

ALEX KING AND THE ABERDEEN MARATHONS

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During the 20th century Aberdeen produced several notable marathon runners. The first of those was Alex King who won the Aberdeen marathons on three occasions, namely in 1912, 1913 and 1925.

The first of the Aberdeen marathons was held in 1909. It is perhaps worth explaining why it was that the world's first marathon race was held and also why it was that in 1909 numerous marathon races were held throughout the world.

In 490 B.C. an army from Athens defeated a much larger Persian army at Marathon. According to legend, a messenger ran from Marathon to Athens with news of the victory and collapsed and died once he had delivered it.

Thanks in large part to the efforts of Baron de Coubertin, the Olympic Games of the classical Greek world were revived in 1896 with the first of them being held in Athens. Bearing in mind the legend of a messenger running from Marathon to Athens carrying the news of a famous victory, in an attempt to create an interest in those 1896 Games it was decided to include within them a race from Marathon to Athens, a distance of approximately 25 miles. Subsequent Olympics have included a road race of much the same length and each of these races was described as a marathon.

At the 1908 London Olympics the distance from the start at Windsor Castle to the finish in the White City Stadium was 26 miles 385 yards. That had not been the distance of the marathon race in any of the previous Olympic marathons nor was it in either of the next two (i.e. in those of 1912 or 1920) but from 1924 the length of the marathon was standardised at the 1908 distance of 26 miles 385 yards (42.195 km).

There is another reason why the marathon at the 1908 Olympics is noteworthy, namely the disqualification of the Italian runner, Dorando Pietri. Pietri had been the first to finish but had been close to collapse as he neared the finish line; he was disqualified as a consequence of the help which he had received from officials. That incident led to a worldwide surge of interest in

marathon running. In fact, it led to a “marathon craze” with many long road races described as marathons being held throughout Great Britain and elsewhere.

The first of several Aberdeen marathons was held in March 1909. The course was from Banchory to Aberdeen. A race of this distance created much interest since nothing like it had been seen previously in the Aberdeen area. According to a press report, “At Mannofield runners had difficulty getting a clear passage through the spectators. All the way down Union Street, along Union Terrace, Blackfriars Street and on to the finish in St Andrew Street the runner had only a passage about one yard in width and it is probable that even this space might not have been available had he not been preceded by a car. ... in St Andrews Street the huge concourse of people was altogether beyond the control of officials and police. As the men came in they were hurried to Mr Jamieson’s premises in George Street where they were supplied with much needed refreshment and comfort.” According to Alex King, Mr Jamieson was a publican who lived in a large house called Thorngrove at Mannofield. He was a patron of the Aberdeenshire Harriers, the club that organised the early Aberdeen marathons and, in that capacity, he had donated a silver Marathon Cup to the club to be awarded each year to the winner of the Aberdeen marathon.

Only one of those early Aberdeen marathons was held over the regulation distance, namely the 1923 marathon that went from Fyvie to Aberdeen. That race was won by a narrow margin by Dunky (Duncan) Wright, the Scottish cross country champion. In second place had been Jimmy Ronaldson of the Aberdeen Y.M.C.A. Harriers and in third place Bill Angus of the Aberdeenshire Harriers. (in 1952, when none of Aberdeen's prewar clubs was still in existence, Bill Angus convened a meeting which led to the formation of a new club, Aberdeen AAC.) Dunky Wright, who had travelled north from Glasgow to take part went on to win the marathon at the first Empire Games which were held in Hamilton, Canada in 1930.

Alex King, unfortunately, had been unable to compete in that 1923 marathon: in a letter to me he stated that he had been off work due to an accident when it was held.

There were several other Aberdeen “marathons” after that full marathon from Fyvie, but the Aberdeenshire Harriers ceased to organise them well

before the outbreak of the Second World War. It was not until 1979 that another marathon was held in Aberdeen, one that was organised by Aberdeen AAC. That 1979 marathon was won by Graham Laing, a club member who was competing for the first time in that event.

