

Parallel lives and accidental heroes

Charles Gains

The centenary of the London Olympics of 1908 coinciding with Beijing has prompted a flurry of articles and books two of which, *The Marathon Makers* by John Bryant and *The 1908 Olympics* by Keith Baker, have been reviewed in these pages. The 1908 Games is fascinating in numerous ways but forever etched in sporting memory through story, pictures and a film is the marathon finish with Dorando Pietri the diminutive Italian being helped across the line by stewards to a subsequent disqualification. The man who eventually took the gold, the American John Hayes is likewise remembered, if only for actually being on the track when the famous incident occurred and later promoted to the title. Athletic buffs will recall the silver medallist, Charles Hefferon of South Africa and but among that distinguished group there will be barely a handful who know who finished third. Look it up if you are curious.

But there are just as many other stories and intriguing possibilities about that particular race. Take the pre-race favourite, the Canadian Onondaga Indian, Tom Longboat. Born on the 4th June 1887 in the Six Nations Reserve, Ontario he was reared in tough circumstances that required walking long distances to the nearest stores. He grew to love exercise particularly running. His talent was spotted by a Bill Davies who had been connected with other famous runners and in 1906 entered him in the Hamilton Bay race. Poorly dressed and presented he was deemed a laughable long odds chance with the bookmakers of the time, an Englishman John Marsh being the clear favourite. Run over about 18 miles Longboat's peculiar running style took him well clear of Marsh and he came home comfortably in 1.49.25. He was never underestimated again. He won a 10 mile race again in Hamilton in 54.50, a Canadian record by two and a half minutes, and his fame was spreading throughout both Canada and the United States.

Inevitably he was entered in the Boston Marathon of April 1907 and became something of a celebrity with the press giving him numerous appellations including 'The Indian Iron Man'. Over 100,000 turned out to watch the race and he didn't disappoint winning easily in 2.24.24. This must have been about 25 miles, 26 miles 385 yards was yet to be standardised at the London Olympics of the following year. His place in Canadian running history was assured before the question of London was raised. By now he was virtually a professional with a nominal job provided by a sponsor and was lucky a way was found to circumvent the rules and allow him a place in the Canadian team for the Olympic Games. The bare facts of the race held on July 24th from Windsor Castle to the Royal Box at the White City are well documented. Run in very hot and humid conditions Longboat is recorded as in second place but walking at 17 miles and collapsed suddenly at 19 miles. Rumours immediately circulated that stimulants taken by many runners of that time were responsible but the weather was the more likely reason.

Longboat took this disappointment well and officially became a professional a few months later. Thus began several years of racing including head to head promotions especially indoor matches such as that at the famous Madison Square Gardens in New York on December 15th, 1908 where he was pitched against Dorando Pietri who was cashing in on his London reputation in a demanding series of races against the official London champion John Hayes

elsewhere. Race conditions were appalling on a small track, huge audience and in a smoke filled arena. The pair ran together until Pietri suddenly collapsed at 25 miles leaving Longboat to coast home easily in 2.45.05. They met again in Buffalo two weeks later in similar conditions when Pietri collapsed yet again, this time at 19 miles and Longboat although distressed himself continued albeit slowly to satisfy bookmakers and sponsors demands.

Longboat continued to race until 1913 gaining a reputation for eccentricity. He failed to win the Powderhall Marathon in Edinburgh in January 1912 but a month later set a world professional 15 mile record of 1.20.04 also in Scotland's capital city. World War 1 was imminent and Longboat was a volunteer in 1916 serving three years with the 107th Pioneer Battalion and other regiments. He arrived in France in early 1917 and was to be involved in some of the ensuing major battles. He was wounded and returned home in 1919 to discover that his wife having thought him dead had remarried. He too subsequently re-married and had four children His money dissipated he took modest employment as a refuse collector with the Toronto Council for 20 years. Apparently content with his lot he died in 1948. His story which includes coping with racism is well recorded, particularly Bruce Kidd's biography Tom Longboat (Markham, Ontario, 2004) but there is also an entertaining account by David Blaikie which can be found on the website www.davidblaikie.com. Tom Longboat is truly one of Canada's greatest sporting heroes.

Then there is my hero Jack Price following a parallel existence in England's industrial Midlands. Price was born at Field House in the picturesque village of Neen Savage in Shropshire in 1884. After leaving the village school he found work locally but despairing of casual labouring he gathered his belongings and at the age of 17 walked the 40 miles or so to the town of Halesowen in Worcestershire to look for employment in the booming steel works. He was to stay there the rest of his life at the huge Stewarts and Lloyds complex. In 1904 he was entered in a walking race and his innate strength eventually carried him through the field to victory. His running career was born and eventually he signed up with Small Heath Harriers which had a branch in Halesowen and he went on to a very successful cross country career and international selection. In 1908 the Olympics loomed and trials for the marathon were being held around the country. He ran in the Midlands version from Coventry to the West Bromwich Football ground, a distance of 25.5 miles. The favourite was WH (Dido) Day of Birchfield Harriers and they were together at 10 miles in 58.33 but Price then pulled steadily away to win in 2.37.13. He was automatically chosen to be part of a 12 man United Kingdom team selected for the London Marathon.

