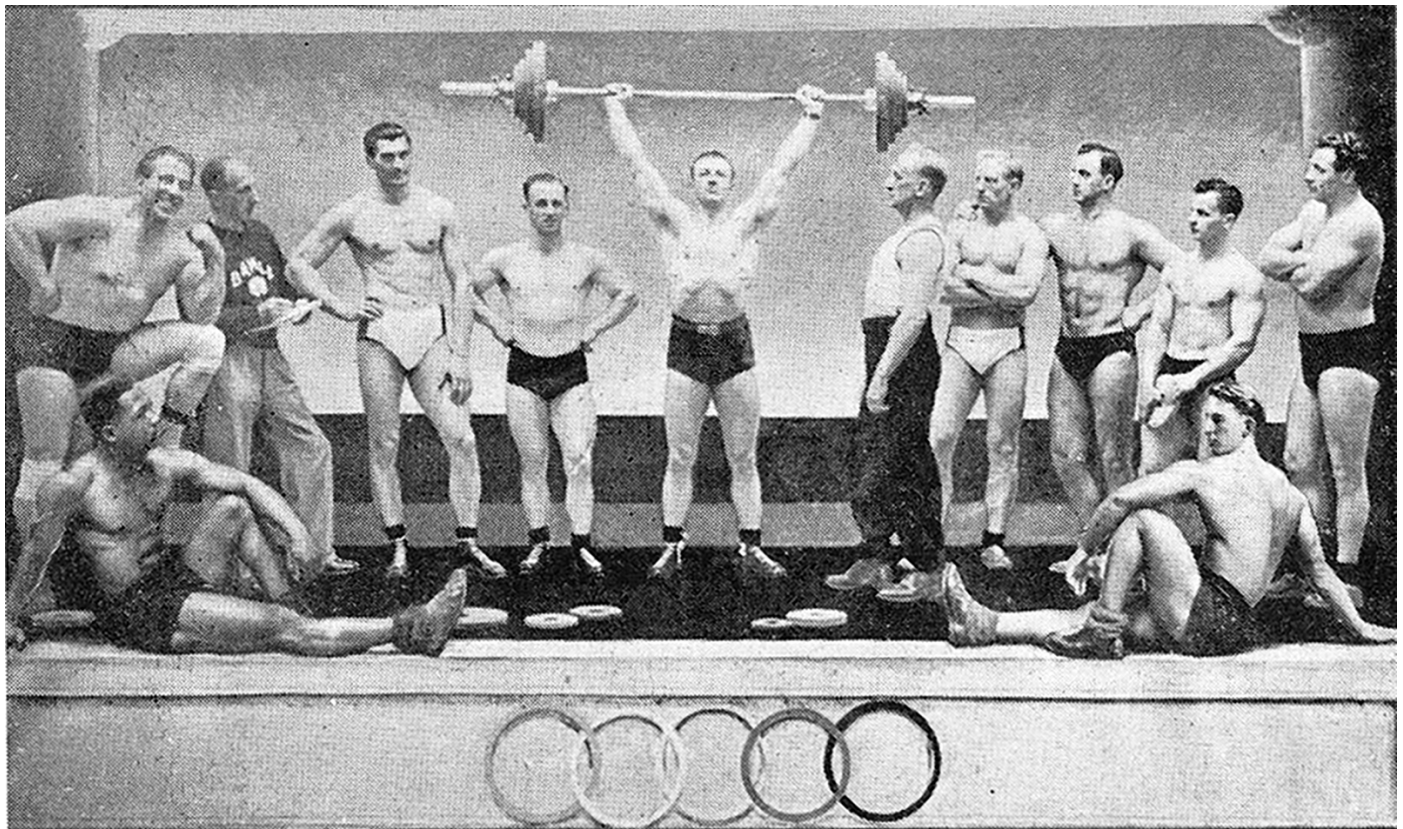
tifies that on 8 May 1948 at the Scala Theatre in London, Ron Eland was awarded the British Lightweight Championship title with a total of 672 pounds (203¾ pounds clean and press, 203¾ pounds snatch, and 264½ pounds clean and jerk). These results are in line with Eland's self-reported training strategies, according to which he would train with the same poundage for the clean and press and the snatch, which proved successful.³¹

