

The British marathon race and the “Fantastic Four”

By Donald Macgregor



The “Battle in the sun of Colombes” where Ernest Harper began his Olympic career in 1924. In the cross-country he was fourth (in the photo behind the American Richard Johnson, who won bronze), and placed fifth in the 10,000 m.

Photo: Official Olympic Report Paris 1924

The four leading British marathon runners of the 1920s and 1930s were Sam Ferris, Ernest “Ernie” Harper, Donald McNab Robertson and Duncan “Dunky” McLeod Wright. The first two were Olympic silver medallists; the third was seventh in 1936, and the last fourth in 1932. Altogether, they competed in ten Olympic Games.

Some factors that should be borne in mind: in the late 1920s, the world was hit by the economic recession; in Britain and on the European continent it had serious effects, with wages reduced and jobs in short supply; in most countries, lack of money meant a reduction in the number of athletes sent to Los Angeles in 1932 (for instance, the entire British team numbered 194 in Amsterdam and 71 in Los Angeles).¹

There were relatively few international marathon races until modern times, so that most runners were confined to domestic competition. Most runners ran cross-country or track – each year there was the International Cross Country Championship, in which Ernie Harper ran nine times, winning in 1926 in Belgium, and Dunky Wright eleven. There were of course other good marathon runners, including Harry Payne, Bert Bignall, and Harry Wood, all of whom posted fast times. Six runners in each national squad were permitted until, at

the Berlin Olympic Congress of 1930, the maximum was reduced to three.

No Britons competed in the European Championships until 1950. The Empire Games were first held in 1930 in Hamilton, Ontario, with small fields, then in London in 1934 and in Sydney in 1938.

Ferris and Wright – great rivals and friends

Distance running in Great Britain was mainly a sport for the working classes. In England, as well as in Scotland, track athletics was more the province of the well educated. Professionalism, despite its long traditions in the north of England and Scotland, was severely frowned upon.

Two of the finest marathon runners resident in England were Sam Ferris, a member of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and Herne Hill Harriers from London, who had, in fact, been born in Northern Ireland; and Ernie Harper of the Hallamshire Harriers of Sheffield. In 10 years, Ferris² won the Polytechnic marathon on eight occasions, finishing second in 1924, but not taking part in 1930 because he was recovering from a hernia.

Each race during the Olympic years was a prelude to the Games themselves. Ferris was the first British finisher in three Olympics: fifth in Paris in 1924, eighth in Amsterdam in 1928, and second in Los Angeles in 1932, just 19 seconds behind the Argentinian winner, 20-year-old Juan Carlos Zabala, who coincidentally had been adopted at the age of 13 by the Scottish high jumper, Alexander Stirling.³

On that last appearance Ferris misjudged the finish. He had picked out a giant milk-bottle advertisement a mile from the stadium as the point at which to make his final push, but on the day of the race extra seating for spectators had been built around it, and he did not realise how close he was to the tape and to Zabala.

Born in Dromore, County Down, in Northern Ireland, on 29th August 1900, Ferris was always cheerful when he ran, coming through the field late, and almost unbeatable when he did so. His marathon career lasted from 1924 to 1933. He won 12 of his 20 races and three AAA titles and had marathon victories in Turin, Copenhagen (only 21 miles), Manchester and Liverpool. He was 1.70 metres tall. His best time was 2:31:55.

Ferris did not start running until 1923, when he was posted to India in the days of the Raj after joining the RAF in 1918. He was a mechanic rigger where he worked on two-seater Bristol fighters and was based at Amjala on the Punjab plains as part of the defence of the Northwest frontier.

He took up running simply for something to do and began with half-miles and cross-country. When he returned to Britain and was based in Scotland he joined Shettleston Harriers. There he met up with Dunky Wright, his great rival and friend to be. At the RAF cross-country championship he came in third and was spotted by the legendary coach, Bill Thomas, who later coached another great RAF athlete, Reg Thomas, winner of the first Empire Games mile in 1930, and then repeated as Empire mile champion in 1934. Thomas also coached the 1936 Olympic 1500-metres champion Jack Lovelock from New Zealand as well as many others at Oxford University.

Thomas told the doubtful Ferris that he thought the marathon was the distance for him. He was nothing if not persistent and kept on at Ferris, who wavered to the extent of joining Herne Hill Harriers, where Thomas was also the coach.

