

OLYMPIC GAMES WILL SURELY MISS ABEL KIVIAT

*Elliott Denman**

Abel Kiviat would have loved Barcelona. Barcelona would have loved Abel Kiviat.

So it was written in the Games plan. Mr. Olympian - the senior citizen of all senior citizens - was scheduled to play a ceremonial role in the opening of the Games of the Olympics this summer.

There was every expectation that he would be able to join the torch relay and carry the classic Grecian flame - trot with it for a few strides, perhaps - in its final meters around the Olympic track.

All of Catalonia - the area around Barcelona which doesn't really consider itself Spain - would cheer the man who won a silver medal in the 1500 meter run 80 years earlier, at the Stockholm Olympic Games. Indeed, the rest of the world would join in the most incredible salute one would ever imagine.

Of course, it would be the job of the Olympic host city organizing committee to select the athlete(s) who would actually mount the top of the stadium and ignite the flame that would burn brightly over the course of the Games. But, as in all relays, the glory would be shared and a good piece of it this time would be Abel Kiviat's.

Kiviat planned to do all this one month past his 100th birthday.

On June 23, 1991, the Manchester Township resident had been the guest of honor at a New York Road Runners Club birthday party saluting his 99th. He seemed to be full of all the familiar vinegar. The array of old wisecracks was still there. There was talk of old rivals and past races - and all optimism about the year ahead. But Abel Kiviat - the New York City all scholastic shortstop of 1909, before focusing all his energies on middle distance running - was already into extra innings.

And now he is gone, the last out written against his name.

It did seem that this marvel would run on forever, that he'd actually outrun Father Time himself, that he'd never leave the marathon course.

The Great Scorer ruled that it was not to be.

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Now they will have to get on with the Opening at Barcelona without him.

Alas, the Ceremonies just won't be what they might have been.

Still, as the new Games loom, the tears must be held to a precious few. Abel Kiviat's God-given share of life was far longer than most. And he played out every inning to the fullest.

There were all those storied deeds of his youth.

There was stardom at Staten Island's Curtis High, followed by stardom for New York's Irish American Athletic Club.

Followed by stardom for the United States Olympic Team.

There were those world records he set and the national championships he earned and the medals and trophies he collected.

There was the fine woman he married and the family he raised and the years he spent at work in New York City's court system.

The years rolled on, but Abel Kiviat never strayed too far away from his favorite sport. There he was, for years and years, serving it as a volunteer official at meets large and small. Most certainly, the lifeblood of the sport is an ongoing supply of athletes dedicated to the training and perseverance necessary for success. Just as certainly, there would be no sport without the men and women serving it as officials.

Are these really times that try men's souls? Track and Field keeps going only because it maintains a supply of souls trying men's times.

Abel Kiviat, to be sure, was there all along.

Still, he was "rediscovered" in later life by such people as Stan Saplin and Bud Greenspan and Johnny Carson and the royal family of Sweden.

He became a celebrity all over again - and the particular hero of the New Jersey Governor's Council on Sports and Fitness.

Not long after the Seoul Olympic Games of 1988, Kiviat at last met Manchester Township's other Olympian - Andrew Valmon. They talked of track meets gone by and track meets to come. Valmon ran the 400-meter final at the World Championships in Tokyo, as the world said goodbyes to Abel Kiviat.

Life and sport run on.

But no matter what some athletic shoe company ads declare — there is always a finish line.