His Olympic nomination to represent Great Britain was made official by Oscar State in a letter from the British Amateur Weight Lifters' Association on 16 June 1948, with Eland becoming the first South African to represent Britain in weightlifting.³² A former student of Eland, Precious McKenzie, represented Britain under similar circumstances in 1968. McKenzie was barred from competing for South Africa in the 1958 British Empire and Commonwealth Games but subsequently represented Britain at the 1966, 1970 and 1974 Games, taking gold in each competition. The letter further reads that Pullum organized Eland's expenses, accommodation, and lost wages to be covered as well as access to the opening ceremony. Eland had high praises of his treatment during his stay in Britain and was "very proud" to represent Britain at the Olympic Games.³³ According to Di Stefano, Britain "intervened" on Eland's behalf in order for him to compete and "British media supported him even more [than South African media] because they [Britain] were against segregation and apartheid."³⁴ The British newspaper *The Daily Mirror* reported on Eland's British Olympic trials with a picture of him under the title "Colour barred: but not for Britain" as well as "5,000 Miles to Lift for Britain" in the British magazine *Health & Strength*.³⁵

During the Olympic competition, Eland fell ill and withdrew from the contest, held on 10 August at the Earls Court Exhibition Centre, after a successful first lift, placing 13th.³⁶ He was later diagnosed with appendicitis for which he underwent an operation upon his return home to South Africa. However, his British Olympic weightlifting narrative extended beyond the actual competition. Eland placed second at the British Empire Championships, held in conjunction with the Olympic Games. In a *Health & Strength* column, Eland thanked his coach, Pullum, for the "wonderful and memorable time, spent under [his] fine supervision with the British team."³⁷ Britain, through the help of Eland's second place, ranked third in the Empire Championships. Similar to Eland's positive remarks, the British media portrayed Britain as a "savior" in Eland's story. Another original diploma found amongst Eland's archives indicates a total competition result of 704 pounds, beating his previous British lightweight championship total by 32 pounds. According to Eland, he "would have placed fifth, if [he] lifted [his] best."³⁸ He further stated that his trainers Pullum, Oscar State, and Murray "broke down [his] bad habits and



Ron Eland (right) with his coach, William A. Pullum, during the 1948 Olympic Games in London. A lifelong physical culturist and champion weightlifter himself, Pullman claimed that his life in the iron game began when he cured his childhood pulmonary tuberculosis through exercise.



The British Olympic Weightlifting Team at the 1948 Olympic Games, Eland at the bottom left. Julian Creus, silver medalist in the bantamweight class, is the fourth man standing from the left. James "Jumping Jim" Halliday, bronze medalist in the lightweight class, hoists the weight overhead in the center.

made [him] lift like a robot," as they did not like the American weightlifting style that Eland had been taught in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. "I would have done much better if they had let me go but they wanted a person to lift perfectly . . . I did improve, but they should have let me go further," stressed Eland.³⁹ This statement suggests that his trainers intended for Eland to conform to British culture and style of weightlifting. It is common practice that trainers coach their athletes according to particular training philosophies that are visually distinguishable. For example (although generalized), the American weightlifting style emphasizes "staying over the bar" during the pull phase of a lift, compared to the Chinese style, which encourages "keeping the bar close." It is, however, unusual to make such drastic changes shortly before a competition. This (potentially detrimental) adaptation to Eland's lifting style raises the question whether the change was solely intended to increase his performance or whether it was attempted to transform Eland into a model of a traditional British-style weightlifter to visually fit into the British Olympic team.

