

Supervisor Mr Chan, Principal Yeung, parents, guests, Confucius Hall students it is indeed a great honour to be invited here today to join you in celebrating the success and achievements of both individuals and the school as a whole.

The HKRFU is very proud to be associated with Confucius Hall, home of our School of Rugby programme, which comes from Scotland – and indeed as you may remember the Scottish First Minister, Alex Salmond, has himself visited the school and met the students.

I thought then that I would speak today about a subject that combines in no particular order Scotland, China, history and sport, a true tale which I hope you will find interesting, entertaining and inspiring, the story of Eric Liddell, the Flying Scotsman and China's first Olympic gold medallist.

Eric Liddell was born on 16 January 1902 in Tientsin in northern China. His parents were Scottish Christian missionaries, and Eric commenced his education in China before leaving at the age of 6 with his older brother to attend a boarding school in England.

At school Eric was a diligent student and a brilliant athlete – he not only excelled on the track, but also captained both the rugby and cricket teams. In a common theme throughout his life he was also well liked by both his fellow students and the teaching staff – despite his successes his headmaster described him as being “entirely without vanity”.

After school Eric headed to Edinburgh University to study science, and he also continued his sporting feats. In 1923 he broke the British 100 yards record by posting 9.7 seconds in taking the national championship, and he also played 7 international matches for the Scottish rugby team.

His attention now switched to the 1924 summer olympics which were being held in Paris. Eric was expected to represent GB in the 100 yards and was a firm favourite to bring back a medal, until 2 months before the event when it was revealed that one of the qualifying heats in Paris had been scheduled on a Sunday. Eric's christian faith had always been hugely important to him,

and he never played sport on the Sabbath – even now, with his dream of Olympic glory in jeopardy, he stuck to his beliefs and withdrew from the competition. Thankfully the British Athletic Association decided to offer Eric the opportunity to switch to a different event, the 440 yards, whose heats didn't fall on a Sunday, and Eric gratefully took the opportunity, even though this was a distance he had rarely run before.

With just 2 months preparation expectations were not high as Eric entered the Stadium on 11th July 1924, although the pipe band of the 51st Highland Brigade did their best to boost his morale with a stirring performance during his warm up. As he went to the starting blocks one of the USA team physios pressed a piece of paper into Eric's hand – on it was written a quotation from the Bible – “Those who honour me I will honour.”

When the starting gun fired Eric took off like it was a sprint, and being in the outside lane couldn't see where his opponents were. As he entered the home straight he found himself in the lead, and with his head thrown back and mouth open in his unusual style he held on to break the tape in a new world record of 47.6 seconds – Olympic champion!

After the excitement of the Olympics he returned to university to complete his degree, and then despite being one of the most famous sportsmen of the day he packed his bags, gave up his athletic and rugby careers, and returned to China to follow in his father's foot steps as a missionary in Tianjin. He used sport as a way of promoting christian values among the young local children, and became a popular figure in the community. In 1934 he married Florence, a Canadian missionary, and they had 3 daughters.

If Eric's story ended here it was already an amazing adventure, but fate had still more in store for the Liddell family.

The Japanese invasion of China made life increasingly dangerous, and in 1941 Eric made the difficult decision to send his wife and daughters to safety in Canada while he remained and worked with his brother in a

medical centre. In 1943 he was arrested by the Japanese army and taken to the Weifang Internment Camp. Conditions were harsh – a lack of food and medicine, and there was tension between different groups of the prisoners. Eric took on a leadership role, and worked tirelessly to help his fellow inmates. One of them wrote of the camp experience after the war and described Eric as; “the finest Christian gentleman it has been my pleasure to meet. In all the time in the camp, I never heard him say a bad word about anybody.”

Another prisoner wrote of Eric “Often in an evening I would see him bent over a chessboard or a model boat, or directing some sort of square dance – absorbed, weary and interested, pouring all of himself into this effort to capture the imagination of these penned-up youths. He was overflowing with good humour and love for life, and with enthusiasm and charm. It is rare indeed that a person has the good fortune to meet a saint, but he has come as close to it as anyone I have ever known.”

Sadly Eric himself never lived to see the end of the war, freedom and his beloved family again – he died from an inoperable brain tumour in the camp on 21 February 1945. His loss was greatly mourned, and his grave is marked today by a monument, and his house in Tianjin with a plaque.

There is one final footnote to the story, which perhaps best sums up the man best of all. In 2008 just before the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese Government who are very fond of Eric’s memory, revealed something that not even the Liddell family had been aware of...while in the camp the British Government, eager to secure the release of such a famous figure, had agreed with the Japanese Government on a prisoner exchange that would have left Eric free. Instead he gave up his place to a pregnant woman – an incredible act of selflessness.

The Confucius Hall school motto has 8 values to aspire to;

Filial piety, brotherly love, loyalty, integrity, propriety, righteousness, honesty and humility

For me you can find no better role model, no finer example of a person who led his life according to those values than Eric Liddell. Although he was representing GB when he won his gold medal, having been born in China, lived most of his life there, died there and with his love of the country and the people he is sometimes regarded as China's first adopted Olympian.

So, someone of whom the Scottish community can be proud, the Chinese community, and the rugby community – I hope you enjoyed hearing his story and I hope his example can inspire you both as a Confucius Hall student and afterwards.