

Marathon men run into trouble

INSIDE TRACK

Nick Pitt

THE London Marathon — the race, the phenomenon, the charity — is in crisis. One governor is resigning. Another, Peter Yarranton, the chairman of the Sports Council no less, is threatening to do the same unless he receives "the answers I see are necessary". Writs for libel are flying.

At the centre of the controversy are Chris Brasher and John Disley, who were the inspiration and founders of the event, and who have since been its race director (Brasher) and course director (Disley).

Last Wednesday, a Channel 4 television programme made by Duncan Campbell, the investigative reporter who has himself run in the London Marathon, made a series of accusations against Brasher and Disley. Brasher and Disley attempted, and failed, to get a High Court injunction preventing the screening of the programme.

The accusations against Brasher and Disley did not all relate to the London Marathon. Those that did can be summarised as follows:

1. That Disley and Brasher used their position in the London Marathon to promote their business distributing running shoes.

2. That monies which should have been paid directly to charity were retained by the London Marathon company.

3. That consultancy payments were made by the London Marathon to a company controlled by the wives of Brasher and Disley.

To take each in turn. It is not the first time that the apparent conflict of interest between Brasher and Disley's work for the Marathon and the promotion of their own running-shoe business has raised eyebrows. It was pointed out in these pages as long ago as 1982 by Inside Track.

In the early years of the Marathon, Brasher and Disley were involved in the distribution of New Balance shoes, and more often than not their company, Fleetfoot Ltd, secured the right to advertise in the mail-shot that the Marathon sends to all entrants. During that time Brasher lost no opportunity to extol the virtues of New Balance.

In later years, however, Brasher and Disley severed their connection with New Balance and became involved with Reebok shoes, first as distributors, and later, after selling Fleetfoot Ltd to Reebok, as officials of Reebok. As the programme showed, it was then Reebok that almost invariably secured the Marathon mailing-shot rights.

Brasher and Disley point out that the bidding for the mail-shot was carried out scrupulously and without intervention on their part. And whenever Brasher and Disley's companies won the bidding, they did so with the largest bid.

Quantifying the benefit of the mail-shot is impossible, but it can hardly have been negligible. What is clear is that Brasher and Disley's business was spectacularly successful, and has made them both millionaires.

The second criticism, that monies that should have gone to charity were retained by the Marathon, highlights the conflict between the Marathon as a fun run trying to maximise its contribution to charity, and a top-class international race trying to attract elite runners.

The TV programme alleged that Brasher favoured the latter, and was manipulative in so doing. In particular it claimed that more than once he had understated the surplus made by the event, which meant that more money was held within the Marathon, and less passed on for distribution to its beneficiaries.

There is no suggestion that the monies retained were for the personal benefit of Brasher and Disley, but that they were used to attract top-class runners to the event, as well as to wine and dine their agents, and pay for trips to persuade them to take part.

The third criticism is perhaps the most serious.

Ice-cold Alex makes it ladies' day at Doncaster

SO THE lady was not for turning, as 24 sorry-looking males found to their cost. Alex Greaves, who has been whipping up a sand-storm in the minor leagues of the all-weather tracks took to the turf with devastating effect when she stormed home on Amenable to win Doncaster's Lincoln handicap, the first big prize of the Flat season.

With a string of successes on the synthetic surfaces in the past year, Greaves had been dubbed the "Queen of the All-Weather". It was a patronising epithet that had rankled with the 22-year-old rider and after dismounting from Amenable she understandably took pride in announcing: "I think I have proved I'm a jockey now."

And how dramatically the diminutive Yorkshire lass did it, disobeying orders to take the first leg of the Spring Double by the scruff of the neck on the 22-1 outsider.

David Barron, the trainer of Amenable, had instructed Greaves to restrain the six-year-old at the rear of the field as long as possible to use his late burst to maximum effect.