Canadian lightweight lifter John Stuart placed fifth with a total of 733 pounds at the Olympic Games.⁴⁰ Stuart's name appears in Eland's archives on a note without an author, written about Eland's endeavors. It is described that Eland's "saddest moment" was when "England lost the British Empire Games title to Steward of Canada by 10 lbs.," and not the early withdrawal from the Olympics. In a lengthy hand-written compilation of notes, Eland

reminded about his participation at the Olympic Games. He described how proudly he wore the "red, white and blue flag stitched to his blue blazer," as the first nonwhite participant from South Africa to compete for Britain. "I proudly marched into the Olympic Stadium at Wembley, London, England, on that memorable day, rubbing shoulders with the best Olympic sports men and women Great Britain could present." He further described his nomination as an honored place among the British elite athletes. Eland emphasized his excitement about being the official lightweight weightlifting representative for Great Britain instead of South Africa. An unidentified newspaper article reads that Eland was "overwhelmed by his reception when he won the British lightweight title." The notes read further that Eland broke all his South African records under Pullum's training upon arrival in Britain. Although no records of personal bests during his training in Britain exist, these notes suggest that Eland must have lifted more than the 715 pounds in total, as reported during the pre-Olympic trials. Since he lifted 705 pounds during the British Empire Championships, placing second, and Canada only won by ten pounds, he could have placed first if he had lifted a total that was equal to his supposed record-breaking training lifts. This may explain the saddest moment of placing second during the British Empire Championships as he knew that he had already lifted heavier during training shortly before the Olympic Games than the Canadian winner, John Stuart. We demonstrated that athletes'

descriptions have to be considered in the context of their representation in society. This provides a fuller picture of the socio-political circumstances surrounding their participation and perception of their experiences in order to contextualize and critically analyze sport performance.

BLACK WEIGHTLIFTING HISTORY AND POST-SECOND WORLD WAR SOCIETY

Eland shared common experiences of objectification with other weightlifters of his time. Sport historian Jason Shurley analyzed the media's depiction of African American weightlifter John Davis between 1938 and 1957 in *Strength & Health* magazine.⁴¹ Shurley highlighted prevailing racial stereotypes in American society during the 1940s and reported on social and political exploitation of black male bodies in printed media. The analysis concluded that the media attributed Davis' physical giftedness to being "less removed from his savage ancestors," which was a prevalent eugenic social theme in American Society.⁴² Eland made similar headlines in *Health & Strength* with descriptions by his manager Oscar State such as "my dark horse" and in South African media with titles such as "Coloured Teacher Equals Empire Record."⁴³ The Amateur Athletic Union in the USA, according to Shurley, used Davis as a ploy in America's attempt to prove social and political superiority during the Cold War by explicitly including him in the 1948 and 1952 American Olympic team due to his performance capabilities despite the prevailing racial stereotypes in the United States at that time.⁴⁴ The historian Peter J. Beck described sport's perceived potential as "an instrument of 'soft' power (as opposed to 'hard' military and economic power)."⁴⁵ A political trend that related Davis' experiences to Eland's inclusion in the British Olympic team in 1948 became apparent.

BRITAIN AS 'SAVIOR'?

The Olympic Games in Berlin 1936, Helsinki 1952, and Moscow 1980 were held with much political controversy.⁴⁶ The London 1948 Olympiad did not attract similar political coverage in historical academic texts due to a perceived lack of broader political significance. However, the 1948 Games held much political-historical significance since it helped to relaunch the Olympic Movement after the Second World War that had caused the cancellation of the two previous Games. Although Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937) stated that "the important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning, but taking part," the political implications surrounding the movement were apparent throughout history and climaxed during the 1936 "Nazi Games" in Berlin.⁴⁷ The Olympic Games were always subjected to political influences and an extension of political agendas of the hosting nation. The 1948 edition, however, was "relatively free from political rancor" but faced a damaged post-World War II world economy.⁴⁸ Beck elaborated on how the London Olympic Games were utilized by the British government. He described how Clement Attlee, Prime Minister of Britain, proclaimed that the 1948 Olympics "must not only go on but must also reflect well on Britain."⁴⁹ This gave rise to a notion that the Games should

