

JOE SCOTT – NEW ZEALAND'S MOST AMAZING ATHLETE?

The name of Joe Scott is probably not known to readers of this newsletter but hopefully we can redress that oversight. Let me start with this article, reproduced in the latest issue of the Racewalking New Zealand newsletter, written way back in 1935 for the New Zealand Railway Magazine.¹

THE NEW ZEALAND RAILWAYS MAGAZINE, VOLUME 10, ISSUE 9 (DECEMBER 2, 1935)

NEW ZEALAND'S MOST AMAZING ATHLETE. — TEN-YEAR-OLD LAD DEFEATS CHAMPIONS AND LATER WINS WORLD'S CHAMPIONSHIP

Specially Written for "N.Z. Railways Magazine," by W. F. INGRAM

NOT so long ago I had a discussion with "Dorrie" Leslie, perhaps the best known athletic official in New Zealand and a champion athlete in his day. I asked him his opinion of who was the greatest track athlete seen in New Zealand. Without hesitation he informed me that the palm should go to Joe Scott.

How many of the present generation of sporting enthusiasts have heard of this athlete? Not many, I'll warrant. But Joe Scott was a household name in the years immediately following 1875 and when he passed away, in 1908, the sport lost a most famous personality and a great champion.

On January 1st, 1875, New Zealanders saw the first of many fine performances by this wonderful walker. It was in the days when walking events were exceptionally popular, and on that day at the Caledonian annual sports meeting at Dunedin, history was made. Joe Scott, at that time, was only ten years of age, stood 3 ft. 4 ins. in height and weighed 3 st. 9 lbs., but he was entered in the two miles open championship walk. Sixteen of the country's best heel-and-toe artists were in the field, including J. Spence, the winner in 1874. Spence was a perfect giant, standing 6 ft. 4 ins. in height. Just imagine the contrast—Scott, 3 ft. 4 ins. and Spence, 6 ft. 4 ins.!

The walk was regarded as a certainty for Spence, as he had lately carried off all before him in the North Island. Spence took the lead at the start and maintained it until the commencement of the last lap, Scott lying second, close up. The big chap did his utmost to shake Scott off his heels, but the little man answered spurt for spurt. Rounds of applause greeted the midget as he stuck to his rival, but the climax was reached when, at a signal from his trainer, Austin Smith, Scott made his final effort. Walking in grand style and in the fairest possible manner, he drew up level and amidst the wildest enthusiasm and to the delight and amusement of the crowd, Scott, with a magnificent spurt went clean away from the big fellow and won the race by forty yards.



Joe Scott, aged 12 years.

Fifteen thousand spectators went mad with excitement and broke into the enclosure, delaying the sports for nearly an hour. When order was restored the Governor of New Zealand, Sir George Bowen, who had been an interested spectator, sent for Scott and congratulated him, at the same time presenting him with two sovereigns. Scott was then carried round the ring in the arms of one of the directors, and a sum of nearly £50 was collected.

Publicity methods in those days had not reached the superlative heights known to-day, but the news of Scott's

¹ See http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-Gov10_09Rail-t1-body-d30.html

extraordinary walking ability soon spread and within a week his trainer had received offers from all over New Zealand asking that the little chap give displays. Eventually he was booked for a tour lasting twelve months, and visited Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Dunedin, and the other principal towns in the Colony. Scott proved a tremendous attraction and the theatres were packed wherever he appeared. His great pace—for one so young—combined with his graceful style of walking, was everywhere admired. Of course, in those days walking races were the vogue, just as wheelbarrow derbies seem to be to-day.

But Scott was just at the beginning of a great career. In 1877, William Edwards, who had been winning all his races in Australia, arrived in New Zealand and after defeating J. McGregor, who at one time held the seven miles championship of New Zealand, challenged all-comers from one mile to a hundred miles. Scott's trainer promptly accepted the challenge, and matched Scott to walk Edwards for £200 a side and the seven miles championship of New Zealand. At this time, mark you, Scott was only twelve years of age! This race took place in the Garrison Hall, Dunedin, and caused immense excitement. Over six thousand spectators paid good money to see the contest. Scott, weighing only 4 st. 2lbs., was naturally enough the favourite at heart, although sound judges voted for a win by Edwards. Edwards walked as well as he had ever done previously, but proved no match for the midget, and in the last mile, Scott just walked away from him and won easily in 57 min. 6 sec. A few weeks after this Scott walked against Edwards in a race of 100 miles and won just as comfortably. At the age of twelve years, Joe Scott thus held the seven miles and one hundred miles walking championships of New Zealand.

The craze for long-distance walking—then at its height in England and America—now reached New Zealand and, in 1880, the first big twenty-four hours, night and day, competition was organised. This attracted competitors from all parts of the world, but the 15-year-old New Zealander proved equal to the task, winning first place and with it a purse of £200 and the championship belt. To make this belt his own property he had to defend it successfully against all-comers for three years. This he did without any great inconvenience to himself.

During the next few months Scott won twenty-two races in the North Island, the events ranging from twelve hours duration to six days.

About this time Arthur Hancock, the English champion, arrived in Australia and found backers there to match him against Scott to the extent of £500 for a walk of twelve hours. This event, being of international character, excited an extraordinary amount of interest, and Dunedinites were fortunate in arranging the match. Special trains ran from all parts of the land and the Garrison Hall was packed to suffocation, many thousands being unable to gain admission. It was a great race PAGE 80 for fifty miles, after which the staying powers of Scott—uncanny for a lad so young—proved too much for Hancock, who finished a long way behind.

