

Runner's Web

Tom Longboat, Canadian Marathon Runner

Canada's greatest runner ever: Tom Longboat endured racism and a fall from grace

BYLINE Charles Enman
SOURCE The Ottawa Citizen

Among Canadian marathon runners, there was never a greater name to conjure with than Tom Longboat.

In the decade leading up to the First World War, Mr. Longboat was the nearly unassailable king of the marathon, the Wayne Gretzky or Tommy Burns of his sport.

And of course, he was an Onondaga Indian, one of the six tribes of the Iroquois Confederacy.

His native origins made his bursting forth into public attention all the more remarkable, since international sport was, at the time, a white man's game. And when the trajectories of his career and life turned downward, that was simple proof for many in those racist times that his earlier celebrity was a distortion of the native person's destiny.

Even newspapers referred to Mr. Longboat as "the Injun" and "Heap Big Chief."

Tom Longboat was born June 4, 1887, on the Six Nations Reserve south of Brantford, Ont. His father died when he was still a young boy, leaving his mother to raise four children.

Even in childhood, Mr. Longboat loved to run everywhere.

In 1906, at age 19, he entered the 20-mile Hamilton Bay race, an utterly unknown entrant who didn't impress the onlookers. One writer described Mr. Longboat on that day, before the race, as cutting "a pathetic figure in a pair of bathing trunks with cheap sneakers on his feet, and hair that looked as if it had been hacked off by a tomahawk."

Some of the bookmakers had put Mr. Longboat down at 60 to 1 odds, and one lucky bettor even managed to place a \$2 bet at odds of 500 to 1.

Such odds would never be seen again in Mr. Longboat's career.

That day, his running style didn't initially impress, either. Most runners of the time ran with arms high, pumping the elbows. Mr. Longboat kept his just above the waist, a more natural form that most runners use today.

Of course, the only thing that mattered was his speed -- and Mr. Longboat had that. This unknown interloper not only won with a time of 1:49:25, but came within seconds of setting a new course record.

Only days later, Mr. Longboat entered and won the 15-mile Ward Marathon in Toronto.

Next, he won the 10-mile Christmas Day Race in Hamilton, clocking a time of

54:50 that broke the Canadian record by a phenomenal 2 1/2 minutes.

Mr. Longboat, unknown only months before, was now the odds-on favourite at the Boston Marathon in April of 1907. Sports reporters hailed him as "The Speedy Son of the Forest" and "The Indian Iron Man."

His chances of winning were considered so strong that bookies were leery of accepting a bet on him, at any odds.

And Mr. Longboat disappointed no one.

He crossed the finish line at 2:24:25, setting a new course record that remained unbroken until the course was made easier.

The whole city of Toronto acclaimed him when he returned.

As David Blaikie wrote in Boston: the Canadian Story, "A sea of celebrating humanity engulfed Longboat as he stepped from the train. The champion was placed in an open car, a Union Jack about his shoulders, and taken to City Hall in a torch light parade. Young women gazed at Longboat in rapture as bands played and fireworks exploded around him. A gold medal was pinned to his chest and the mayor read a congratulatory address, highlighted by an announcement of a 500-dollar gift from the city for his education."

However, not everything was going well in Mr. Longboat's life. The West-End YMCA, where he had been living and training, expelled him for violating curfew. But Mr. Longboat's racing credentials soon won him membership in the Irish Canadian Athletic Club, owned by one Tom Flanagan.

For a time, Mr. Longboat flourished under Mr. Flanagan's training and continued to win races.

Would Mr. Longboat turn professional? Doing so had appeal. In the first decade of the century, races between professional racers were drawing large sellout crowds in arenas around North America. The purses were large -- and Mr. Longboat's winning potential was now a matter of record.

There was only one consideration. The 1908 Olympics were approaching, and Mr. Longboat was the odds-on favourite to win the marathon event. But he could only enter the Olympics as an amateur.

To many people, it looked like Mr. Longboat already was a professional. He was staying, gratis, in Tom Flanagan's Grand Central Hotel. He didn't have a real job. What was he if not a man living off his winnings -- and therefore a professional?