benefit Britain economically as well as advance national interest in the international political arena.⁵⁰ The Games thus presented an opportunity for the British government to portray itself as a leading and uniting force in a post-war world. It also provided an opportunity for mediation in an emerging Cold War world, driven by two political superpower nations, the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The British government therefore made repeated attempts to ensure Soviet participation on the premise that it "was a good thing in the broader political sense."⁵¹ Britain could use the Olympic Games to prove its regained international stature in light of the cancellation of the previous two events. This political utilization alluded to a rather self-serving purpose, placing Britain on a pedestal as savior of the Olympic movement and as voice of social and political leadership in a divided postwar landscape. Britain's success in its own country was paramount to upholding this national prestige, which could be extended to Britain's supposed stance against segregation and later apartheid in South Africa. The question is whether Eland's inclusion in the British team was purely sport related or had underlying socio-political implications as well. Deducing from Eland's archive the British government's deep involvement in the London Games to ensure success suggests the latter.

Eland was interviewed by Dr. Jim Meschino for a Canadian television interview series titled *This Is Your Life – Fitness: Fact and Fiction* on 20 November 1987. Meschino posed the question to Eland of how important he believed the 1948 Olympic Games were for Britain. Eland responded as follows:

They were very important. Britain had just come out of a slump. You should have seen London in 1948. Those bombed buildings and the houses and the people who were crippled . . . and everybody spoke about the rough time they had gone through. Britain needed to be uplifted. The morale needed to be uplifted . . . They did a marvelous job. They were really successful in their organization. There's nobody to beat the British for organizing.⁵²

A follow-up question asked if he felt he had been part of a "chess game" and been brought into the country to represent Britain out of selfish desire or "just for the sport." Eland elaborated as follows: "It was very convenient for Britain to have me. It was very convenient that I was so strong and capable. Britain could still say that she is still the master of the world. She had gone through war. The allies had been successful. She is going to get her morale back where it was before."⁵³

Indications are that Eland was aware of the broader political implications of the Olympic Games for Britain and the potential value that he had for the British team. The explicit invitation by Oscar Sate for Eland to participate at the British Olympic Trials may have therefore been in part driven by the extensive political pressure on the British

Olympic Committee for Team Britain, and therefore by extension the country, to be successful at the Olympiad on home ground. Much like Davis's participation for the government of the United States at the same Olympic Games, Eland's participation may have offered Britain yet another showpiece to display national superiority. Di Stefano's comments that Britain supposedly opposed segregation in South Africa and "intervened" on Eland's behalf in order for him to compete, reveal how these narratives are adopted by the media, creating an image of Britain as a voice of reason in both social and political aspects.⁵⁴ Such a claim is supported by the British media's explicit declaration that Britain, unlike South Africa, does not bar athletes such as Eland based on their color.⁵⁵

However, developments around the 1952 Olympic Games proved this assertion wrong. An undated article in *The Times* about Eland's potential participation for Britain at the 1952 Games under the title "Colour Bar Again" clearly describes how the British Olympic Association introduced legislation that barred athletes from its dominions from representing Great Britain.⁵⁶ This contradiction corrupts the impression of Britain and its sport associations as a virtuous leader and could possibly raise questions about the sincerity of Eland's inclusion in the 1948 Olympic team. However, much like in Davis' case, the British government's potential influence in the selection of Olympic athletes remains speculative. After all, when Eland took the stage on 8 May 1948 at the Scala Theatre, he lifted 672 pounds in total to become British Lightweight Champion, beating all British competitors and qualifying him for the Olympic Games as official representative for Great Britain. This achievement stands on its own, and his performance should not be downplayed in light of the above-described socio-political context in Britain.

Nevertheless, this conversation is necessary to make sense of Eland's Olympic experience. In this context, the international diplomatic relationship between the South African and British Olympic committees as well as Britain's changing legislation for colonial athletes post 1948 remain fields to explore in further research and could provide greater detail about the socio-political landscape in connection to stories similar to those of Eland and Davis.

