OBITUARY

Jack Adams, a Giant of Motor Behavior, Has Died

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Jack Ashton Adams passed away in September 2010 at the age of 88. He was a fine friend who provided special assistance to the field of motor behavior in general and to the Journal of Motor Behavior in particular. He worked in the area of motor behavior almost exclusively during his long career, contributing in many ways to the field. The motor-behavior field has lost a cherished colleague and ally.

Adams was raised in Davenport, Illinois, and he attended the University of Iowa. He served in the US Army during World War II (1943–1945), receiving a Bronze Star medal along the way. He eventually received his PhD in experimental psychology at Iowa in 1951 under Donald Lewis, working in the area of motor-skills transfer (Lewis, McAllister, & Adams, 1951). Adams joined the U.S. Air Force Personnel and Training Research Center, where he worked from 1951 to 1957. He then joined the Psychology Department at the University of Illinois, where he remained until his retirement. While at the University of Illinois, he was the director of Illinois’ Aviation Research Laboratory from 1957 to 1965.

Adams was a prolific researcher and writer, with three books Human Memory (1967); Learning and Memory (1976); Human Factors Engineering (1989)], well over 100 articles in refereed journals, and many tech reports. My own introduction to Adams was through his 1964 review of motor-skills research (Adams, 1964). This article became the bible for many of us graduate students in the area. In my graduate-student days at University of California, Berkeley, and, later, the University of Illinois, I used to carry my tattered, but beloved, copy of Adams’ article around as a kind of “standard equipment,” to be kept close at hand for quick reference. We also relied heavily on Adams’s work on warm-up decrement (1955 and 1961) at that time, and later as well. For me and my fellow grad students, Adams became the clear leader in motor behavior. When I was faced with the decision about where to go for my PhD, Illinois was an easy choice—in no small way because “the master” was on the psychology faculty there. At Illinois, we students tried to assimilate as much as we could from Adams—I attended every one of his courses—and we would generate feeble excuses to visit him in his office. He was always a good sport about it, never complaining, always helping to guide us.

Adams was not only prolific in his writing, but he also had a very delightful style that was difficult to miss. He talks of his finally published, but many-times-revised manuscript as “the eternal version.” In one place, while talking about the tasks used by the early motor-behavior researchers, he speaks of “the indestructible pursuit rotor.” In an (anonymous) review of one of my own articles, he says that he is glad to see “…that Schmidt has the raw courage to split an infinitive.” I knew instantly the identity of the reviewer. In another place, he wonders “… about individual differences that reside in the cesspool of the error term …” in experimental studies. He said that (nontheoretical) empirical research amounted to “…fact-gathering for its own sake, leading to a swamp of facts.” Very colorful. In a review of a book, he wrote that, “This [book about skills] should have been an important event [in the field], but it turns out not to be worth your green stamps.” In 1969, when a famous individual-differences researcher mentioned that even Jack Adams had done factor-analytic work, Adams, who appreciated individual-differences work but greatly disliked factor analysis, replied, “I was foully assaulted by [this researcher]. I have never conducted a factor analysis in my life, nor do I smoke, swear, or go out with women of questionable virtue.” There are many more examples.

Adams’s contributions to motor behavior were many and varied. His writing in articles and books, and even in reviews of our articles for various journals, was full of guidance and encouragement. Many of us relied considerably on his advice. He was a genuine leader.

Perhaps his greatest contribution to the field was his role in Journal of Motor Behavior. He was the first one I called when I was setting up the Journal of Motor Behavior’s editorial board in 1968–1969; his agreement to serve was a strong point in convincing other renowned researchers to sign on as well. At about this time, he was working on his closed-loop theory of motor learning (Adams, 1971). He could have published this article in any number of journals. But he didn’t; he submitted it to the Journal of Motor Behavior. This paper was, of course, a “smash hit,” and it generated much-needed support for the fledgling journal.

In 1988 he was awarded the North American Society for the Psychology of Sport and Physical Activity’s (NASPSPA) Distinguished Scientist Award. The judges felt that, despite his coming to NASPSPA only occasionally, his contributions to NASPSPA were enormous in terms of theoretical ideas and examples of how to test them, his scientific philosophy, his strong historical perspective (e.g., Adams, 1987), and of course his own empirical results. His thinking and writing were so pervasive that it seemed as if he was really present at all the meetings.

The field of motor behavior owes a great deal to Adams’s thinking and research. We will miss him.
REFERENCES


