

MEL WATMAN - OBITUARIES



"It is with great sadness that we have to acknowledge the passing of Mel Watman earlier today. To the sport of Athletics he was foremost in reporting our sport from his background as a leading international statistician whose enthusiasm was not dimmed even until the end. When speaking to him just a few days ago, when his terminal cancer had become more widely known, he commented how lucky he had been to spend his life writing about his track and field heroes and heroines and travelling the world to do so. The working relationship between Mel and Track & Field Tours was a long and fruitful one with his ranking data part of our recent Tokyo 2020 / 21 Supporters Information guide as it has been over many decades at all major events. The thrill of working with him, "talking track" and assisting him promote some of his more recent books to clients was an extension of reading his reports as a teenage athlete in the old pocket size "AW" - back then seeing your name in the results that Mel curated brought such joy to us novices of the sport. The magazine under Mel's stewardship was the route into a lifetime love of a sport for so many of us and he was a very major influence – the David Attenborough of Athletics in our time perhaps? It is hard to believe that chatting to Mel in early August, when he was his usual lively self, will now be just a fond memory of a much valued friendship. Mel leaves his wife Pat who he had cared for so lovingly in recent years whose nieces and nephews will now take up the baton now Mel's leg has been run". **David Barnett / T&FT**

Sebastian Coe / World Athletics President:

"For as long as most of us in athletics can remember, Mel Watman has been a colossal figure both on and off the page. Informed, insightful and passionate; a life lived through athletics. He will be missed."

Peter Matthews / Athletics International:

"With the utmost sadness I have to report that **Mel Watman** died on September 17. He will be very fondly remembered by hundreds if not thousands of athletics enthusiasts all over the world, and it was my privilege to have known this kind and gentle man and worked with him for over half a century.

The following was written, I think, for his induction to the England Athletics Hall of Fame in 2013 and I have lightly edited and updated it."

Mel was born on 26 May 1938 in Hackney, London and has been a North Londoner throughout his life living most recently with his beloved wife Pat in Stanmore. Pat, for whom Mel was the full-time carer in recent years, and who had just been moved into the same nursing home as Mel, She was able to be at his bedside holding his hand when he died peacefully.

He was, as he says, "hooked on athletics" from the age of 12 when he watched the 1950 AAA Championships and started work as a journalist on his local paper in 1955, and learnt his trade that way.

He was a keen, if not especially talented athlete, and was a member of his successful school team at Hackney Downs and a member of Grafton AC, a steeplechaser. From an early age he had the ambition of editing *Athletics Weekly*, and he started writing for them in the 1950s. He joined AW as assistant editor in 1961 and succeeded Jimmy Green as Editor in 1968. He remained in that job until after the LA Olympic Games of 1984 when he stepped down, but remained as consultant editor until 1988. He was unhappy (obviously) with the EMAP takeover of the magazine, but as ever was loyal. However, when *Athletics Today* was set up he was its co-editor with Randall Northam from 1989 to 1993.

Concerned about the collation and publication of international results and news when AT ended publication, he set up *Athletics International* with Peter Matthews, and this immediately became and remains the world's foremost provider of deep international results. He has also in recent years continued to contribute to AW.

For AW, he was the youngest accredited correspondent at the 1958 Commonwealth Games in Cardiff and at the 1960 Olympic Games in Rome – going on to very many major championships, including nine Olympic Games. He semi-retired from such trips after Atlanta 1996, but of course was there at London 2012. He was a co-founder of NUTS (National Union of Track Statisticians) in 1958 and a founder member of the British Athletics Writers' Association in 1962 (sometime Chairman of BAWA).

He wrote and compiled several books from his *Encyclopedia of Athletics*, first published in 1964, which went into five editions, several editions of *Who's Who in World Athletics*, *Olympic Track & Field History*, *All-time Greats of British Athletics* and most recently his *Official History of the AAA 1880-2010* and its companion volume the *Official History of the WAAA 1922-2012*. He also edited a mammoth work by the IAAF to celebrate its centenary. He long had a huge reputation for knowledge-able reporting with an acute sense of history and a notable ability to write concisely and accurately.

Known as a keen traveller for years, many of us were not aware of his love of gambling, particularly the slots in Las Vegas and Atlantic City and he made numerous pilgrimages there. He had his successes, but generally contented himself with reasonable losses. Such capitalist leanings being quite at odds with his socialist views!