PERSONAL DRIVES AND POLITICAL TOOLS

A question now arises, "How did Eland perceive his role as a black South African within the British Olympic team?" The scholar Lesley Le Grange's reference to the concept of mimicry provides possible answers in this regard. Mimicry describes how the "colonized mimic the colonizer by adopting the colonizer's cultural habits, assumptions, institutions and values" but the results are "never a simple reproduction of those traits."⁵⁷ The defining aspect of mimicry is the potential for the colonized to redefine the relationship with the colonizer.⁵⁸ Eland, speaking from a colonized perspective, noted that his Olympic experience revealed both a sense of honor to represent Britain as well as a personal achievement. The television

interview *This Is Your Life* revealed Eland's awareness of the merit that he brought to the British team and the "convenience" of his inclusion as a way for Britain to demonstrate that it was still "the master of the world." Evidence for Eland's claim of his selection as a British convenience exercise can be deduced from his front cover feature on *Health & Strength*, being a leading magazine for physical culture and strength sports during the 1940s. It can be asked, "Was this a 'feel-good' story for British media to prove a sense of British intervention in South African segregation?" If so, it may be suggested that Eland uncritically accepted this political hegemony and mimicked British pride on the international stage. Thus, did Eland escape from the oppressive structures in South Africa to fulfil an Olympic dream only to assimilate into a dominant "savior" country? In other words, did he display any form of personal agency while being subjected to higher governing powers that might have used him for ulterior motives?

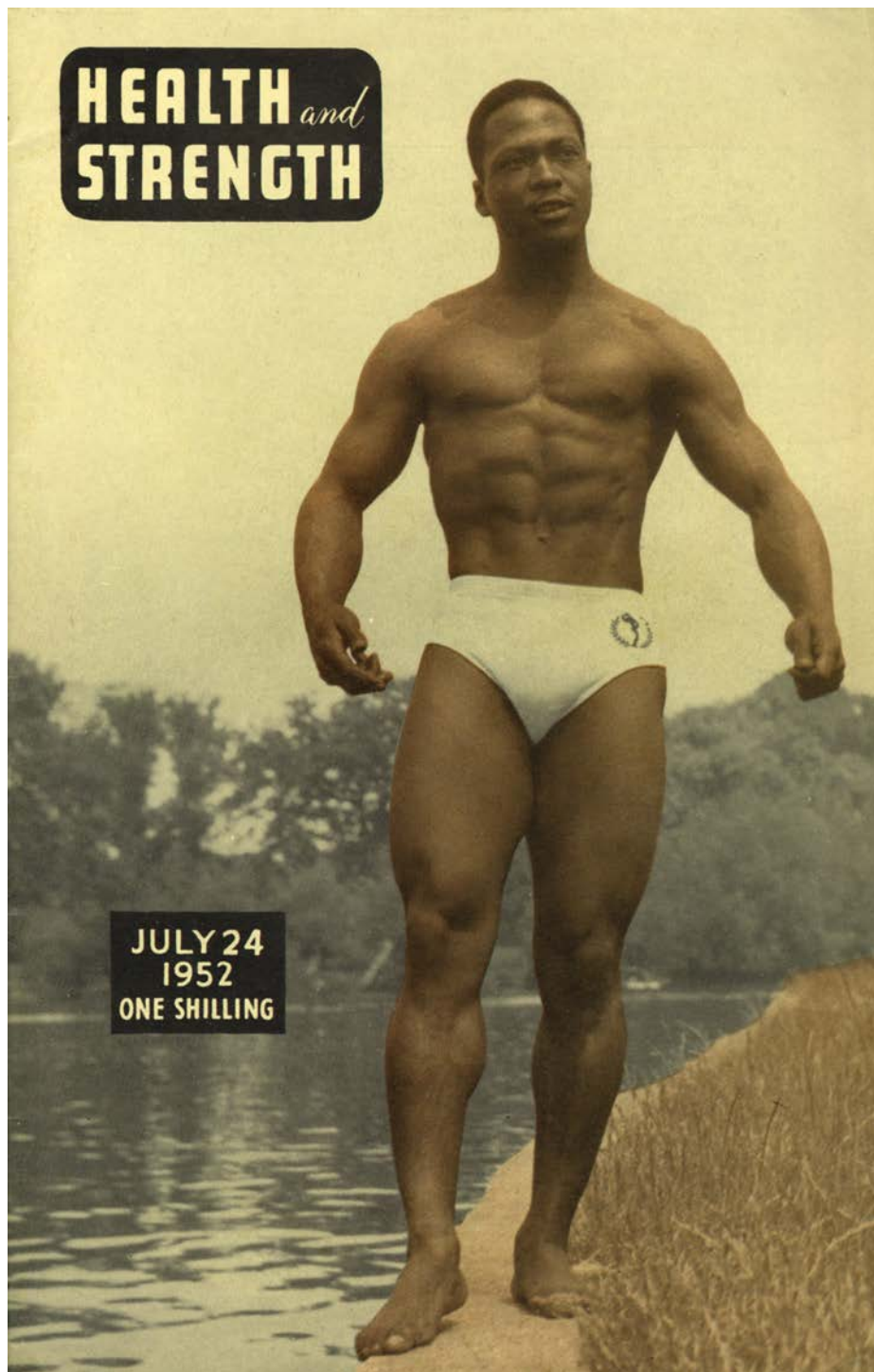