That same year, 1923, saw the opening of Wembley Stadium, and the RAF Cup final was played there between Manston and Cranwell. Thomas sent Ferris on to the track, told him to start running, and then vanished. He did not come back until Ferris had covered 10 miles in 61 minutes and then told him that he was running so strongly he should keep going. He produced a full fire bucket and a sponge to give Ferris a soaking at 15 miles and ignored his plea of "How much further?" Ferris completed 20 miles in 2hrs 15mins, lost 3 kg in weight, and was straight away posted to Uxbridge for an Olympic Scheme to prepare all RAF champions for the 1924 AAA race in a bid to have them selected for the Paris Olympics.

Protests that Ferris was not a champion were pushed aside by Thomas, who declared that he was the only RAF man likely to qualify for the British team, and he was proved right. One of a record number of 80 starters for the 1924 Poly, the novice Ferris held back. At 20 miles he was fifth and 5 mins 30 secs down, and he then picked up four minutes on the leader, Dunky Wright, by 25 miles and closed to within 45 secs at the finish – 2:53:17.4 to 2:54:03 – to earn Olympic selection.

Because of the heat wave in Paris there was considerable anxiety about the fate of the marathon runners who were due to start the day after the infamous 10 km cross-country event in which the great Paavo Nurmi of Finland, had ignored the conditions while behind him there had been chaos as competitors fell exhausted and unconscious, one of them running into the stands. Accordingly, the Olympic marathon was put back three hours to after 5 p.m., and Ferris, way back on the leaders,

moved from 30th to 13th and then to ninth with about 8 km to run. He continued to pick off runners to come into the stadium to finish fifth in 2:52:26, compared to the winning time of 2:41:22.6 by another Finn, Albin Stenroos. Ferris ended his first season by placing third in Manchester in his best time so far of 2:47:44.

His training was very modest compared to the changes that Jim Peters was to make in the 1950s to volume of mileage, which led to faster and faster times. Wearing his Woolworth's gym shoes, white socks and white shorts and singlet with either the Union Jack or the RAF badge on the front, Ferris always followed Bill Thomas's instructions. He ran five miles a day on the track and 13 miles round the Uxbridge area every Tuesday, and he took a four-hour country walk on a Wednesday, but his weekly running mileage never exceeded 40. In an interview with Ferris in the *Road Runners Club* newsletter of January 1975 the writer commented: "Today's marathon runners will not be surprised that on such a schedule, bodies were lying about all over the place at the finish of a race. You were not considered to have run a marathon properly if you could stand on your feet afterwards."⁴

In 1925 Ferris won the Poly for the first time (and the AAA championship combined with it), staying off the pace and being two minutes down at 10 and 15 miles, and then running with the American, Frank Zuna, to 20 miles where he was still 1 min 46 sec behind the leader, Wright. But by 25 miles he was well away and he set the fastest ever time by a Briton with an exceptional 2:35:58.2 with Zuna 2nd almost 2 1/2 minutes behind. In 1926 he won the Poly again, trailed by three-time winner Bobby Mills as they leisurely went through 10 miles together in 1:01:41 two minutes behind the leaders, and then picking up nearly all of that in the next five miles, taking the lead again at 25 miles, and beating Mills by almost four minutes in 2:42:24.2.

Later, in 1926, Ferris went to Turin for the international marathon there and won comfortably by three-quarters of a mile in a course record 2:46:18.6 from Joseph Marien (Belgium), and Stefano Natale (Italy), and his prize was an 18-carat Omega gold watch.

First held in 1919 over a 42.195 km route, the Turin race had been resumed in 1921 after a year's break on a long course of 42.75 km, mainly of paved asphalt, under the auspices of the newspapers, *11 Paese Sportivo* and later *La Stampa*. Often incorporating the Italian



In 1920 Bobby Mills set a British record in the Polytechnic Harriers marathon with 2:37:40.4 It was a performance which he never came close to repeating. A month later he finished 14th at the Olympic Games in Antwerp – more than 15 minutes behind the victorious Finn, Hannes Kolehmainen.



Donald Macgregor | *1939. Scottish marathon runner at 1972 Olympic Games (7th place). He also participated in the 1970 and 1974 Commonwealth Games. Personal best: 2:14:15.4 hrs; 24 times under 2:20. President of the Scottish Cross Country Union (1980). Over 40 years as teacher and lecturer. Liberal Democrat Councillor on North East Fife District Council; at present on Fife Council. Autobiography *Running My Life* (2010), with Tim Johnston, *His Own Man*, biography of Dr. Otto Peltzer (2016).

