



Sabu's World Record

Last August, the Jamaican juggernaut Usain Bolt set the Beijing Olympics on fire with three world records. This 16th, at the Berlin world athletics championship, Bolt at full pelt, galloping on two legs, took just 9.58 seconds to skim over 100 metres, thus docking .11 seconds off his Beijing record – the biggest margin of improvement in the 100-metre record since electronic timing was introduced in 1968. This reminded me of an ephemeral world-record-shattering moment in SSKZM.

Circa 1978. Our PT instructor R G Pillai was conducting 100 metres dash for the eleventh standard students as part of our physical and health education curriculum. The most conspicuous among those who lined up at the starting point was Sabu N John (961/Prasad/80), the undisputed long-distance ace, and a fine sprinter to boot. As ever RGP multitasked as the starter and timekeeper. The starting was rather primitive: no gunshot; he stood beside the finishing point, swung a white flag with his right hand to kick off the race and simultaneously pressed the stopwatch with the left thumb to clock the pace.

The celerity of the sprint surprised him. He glanced at the stopwatch: 9.9 seconds! A new world record! (Then, the longstanding world record of 9.95 seconds was held by the American Jim

Hines – the first man to run sub-ten second hectometre.) Instead of breaking into celebratory whoops and high-fives, he, nonplussed, scrutinised the dial again. The hand stood rock-steady at 9.9 seconds! He had unshakeable faith in that Methuselah stopwatch and knew it never lied, yet he had to account for Sabu – a nobody – rewriting a world record. So he wore his Sherlock Holmes hat and sauntered down the six-lane track, with typical ding-dong RGP-gait, to sleuth.

The large parade ground doubled up as the physical training arena too, i.e. it could be converted into two football courts, two cricket fields or 400-metre track for athletics. Marked with lime, there was a hallucinatory maze of lines and arcs contributed by the above activities at and around the 100-metre starting point. Since the Annual Sports Day was celebrated couple of weeks ago, the quicklime had diffused and faded.

He ambled few paces and stared at the horizontal markings for placing the set of hurdles for the 110-metre hurdles event. Aha! Obviously, Sabu & Co had accidentally (or deliberately) lined up there, 15-odd metres from the original starting point. Having conquered the mystery, RGP bellowed orders for rerun.

All along, Sabu, with a quizzical mien,
mouth agape at full rictus, arms akimbo,
could not but wonder what the fuss was
all about! Only later he heard he had all
but upended the world order!

— **M P Anil Kumar (1122/Prasad/81)**