During Hancock's stay in New Zealand he met Scott four times in twelve-hour walks, but the New Zealander won all the races, His transparently easy victories caused unbounded enthusiasm and resulted in a sum of £1,000 being subscribed to send him to England to test him against the world's best heel-and-toe performers.

Scott and his trainer arrived in England in 1888 and on arrival Austin Smith immediately issued a challenge for Scott to walk any man in the world for 12, 24, 48 hours or six days. It should be explained that a six-day walk meant six days of twelve hours continuous walking. There were no takers for the challenge and eventually Scott's trainer deposited £100 to be won by any walker who could defeat the young New Zealander. There were no walkers in England who would risk a side-wager, but there were quite a number willing to walk against Scott on the off-chance that a win would enrich them to the extent of £100 without incurring any financial responsibility. But, come one come all, they failed. Hancock tried Scott out over the 12-hours and lost; Hibberd took the New Zealander on over 24-hours, but did not see Scott after a few hours, while Howes tackled the New Zealander over 24-hours to suffer the same fate.

Scott's next appearance in England was at the Agricultural Hall in the world's championship walk of six days. This carried a cash prize of £200 and a championship belt. Here Scott met the cream of the English walkers, among whom were such striders as Munro, Hibberd, Granks and Giffen—men who were famous long before most of us were born—and fifty others. As was the case in his other races, Scott won this with ridiculous ease. A little later a similar contest was arranged at Bingley Hall, Birmingham. A cash prize of £200 attracted 75 competitors, but Scott won by over thirty miles! A few exhibition walks in Scotland concluded his one year stay in England and, in company with his old trainer, Scott returned to New Zealand.

By a singular coincidence they arrived back in 1889 just as the Caledonian Society's sports were about to commence, and at the request of the officials Scott walked a lap of honour, wearing his championship belt. If you should ever pay a visit to Wellington, call at the Arms Office of the Central Police Station and you will see a photograph of Scott wearing this valuable trophy. Fourteen years to the day after making a sensational debut

Scott walked once more the cinders, but whereas he had been a stripling youth of ten years, he was now a well-built young man of 24 years and Champion of the World!



Scott with his World Championship Belt - 1889

Scott did not do a great deal of serious walking after his return, although he continued to hold his superiority over the others; and it was at 43 years of age that he passed away from an illness aggravated by a habit of taking a mouthful of brass tingles when working at his trade as a bootmaker. These tingles set up an infection of the tongue and in his latter years Scott was a martyr to terrible pain.

Scott's best records were: 12 hours, a distance of 72 miles 890 yards—over two miles better than the English record; 100 miles in 17 hours 40 minutes—twenty-four minutes better than the English record, and 72 hours, a distance of 363 miles 1,510 yards—54 miles better than the English record. These were recognised as world's records and although professional records are not officially endorsed or tabulated as is the case in amateur sport, I cannot find any trace of his efforts having been bettered in later years.

In a brief tribute in the “London Sporting Life” when Joe Scott passed away, in 1908, his old trainer wrote:

“His beautiful style of walking made him very popular with the crowd, for—even when travelling at a very high speed—he always came up to their ideal of fairness’. I have no hesitation in saying that his marvellous achievements as a youngster and his colossal records later on, will stand as a gigantic and everlasting monument to the pluckiest, most graceful and greatest little walker the wide world has ever seen.”

New Zealand has every reason to be proud of its athletes on track and field. Men of the calibre of Arthur Holder, George Smith, Gerald Keddell, Len McKay, Harry Kerr, Jack Hempton, Pat Webster, Dorrie Leslie, Norman Gurr, Bill Low, Jimmy McKean, W. F. Simpson, F. Creamer, Dave Wilson, Harry Goodwin, and W. H. Madill have done much to make our sporting name respected. They belong—as competitors—to a past generation, a generation we are sometimes apt to overlook when discussing the deeds of Jack Lovelock, Randolph Rose, Billy Savidan, Alan Elliot, George Davidson, Malcolm Leadbetter and others. But when it comes to quiet reflection, a study of the record books and the most pleasant of all sporting recreations—a quiet chat with one of the old-timers—I feel sure that one and all will agree with me that New Zealand's greatest track athlete was Joe Scott.

What an amazing athlete! Once I was pointed in the right direction by this article and I started my own browsing of the internet, I was amazed at how much information I found, all backing up the information given above and, in some cases, extending it.

- The above article
http://www.nzetc.org/tm/scholarly/tei-Gov10_09Rail-t1-body-d30.html
- 2008 Article from Otago Daily Times
<http://www.odt.co.nz/sport/athletics/23126/great-scott-one-best-walkers-all-time>

- Wikipedia entry
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Scott_\(walker\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joe_Scott_(walker))
- New Zealand Hall of Fame entry
<http://www.nzhalloffame.co.nz/page.pasp?searchtext=scott&Go=Go>
- Entry in New Zealand Dictionary of Biography
<http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/2s8/1>

I also found that there is a special display on Scott at the New Zealand Sports Hall of Fame at the Dunedin Railway Station and that, in his 700-page book, *King of the Peds* (Author House, United Kingdom, 2008), on international professional pedestrianism during the 1870s and 1880s, author Paul Marshall devotes a chapter to Joe Scott and race walking in Dunedin.

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19 January 2010