During the 1980s there was another marathon boom in Great Britain with marathons being held in many cities, including London. The first of the London marathons was held in 1980. Graham Laing entered that marathon and finished fifth. In the same year Graham won the SAAA marathon title and then, in 1982, he represented Scotland in the Commonwealth Games marathon. In 1984 Fraser Clyne, another member of Aberdeen AAC was selected to represent Scotland in the Commonwealth Games marathon after he had recorded some fast times for the event. (He did not have far to travel to these Games since they were held in Edinburgh.) Fraser went on to win a total of five SAAA marathons, the same number as another Aberdeen AAC member, Alastair Wood, had won in the 1960s. In 1962 Alastair had not only represented Scotland in the Commonwealth Games marathon, but had also represented Great Britain in the European Championships marathon and had finished a very creditable fourth in that race.

The London marathon is televised and attracts thousands of competitors. At the time of writing it appears likely that it will continue for many years to come. Most of the other city marathons, however, have been discontinued. The last of the Aberdeen marathons was held in 1990 when there were 174 finishers. Although that was a respectable number it was well down on the peak of 1314 finishers in the 1984 race. With the considerable amount of work involved in staging a marathon race and the decline in entries, Aberdeen AAC decided to stop putting on marathon races and to concentrate instead on promoting the 10 km race which latterly had been held in conjunction with each of the Aberdeen marathons: this 10 km race has attracted over 3000 entries and again, at the time of writing, looks likely to continue for many years.

The winning of three of the early Aberdeen "marathons" is not the only claim to fame of Alex King. In a letter to me dated 4 September 1978 he provided me with the following information:

- he got a bronze medal at the 1912 Scottish Olympic Marathon Trial;

- on 26 July 1913 he ran 15 miles at Pittodrie in a time of 1 hour 26 minutes and 36 seconds;
- he joined the Canadian army and won the 1 and 5 mile races organised by it in Kent in 1916;
- he finished third in a big international meeting of the allied armies in 1918;
- at 60 years of age he ran the mile in 5:42.

The quality of that mile time can be judged from the fact that, in the 2018 Aberdeen AAC yearbook, the club record for the over 60 men's 1500m is given as 5:23.96. That is an inferior performance to a Alex King's 5:42 for the mile. Further the club record holder for the over 60 men's 1500m is given as Colin Youngson who in 1975, 1981 and 1982 won the SAAA marathon championship and who also in his younger days could run a mile in a respectable time.

As is evidenced by an article which appeared in the local press, Alex King continued running well into his sixties. The article featured a group to which it referred as the "Walker Park Boys". It stated that the group trained all the year round, once a week in the winter and three times a week during the summer months. The article also stated that at sixty eight, Alex King was the oldest member of the group. An accompanying photograph shows a fit looking Alex King sitting at the centre of the front row of the group which was neither a club nor a part of a club.

Alex King, like Jimmy Adams about whom I have written elsewhere, was a highly talented athlete whose involvement with athletics continued long after he was past his peak. In his letter to me of 4 September 1978 he stated that he was 30 years with Aberdeen University as trainer, masseur and coach. He also stated that he had been for many years with the Shire as competitor, trainer and secretary. He also must have taken an interest in how Aberdeen's female athletes were performing because in that letter he stated that "The Bon-Accord Ladies produced Alice Milne who did the mile in 5 min 20 sec." After the SWAAA was formed in 1931 it produced a list of best performances by Scottish women. As can be confirmed from the internet, the first of the best performances for the women's mile is listed as being that of Agnes Milne of Bon-Accord AC who is credited with having recorded a time of 5:45.0 on 2 May 1931 in Aberdeen. It is virtually certain that this Agnes Milne is the woman whom Alex King named as Alice Milne. I consider it probable that Alice

or Agnes Milne did run the mile in a time of 5 min 20 sec before the SWAAA was in existence but that this performance was either never communicated to the SWAAA or was not accepted by that organisation as authentic.

The first of the Aberdeen AAC cashbooks reveal that on 3 May 1954 the club received a subscription from Alex King who thus was a member of Aberdeen AAC for at least one year. That fact might have escaped his memory because he made no reference to it in his letter to me. However, in that letter he did state that "I was pleased to donate one of my old cups to the AAAC in addition to a few medals". I have no idea what happened to the medals. However, as can be confirmed by looking at the list of Men's Trophy Winners in any club yearbook, one of the Aberdeen AAC trophies is called the King Trophy. Presumably that is the one which was donated to the club by Alex King. Perhaps, when trophies are awarded at AGMs, something should be said about this and other trophies which are associated with someone's name when this information is available. Perhaps also the club committee should ensure that the necessary research is undertaken and the findings entered into the club's yearbook as part of the club's history.