The best performing Scottish runners before the Second World War: Dunky Wright (left), who took part in the Olympic Games from 1924 to 1932, and Donald Robertson (right), who finished seventh in the marathon at the 1936 Games in Berlin.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive



championship, it attracted some of Europe's best runners until it was last held in 1933, though the same course was used again for the inaugural European Championships the following year.

Marien and Natale entered the Poly marathon in 1927, but after the trio had come together at 15 miles, Ferris quickly opened up a 200-yard lead, was a minute ahead of the Italian at 20 miles, and won by almost five minutes in 2:40:32.2. Two months later Ferris won again in Manchester by over 11 minutes in 2:48:46.2, and then in September in Liverpool he beat his British record with 2:35:27, finishing almost 10 minutes ahead.

Olympic year of 1928 started with great hopes that Ferris would be the first British marathon victor at the Games, but sadly it was not to be. Ferris won his fourth successive Poly in 2:41:02.2, unusually going into the lead at five miles and triumphing by almost 10 minutes, but he injured a tendon when stepping on a stone in training and had to miss the AAA marathon held separately to the Poly. Harry Payne won this in 2:43:34.3

from Harper, Wright and Bert Bignall, and it was Payne, Bignall, Ferris, Wright, Harper and Harry Wood, who had won the Manchester race in May in an excellent 2:39:29.2, who were selected for the Amsterdam Olympics.

Ferris's injury was so serious that some days he could not even walk, and he had grave doubts about completing the race and was never really committed to it. Yet, after he had started very slowly, the twinges disappeared along the flat canal-side course, enabling him to again be the first British finisher in eighth place in 2:37:41.9 behind Boughéra El Quafi from France (2:32:57.2), who in the following year became Olympic champion in Amsterdam.

In the Liverpool race at the end of September, Ferris ran away from a field which included Harry Wood (11th in the Olympics) to set another British record of 2:33:00, which ranked 2nd to El Quafi on the world-ranking list.

In 1929, Ferris ran two marathons. The first of them was his by now routine success in the Poly, in 2:40:47.4, opening up a gap between 15 and 20 miles and winning by a fraction over three minutes from the Finn, Verner Laaksonen, who had been 12th in Amsterdam.

Victory for the Scotsman Dunky Wright in Canada

The first British Empire Games were to be held in Hamilton, Ontario, in 1930, but Ferris missed the Poly after putting a foot in a rabbit-hole while leading in the RAF cross-country championship and suffering a hernia. Wright won the subsequent AAA race in a personal best 2:38:29.4 from Martti Marttelin (Finland) with a fast-finishing Ferris two minutes back though not fully fit. It was Wright's day at the Empire Games and he led from six miles and had covered two laps of the track at the finish by the time Ferris entered the stadium. It says much for the sportsmanship of those days and the friendship between the two runners that Ferris shook Wright by the hand as he stood on the infield – Ferris had two laps to go. The Scot crossed the line in 2:43:43.2 and no other times were taken!

Ferris won the 1931 Poly in 2:35:31.8, unchallenged after a slow start and more than five minutes ahead of Bert Norris, and that was his only major race of the season, although he ran his regular mix of events in RAF station and squadron meetings, including a half-mile relay leg. In 1932 he was determined to win the Olympic race in Los Angeles, and he prepared for the Games meticulously, taking the Poly by almost seven minutes from the South African, Tommy Lalande, after having hung back until making his move at 17 miles. Ferris did not compete in the AAA event, which was a pity, judging by that excellent widow, Marjorie, and his daughter, Rosemary Vigrass. Marjorie, who was 89 on the day of the ceremony, took along her late husband's 1932 silver

medal. The dedication plaque in the park says simply: "These playing fields are dedicated to the memory of Sam Ferris, a native of Dromore, who competed in the marathon at the Olympic Games in 1924, 1928 and 1932. He won a silver medal in 1932."

The Silver Medallist at the Berlin Olympics

Ernie Harper⁵ was born in Chesterfield on 3rd August 1902. Like Ferris and Wright, he was a three time Olympian, competing in 1924, 1928 and 1936. In 1924 he finished fifth in the 10,000 metres and fourth in the cross-county event.⁶ He was the only British finisher in this race; therefore, the British team was unplaced. Just fifteen of the thirty-eight starters finished the event due to the extreme heat and the fumes from a nearby energy-producing plant, which affected the runners' breathing. It was a disaster, so that the IOC discontinued the event. In 1926, he won a 10,000 m in Oslo, and scored a 10,000 and 5000 metres double in Bergen, Norway. He had many cross-country successes.