Subsequent to the above he published *My Life in Athletics* by Mel Watman, 510 pages, 234 x 155mm, in 2018. In this marvellous book Mel weaves what is a personalised history of athletics from the 1950s with his own story and reminiscences. The text includes much of his original writing from *Athletics Weekly*, *Athletics Today* and *Athletics International*. (I note that a few copies are available from Amazon – PJM).

Stan Greenberg* / former BBC Athletics Statistician:

"I had known Mel from a day in 1955, at Victoria Park athletics track, when Alf Wilkins and I were, needless to say, talking about athletics. We happened to mention a German sprinter named Heinz Futterer, and this youngster butted in as he was surprised anyone else knew of the German. That was the start of a friendship which, as far as I am concerned, reached a point where I looked on Mel as the brother I never had. Rarely did a week go by without at least a couple of phone calls or, in more recent years, e-mails - often both. Also I was privileged to be his best man when he got married to his adored Pat. He and I spent many a happy hour at athletics meetings both at home and abroad, and usually got together despite his reporting work and my BBC involvement often intruding. He will be greatly missed by enthusiasts all over the athletics world, but nowhere as much as by me."



Stan & Mel together – an enduring stadium sight: the “brains trust” of British Athletics

(* a regular T&FT client since retiring from his BBC post)

Mark Butler / current BBC Athletics Statistician:

"Mel Watman had been there for all my life in athletics. Reading his words in the first of the *Birds Eye* yearbooks he compiled with Ron Pickering ignited my passion for the sport at age 13. I then discovered that every week, I could find such reporting in a pocket-sized magazine called 'Athletics Weekly', which Mel edited at the time. My parents agreed that I could replace my weekly comic subscription with it, and my interest in the sport was taken to a new level by Mel and his team.

I met him for the first time at the 1979 European Cup Final in Turin. One of the highlights there was the first ever sub-two minute 800m by a British woman, when Christina Boxer benefited from being dragged around in a super-fast race. Or so I concluded, until reading Mel's thoughtful counterpoint one week later in AW – “dragged” implies a certain passivity

whereas Chris fought, and fought hard, to stay in contact with much faster competitors than herself.” That example of generous reporting stayed with me. He was always on the side of the fair-playing hard-working athlete, giving credit where it was due. But also unafraid to comment, with great authority, on the issues which blight our sport, such as doping, and the mayhem currently caused by new shoe technology. How lucky we are to have Mel's event reports right up to Tokyo 2021. We now know what an enormous effort it must have been for him to complete those, just days ago.

While AW changed direction, Mel's output was available in *Athletics Today*, then *Athletics International*. It was the former publication where I got to work with him closely in 1989/1990. He had the knack of not only correcting all manner of typing and grammatical mistakes, but doing so in a way which made it very simple to make those corrections. This was a much-appreciated talent as I made my way in my first job in athletics. Working from a desk which looked improbably cluttered, Mel was able to pick out the book, magazine or paper scrap needed for the job in hand. If he didn't already know an answer, he knew where to find it, and quickly.

Having read of Mel's own excitement at attending his first Olympics I felt compelled to ring him to express my own thrill at being at the stupendous opening ceremony at my first Games, Atlanta 1996. I'd forgotten that the time difference meant it was the middle of the night in Middlesex, but he took my call with great warmth and patience. Only once did I ever witness Mel being cross. So unexpected and uncharacteristic was the moment that the deserving target of his annoyance was put in their place for the rest of the day.

Up to very recently, no British meeting was complete for me without having compared notes with Mel and Stan Greenberg in the tribune before heading home. It was heartwarming for me to see that the powers-that-be assigned prime viewing spots to Mel (and Stan) at the 2012 Olympics and 2017 World Championship, both staged just 25 miles from Mel's home. I didn't feel that such major championships were truly over until I'd read Mel's version of events in *Athletics International*, which he edited so superbly with Peter Matthews. He invariably brought up some salient detail which the rest of us had missed along with a great sense for jokes and puns. “Slinging in the rain” was one line which I've borrowed myself on at least one occasion at rain-soaked throws contests. He was a hero to me more than any athlete.

For more than a generation, we have enjoyed reading the wisest of words about our sport from Mel Watman. Without his point of reference, it will never be the same again.”

Other Tributes on Athletics websites:

<https://athleticsweekly.com/athletics-news/legendary-athletics-writer-mel-watman-dies-from-cancer-aged-83-1039949759/>

<https://www.worldathletics.org/news/news/mel-watman-obituary>