In 1907, the New England Amateur Athletic Union declared Mr. Longboat a professional, banning him from returning to Boston in 1908 to defend his marathon victory.

Mr. Longboat's Olympic eligibility was now under real threat and Mr. Flanagan had to do something. He set Mr. Longboat up in a cigar store business, a venture that didn't last long, but it did help Mr. Longboat maintain amateur status.

The 1908 Olympic Marathon was supposed to be Mr. Longboat's most shining moment, but destiny had other plans. He was in second place when he collapsed at the 19-mile mark.

All sorts of rumours immediately began to fly. Some people suggested that Mr. Longboat must have been drugged so certain crooked bettors could rake in huge

winnings on his upset loss. There were even suggestions that Mr. Flanagan, his manager, had had a hand in it.

Howard Crocker, the manager of the Canadian Olympic team, stated flatly: "Any medical man knowing the facts of the case will assure you that the presence of a drug in an overdose was the cause of the runner's failure."

Well, nothing was ever proved. And Mr. Flanagan's interests would hardly have been served by having Mr. Longhouse lose. In the long term, Mr. Longboat had far more worth as an Olympic gold medal winner than as a quitter. Perhaps, in the end, his loss can be put down to the day's exceptional heat, the graveyard of many a marathon dream. In November 1908, Mr. Longboat did turn professional.

He was sure to win fabulous wealth, the newspapers said. But first, there was a huge kerfuffle over Mr. Longboat's decision to move out from under the heavy hand of Mr. Flanagan's management.

Mr. Flanagan spoke darkly of men who had been manipulating Mr. Longboat, "undermining my influence with the use of debasing substances. These men have sufficiently degraded the Indian by pandering to his weaknesses to render it very doubtful that he could again be brought under a system of discipline that would guarantee a fair showing."

Many people predicted that Mr. Longboat would lose his racing edge if Mr. Flanagan were not training him. And if Mr. Longboat did win, he would squander his winnings, native that he was.

In the end, the two patched up their differences and Mr. Flanagan continued as manager.

Racist assumptions weren't held only by Mr. Longboat's detractors. Lou Marsh, a famous Toronto Star writer, once described Mr. Longboat as "smiling like a coon in a watermelon patch." And while delivering that kind of condescension, Mr. Marsh was a friend and later became Mr. Longboat's manager. Racist stereotypes were so entrenched as to be invisible, often even to people of good motivation.

Mr. Longboat's first important race as a professional was in December 1908 at Madison Square Gardens in New York City -- a two-man race, against Dorando Pietri, a great Italian runner who, by some accounts, almost won the 1908 Olympic Marathon. (Or did he? A dehydrated, exhausted Mr. Pietri stumbled repeatedly as he neared the finish line, and onlookers helped him cover the final yards. This was clearly against the rules, and Mr. Pietri was disqualified. But without help, he might not have been able to finish on his own.)

Mr. Pietri and Mr. Longboat were each guaranteed one-quarter of the gate receipts, amounting to \$3,750 apiece. The race, on a circular track, was for the full 26-mile 385-yard distance of the official marathon.

Mr. Longboat let Mr. Pietri lead for much of the first 25 miles. But for the last mile, he surged ahead, using the strong kick that had become his signature finishing strategy.

Mr. Pietri tried his best but had no hope against Mr. Longboat's astonishingly fresh legs. Finally, he collapsed unconscious and was carried from the track. It was one of Mr. Longboat's greatest victories.

Less than a month later, they had a rematch in Buffalo, New York. The result was much the same, with Mr. Pietri collapsing at the 19th mile.

Now, the problems brewing between Mr. Longboat and Mr. Flanagan came to a

full boil. Mr. Flanagan said his protege ``refused to train properly and just generally went prima donna on me." He sold Mr. Longboat's contract to an American promoter for \$2,000.

It didn't hurt Mr. Longboat, who continued to win races. Some of his most famous races in the next couple of years were against British distance champion Alf Shrubbs. Mr. Shrubbs tended to win in distances under 20 miles; Mr. Longboat remained supreme at longer distances.

Mr. Longboat didn't win every race, of course. But since his break with Mr. Flanagan, the public tended to attribute any losses to lazy training habits.

