



British athletes competing in the 1924 Paris Olympics are spotlighted in "Chariots of Fire," an inspirational film.

the movies
Louise Snider

Elevating theme marks true story of Paris Olympics

When did you last see a movie with a hero you cared about? Someone who acted on principle? Someone who followed his conscience?

And when did you last see a movie that left you feeling better about the human race?

"Chariots of Fire" (PG) is such a movie. The true story of two British athletes who participated in the Paris Olympics of 1924, it is so far superior to the usual sports-inspiration movie that there is scarcely a point of comparison.

Insights into character, absorbing drama, action, humor and astute observations of manners and social class are just some of the film's qualities. To those you can add incisive, and at times very moving, dialogue.

The impact of "Chariots of Fire" is even more surprising when you consider that this is not a movie about underdogs. Any movie can win over an audience to root for the underdog. "Rocky" is a good example of that type. The protagonists of "Chariots of Fire" are special people who heed special callings.

HAROLD ABRAHAMSON (Bob Cross) is a Cambridge law student and the son of a wealthy Jewish businessman. He runs from a desperate need to prove himself in a Gentile world. His response to the invidious anti-Semitism around him is a fierce competitiveness that drives him to distinguish himself.

He is not content to be the fastest runner at Cambridge, or even in England. He must be the fastest in the world. His desire is so great that even victory may not quench it.

Eric Liddell (Ian Charleson) hears a different calling. A devoutly religious Scotsman, he comes from a family engaged in missionary work. He plans to go to China with his sister to operate a mission there, but his plans are interrupted.

"God made me for a purpose," he says, "but he also made me fast."

Like the artists of an earlier age, Liddell regards his ability as a God-given gift he must honor by using. This very faith, however, which compels him to run also works against him.

His sister reprimands him for putting secular activities ahead of missionary work. British officials argue with him to put aside this religious conviction and run an Olympic heat on the Sabbath.

THE MOVIE cross cuts between both men as each finds his own way. There is an unbending determination about them that might almost put one off. If the director Hugh Hudson didn't also show us how engaging these two runners could be.

Scenes of Abrahamson belting out a chorus of Gilbert and Sullivan and Liddell glowing with sincerity as he describes his feelings easily win us over.

The movie is rich with fine performances, not only from the principals but the whole supporting cast. Ian Holm as Abrahamson's Italian-Arab coach, Sir John Gielgud as the headmaster and Alice Krige as Abrahamson's sweetheart especially stand out.

The acting is enhanced by a wealth of detail that establishes a dramatic atmosphere where traditions and hypocrisy reign side by side. Thus, the headmaster who chastises Abrahamson for pursuing his running career with ungentlemanly zeal also delights in the reflected glory from his student's successes.

The snobbish elitism of the establishment makes a stunning contrast with the blunt honesty and dedication of Liddell and Abrahamson.

For all these reasons, "Chariots of Fire" is a movie to thrill to and to savor. It says something about running, but it says much more about the human spirit and the inner fires that drive individuals to excel.



The human spirit is captured in this movie about runners who pursue their calling for different reasons.

what's at the movies

- ABSENCE OF MALICE (PG).** Sally Fields stars as a reporter who labels a labor leader (Paul Newman) in a murder case. Film written by former Detroit Free Press editor Kurt Luedtke.
- ARTHUR (PG).** Dudley Moore is a playboy millionaire in love with Liza Minnelli in this contemporary comedy.
- CINDERELLA (G).** Based on the French version of the rags-to-riches fairy tale written more than 300 years ago, this Disney classic is being distributed a fifth time to delight young and old audiences.
- HEARTLAND (PG).** A young widow with her 7-year-old daughter goes to work as a housekeeper for a Scottish widower. The two strong-willed individuals grow to share their love for the land and family commitment in drama set in Wyoming in 1910.
- MADMAN (R).** The idyllic atmosphere of a summer camp is shattered when a nightmare becomes reality.
- MODERN PROBLEMS (PG).** The misadventures of a lovesick air traffic controller, played by Chevy Chase.
- ON GOLDEN POND (PG).** Katharine Hepburn, Henry Fonda and Jane Fonda star in drama about an elderly couple, their daughter and the strength of the family relationship at the parents' summer place.
- RAGTIME (PG).** Based on the best-selling novel by E.L. Doctorow, the film takes in the events and personalities of the early '20s and features James Cagney's return to the screen as the New York City police commissioner.
- REDS (PG).** Sweeping film that encompasses 1917 Russian Revolution in story about American journalist John Reed and his love affair with Louise Bryant. Warren Beatty, Diane Keaton, and Jack Nicholson star.
- ROLLOVER (R).** Jane Fonda is a widow trying to run her husband's financial empire, and Kris Kristofferson is a troubleshooter who helps her tackle international opponents in this suspense thriller.
- SHARKY'S MACHINE (R).** Burt Reynolds is Tom Sharky, an undercover cop assigned to the vice squad, which he turns into his own "machine."
- SPETTERS (Unrated).** From Paul Verhoeven, director of "Turkish Delight" and "Soldier of Orange," comes a story of three young men and their dreams and one young woman with a goal and a plan.
- TAPS (PG).** George C. Scott is the head of a military academy and Timothy Hutton one of a group of cadets who are determined to save the academy from being closed when its survival is threatened by real estate development.

MOVIE RATING GUIDE

- G General audiences admitted.
- PG Parental guidance suggested. All ages admitted.
- R Restricted. Adult must accompany person under 18.
- X No one under 18 admitted.

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