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KENNETH MCRAE
WORLD CHAMPION ATHLETE

Written by Peter MacRae, London, September, 1999

INVERNESS is famous as the birthplace of noted athletes - Charles McLean, Donald Ross, A. A. Cameron, and many others were born and brought up in that country; but had no one else besides the stalwart Highlander, whose name heads this page, come from the shire, it would be famous for having produced him alone. "He that drives fat oxen, should himself be fat," and it seems that he who makes tall throws with the hammer must himself be tall, as all good hammer-throwers have been tall men, and "Kenny" McRae is among the tallest of them all.



McRae stands 6 ft. 3 in. in his boots, and weighs about 15 st. 7 lb. while his chest measures 44 in. He was born at Windhill, Beauly, in 1850, and, like the majority of "Men of Muscle," began to earn his living by working - on a farm. From the age of twelve years until eighteen years, he continued at this employment and then from tilling the soil and tending the lowing line he ascended-or descended-to the manufacture of Scots whisky. For the next thirteen years he was engaged in producing the favourite tipple at different distilleries.

As was shown in the career of the Taits, William of that family came to the front as an athlete when very young and this was doubtless brought about by systematic training under his brother John, coupled with the fact that he did not have too much hard work, at the time. When a man has engaged in an arduous employment all day he has little enthusiasm for athletics when the evening comes; unless in instances like that of McRae, where the love of manly feats in the field predominates over all else.

The amateur champion, of whom so much is made, sinks into insignificance when compared to men like McRae, who have had to work hard during their entire life-time and yet have been champions; men who have met with many of fortunes buffets and few rewards. "Kenny" McRae has made better throws and has done better athletic feats under more trying circumstances than perhaps any other athlete that ever lived.

Fancy, ye athletes who compete perhaps twice in a season, and have then been preparing for those two meetings and nothing else months before hand. You have been dieting

yourselves, sleeping according to regulations, and have been nightly rubbed down with a formula specially adapted to your tender skin. Just think of "Kenny" McRae working hard in a distillery, and going straight from his work to the games, and there accomplishing feats with the caber, hammer, ball, etc., that have seldom been equalled by any man.

Later on, when he left the making of whisky, instead of looking for an easy job during the winter, where he could retain his form ready for the games when the roses came again, he selected one of the worst callings an athlete could follow worker in a gaswork, with its heat and stifling, gassy fumes. Here, indeed, was a delightful spot in which to train for the athletic field There was any amount of embrocation in the form of black and grimy sweat, and his diet would, of course, be carefully attended to by that paragon of trainers-the Edinburgh landlady.

For thirteen years McRae was employed in different distilleries, that is from the age of eighteen until thirty-one, when he made his debut in the Edinburgh Gasworks, where he toiled during the long winter, attending the Highland gatherings in the summer, and returning to the smoke and grime in the fall.

At the age of sixteen, while yet a farm servant, "Kenny" began to practise the national sport, but he did not reach his best until quite thirty years of age; in fact many of his most remarkable performances have been accomplished when he was almost ten years older.

In 1879, being then twenty-nine years of age, McRae threw the light hammer at Inverness 120ft. 6in., and the 21 lb. hammer 95ft. 6in. At Kingussie, in 1882, he made some extraordinary hammer throws. On this occasion he made 125ft. 5in. with the light hammer and 99ft. 9in. with the 21 lb. hammer. McRae himself considers this the best he has ever done in competition. At the Edinburgh Exhibition in 1886 Kenny made what was probably his best putt with the stone.

The stone used at this great gathering was brought specially from Inverness. The weather on the date fixed for the games was most unfavourable, rain coming down in torrents, and at last the meeting was postponed until the following day, when, luckily, the sky was bright and clear, although the ground was still exceedingly wet and slippery, and it was found necessary to sprinkle a quantity of saw-dust over the pitch in order to afford the competitors a footing. This plan was most satisfactory - at least, as far as McRae was concerned - the final result being: McRae 1st, 40ft. 3in. ; Owen Duffy 2nd, 38ft. 3in. ; George Davidson 3rd, 37ft. ; and A. Nelson, Blairgowrie, 4th, 35ft. 7in. Even the 4th man was a good putter, and yet McRae was 4 ft. 8 in. over him, which adds considerably to the value of McRae's performance. "Kenny" also won the light stone, the hammer, and the caber on the same day, thus carrying off premier honours in each of the heavy events.

At the Glasgow Exhibition Highland gathering in 1888 - not the police sports which were also held there, and which McRae did not attend, - "Kenny" won light and heavy ball, hammer, and 56 lb. weight. His distances were - light ball, 44ft. 4in.; heavy ball, 38ft. 7in.; while with the 56 lb. he made 28ft. 6in.

