

Beyond Sports



Timekeeping



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From the Feet of Heracles to Electronics

History does not tell us how the Ancient Greeks measured the athletes' performance. Legend has it, however, that Heracles, the patron of athletes, marked out the original olympic stadium with 600 footsteps imprinted in the pale sand—a distance the equivalent of 192.70 metres. The Romans, on the other hand, resorted to the abacus when trying to determine the winner of a chariot race.

Modern timekeeping has its origins in Britain, where the chronometer has been in use since 1731. The invention of the watch pushed earlier methods of timekeeping into oblivion, and inventors and skilled craftsmen, especially in Switzerland, worked tirelessly to improve this instrument. But man's inventive genius was not to stop there. Other techniques were appearing and being developed, parallel to watchmaking, among them the use of electricity to transmit synchronized impulses between the starting grid and a small box placed on the finishing line, where the traditional tape, if it is used at all, now

has no more than symbolic value. Modern timekeeping techniques have done away with the possibility of error. They include, among other innovations: equipment which automatically records the time of any athlete, animal or vehicle; complex electronic installations with integrated circuits; photoelectric cells driven by quartz watch mechanisms; cameras to film the end of a race; instant replay TV cameras which allow officials to view a doubtful sequence as many times as they wish.

The development of sport goes hand in hand with the battle against the clock. "Objective" performances, which not long ago were a goal to be realized, are now no more than a starting base. They testify to the athlete's ability to conquer ever-widening horizons. Technological progress now makes it possible to time athletes' performances to within ten thousandths of a second, something which is happening more and more frequently.

For a long time, records stood according to the verdict of timekeepers with stopwatches