As they raced past halfway, ice-cold Alex sat totally unmoved with at least three-quarters of the field in front of her, and when she made her move Amenable scythed them all down with unbelievable ease. Thus, Greaves found herself in front with more than a furlong left to run, wondering whether she had played her hand too soon and might yet have the greatest triumph of her brief career dashed from her grasp.

But, having gained four

straight successes on the all-weather, Amenable was almost certainly the fittest horse in the race, and while the rest were buckling the speed to the line like an arrow to win somehow from St. Ninian and Band On The Run.

Not only did Greaves dent male pride, she also confounded those who insisted that a low draw was vital in the soft ground.

Virtually the whole field tacked across to the far side of the course, but Greaves, who was drawn 23 of the 25 starters, launched her spectacular run up the centre of the track, but on the stands side of the main pack.

To Josh, it's nothing short of a National disgrace

REMEMBER the Grand National? Josh Gifford does. The man who won it 10 years ago with Aldaniti believes any resemblance to the race of that name to be run at Aintree on Saturday week is purely coincidental.

As champion jockey and now a leading trainer, Gifford can look back over a 30-year infatuation for the National with a passion that is still smouldering. The flame has dwindled, however, as the object of his desire has become ever easier to attain.

Big was definitely beautiful as far as Gifford is concerned. Before Aintree took the soft option and scaled down those mountainous fences, the National was a battle for survival that presented a fearsome challenge for horse and rider.

Jockeys would approach the race high on fear, like fighter

pilots preparing to lift off into enemy skies. "There was nothing else quite like the National. It was the most fantastic thrill just to ride in the race," Gifford said. "I took part in 10 Nationals and loved every one of them. The only regret when you pulled up after the finish was that you had to wait 12 months before you could go round again."

Despite his apprehension, Gifford's first ride over the National course went like a dream when he took the Topham Trophy on Dagnar Gifford: "The first time I saw the old National fences I didn't believe any horse could possibly get over them. And when I first jumped Becher's Brook it was like leaping off the top of the Eiffel Tower."

The National is still special. It's the climax to the season. As soon as I turn off the M1 onto the M6 I can feel the excitement building. Maybe

they will see others at last giving Greaves a chance at the highest level. Julie Krone has broken the mould in the United States, and Greaves deserves to be jousting head-to-head with Pat Eddery and Willie Carson on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, there was a warning shot from the first lady of jump racing, Jenny Pitman, after the silk-smooth triumph of her horse, Strong Gold at Newbury. Rumours concerning the defection of Pitman's Cheltenham Gold Cup winner, Garrison Savannah, from the Grand National, had sent shivers down

the spines of ante-post punters on the horizon, and Pitman later added substance to the gossip.

After Garrison Savannah's epic Cheltenham triumph, Pitman announced that the eight-year-old would try to become the only horse apart from Golden Miller to win the Gold Cup and the National in the same year. The trainer subsequently warned backers not to rush in as her horse has ongoing leg problems. Now

she is thinking twice about risking her champion in the National mayhem and is considering switching him to the less-arduous Martell Cup earlier on at the Aintree meeting.

Lester Piggott, eschewing the glamour of Doncaster, plumped instead for five rides at the relative obscurity of Lingfield and chalked up another milestone in his extraordinary career as he cruised home on La Masaas to record his first win on a synthetic surface.

As Piggott glanced round contemptuously at his toiling mount, the way that he has so often done in the past, it would have been a bold man who suggested that the passing years have robbed the great man of one iota of his genius.

According to Willie Carson, in a recent newspaper article, however, Old Stoneface, who later gained a second win on First Stage, should never have bothered to come back. The legend can never be rekindled, Carson said.

Try telling that to Piggott's legions of fans. After the 11-times champion astonished the racing world by pulling his riding boots back on again last October, punters pounced like hungry wolves when bookmakers offered him at 100-1 to win another title this season. Odds of 33-1 are still available, and the faithful may view that as the biggest steal since the Great Train Robbery.