In numerous interview transcripts, Eland described and emphasized the pride that he took in "beating the odds" of being excluded from participating for South Africa by making the British Olympic team as the first black South African with such accolades. In *This Is Your Life*, Eland emphasized how the *Daily Mirror's* headline "Colour Barred: But Not by Britain" had "gone a long way with [him]," and he appreciated the media's acknowledgement of his journey from South Africa to Britain.⁵⁹ This suggests that Eland believed that a black man could prove himself if he was given the same opportunities as a white man in life and that the 1948 Olympic Games were his chance to prove this. Hence, the accomplishment of his personal dream to compete at the Olympic Games appears to have been of greater importance than the honor to represent Britain. Throughout his writings, Eland reminisced about his past as a competitor on the highest international stage but rarely mentioned his early dropping out of the contest due to the appendix injury, nor placing thirteenth. In the context of mimicry, an argument can be made that Eland redefined his relationship with his colonial masters through his personal accomplishment of participating at the Olympic Games and did not consider himself as a political instrument to showcase British superiority. His awareness of the political convenience of including him in the British Olympic team appears to have had no implications for his personal desire to achieve Olympic honors. In fact, he maneuvered space for himself within these constraints to fulfil his ambition and achieve his mission. In a letter to an endorser for the South African Medal of Good Hope to be bestowed upon him, Eland described his denial to represent South Africa as a "missed opportunity for both blacks and whites" and that "South Africa missed a critical opportunity to include blacks as citizens who could make great contributions to their country and become positive role models for its youth."⁶⁰ This statement further suggests that Eland's motivation to compete for Britain formed part of a bigger personal mission, namely to serve as a role model for South Africa's youth, that superseded any ulterior British colonial motives.

