

Wes Santee, the Four-Minute Mile, and the Amateur Athletic Union of the United States

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On May 6, 1954, Roger Bannister ran a mile in just under four minutes. People throughout the world celebrated his achievement.¹ It carved the lanky Briton permanently into the history of international track and field and into the public consciousness. In a recent book chronicling track and field record holders, Gerald Lawson observed that no other milestone in track and field "has so captured public imagination."² Track and field historians Corder Nelson and Roberto Quercetani referred to Bannister's race as "probably the most memorable moment in track and field history."³ Bannister's achievement is still considered one of the most important athletic milestones of the twentieth century.⁴

The four-minute mile garnered unprecedented attention for many reasons. First, runners had chased the barrier for the previous quarter century.⁵ But it continued to elude the world's best milers, including the great Swedish duo, Gunder Haag and Arne Andersson, who both ran under 4:02 in the 1940s.⁶ Second, the mathematical perfection of the four-minute mile added a mystical quality. An evenly paced four-minute mile resulted from four 1-minute 440-yard laps. The barrier continues to be a rite of passage for national-class milers.

Third, throughout the twentieth century the importance of records and athletic barriers in sport increased dramatically. John Hoberman has argued that "a subculture of high performance sport" emerged and dominated sport throughout the last century.⁷ Athletes, coaches, governing bodies, fans, and the scientific community all became obsessed with the need to constantly break records, regardless of whether this had a negative physiological or emotional impact on the athletes. Indeed, the Olympic motto, "faster, higher, stronger," implied the goal of constantly elevating human achievement in athletics.⁸ This cultural and athletic

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phenomenon—the emerging subculture of high performance sport—is demonstrated perhaps most clearly in the cultural importance of the four-minute-mile chase.

The race to break the four-minute mile included not only Bannister but also contemporary milers John Landy and Wes Santee. In the early 1950s, track experts considered Santee, Landy, and Bannister the most likely candidates to “break four.” Landy followed Bannister’s historic subfour with his own 3:58 mile six weeks later. Santee, however, never ran the mile in under four minutes. His track career ended with a mile best of 4:00.5 (an American record at the time) and a briefly held 1,500-meter world record of 3:42.4. The Amateur Athletic Union of the United States (AAU)—the nation’s governing body of track and field—ended Santee’s athletic career well before his athletic peak when it imposed a lifetime suspension on him in 1955 for violating its amateur regulations.

The four-minute-mile chase and Santee’s expulsion from track are intimately connected and place Hoberman’s “subculture of high performance sport” theory in a curious position. Santee became the most popular and well-known track athlete in the United States during the mid-1950s because of his role in the historic chase to break four. He received extensive national media coverage. Fans flocked to see Santee, who “was the biggest draw of his time.”⁹ Santee’s popularity underscores the athletic and cultural importance of the four-minute-mile chase and supports Hoberman’s argument about the subculture of high performance sport.

Santee’s expulsion also indicates that, at least in the 1950s, the subculture of high performance sport was hardly as universal as Hoberman suggests.¹⁰ If record-breaking performances were the most important consideration to all involved in sport, then why would the AAU, who benefited greatly from Santee’s popularity, permanently suspend its best miler at such a critical juncture in the history of the mile race? Just as the cultural and athletic significance of the four-minute-mile chase supports Hoberman, Santee’s suspension undermines the monolithic nature of his argument.

So why did the AAU fail to maintain its position in the emerging consensus on record-breaking performances? Santee was suspended because his sometimes brazen actions belied the AAU’s public enforcement of its amateur regulations. In doing so, he publicly exposed what most track aficionados already knew—that there was an underground-labor-relations system in track that was encouraged by meet directors, who were often important AAU officials. Perhaps more important, the AAU suspended Santee because his actions directly challenged the AAU’s unilateral authority. The further Santee pushed his challenge against them, the more important it became for the AAU to win, regardless of the costs. The AAU’s desire to maintain its unquestioned position of authority in track easily superseded its desires to encourage and support Santee’s record-breaking potential. The AAU’s need to maintain unilateral decision making trumped all other considerations.