CHAUVINISM is now a major problem in the Five Nations' championship, and in the wider world of international rugby. There is not nearly enough of it, not nearly enough scoundrels finding a last refuge in patriotism. It is now time to sink deep moats between nations.

As the tournament which ended so gloriously last weekend proved, international sports need sharp edges. It can do without the trappings of belligerent nationalism — the national anthems, the automatic assumption that the French are shifty — but it thrives on, depends on, strong national identity, jerseys bearing the national emblems and the massed followers ringing behind their team. You might find a kind of baselessness, perhaps even racism, in this fervour. Tough.

Those vital identities are becoming increasingly blurred. The Brian Smith affair proves the point. Smith, an Australian, departed for his homeland last week. He had just completed two seasons as

Rugby needs an injection of patriotism

Ireland's fly-half and had, the Irish claimed, promised faithfully that he would appear in their cause for the foreseeable future.

I believe he played for Ireland for two reasons. First, because the Irish were silly enough to accept him in a rush when he promised to turn green and follow Ireland after he claimed a surprised ancestor somewhere in the Irish outback.

Second, because the rules could not stop him. In international rugby the eligibility rules can be summarised thus: A. Anyone can play for anyone. B. Anyone can then play for someone else.

Ireland's team management professed themselves outraged at the cynicism which saw Smith leave immediately the championship was over and the shop windows shut. "We have wasted two years of preparations."

Ken Reid, of the IRFU, said: "The Irish were badly stung by their own opportunism."

The blurring is increasing. The only logical outcome, perhaps two World Cups down the line, is that the tournament will be nothing more than a meet of teams of strolling adventurers, of international cavaliers.

Both Australia and New Zealand will be Pacific Islands XV's — not because of legitimate migration from Fiji and Samoa, but because of bought-in players being rushed from the airport into the national squad. France have ridden roughshod over the objections of lesser unions such as the Ivory Coast and Morocco to press non-French chimes into French colours.

Scotland have caused hilarity by their ferocious lineage probing, finding Scottish ancestry 14 times removed. They have found the Gloucesters

rugby, too. Yet they have bravely imposed a six-year full-time residential qualifying period, and will allow lineage only back as far as grandparents.

I would only add to the Welsh attitude that once you have played for one country you should be stuck with it for good. Any set of eligibility laws will contain anomalies.

To have none at all is ludicrous and threatens a wholesale devaluation of a game which is soaring.

It seems that even England could be nudged towards the rent-a-player schemes. In the hour of victory, almost three-quarters of their formidable Grand Slam side talked about retiring after the World Cup.

The wavers probably had their minds made up last week when the RFU issued a terrifying document. It was the fixture programme for next season and it revealed

that international-squad players will come off two and a half years of continuous preparation for the World Cup — including yet another superfluous and even dangerous tour to Australia this summer — straight into the most concentrated programme of cup, league and international rugby ever imagined. It is no surprise that a concerted mass of England players and coaches moved towards the exit.

For their own good, I would beg just one more thing from England's heroes. Do not talk of retirement. By all means plan it provisionally, even set the date for it. But please, please, do not go public. I have always believed that declarations of intending retirement, or even of retirement at some date in the mid-future, become an intolerable weight on any sportsman.

Suddenly you are commit-

ted. People automatically assume your play is diminished. You are caught in a whirl of farewells — last game on this ground, retirement speech at that function, the last match for England, and so on. And once you have set in motion that unstoppable retirement bandwagon, and you grind off into the sunset, what happens if you regain the urge, if you find unfinished business on the sporting field?

The comeback syndrome, whether for sportsmen or rock bands, is desperately embarrassing. You do not need to suffer it if you have not already announced that you are going anywhere.

Nobody will feel cheated, nobody will feel anything but understanding for the current England players when they depart the game, because they have served England with wonderful commitment. But they could save themselves real pain if they go out suddenly, and unannounced, when they know for sure that their time has come.