In 1928, Harper intended to switch to the marathon. In preparation he undertook a 23-mile run from his home in Stannington, Sheffield, watched by thousands, science of hindsight, when there was one of the greatest finishes ever seen between Wright and his Maryhill Harriers clubmate, Donald McNab Robertson. They entered the stadium together, having run shoulder-to-shoulder over the last six miles to Stamford Bridge with Robertson winning by 1.2 sec in 2:34:32.6.

Ferris had one last marathon in 1933, winning his eighth Poly in 2:42:24.2. Using the tactics that had given him so much success, he started slowly, came though at 16 miles, passed 20 miles in exactly two hours, and then had a great battle with Bert Norris to win by almost exactly a minute. He then retired from top-class athletics and was posted by the RAF to Iraq where he teamed up with Jimmy Green, future founder of *Athletics Weekly*, for training runs at 4:30 in the morning to escape the full heat of the day. Ferris completed his tour of duty in the Middle East in 1939, still unbeaten in competition, and he continued to serve in the RAF until 1950, retiring with the rank of Warrant Officer.

Apart from his marathon achievements, he had won the RAF three miles title twice and the cross-country title six times and was also Middlesex champion at four miles and Ulster champion at three miles on the track and a member of the Irish cross-country team on three occasions. He continued to pass on advice to anyone from novices to the best in the land and he wrote regular road-race reports for *Athletics Weekly* and dabbled in photography. His impish sense of humour never left him even towards the end of his life when he was confined to a wheelchair. He died on 21st March 1980.

His name lives on in his birthplace, Dromore, with a large sports complex named Ferris Park in his honour. The first phase was opened in 1997 by his and paced by a runner from Chesterfield called Mitchell. The hilly run took him 2 hours 23 minutes 18 seconds. The qualifying race was the AAA championship, from Windsor to the White City Stadium in early July. Harper came in second to Harry Payne (2:34:34) in 2:37:10, and gained selection.

The Amsterdam race started at 3:14 p.m. on Sunday, 5th August in ideal conditions (16 degrees C). There were 69 entrants. The British runners finished in eighth (Ferris), 11th (Wood) and 13th (Payne). Wright was 20th, Bignall 21st and Harper 22nd, having gone off too fast, in 2:45:44.

In 1929, Harper set a new record for 25 km (1:23:45.8) in Berlin, and in Glasgow in 1932 a record distance for two hours of 20 miles 1604 yards 2.5 feet [32,2015.54 m]. He ran no marathons between 1928 and 1936.

The AAA laid down the criteria for selection for Berlin, that is, that those selected should reach the standard of those placed sixth at Amsterdam in 1928. There were two opportunities in the UK – the Poly, where Harper finished fourth, in 2:40:24, four minutes outside the time required. At the AAA race over the same course from Windsor to the White City Stadium, Harper and Donald McNab Robertson entered the stadium together. The Scot sprinted to victory in 2:35:3.6, 1.2 seconds ahead. Both men were selected.



In 1932 Sam Ferris became the first Briton to win an Olympic marathon medal. He took silver behind 20 year old Argentinian Juan Carlos Zabala.

Photo: Official Olympic Report Los Angeles 1932

In Berlin, Harper earned praise for advising eventual winner Sohn Kee Chung not to chase after Zabala who had opened a big lead. Zabala eventually pulled out of the race. Sohn, a native Korean, who had to start under the name of Kitei Son for Japan, was later reported to have said: "Much credit for my victory must go to Harper of England, from the time we started, he kept telling me not to worry about Zabala, and let him run himself out."⁷ Harper was in severe pain for the last 13 kilometres. The next day the *Sheffield Telegraph* writer W. Capel Kirby explained that within minutes

Ernest Harper took a break from marathons after 1928, but returned to the road in 1936. In Berlin he celebrated his greatest performance. He won silver behind the superlative Korean Sohn Kee Chung, forced to run in Japanese colours under the name of Kitei Son.

Photo: Volker Kluge Archive



of finishing Harper had told him he was "through with running" and that his badly blistered feet had prevented him from keeping up with Sohn.⁸

After the race, Harper, as was his usual habit, asked for a cigarette, but disliked the taste of the German one he was given.⁹ He later expanded on the reasons for retirement, stressing in particular his debt to his employers, Thomas Wragg and Sons, Loxley (brick makers).