Little did Price know how the drama of this most famous race would play out and his initial contribution. In the final 5 years before his death in 1965 I spoke with him a number of times about the race and heard him speak publicly about it on a couple of occasions. His version was consistent. He maintained he was badly advised by the United Kingdom team management and instructed, along with other contenders, that Longboat was the favourite and at all costs to 'stay with the pace'. Suicidal advice but this he did and was from 4 to 14 miles never out of the first four actually forcing the pace at ten miles (56.53) and with lead of 41 seconds at 13 miles (1.15.13). This was down to a mere seven seconds a mile later and then he was gone from the race altogether. As Jack returned to this story again and again one could sense his anger, if not bitterness. It was completely out of character. He was above all things a shrewd, cautious and confident runner and if he had followed his normal race plan would certainly have finished in spite of the conditions and been a possible medal winner. The 'winning' Dorando time of 2.54.46 was well within his compass. The disappointment affected him for the rest of his life.

Like many others he could not wait for another Olympics, all the quality races were then professional and he was to appear in numerous events many of which were 'head to head' encounters which he mainly won. Most notably he took the Powderhall Marathon held in Edinburgh in January, 1910, now over the regular distance of 26 miles 385 yards and 104 laps of a track in atrocious conditions, high winds and snow storms. The time of 2.40.07 was remarkable. Also later in the same year at Newcastle he set a World Best for 15 miles of 1.21.00 having gone through 10 miles in 54.26. This was the time, as we have seen, that Longboat was to lower by 56 seconds in 1912. Later in life Price became a well known coach to numerous talented runners based at Halesowen but providing a backbone of the all-conquering Birchfield side of the inter-war years. Most notably he was coach to JE(Eddie) Webster, an accomplished distance runner, steeplechaser and winner of the International Cross Country Championship in 1925. Later in the 1940's the Halesowen club emerged in its own right with Jack still involved as a coach and highly respected in the community.

Price, like his Canadian counterpart, had volunteered for the First World and served with the 27th Siege Battery, Royal Garrison Artillery from their inception on 5th September 1915 to when they were disbanded on 15th April 1919. His unit was engaged in action on no fewer than 33 occasions both in Flanders and France. Some of these were the bloodiest of the war. But the spirit of competition never deserted the lance-bombardier and in respite behind the lines he continued to train and won his divisional heavyweight boxing championship. Ironically, Longboat was often in the same sphere of conflict, likewise competing and racing when he could. It is certain that Price was at the third battle of Vimy Ridge, known forever as the mud and blood bath of Passchendaele, and it is highly likely that Longboat was there too with the 80,000 bulk of the Canadian forces. In this terrible battle throughout the summer of 1917 over 500,000 Allied troops were killed as well as 250,000 Germans and was a turning point in the attrition policy of both sides. I fantasise, that at some time their paths actually crossed perhaps as a lost Cannuck dispatch rider skidded into a British gun emplacement to ask the way of an exhausted gunner. But I leave that sort of conjecture to those of a literary bent.

What I can imagine though is a 1908 race run a week earlier in cool conditions including a slight drizzle. After the initial rush Tom Longboat and Jack Price lock together, their similar loping actions metronomically attuned. Periodically they test each others weakness, neither gaining nor giving an inch. A titanic struggle long remembered. They enter the White City and prepare for the final sprint. Suddenly the cigar salesman sticks out a hand to the steelworker, they shake and nod in agreement. To the roar of the huge crowd and the delight of the Royal family they cross the line together in the fantastic time of 2.44.46. The spirit of the Games is suddenly rekindled after weeks of rancour and dispute! Meanwhile over a mile off the pace and approaching Wormwood Scrubs an Irish-American called John Haynes, a reported assistant at New York's Bloomingdale Stores, is encouraging an Italian baker called Dorando Pietri to stay in the race both for personal pride and the honour of their respective countries. Nonsense, of course, but that, or any other combination of events, could easily have happened. Heroes are frequently accidental

Footnote:

Club colleagues won't let me get away with this account without mentioning at least WT(Billy) Clarke. Billy really is a forgotten hero, except round here. Clarke, like Price and

Longboat, was in the same 1908 race having won the Liverpool trial. He was already a distinguished runner with the famous Sefton Harriers team of that time. As subsequent times indicate he too could have had a legitimate claim on that same Olympic title but clearly was also overcome by the conditions. However, he struggled on almost certainly oblivious to the drama unfolding before him and finished in 12th place in the mediocre time of 3.16.08. However, history will record, at least, that he was the first British runner home on that momentous occasion. Among Clarke`s subsequent successes was that of winner of the Hastings Marathon in December 1908 in a very respectable 2.37.16. It is interesting to note other London Olympians taking part, 2nd Fred Lord (Wibsey Park) 2.38.13, 3rd Harry Barrett(Polytechnic) 2.38.31 and 5th Jack Price(Small Heath) 2.40.33 . The Hastings Lions are recreating this centenary celebration race over the same course on December 14th of this year. Runners might find beating the times of Clarke *et al* quite a challenge! Already over 1000 have registered.

Robbie Wood has produced a brief sketch of Clarke which can be viewed on the club website:

www.lps-athletics.co.uk

Those interested in competing in the 100th Anniversary Hastings Marathon should visit the website:

www.hastings-half.co.uk

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