Polonia triumph in fight to finish

David Hunn

AT ITS best, volleyball is one of the world's most watchable sports. We were some way short of the best at Crystal Palace yesterday, but at least the English cup final produced a stupendously exciting finish: Polonia beat Liverpool City 17-16.

The match barely came to life until the fifth and final set, for which the sport has a different scoring pattern. For four sets, points can only be scored by the team who are serving. A successful rally by the non-serving team brings them service, but not a point.

When a fifth set is played, every winning shot scores a point, every mistake loses one. The scoreboard is never still, the spectators are in a perpetual frenzy and the poor players are forced to live on a peak of intensity.

Polonia have not lost a fifth set this season. Their splendidly automatic and spirited squad came back from what might have been a humiliating fourth-set defeat to survive an assault that took Liverpool into the lead at 13-12, at 14-13 and again at 15-14.

Inspired by their captain, Jurk Jankowski, the England and Great Britain international, they kept their heads at the moments of greatest crisis — and there was none greater than when a serve by Danny Ho went out of court to give Liverpool that 15-14 lead.

Jankowski is a remarkable player, dynamic and volatile, whose athleticism and powerful smashing bring Polonia much of their success. His jump service, which he uses sparingly, is an alarming proposition for the receiver, who can be flattened by its power.

Though he is as English as anyone on the Liverpool side (four of whom are Irish and one Dutch), Jankowski retains appealing traces of his ancestry. "I will break my drinking ban now," he said after the match. "I must release my emotions."

The major surprise of the year in British volleyball was that Mallory failed to reach the final. They lost an electrifying semi-final to Polonia two weeks ago — also by 17-16 in the fifth.

Liverpool City are not in the Mallory class, but their very tall side proved extremely difficult to beat. Their blocking was effective throughout, and in Peter van Wijk and Graham Smith they had hitters who led them close to victory.

They were unlucky to lose Phil Newton, their England setter, to a dramatic attack of cramp in the fourth set. After the customary manipulation failed to revive his legs, he had to be carried off.

Polonia lost Shaun Poole, their Irish international, with a damaged ankle in the third set. It is amazing, given the immense physical effort expended, the desperate dives and the mighty leaps, that more damage is not done.

To be honest, the early sets did little to invigorate the uncommitted in the crowd, and although the enthusiasm of the fans was noisy enough, even they must have been disappointed by the general standard of play. Liverpool took the first and fourth, 15-12 and 15-3, and Polonia the second and third, 15-9 and 15-7.

