



BOA Chairman Colin Moynihan makes presentation of 1952 medals to Neil Nugent (with torch) and Sir Derek Day Philip Barker

After 58 years, Helsinki Hockey stars get their medals

They had to wait fifty eight years, but two of Great Britain's Hockey players from 1952 have finally received the bronze medals they earned at the Helsinki Olympic Games.

Derek Day and Neil Nugent both played their part in getting Great Britain into the Olympic semi finals, but because organisers mistakenly only provided eleven medals, both men missed out when the team drew lots to see who should receive one. They were forced to watch the medal ceremony from the stands as their team mates mounted the podium.

Only now has the omission been rectified, thanks to the efforts of a team mate Tony Nunn and some delving by 1988 gold medallist Richard Leman and Jan Paterson of the British Olympic Association. The IOC ordered the striking of two new medals from the original moulds. BOA Chairman Lord Moynihan made the presentation during the interval of the Great Britain vs. Germany match in the Four Nations tournament held Nottingham in July. Nugent said:

it really was a very strange experience because you must remember was this was about something I did nearly sixty years ago and here I am being given something for that. So it was odd, but it was very moving and I enjoyed it immensely.

The pair were accompanied by their surviving team mates and the occasion was a chance to look back. Day who

did at least receive a knighthood from the Queen after a career as a diplomat said:

It meant a great deal but it didn't then have the cachet and the glamour that it does now, but actually to be in an Olympic games and to see all these other athletes performing and to be a modest part of it yourself was very exciting.

The British team which travelled to Helsinki were expected to do well. As silver medallists in 1948 They had been seeded. The preparation of the team remained basic. Day said:

For the Olympics, those of us who lived in London were expected to get together once a week and train. We didn't have anyone to train us, we just went up to some sports ground, ran around three or four times, hit a hockey ball a little bit, then decided it was time to have a drink, so it was a totally different approach to the game.

Neil Nugent was serving in the Royal Air Force at the time.

We played every week in the run up, we went to Lilleshall, there were two teams and you never knew if you had made the Olympic side or not, until I noticed I was beginning to be chosen to play with the players I thought were the better ones.

The hockey team were on the first flight of the British Olympic Association "Airlift" which left England on July 11th.¹ They were joined by the rowing team for a flight in an RAF York, converted from its wartime duties for the purpose but by no means a comfortable flight.

Neil Nugent remembered the Opening Ceremony. The team paraded at the Opening Ceremony behind flag bearer Harold Whitlock, a gold medallist in 1952.

My abiding recollection of the games was this. You think streaking is modern, it isn't, everybody was there in their lovely uniforms with their flags and we started marching around the arena and suddenly, despite all the security three vestal virgins in flowing white robes that you could see through nothing else were at the head of the procession and walked A round and everybody was saying who are they? Where did they come from? I think they were some kind of protest. This was in 1952 and I remember that so well.

What he had seen of course was the lady who became known as the "Peace Angel." Great Britain beat Belgium 1-0 to reach the semi final. Nugent was now even more confident of success.

I genuinely believed that we would win the gold, I really did. Before the games our defence was really so good, I believed that we would hold out against any team and that we would score a goal.

In the semi final, they faced defending champions India. Day said:

They were the ones to beat. Certainly they had much more skilful stick work which was far in advance of ours. Ours was slightly traditional English hockey with hitting the ball a long way there was none of this very close harmony that you get now. We had our chances but I think they were the better team.

India scored three times in the first half but Great Britain were already at a disadvantage as Nugent recalled.

What hasn't been said was, I was injured about half way through. There were no substitutes, so I moved to the left wing where I hobbled about and effectively there were ten men. No one said anything about that but that is what happened.

The British Olympic Association's own report on the tournament by Assistant Manager MG Cowlshaw did not mention this, nor did it record what happened after the semi final. Day said:

There were two goalkeepers. I had played in the earlier games and I merely suggested to the manager that they might like to give the other goalkeeper a game. It seemed a pity to come all the way to Helsinki and not play. So he decided, perfectly understandably, to ask the Welsh keeper Graham Dadds to play in the bronze medal match."

With Nugent injured, his place was taken by John Taylor. Only then did it become clear that the organisers did not have sufficient medals to go round. Nugent recalled:

Robert Fison told me that he had drawn lots and, very sorry, you and Derek will not be getting a medal.

The match for third place and bronze medal between Great Britain and Pakistan was a stirring affair which reached its climax in the last five minutes.² Nugent went on:

I knew sitting in the stands with my crutches watching this game, that I was not going to get a medal out of this. I didn't mind, we had won, it didn't trouble me, not really.

Great Britain took a two goal lead through John Conroy and Robin Fletcher but Pakistan pulled a goal back and applied pressure in the closing stages. Britain held on to win 2-1. Nugent did have the chance to visit the main stadium and see some Athletics including the 5000m final.

I saw Zatopek run and I saw Chataway fall and very bravely carried on but he was done for, that's why he fell, he wasn't going to win.

Stalin had allowed the Soviet Union to compete for the first time but the climate was one of distrust towards the West. Their team snubbed the Olympic Village and stayed apart from the rest of the teams. Nugent said:

The Russians had a separate village, that was a strange thing, we were supposed to be together but we were not.

The team returned home on July 25th – the day after the Olympic Final. "There weren't enough seats for everyone so some of us sat on the floor of the plane" recalled Day. It was an episode which recalled their predicament with the medals.

For both, this was their only Olympic Games. Derek Day had joined the foreign office and had a distinguished career as a diplomat. Neil Nugent's service in the Royal Air Force forced him to give up the game.

This was the problem, I was squadron leader operations and gradually I had to make up my mind what I was going to do and had to take up golf.

In 1988, Great Britain's men won gold at the Seoul Olympic Games. Richard Leman recalls how the management made sure that reserve goalkeeper Veryan Pappin and Stephen Martin were brought on as substitutes in the closing minutes of the final to make sure they got a medal. "We were not going to take any chances," he said.

All interviews conducted on 14th July 2010

Philip Barker

Notes and References

- 1 *British Olympic Association Official Report* – World Sports, p. 106.
- 2 *Ibid* p 70