Oxford’s tradition of academic excellence goes hand in hand with a reputation for sporting excellence. We have a proud Olympic heritage dating back to the Games of the I Olympiad in 1896, with a tally of 158 Olympic medals won by our students and alumni on behalf of many nations across the globe, including three golds and two bronzes at London in 2012. World records have been set by our students, including Charles Burgess Fry, who equalled the long jump world record in 1893 (the same year in which he took a first-class degree in Classics), and Roger Bannister, who on 6 May 1954 became the first person to run a mile in under four minutes. The Boat Race – one of the most popular fixtures in the British sporting calendar, which attracts television audiences of over 15 million – features oarsmen and women of international standing. The Oxford Blue – an accolade that stems from the first Boat Race in 1829, when Cambridge tied light blue ribbons to their boat and Oxford adopted Christ Church’s dark blue – is widely recognised as a symbol of sporting excellence.

Oxford’s achievements in the sporting arena are matched by the range and volume of activity that takes place across the collegiate University. We offer the largest variety of sports of any university in the world, with over 85 University clubs and 200 college clubs catering for all tastes and levels, from the interested beginner to the international athlete. And each year over 140 Varsity matches take place across 70-plus sports, with new disciplines added regularly.

This issue of the newsletter focuses on sport at Oxford and the ways in which External Affairs works to support and promote it. The stories we highlight include the £60m redevelopment of the Iffley Road sports complex, and the making of sporting history on 11 April when the BNY Mellon Boat Race is joined on the Tideway for the first time by the Newton Women’s Boat Race.

I hope you will join me in cheering on the Dark Blues – both men and women – whether it’s from the banks of the Thames, at a Boat Race dinner or in the comfort of your own living room.

With all good wishes for the Easter break,

Nick Rawlins
2015 marks an important milestone for the Boat Race as it is the first year that the women’s and men’s races will be held on the same day and on the same 4.5 mile course from Putney to Mortlake. Saturday 11 April will see the first Newton Women’s Boat Race on the Tideway take place at 4.50pm, followed by Isis v Goldie at 5.20pm and then the 161st Oxford v Cambridge BNY Mellon Boat Race at 5.50pm. The move has been made possible through a five-year sponsorship deal with BNY Mellon and its UK-based subsidiary Newton, which began in 2013.

The Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor will be hosting a cocktail reception for alumni and donors aboard the Erasmus, which is moored alongside the start line at Putney Bridge. One of the aims of the event is to showcase the breadth of student talent at Oxford and raise the profile of sport at the University, particularly women in sport. The Alumni Office will also be hosting a stand on the Riverside Terrace during the afternoon so that alumni can find out more about the benefits and offers available to them.

The Boat Race dates back to 1829 and was the result of a challenge between two school friends: Charles Wordsworth (nephew of the poet William Wordsworth) of Christ Church, Oxford, and Charles Merrivale of St John’s, Cambridge. The first women’s race took place in 1927 on the Isis, where according to The Times, the teams were marked on ‘steadiness, finish, rhythm and other matters of style’; it was not until 1964 that the race became an annual event. The current score stands at 40 to Cambridge, 29 to Oxford, in the women’s race; and 81 to Cambridge, 78 to Oxford, in the men’s race.
Sports hall named in honour of ‘model scholar-athlete’

The first phase of the University’s new sports centre at Iffley Road is to be named in memory of Dr Acer Nethercott, who died two years ago aged 35. A ‘model scholar-athlete’, in the words of the Vice-Chancellor, Acer coxed three crews to victory in the Boat Race (the women’s crew in 2000 and the men’s boat in 2003 and 2005) and won an Olympic silver medal and two World Championship bronze medals as a cox for Great Britain. He also excelled in his studies at Oxford, gaining a first and a doctorate in the philosophy of language.

The Acer Nethercott Sports Hall will be the first building of the redevelopment of the Iffley Road sports complex, a £60 million project that will increase the available space for University sports clubs and members of the local community. The new building will contain a four-court sports hall for 30 indoor sports and a multi-purpose activity room for exercise classes and community use. The facility will feature the latest technology including, potentially, an LED backlit glass floor – the first of its kind in the UK. Subsequent phases of the sports complex will include an indoor tennis centre, a combined rugby and rowing training centre, and a new grandstand incorporating a cricket school.

Fundraising is in full swing for the £8m needed to enable construction to begin, with around £6m having already been secured. Sir Roger Bannister is Patron of the Appeal, and a letter that was recently sent in his name to alumni has resulted in nearly 200 donations totalling £80,000, demonstrating the depth and breadth of support for this initiative.

Sporting awards

Talented sportsmen and women at Oxford are being invited to apply for sporting awards offered by the University’s Alumni Association. Four awards of £250 will be made in Trinity term to undergraduate and graduate students to help them excel in their chosen sport and contribute to the success of sport at Oxford. The deadline for applications is Monday 1 June. Details are at www.alumni.ox.ac.uk/sporting-awards.

Sporting offers

Discounted sporting facilities are just some of the offers available through the Oxford Alumni Card. Card holders are entitled to discounted membership of the gym and swimming pool at Iffley Road as well as membership of the University Club on Mansfield Road.

Other benefits include educational tours, opportunities for lifelong learning, and the online Oxford Alumni Community – a professional networking platform designed to help alumni connect with each other all over the world. Members can post and search for jobs and mentors, view events and search the directory for other alumni members. Find out more at the new-look alumni website at www.alumni.ox.ac.uk.