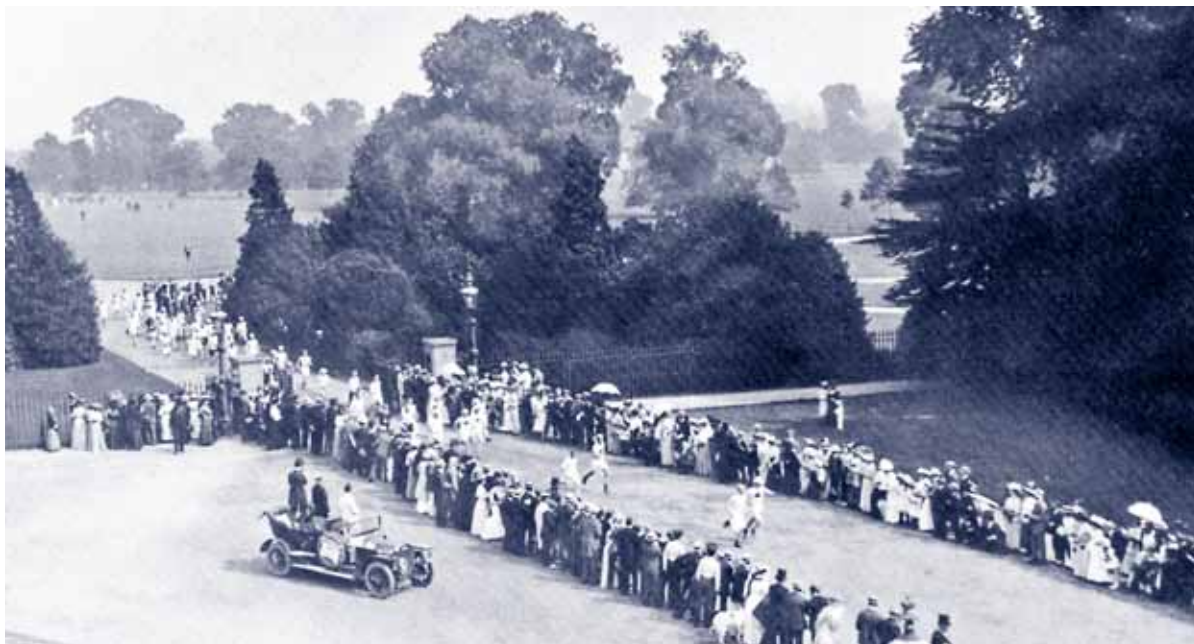


Scotland's Thomas Jack – It was Blisters, not Brandy

By Donald Macgregor



After the start on the East Terrace of Windsor Castle the field of marathon runners left the park at Barnespool Bridge.

Scotland, with a population around one tenth of that of the UK, has produced a considerable number of Olympic athletes, among them gold medallists such as Wyndham Halswelle (London 1908, 400 m), Eric Liddell (Paris 1924, 400 m) and Allan Wells (Moscow 1980, 100 m).

The first Scottish Olympic marathon runner (of seven to date) was Thomas "Tom" Jack, a member of Edinburgh Southern Harriers, who was selected for the Great Britain and Ireland team for the Marathon in 1908. Five qualifying races were held before the selection date. In one of these, a 22 miles 1420 yards trial on 25 April from Windsor to Wembley Park in London, the winner was Alex Duncan in 2:15:45 from James Beale, 2:17:00, and Fred Lord, 2:18.04. Tom Jack was fourth in 2:18:42.¹

Twelve runners were selected for Great Britain and Ireland. On the afternoon of Friday, July 24th, Jack, number 61, was in the fourth and last row when the race was started at 14.33 by Lord Desborough on the East Terrace of Windsor Castle. It was a hot day by English standards: the temperature rose from 22.2 C (measured at Kew Gardens) to 25.0 C at 15.00. Jack, wearing a wide-brimmed hat and new leather shoes, led through the first five miles in 27:01, his intermediate times being, according to the Official Report, 5:01, 10:11, 15:42, and

21:18. David E. Martin and Roger Gynn² erroneously describe him as an Englishman, as does the Official Report, which states that "as soon as he reached the body of attendants (who were awaiting the competitors five miles from the start) he stopped for rest and refreshment and never really got into his stride again".

The first official stop was a public house called The Crooked Billet. In an exhibition at the British Library in 2012, its curator described a postcard of Jack as his favourite, and seems to have made the casual remark that he stopped off at a pub along the way³. This has come to the attention of Tom Jack's youngest son Norman Jack (who lives in Canada) and of his grandson, Campbell Campbell-Jack, in Scotland, who point out that Tom Jack was a lifelong teetotaler and that his retirement was mainly due to blistering caused by his thin leather shoes⁴. There is however little doubt that the temperature, and the dust thrown up by motor cars and accompanying cyclists exacerbated the problem.