"I had Sohn in sight the whole way, but with this blister I could hardly bear to put my foot on the ground. But Sohn's a great runner and I don't mind losing to him. Besides, there was twelve years between us."¹⁰

The British team at Berlin had not done as well as some had hoped, but the sanguine team manager Arthur Turk commented on return to London: "We did quite as well as expected, and it must not be forgotten that we were against many men who had trained specifically for their events." Clearly a man with his finger on the pulse!

Harper ran for Hallamshire Harriers and Athletic Club in Sheffield. He represented England in International Cross Country Championships from 1923–1931, winning the individual competition in 1926 in Belgium. What marked him out was "his superior knowledge of himself, how to balance training, racing and recovery and remain fit and fresh and improve at the same time."¹¹

Harper had a fine reputation for sportsmanship. Apart from the incident in Berlin mentioned above, other stories tell of him helping up competitors who had fallen, and re-directing someone who had taken a wrong turn on a cross-country course. More prosaically, he was once said to have vacated his seat on a crowded

bus to allow another passenger to sit, instead running behind the vehicle all the way up the steep hill to his home.

In 1939, Harper turned professional. Around that time he lived with his married daughter, who had settled in Australia. Harper died in Tullamarine, Melbourne on 9th October 1979.

Scottish Running in the 1930s

Distance road running and cross-country were mostly concentrated in the west of Scotland in the industrial heartlands. The leading runners could be described as proletarians, though whether they recognised the term is uncertain. The two leading Scottish marathon runners of the time, Duncan McLeod Wright and Donald McNab Robertson may have had political views, but those have not come down to us. Robertson in particular seems to have lived for running. He was almost certainly the first of the hundred miles a week brigade, closely followed by 'Dunky'.

Robertson, born on 7th September 1905, came late to athletics. A bachelor, whose fiancée had died young, he lived with his widowed mother in Glasgow and worked for Glasgow Corporation as a coach painter. Donald lived at 95 Garnet Street and had a brother called Andrew, who also lived in Glasgow. All his free time seems to have been devoted to training. In the 1980s the present writer interviewed one of his Maryhill Harriers teammates, Andy Burnside, but few details about him emerged. No one had a bad word to say about him, nor were there any anecdotes. His training ("like a horse" in the words of one of his teammates, Gordon Porteous) could be as much as twenty miles, four times a week, with 25 miles on Saturday and a thirty mile hike on Sunday. He had little time for leisure.

Donald McNab Robertson was twice selected for the Olympic Games. In 1932 he could not afford (and was not permitted by his employers, Glasgow Corporation) to take time off to go to Los Angeles. Dunky Wright went in his place. In 1934 he won a silver medal in the Empire Games marathon in London and in 1938 in Sydney he was fourth.

A six-time AAA marathon champion, he was selected for Berlin in 1936. Sadly, Robertson was no diarist, and so we are deprived of his impressions of Hitler's Olympics. In the race he came through strongly, finishing seventh in 2:37:06.2, the best position by a Scottish athlete until 1972. "Donald McNab Robertson had been maintaining a very steady pace to conserve energy on this warm day, and it paid off as he now moved into seventh at 39 kilometers."¹²

During the war, Donald saw action in France, the Netherlands and Belgium. He was involved in the D-Day invasion (it interrupted his plans to run in the South

London Harriers 30 miles in 1944) and was among the first British units to liberate Brussels in September of 1944. A newspaper clipping shows him wearing a beret and a lance corporal's stripe.¹³

When the first Scottish marathon championship was held in 1946, the 40-year-old Robertson, who had yet to be demobilized from the army, won it. He repeated his win in 1947. Tragically, he died in his sleep (from a pulmonary embolism) on 15th June 1949, aged 43. In his short career he ran 16 marathons, winning 10.

The Scots Athlete carried an obituary¹⁴. He had been on a training spin on the evening before his death and had been training conscientiously for the 1948 Scottish championship marathon. He was greatly loved in the athletic community. "The warmth of his smile, and his friendship, endeared him to every sports follower in the country."¹⁵

Scotland's greatest ever marathon runner?

