

Huggins, Mike ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2789-4756> (2014) Book review: Only gold matters: Cecil Griffiths, the exiled Olympic champion. *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 31 (17). pp. 2284-2286.

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Book review

Only Gold Matters: Cecil Griffiths, the Exiled Olympic Champion

Mike Huggins

Only Gold Matters: Cecil Griffiths, the Exiled Olympic Champion, John Hanna, Sheffield, Chequered Flag Publishing, 2014, index, black and white photographs, 6 tables, 302 pp., £11.99 (paperback), ISBN 9780956946058

Amateurism is an important theme in the history of modern British sport. But its ideological and regulative principles have been dominated by study of the contrasting worlds of the 'gentleman amateur', the 'shamateur' and the working-class 'professional'. We know far less about the ways in which amateurism impacted upon the sporting lives of working-class men and women in past times. Outside the work done on a few limited sports such as football, rugby, cricket and rowing, we still have limited understanding of middle- and upper-class exclusionary practices and the ways in which they affected working-class athletes, or the extent to which working-class athletes were able to participate in the early Olympics. Studies of working-class amateur track and field athletes of the pre-World War II period are in particularly short supply. Two working-class athletes from this early period who made it to England Athletics' Hall of fame, Walter George, nineteenth-century athletics' first superstar in the 1880s, and Alf Shrubbs, the world's greatest distance runner of the early twentieth century, were banned from amateur competition for taking money.

John Hanna's book on Cecil Griffiths sheds light on another fine working-class amateur athlete, this time from Wales, who suffered a similar fate. Griffiths was born in 1900, and brought up in Neath, but his father died in 1906 and the family struggled. Cec played for the Neath Rugby Club junior side but excelled as a runner, taking part in local races. He found a job at the local railway offices initially but in 1918 he joined the army, getting a place with the Queen's Westminster Rifles, based in London. There he made contact with Joe Binks, the News of the World Athletic correspondent, who arranged for him to compete at higher level races over 440 and 880 yards. His defeat of the New