In fact nearly all, if not all, the official stops were public houses, where Oxo (the official drink), eau de cologne, water, tea and food were available. Several competitors did accept alcohol en route, but Tom Jack was not one of them. In the heat, his feet may have swelled up, and that would have worsened the pain



The fast downhill start from the Gates of Windsor Castle past Queen Victoria's statue.

Below: Thomas Jack (1881-1961), Scotland's first significant marathon runner.

Photos: Donald Macgregor Archive, Volker Kluge Archive

from the chafing. Given a pair of decent shoes, his chances would have been considerably greater.

Tom Jack does not deserve to be condemned as a marathon dropout who started too fast. In this article I attempt to explain more about his background and recount some of his considerable achievements.

Both his parents came from farming families

Thomas Jack's introduction to athletics came through racing his brothers on the family farm at Brother-ton, half a mile from the small village of Bellsquarry, between Mid- and West Calder to the west of Edinburgh. He was born on 5 February 1881.

As the result of an accident on the farm, his father died in 1891. His mother had a discussion with his father on his deathbed, and it was agreed that the farm would continue under a manager. Tom's eldest sister Margret would soon be of an age to help her mother. It was also thought that Tom would make a "decent farmer", that William, next in age, was "the clever one", and that Robert, the youngest, was too young to tell.

Tom Jack wrote in his recollections⁵: "From my youngest days I was interested in running. One day when I attended the village school, I was an hour late after returning to school after the lunch break because I was being chased in some game and refused to let myself be caught.

"Brought up on the farm, my brothers and I, and some of the farm servants, used to indulge in forms of athletics. In fact on the fine summer evenings we had a regular sports meeting every night, and went through practically a complete championship programme. One lad used to talk about "going out for a bit of a sprint round the field, the sprint being exactly 1100 yards in

length, and being performed almost immediately after rising from a heavy supper."

Tom Jack goes on to describe a visit with a cousin from Glasgow, and their visit to Edinburgh to watch the 1899 international athletics match between Scotland and Ireland at Powderhall stadium. This impressed him greatly, but the nearest amateur running club was in Edinburgh, and he was discouraged in every possible way from athletic participation.

He got started in 1901, when, having joined the Volunteers, he took part in the Volunteer sports, but did not distinguish himself. That autumn he contacted D.A. Jamieson, Secretary of Edinburgh Southern Harriers (founded 1893) and a well-known athletics historian, and joined the club along with H. Jones, another Volunteer. Between them they collected all the 1st and 2nd prizes the club had to offer except one.

Jack competed in around 250 races between then and the outbreak of World War I. Among his notable victories were the Scottish Amateur Athletic Association (SAAA) 4 miles title in 1908 and 1912 – best time 20:45 (1912), the 10 miles in 1904, 1906, 1907, 1908, 1909, 1910 and 1912). His best time was 53:04 in 1907. In 1908 he finished third in the AAA 10 miles. He ran for Scotland versus Ireland four times, winning the 4 miles in 1907. He was also Scottish cross-country champion in 1907, 1908 and 1912. He ran in the International Championship (at that time the four home countries of the UK plus France) five times (1907-10, 1912).

A sergeant in the 4th Battalion Royal Scots, when war was declared he was told to report to Edinburgh Castle, later being selected to become an officer. He was then posted to the Border Regiment, the authorities thinking





News which caused excitement in the stadium: after four miles three British runners headed the field: Thomas Jack (start number 61), Jack Price (55) and Alex Duncan (52). Jack was the first to retire after seven miles, then came Duncan after ten miles. Price, who had still been in the lead after 14 miles, abandoned the race three and a half miles farther on. Of the eleven Britons who started the race, only four reached the finish. Below: in tail coat and top hat – the stadium announcer.

it was a Scottish regiment, though it was mainly recruited in Northumberland. He later became an officer in the Machine Gun Corps, and it was with that Corps that he was at Gallipoli and awarded the Croix de Guerre, though he refused to tell his son what he had done to be awarded it, other than help the French.

He was a science graduate of Edinburgh University and a trained teacher, who later became Headmaster of Castle Hill School in Edinburgh.

Uniquely, Tom Jack served as President of the Scottish AAA in 1912–13 while still an active athlete, having been a member of SAAA council for seven years, and continued the connection with his sport until his death. He had married Agnes Ormiston in Edinburgh in 1920. Their three sons were Archibald (Archie), William and then Norman. Tom Jack died in hospital in Edinburgh as result of a blood clot to his brain following an operation⁶ on October 9, 1961⁷.

Multi-talented, his range went from four miles to marathon

In 1905 Jack had made his debut at the Eastern District Cross Country championships at Colinton, coming a close 2nd to PJ Melville (Watsonians). At the 1907 National Championships held over a two-lap, ten mile course at Portobello Road (the ground of Hibernian FC), the going was dry but very cold, frosty and hard. Jack, challenged by Sam Stevenson (Clydesdale H), the 1906 champion, and John Ranken (Watsonians), won in 65:38.⁸ Coincidentally Stevenson was also selected

for the 1908 Olympic marathon, perhaps through the influence of his clubmate, former champion Alex Hannah⁹. Although listed among the starters, it is likely that Stevenson did not in fact run.