Duncan McLeod Wright was born on 22nd September 1896. A successful cross-country runner, he first attempted a marathon in 1923, running from Fyvie Castle in Aberdeenshire to Aberdeen. His coach advised him to start fast and not to let anyone catch him. With four miles to go, he was offered some brandy (the requested tea not being available), with unfortunate results. He was almost caught by local man, Jim Ronaldson, but crossed the line in 3:13:12.4.

He made a more serious attempt in the Polytechnic race of 1924, winning by 26 seconds over Sam Ferris in 2:53:18. He improved his time in winning the *Sporting Chronicle* marathon in Manchester in 2:34:25. This sufficed to gain him selection for the Paris Olympics. The race was held under trying conditions; it was so hot that the start was delayed until 5:23 p.m. Despite this, 28 of the starters retired, including Dunky, who had severe blisters. "At 20 miles I was lying about sixth. Now, I'd taken the British coach's advice to bind up my ankles with Elastoplast to give some support on the cobbles. The effect was to make my ankles swell and get sore. So I came to a bine (basin) of water and put my feet in it and stripped off the plasters. Just then an ambulance arrived and picked me up. I'd been staggering about a bit, so I wasn't too unwilling a passenger."¹⁶

In Paris, Wright made the acquaintance of Eric Liddell. He said of his first impression: "It was at Queen's Park sports in 1921 ... Through a small window from the competitors' room underneath the Stand, I saw Eric for the first time in the 100 yards and was completely thrilled."¹⁷

Wright later accompanied Liddell on his evangelical tours of Scotland, and wrote in an SAAA circular in 1970: "I was one of Eric's colleagues at the Paris Games and enjoyed his friendship for many years, and without

hesitation I declare that he was the greatest sportsman I ever met."¹⁸

Dunky was a man of many clubs. He started with Clydesdale Harriers, fell out (it is thought) with some officials, resigned and joined Shettleston Harriers in the east end of Glasgow. An ill-judged attempt to start an 'élite' club, Caledonia AC – sponsored by Glasgow footballer and fish merchant WS Unkles – only lasted a year. Dunky then joined Maryhill Harriers, with whom he enjoyed many successes.

In 1928 he was selected again in the six-man British team for Amsterdam, this time finishing 20th. It was his third and final Olympics, in Los Angeles in 1932, that brought him close to being an athletics immortal. Because of the economic situation, teams from Europe attending Los Angeles were relatively small. The class system, which still exists in Britain, though on a lesser scale than in the 1930s, meant that nearly all-British team members were members of the Achilles Club, restricted to graduates of Oxford and Cambridge universities. Dunky and his marathon colleague Sam Ferris were, as Dunky told the present writer in 1975, picked because "we had to have someone in the marathon". They crossed the Atlantic on the *S.S. Empress of Britain* as far as Québec, and Sam and Dunky trained by running round the decks. There followed a long rail journey across the continent. In Dunky's words (in a BBC radio broadcast from 1967) "at every stop, be it for only half an hour, Sam and I were out on the road for a run".

As the marathon was late in the programme, Dunky was able to enjoy the social whirl of Hollywood, meeting such stars as Douglas Fairbanks.

On race day which "was not excessively hot", Dunky and Sam Ferris had a race plan. Dunky intended to get into the lead after halfway, and Sam would use his fast pace in the latter stages to try to win.

In the event Zabala led from the gun. He was challenged and then overtaken by Lauri Virtanen (a marathon debutant, substituting for the banned Nurmi). The Finn stopped for a glass of milk – on hearing which, the coach Lauri Pikhala said, he should have been drinking tea, but none had been provided. As a result of Virtanen's retirement from the race, Wright found himself in the lead at 35 km. But going down a slight incline, he felt a twinge in his thigh, and had to slow. Zabala passed him and a quartet of runners neared the stadium. Zabala, close to exhaustion, crossed the line and collapsed. Ferris was second, only 15 seconds behind, followed by Toivonen and Wright. It was the closest Olympic finish ever.

The Scottish Amateur Athletic Association, under pressure from the Scottish Marathon Club (established by Dunky Wright, Jimmy Scott, and a few others), promoted the first Scottish marathon championship in

Dunky Wright (left) and Donald Robertson (centre) during an Edinburgh to London relay in 1947. Robertson died suddenly in 1949 from a pulmonary embolism. He was only 43.

Photo: Donald Macgregor Archive



1946. At that time severe rationing was in force; food parcels from Australia, South Africa and the USA were sent to improve athletes' diet, and clothing coupons were needed to purchase running shoes. Dunky was made Sports Officer of his Home Guard battalion, and (no doubt surreptitiously) obtained a supply of heavy brown Army plimsolls, which had much thicker soles than the usual ones.¹⁹ Robertson wore plimsolls from Woolworths which cost a mere 1/11 (ca. 1 €).

