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Roger Bannister; Michelle Akers

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - ROGER BANNISTER; MICHELLE AKERS
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Over the past week the world of sport has been remembering one of the most significant achievements of the past century, Roger Bannister's running of the first sub-four-minute mile at Oxford on May 6, 1954. Bannister's time was 3:59.4. The current record is 3:43.13 set in 1999 by Hicham el-Guerrouj of Morocco.

I can't say that the world of track and field commanded much of my attention at the time, but I do remember the event and I do remember hearing the many discussions preceding Bannister's achievement. The possibility of any human actually cracking the four-minute mark, as I recall it, could at times be quite heated, and I do remember that for some reason "four minutes" had acquired a mystical quality about it.

I remember also that when it happened, Bannister's record-breaking performance was hailed as one of the greatest sporting achievements of our time. As I recall I had no doubt that this was so.

Bannister's achievement came in conjunction with Hillary's conquest of Everest and the coronation of the new Queen of England. Coming at time when--Churchill notwithstanding-- the sun was rapidly setting on the British Empire, Bannister's achievement let in a bit of fresh air to the society that was still not completely recovered from the ravages of the world war. This was something that Bannister himself recognized at the time and something that makes it an event whose significance stretched well beyond the confines of the track.

Four minutes was more a psychological barrier than a physical one. This was clearly demonstrated when Bannister's record was surpassed within two months. As a result, almost immediately a new discussion began. How fast could a human being run the mile? What was the limit? Certainly there must be some absolute point beyond which a human could not go. When asked about this point recently Bannister said that he believes the limit is at 3:30, something which he says he predicted in 1954 and which he still believes to be the case.

The search for absolutes is always a tricky business and on the threshold of genetic manipulation and better living through chemistry the notion of such a limit is not something that any longer seems a certainty. It should also be added that the

changes taking place in human evolution and the constant advances in training techniques raise additional doubts about the existence of any absolute limit on human possibilities.

It is however an interesting and perplexing question. Are there certain limits to what the body can achieve? Most would say yes, but when pressed to delineate such limits, most would back away. We know there must be a limit, but it seems to be part of our nature, or is it part of our culture, that pulls us back from a demarcation point.

If there were an absolute beyond which we cannot go, a barrier such as four minutes for a mile, then who would any longer try to go there? We don't want to see beyond the horizon where the wall exists, and indeed we don't want to envision the existence of such a point. In sport this is expressed in the simple maxim, "Records are made to be broken." Take that away and sport would change forever. Take that away and life would change forever.

One person who never thinks in any terms of limitation is Michelle Akers who this past week was named to the U.S. Soccer Hall of Fame. She will be inducted on October 9. It will be a richly deserved honor for the University of Central Florida graduate.

In her prime Michelle Akers was considered the best soccer player in the world, and when Pele chose his top 125 best living players Akers was one of only two Americans on that list.

While at the University of Central Florida Michelle Akers made the Lady Knights one of the top soccer programs in the country, and her presence here attracted several other world-class players to the campus.

In 1991 Akers led the U.S. team to the first Women's World Championship in China with a dominating performance scoring ten goals. She scored the first goal in the history of the national team, scored 105 goals while playing for the national team, including the clinching penalty kick in the 1999 semi-final against Brazil.

In the later part of her career Michelle Akers suffered several health problems encountering repeated bouts with chronic fatigue syndrome, but it did not prevent her from a continuing string of achievements on the soccer pitch. She continues her involvement in soccer in Central Florida conducting soccer camps, consulting

with the UCF soccer program, and promoting the game wherever she goes.

Her selection to the Hall of Fame is a richly deserved honor, and in her own way she broke barriers that were just as psychologically limiting as the Four Minute Barrier cracked by Roger Bannister.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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