Selected for the International at Scotstoun Show-ground, a race run over a 4-lap 10 mile course before 2000 spectators, Jack was 5th, less than a minute behind A. Underwood (England) who ran 54:26.4. Jack won also the Scottish Championship in 1908 by a single second. In 1909 and 1910 he was third.

Olympic selection in a team of twelve, of whom eleven started

Revd. Dr. Campbell Campbell-Jack, Thomas Jack's grandson, in his blog A Grain of Sand (2012) writes that "the true story [of Jack's Olympic experience] is more prosaic, and noble [than the British Library exhibition account]. My grandmother, a lady of such moral rectitude that she could make Savonarola appear a louché libertine, recounted the events of that day.

"Today the Olympics are a huge event, professional athletes supported by battalions of experts compete against each other using the best equipment sports science can devise. In 1908 it was different. Athletes were strictly amateur, trained after work and supplied their own off the shelf equipment. Before the 1908 Games, in preparation to represent his country, Thomas Jack kitted himself out with new equipment, which proved his undoing.

"When the gun fired ... he started fast, his time for the first four miles was faster than when he had broken the Scottish four mile record. Although it was fast it was according to plan, he wanted to establish a significant lead and break the weaker runners before settling down to the long grind of the marathon. He was twenty-seven years old, experienced in international athletics and knew what he was doing. He was confident.



After 15 miles (24.14 km) the course went past Pinner Gas Works. Jack Price was still in the lead, followed by the Italian Dorando Pietri (photo) in fourth.

Below: "Dorando" – the American composer Irving Berlin dedicated a song to the tragic hero of the 1908 marathon. Below right: Cartoon from the San Francisco Chronicle.



"After the first four miles the pain began. The new running shoes began to chafe. These were not the scientifically designed running shoes we know today. These were little more than plimsolls made of thin leather. His had not been properly broken in. As he ran the pain increased. He continued running.

"He continued running until, at mile seven, it was physically impossible for him to continue. Later, on being asked how he could have carried on running whilst in such obvious pain he simply looked at his interrogator and replied, 'I was representing my country'.

"As the marathon was run through the streets of 1908 London it would be surprising if there were not a pub somewhere near where he stopped. It is even possible that he was carried into a pub to have his feet treated, although this is unlikely as his brother William was following the race by bicycle and was able to give him any assistance needed.

"The conclusive proof that the innuendo that he stopped running to have a drink in a pub is false lies in events which occurred four years later. 1912 was the year in which he declined an invitation to run in the Stockholm Olympics, an invitation which would never have been extended if [the allegation] is correct. More significantly it was the year in which he was elected President of the Scottish AAA. It was unprecedented for an athlete still engaged in competition to be elected President and it has not happened since. Would that honour have been accorded the man portrayed in the British Library?

"Although selected for the Stockholm Games of 1912 my grandfather was unable to compete because the Edinburgh School Board would not allow him time off work, very different from today."

"His record as a scholar, soldier and athlete were exemplary. But above all, and more important to him

and his family was the fact that he was a Christian gentleman of the utmost integrity. An elder of the United Free Church of Scotland and after 1929 the Church of Scotland he held to the highest principles in every aspect of his life.

Throughout that life he never smoked or gambled. There is the story of him returning from the Middle East on a troopship after the War. To pass the time he and three other officers played bridge. At the conclusion of the voyage they totalled the points and settled accounts. Thos Jack was one of the winners, and refused to take a penny of his winnings as he considered gambling to be a sin.

"As well as refusing to smoke or gamble he never took an alcoholic drink in his life. Does this sound like the type of man to slope off to the pub in the midst of representing his country?"

Whether or not we agree with Dr. Campbell-Jack's view of the statement alleged to have been made regarding the pub, Thomas Jack deserves to be remembered for his achievements within and outside athletics. Given a good pair of shoes, Tom Jack would have written the history of the marathon in a very different way. It was blisters, not brandy, that robbed him of gold. ■

- 1 Track Stats, August 2008.
- 2 The Olympic Marathon, 2000, p. 71.
- 3 Voice of America News/Europe report, 2 August 2012.
- 4 Blog, A Grain of Sand, 2012, C. Campbell-Jack.
- 5 MS in possession of Norman Jack, Canada.
- 6 Correspondence with Norman Jack, May 2012.
- 7 Sports Reference/Olympic Sports 2013.
- 8 This and other cross-country material from CA Shields, SCCU Centenary History, 1990.
- 9 Theory of Alex Wilson, Scottish athletics historian based in Germany.

Up Against It

