Obituary – Dr. Dan the Marathon Man. Requiescat in Pace. Dr. Dan Tunstall Pedoe, 30 December 1939-13 February 2015

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On 21 March 2015, at St. John of Jerusalem Church in South Hackney, a small crowd celebrated the life of Dr. Dan Tunstall-Pedoe.

Dan is the forefather of Sports Cardiology and one of the giants of Sports Medicine in the UK. An identical twin with Hugh, himself a cardiology epidemiologist, Dan was born in Southampton to a mathematician father and a geographer mother. Dan’s family moved to the East End of London, where he was brought up, and was induced to the appreciation of figurative arts by his parents. This resulted in Dan’s love for photography, and being a published photographer while still at school. This love accompanied Dan for the whole of his life, and his children, at the Memorial Service, joked on how for years they only saw one half of their father’s face.

Dan and Hugh went to King’s College in Cambridge on a scholarship, and qualified in London, Dan from Barts and Hugh from Guys. Dan embarked in a career in Cardiology, earning a DPhil in blood velocity from Oxford, and went to San Francisco for one year. On his return to London, Dan took up a Senior Lectureship at Barts, and pioneered the use of Doppler techniques to measure blood flow: a major legacy in medicine. As part of his appointment, Dan was also Cardiologist at Hackney Hospital.

On 29 March 1981, the first London Marathon was run, and Dan was its Medical Director, running quite a few of the London marathons as well. From then on, and for the next 27 years, Dan was ‘Dr. Dan, the Marathon Man’. In that position, Dan made the now defunct Greater London Council appreciate the importance and the need for Sports Medicine. In typical Dan’s fashion, he set himself a great task, and convinced the GLC to fund the London Sports Medicine Institute, in the grounds of Charterhouse Square, within Barts. In 1986 the LSMI was born, no doubt with Dan putting up, as he had done in his NHS life, some of his own money.

I met Dan at the LSMI in April 1987. I had moved to the UK in 1985, and was a basic surgical trainee. In 1984, I had spent one year at the Third Department of Physiology at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, and worked with Bjorn Ekblom and Bertil Sjodin on muscle physiology and anaerobic threshold. Dan had a great vision, and had built a Human Performance Laboratory. The Directorship of the lab was advertised, and I applied. A few days after having been shortlisted, I developed chickenpox: I phoned, and asked what I was to do. ‘Attend the interview anyway’: Dr. Tunstall Pedoe determined that, by the interview date, I would not have been infectious anyway. In the panel, Prof. Craig Williams, from Loughborough, and Dan. I thought I had done well, but Dan told me that I was not the right person for the job. He had insight: I wished to be an orthopaedic surgeon, and three weeks after that interview I become the first full time clinical academic in Sports Medicine in the UK, securing a Lectureship in Sports Medicine with a Registrarship in Orthopaedics between The Hospital for Sick Children – Institute of Child Health, and the London Hospital.

The LSMI flourished, and after a while it became the National Sports Medicine Institute. As I was working only a short cycle ride from the NSMI, I used to go once or twice a week to the only dedicated Sports Medicine library in the country. I kept on meeting Dan, and to exchange ideas in Sports Medicine. More than once, he told me that I was not a typical orthopod, something I am still proud of, and that I should expand my horizons beyond orthopaedic surgery. I did, and ended up collaborating with several sports cardiologists, and still do. I developed a close relationship with the NSMI, and ended up publishing a paper with Dan on the epidemiology of injuries in triathlon.

Dan organised a great series of educational lectures at the NSMI, and I attended them on a regular basis. On one such occasion, I ended up meeting Dr. John Williams, the Author of the first textbook in Sports Medicine in the UK. John lectured on Achilles tendon problems, and at the end put up a quiz worth of a bottle of French champagne. I answered correctly, and my never ending interest in Achilles tendon problems was born. A few years later, the powers that be decided that the NSMI was not worthy of further funding, and a great opportunity was lost.

Dan remained involved in Sports Medicine as Dr. Dan the Marathon Man, and lectured for years at the Centre for Sports and Exercise Medicine at Barts and the London School of Medicine, Queen Mary University
of London. In the middle of 2007, we met in London, and he told me that he had mentioned my name to the great and the good at the College as a candidate for the soon to be advertised Chair in Sport and Exercise Medicine. I was overjoyed, and thanked him. In his typically pragmatic way, he told me that he had only told the truth to the high powered guys. I was pleased, and positively charged. When the advert came up, I applied, and became the first, and up to now only, competitively appointed Professor of Sports and Exercise Medicine in the UK.

Dan continued to lecture with us, continuing a family tradition: his parents had met when both lecturing at Queen Mary. Dan however had developed Parkinson’s, and the spasms and tremor of the condition greatly affected him. The last time I met him, he told me that he was going to continue to fight the disease, but he would have stopped lecturing. I was saddened: the knowledge and wisdom of a great man was going to be denied to generations of sports physicians. Dan was a man of vision, strength, imagination, resilience, stamina. Without him, Sports Cardiology would have taken a lot longer to be established in the UK, and the seeds of Sports and Exercise Medicine would now have been sown. We shall miss you. Requiescat in pace, Dr. Dan, the Marathon Man.