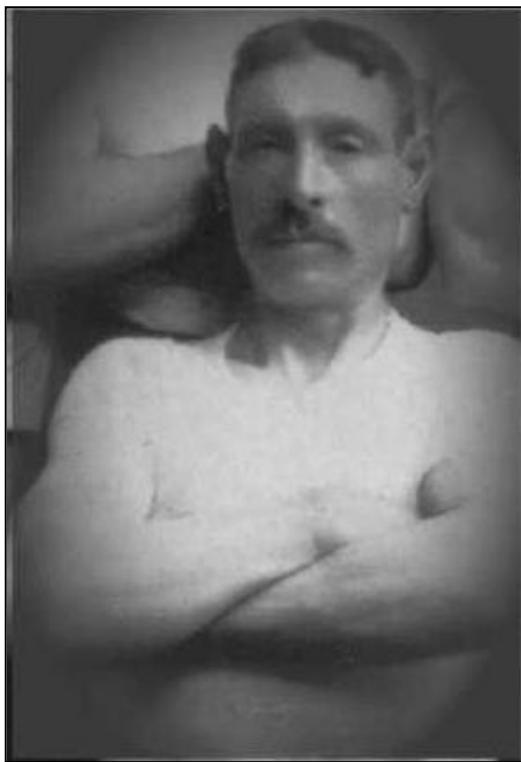
At the great Highland gathering held at the Paris Exhibition when Colonel White collected the clans, as it were, and took the French capital by storm, McRae again proved his superiority with hammers and caber, Duffy being first at putting on this occasion. At this gathering "Kenny" made 122ft. with the light hammer and 93ft. with the heavy hammer. This meeting was open to the whole world, so that McRae may justly feel proud of bringing back the honour to Scotland. In 1887 McRae made 38ft. 6in. with the heavy stone at Birnam, and 129ft. 6in. with a 15½ lb. hammer at Nairn, while at Middlesborough, England, he made 42ft. 4in. with an 18 lb. ball. He has the exceptionally good throw at Tain with a 17½ lb. hammer of 114ft. 10 in. At Aboyne in 1891, he threw the 24¾ lb. hammer 82ft. 10in. In private practice he has made 97ft. 5in. with 22 lb. hammer, and 91 ft. with a 23 lb. hammer, with extra throws, but on perfectly level ground.

McRae holds all the championship medals for the heavy events at Edinburgh, Glasgow, Paris, Newcastle, and Liverpool Exhibitions. He was also a good wrestler in the Scots style, and could high leap about 5ft. 8in. when at his best. In short, he was one of the finest athletes Scotland has ever produced, and that under conditions that only the strongest of constitutions could stand.

In appearance, McRae was stately and erect. He was of the greyhound build, with not an ounce of superfluous flesh, let alone fat, on his sinewy frame. His legs and arms were beautifully modelled, wiry, and strong. He was very broad across the shoulders, and tapered right down to the heel. In proportion to his shoulders and chest his buttocks seemed narrow, but the great length of the legs deceived the eye somewhat here. He had fair hair and moustache, and keen grey eyes and a Roman nose. He was much handicapped in putting by the loss of the second finger on the right hand. To remedy this defect he usually carried a small strap with which he bound the first and third fingers together, thus closing the gap. His arms were abnormally long, and their length was doubtless of much advantage to him in feats of throwing, and would have been of equal service had he chosen the profession of boxing. We are often told that Scotsmen have never excelled in the



ring; but that statement is only partly correct, as there have been men such as Bob Brittle, of Portobello; Sandy McKay, of Glasgow; and others who have figured in the best of company in that line.



The average Scotsman, however, does not seek honour in the prize ring, or there can be little doubt that if men like McRae adopted boxing instead of throwing and putting we would have champions here in Scotland second to none in the world. As Owen Duffy once said, after Hercules and Samson had visited him, and had been down at the back "putting the ball with him." Troth, boy, they're that strong they can't help putting; it made me busy to keep out of their road."

The same might be said of McRae and many other fine specimens of the Scottish Highlander, "They're that big and strong; they couldn't help boxing if once they began."

McRae's last appearance on any field of sport was at the Partick Police gathering two years ago, when Davidson, McRae, Dinnie, and James Currie, of Alexandria, were engaged for an exhibition of wrestling. That, by the bye, was Currie's last appearance at Partick also, and we cannot remember of seeing him as a competitor at any of the games since. The veterans were well received by the spectators, and many were the flattering remarks passed upon their manly proportions as, in the garb of old Gaul they, appeared on the field.

"Then friends that have long parted been,
And hearts that have grown cold,
Unite again like parted streams,
And mingle as of old."

Many thousands flocked to Partick to see those old champions, whose names are known not only in Scotland, but wherever Scotsmen gather, and after the sports the older followers of the games hobnobbed together and again described how Donald threw at such-and-such a place, or "Kenny's got ower the stick." "Ah!" those old fellows would tell you, "there's nane o' they kind o' men noo."

McRae has left the games and the gasworks some years now, and is back again to the hills and the heather, managing a small farm near Nairn; but whatever befalls, while men may come and men may go, while old champions die and new champions are born, a name which will always stand high in the annals of Scottish Highland games is that of Kenny McRae.

Refs:

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Donaldson, Charles: *Men of Muscle and The Highland Games of Scotland*, Carter & Platt, Glasgow, c1903 (?) (Based on *Evening Times* article)

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