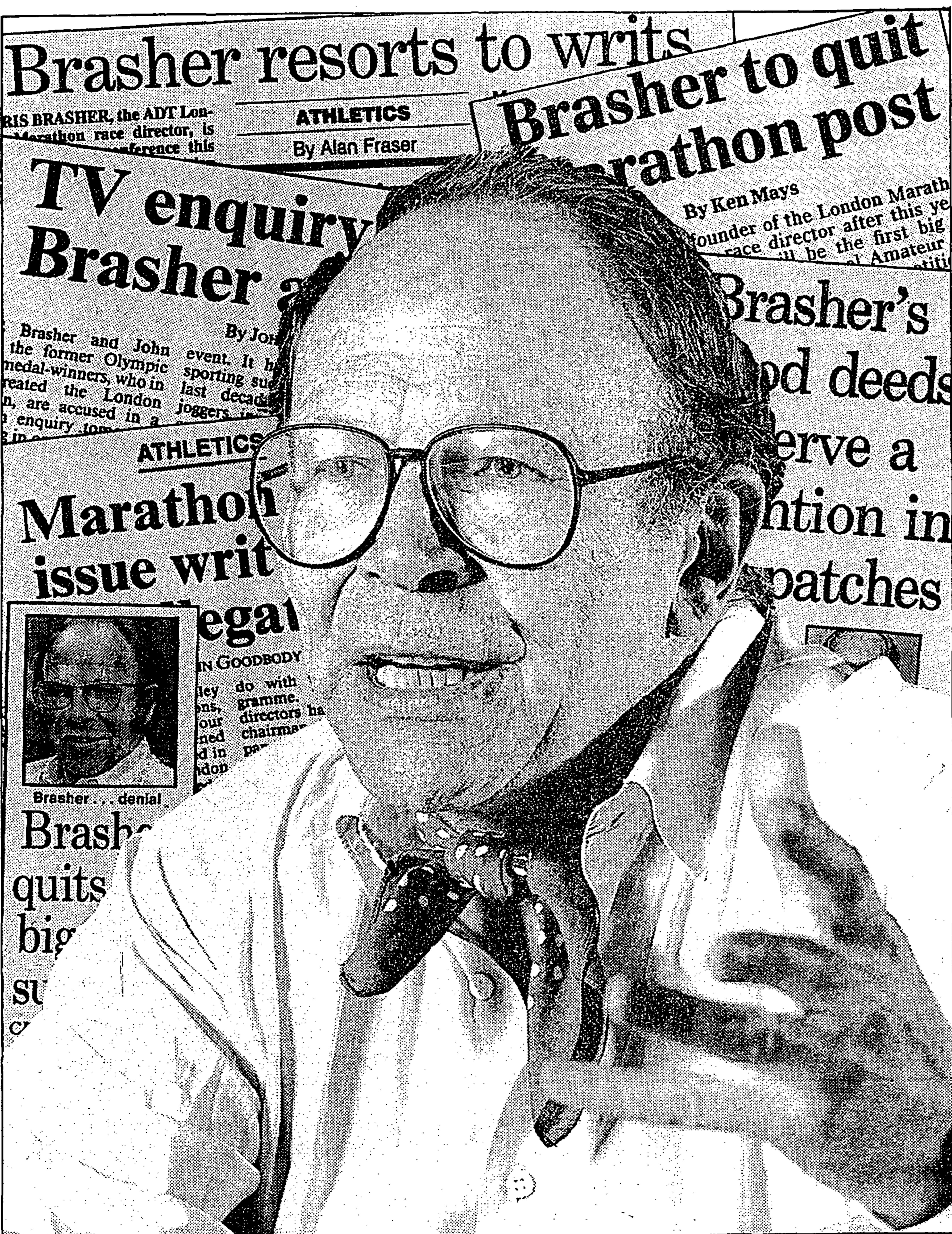
It needed the frantic excitement of the fifth set to rouse the blood, and it was unfortunate that there were two lengthy interruptions to the play. Volleyball requires the players to rotate their positions on court at every point, to ensure that all players are competent in all departments of the game.

Polonia made a mess of this and lost a point in the fifth set when the wrong player served. It took the most earnest consultation between courtside officials to sort it out.

Volleyball seldom makes a mark on the consciousness of the average all-round sports fan, but it thrives out of sight. A year ago the English Volleyball Association appointed the first fully professional coach in the British game, Ralph Hippolyte, and the whole structure of coaching is changing.

"When I first came here," Hippolyte said, "the national team was weaker than a European third division club side, and it takes time and resources to build that up to real national strength." He is determined to do that by concentrating not just on the top, but on the thousands of children who play the game. You cannot do anything worthwhile, he says, until you have a well-integrated youth system.

"I saw my appointment as an opportunity to establish a school of volleyball in a country where volleyball is hardly known. You can't have a major nation, a first-world country, without volleyball."



STEPHEN JONES

ter club a happy hunting ground, and the Gloucester players are vastly amused as yet another dyed-in-the-wool Westcountryman suppresses a smirk and goes off for his Scottish trial.

It makes you proud and admiring of the Welsh stance. Wales are desperate for players. They could be forgiven for inventing the odd ancestor. They have some powerful and semi-resident New Zealanders in their club

rugby, too. Yet they have bravely imposed a six-year full-time residential qualifying period, and will allow lineage only back as far as grandparents.

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