That was nonsense, in the opinion of Bruce Kidd, a great Canadian runner of a later day. Mr. Longboat took daily walks of 20 miles and lifted weights. Twice each week, he took long runs at varying speeds and did frequent time trials.

Mr. Longboat ``seems to have had a particularly good idea of the type of training he needed," Mr. Kidd wrote.

Mr. Longboat's professional career lasted until 1913. He earned very tidy sums of money and spent it freely on friends and family. Never much of a businessman, Mr. Longboat also lost some money in bad investments.

In 1916, he volunteered to serve in the First World War. In Europe, Mr. Longboat ran successfully for Canada in many races among Allied units. For a time, he had the dangerous assignment of carrying messages from one military post to another in France.

Mr. Longboat had married a native woman late in 1908. When he was wounded and reported dead at the battlefield, his wife, believing herself widowed, married another man.

When Mr. Longboat returned to Canada, he had no choice but to accept the situation. Not long thereafter, he married a woman from his own reserve, Martha Silversmith, with whom he had four children.

Mr. Longboat's celebrity didn't do him much good after the war. He moved from job to job and eventually even pawned his racing medals, which he never saw again.

For most of the last two decades of his life, Mr. Longboat was a garbage collector for the City of Toronto. By all accounts, he was a good employee, but he had fallen a long way in the public eye.

Rumours of heavy drinking dogged Mr. Longboat for many years. There's some proof but nothing overwhelming. In 1911, he was given a suspended sentence for intoxication, and 24 years later, he pleaded guilty to a charge of driving under the influence.

His daughter, Phyllis Winnie, says it's true that her father liked to take a drink. ``But he was never alcoholic," she said. ``He was a social drinker."

In the pre-television age, impostors used to go from place to place, assuming the identity of famous people whose faces were obscure to the public.

Several such impostors played off Mr. Longboat's fame, including one who used to cadge drinks in beverage rooms. Mr. Longboat called his shadow a ``cheap two-bit impostor," and wrote letters to the editor to set the public straight.

Late in life, Mr. Longboat developed diabetes. As his daughter, Phyllis Winnie, says, he hated to inject insulin, and his health declined rapidly.

He retired to the Six Nations Reserve in 1947, where he died, less than a year later, of pneumonia. He was 61.

The public memory of Mr. Longboat has of course dimmed somewhat, but he's still remembered. There are races named after him and articles about him continue to appear.

And on Sept. 15, Canada Post released a limited edition of stamps to honour famous Canadians at the millennium. Among those honoured was one Thomas Longboat, Canada's greatest runner ever.

Longboat a 'good father' and a 'special hero': As we near the end of the 20th century, the Citizen has asked descendants of prominent Canadians to reflect on the lives and achievements their famous ancestors. Today, Phyllis Winnie, a 79-year-old resident of the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, writes about her father, long-distance runner Tom Longboat.

BYLINE Phyllis Winnie
SOURCE The Ottawa Citizen

People say that my father, Tom Longboat, was one of Canada's greatest runners, and I am proud of his achievements.

My father was world famous from the moment he won the Boston Marathon in 1907. That and other achievements gave a great boost to native people.

Recently, Canada Post announced that it was going to issue a special stamp in honour of my father.

It is always good when the government honours the achievements of native athletes -- and the idea that my father's name might become better known again pleases me very much.

Mind you, many people do remember him. Even today, it happens that young athletes, some of them native, come up to me and mention that he remains a special hero for them.

In my father's time, racism was a very great problem, but he never spoke of it in the family. He simply tried not to think of it.

Perhaps my father's achievements helped people understand that everyone deserves respect.

Of course, racism is still alive today. In the United States, no one ever seems to mention that my father won the Boston Marathon. It's as though people don't like to think that a native could win it.

Tom Longboat was a good father to me and my three brothers. He had a wonderful smile and was very kind.

None of the children or grandchildren even became real athletes themselves, however.

He died early, at 61, of diabetes. Part of the reason, I think, is that he was afraid of the needle and did not take his insulin.

His funeral service was in the native spiritual tradition, which he remained true to throughout his life.

All in all, his legacy was very positive.

Fifty years after his death, young people still mention his name with respect. I take pride in this.

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