Eland's private archives surrounding his Olympic

participation revealed two important aspects: his pride in ‘making it’ to the Olympic Games as a personal achievement and the socio-cultural role that he aspired to fulfil as an ambassador for black sport and a role model for the youth. The latter is emphasized by his commitment to education throughout his later career as a teacher and coach in economically depressed communities in South Africa and later in Canada. Eland’s commitment to fulfilling a socio-cultural role was confirmed by Dennis Brutus who claimed that Eland was a pioneering contributor to the South African nonracial sport movement.⁶¹ Chris de Broglio, General Secretary of the South African Non-Racial Olympic Committee, also wrote in a recommendation letter on 24 February 1982 that Eland’s “determination and initiative created a new situation in the fight against racial discrimination in sport in South Africa... [laying] the foundation for the challenge to the system of sports apartheid.”⁶² These comments highlight that Eland inspired the antiapartheid sport movement and made the impact that he desired to have.

THE RON ELAND TYPE

Ron Eland’s story and experience was not unique. It was previously mentioned that Precious McKenzie, whom Eland briefly coached, competed under similar circumstances for Great Britain. McKenzie was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1936 and won the Natal 1958 bantam weightlifting title in South Africa. Despite his achievements, as with Eland, he was prevented from representing South Africa at the 1958 Empire and Commonwealth Games and the 1960 Olympic Games due to his official racial classification as “colored.”⁶³ In an interview with the official Team New Zealand (NZ) Olympics channel, he stated, “[The] National Party Government there made it very clear, no black would be allowed to represent their white country.”⁶⁴ Further, he refused to represent South Africa at the 1964 Olympics as he would only be allowed to compete if he travelled segregated from his white team members. McKenzie and his family moved to England where he competed for Great Britain and won gold at the 1966, 1970, and 1974 Empire and Commonwealth Games as well as competing at the 1968, 1972,



Ron Eland’s physical strength is evident in this physique shot used for the cover of *Health and Strength* magazine in 1952. Besides Olympic weightlifting, Eland also competed in bodybuilding and finished third in the 1948 Mr. Universe Competition.

and 1976 Olympics, placing ninth, ninth, and thirteenth. McKenzie was awarded an MBE from Queen Elizabeth II in 1974, “became a friend of the Royal Family, wrote a book, attended future Olympic Games and world championships and became a television personality.”⁶⁵ Upon moving to New Zealand, he won the 1978 Bantamweight Commonwealth Games title. Online publications and recognitions about McKenzie’s achievements are limited in South African media. However, McKenzie was inducted

into the South African Hall of Fame on 5 December 2006 and commented that “[being] recognized by my homeland makes all the past sacrifices seem worthwhile. I can die a happy man now.”⁶⁶ The South African website zar.co.za—Proud to be South African—lists McKenzie as a special South African in a section described as “Those who have inspired us. Those who have defined us.”⁶⁷ [Editors’ note: McKenzie was also world champion and a world record holder in powerlifting.]

It appears that McKenzie only attained a true feeling of accomplishment upon recognition in South Africa, his country of birth, and not through his many international weightlifting championship victories and gold medal achievements. We rightfully ask, “How many other Ron Eland types were there and how many are there today whose stories are still to be added to South African weightlifting literature through examinations of private archives?”

PARTING THOUGHTS

In conclusion, the private archival collection of Ron Eland revealed experiences and circumstances not present in formal academic literature. Our narrative demonstrated that it was insufficient to rely on public records as sole sources to create sport historical narratives. However, we emphasized that the subjectivity of these archives could not be ignored because this would lead to one-sided deductions based on subjective materials. This is why we attempted to critically situate the circumstances surrounding Eland’s participation at the 1948 Olympic Games within a broader socio-political context. Our research indicated a need for further examination of the diplomatic relationship between the South African and British Olympic committees as well as Britain’s changing attitude toward and legislations for colonial athletes post 1948 in order to further analyze the socio-political dynamics surrounding Eland’s exclusion from South Africa’s Olympic team. Further, it can be useful to search for archival material of the now defunct SAAWA and to interview weightlifters who competed during the apartheid regime. This may lead to the discovery of more historically marginalized athletes so that their experiences may be recorded through their private archives.

This article is, to our knowledge, the first formal study on the Olympic experiences of black South African weightlifters. We repeat our research question: “Can Olympic weightlifting historical distortions be sufficiently rectified through a historical examination of private archives?” Our analysis reveals that interrogating private collections is undoubtedly an important method of telling the stories of athletes who never appeared in official record books. Further, the missing information within private archives and new questions that arise from this open up many more avenues for future research that can tell the stories of previously excluded weightlifters in complex ways. The question may therefore not be whether historical distortions can be sufficiently rectified through private archives but rather whether the use thereof, as demonstrated by this article, is necessary to attempt a rectification. Although Eland cannot be considered an official South

African participant at the Olympic Games, his story, nevertheless, challenges the one-sided (white) narrative of existing weightlifting literature.

Ron Eland was inducted into the South African Sports Hall of Fame posthumously in 2007. His contributions to inspiring the antiapartheid sport movement make him an important figure in the history of South African Olympic (weightlifting) history. We therefore encourage further research in this area by not simply adding names and performance results into the history books but rather by stimulating conversations about how SAOWH narratives are created through private archives that include the socio-political contexts and personal experiences of athletes. In light of this, it may be appropriate to question whether Eland indeed did travel five thousand miles to lift for South Africa after all.

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