In August 1947, 26 Scottish runners, including Dunky and Donald took part in the 'Fiery Cross' Edinburgh to London relay run. The idea was to advertise the 'Enterprise Scotland' Exhibition. Thousands thronged Edinburgh Castle to witness the ceremony of lighting the crosses and extinguishing them in goats' blood according to ancient custom. Robertson received the cross from the Lord Provost and all the runners accompanied him out of the city. He went on to complete the 25 miles to Peebles in 2 hours 40 minutes.

The most stirring part of the journey was the last ten miles through London to the Guildhall. Dunky Wright had been chosen to present the message to the Lord Mayor of London. The total distance for this eccentric trip was 406 miles in 47 hours 31 minutes.²⁰

Dunky Wright lived at 17 Polwarth Gardens. He was a salesman of electric photocopying machines, produced by Singer. Dunky was something of a technophile. A cutting from about 1940 shows him running on a treadmill with an oxygen mask strapped on to measure his oxygen uptake. A great friend of Dunky's was Jock Semple of Boston Marathon fame. Jock, a member of Clydesdale Harriers²¹, was also a technophile and had similar testing done on him at Harvard's Fatigue Laboratory. Dunky was married to Mary in 1939. Her maiden name was Mary Guthrie McKay.

After retirement from competitive running, and from his job as a salesman, Dunky became an official, organiser and journalist, ever-present at races, whether

road, track or cross-country. An irrepressible optimist, he was an "athlete's official" rather than a member of the so-called "blazerati". Who else but Dunky would have dared to approach the manager of Glasgow Rangers FC, Scot Symon, to ask if a one hour track race could be held at Ibrox Park in 1956, and to ask *The Daily Express* for prizes?

John Emmet Farrell, a Maryhill Harriers teammate, wrote in *The Scots Athlete* magazine: "Donald was quiet and modest but ambitious. A marathon runner only, he reached his standard by hard consistent work. Dunky was more of an extrovert. He was more talented and versatile – on track and cross-country as well as road. Yet Dunky's sense of humour was not universally appreciated."²²

It was nonetheless a great blow to Scottish athletics when he died in Glasgow on 21st August 1976, aged 79. As journalist Harry Andrew wrote in his tribute:²³ "To be a champion in the marathon, you have to have a heart of enormous size and quality, abiding optimism, infinite patience and a considerable sense of humour. All these qualities Dunky had in abundance. Plus an enormous unflagging zest for life right up to the end. He was a warm friendly little man so interested in everybody and everything. A man just as happy reporting some minor affair as some great international sporting occasion. A man whose delight knew no bounds when he was able to help and advise one of Scotland's young athletes. He had an abiding pride in what he had done as a runner and an administrator. Yet it was a pride without a vestige of conceit." ■

- 1 Volker Kluge, *Olympische Sommerspiele, Die Chronik I*, Sportverlag Berlin, 1997, pp. 604 and 701
- 2 Adapted with permission from an article by David Thurlow, *Track-Stats*, September 1999, Vol. 37, No. 3
- 3 Colin Shields and Arnold Black, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, SATS 2014, p. 124
- 4 Probably RRC Secretary John Jewell
- 5 Harper's life and achievements have been uniquely researched and published in the splendid book *Steel and Grace, Sheffield's Olympic Medallists* by Matthew Bell and Gary Armstrong, Bennion Kearney Ltd 2014
- 6 Ernie Harper, *sports-reference.com*
- 7 David E Martin and Roger W.H. Gynn, *The Olympic Marathon*, Human Kinetics 2000, p. 172
- 8 *Steel and Grace*, p. 172
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 173
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Martin and Gynn, p. 174
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 172
- 13 Information from Alex Wilson, Schwäbisch Hall
- 14 *The Scots Athlete*, July 1948
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Colin Shields and Arnold Black, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, SATS 2014, p. 122
- 17 John W. Keddie, *Running The Race*, Evangelical Press, 2007, p. 58
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 21
- 19 C. J. Youngson, *A Hardy Race*, Colin Youngson, 2000, p. 9
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 11
- 21 Information from Brian McAusland, athletics historian
- 22 *A Hardy Race*, p. 9
- 23 *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 124