

MEMORABILIA

BY DET. MARK D. WARREN

Matthew McGrath—The Olympic Legend Who Picked-Up Where Martin Sheridan Left Off

The year was 1908 and most things were very different back then. That summer the Americans had just won the "New York to Paris Automobile Race." Having left New York on February 12th, the Yanks had beaten four other international teams by driving their "Thomas Flyer" automobile across America, Russia and Europe, arriving in the French capital on July 31st. Before the advent of air conditioning, sleeping on fire escapes or the roofs of city tenements to escape the summer heat had finally become socially acceptable. And for those who could afford their own home in the suburbs, a nine-room house measuring 24 by 32 feet with nine-foot ceilings, full basement and attic, could be yours for only \$4,000.

However, some things haven't changed. Being the world's best athlete is still as difficult then as it is now, and at no Olympic games were we better represented than in London, in 1908.

Having already participated in the 1904 and 1906 Olympics, Patrolman Martin Sheridan had returned from the Games in London in 1908 with his third Olympic gold medal for the discus. However, he was not alone. Alongside him was another young officer from the NYPD, Matthew McGrath, who had won the Silver medal in the 16-lb. hammer throw with the distance of 167 ft. 11 ins; only 10½ inches less than teammate John J. Flanagan, who had won the Gold.

Born in Ireland on December 20, 1876, Matthew J. McGrath became a naturalized citizen on November 13, 1899, before being appointed to the NYPD on December 30, 1902. On the job, he held a wide variety of assignments in those early years of this century—from Patrol, to plainclothes, to working for the First Deputy Commissioner—while still keeping himself in top physical shape.

Standing six feet tall and weighing 248 lbs., Matthew McGrath amazed his fellow officers by setting a new world's record for the 16-lb. hammer throw with a distance of 173 ft. 7 ins. in 1907. Losing that honor to his teammate, John J. Flanagan, the following year in London, Patrolman McGrath regained his title with another world's record hammer throw of 187 ft. 4 ins. in 1911.



Standing side-by-side at the 1908 Olympic Games in London, Martin Sheridan (left) and Matthew McGrath (center and right) both came home winners.

Now the holder of two world's records, McGrath again found himself participating at the Olympic Games the following year—this time in Stockholm. With six attempts allowed, Officer McGrath set an Olympic record on one try before breaking that record again with a winning distance of 179 ft. 7 ins., thus taking home the Gold. This record throw would remain unbeaten until the 1936 Olympics were held in Berlin—24 years later.

After an eight-year hiatus due to the First World War, the Olympics resumed in Antwerp, Belgium in 1920 and now-Lieutenant McGrath was back in action taking fifth place with a throw of 153 ft. 1 in. Obviously dis-

satisfied with those results, Lt. McGrath would again compete four years later at the eighth Olympiad in Paris. This time his effort was rewarded with the Silver medal after a throw that measured 166 ft. 9 ins. As the oldest person to have ever won an Olympic medal in a track event, 43-year-old Lt. McGrath returned home to New York in triumph.

Attaining the rank of Inspector on December 12, 1936 after having spent over 18 years assigned to various Traffic Units, Matthew J. McGrath died on January 29, 1941 after 39 years on the job. Besides having participated in the four Olympiads and holding two Olympic records for the 16-lb. hammer throw, this now-legendary Olympic hero held the Canadian record of 182 ft. 5 ins. for the same event. In addition to winning 17 American National Championships, Inspector McGrath was also the proud holder of three world records for throwing the 56-lb. weight. In those contests, his throw measured 40 ft. 6¾ ins. from within the seven-foot circle, 43 ft. 2 ins. without the circle and 33 ft. 1 in. from a stand.

Perhaps the NYPD's most famous athlete, Inspector Matthew McGrath represented all the very best qualities a police officer could have in the sheer dedication he displayed in his professional work, as well as his personal health. A staunch proponent of a healthy diet and daily exercise including jogging many decades before it became universally popular, Inspector McGrath's athletic career was recently summarized by Mr. Hal Bateman of U.S.A. Track & Field Federation when he said, "Without doubt, Matthew McGrath is an Olympic legend. For him to have competed for as long as he did, in that day and age, is incredible. He was a very outstanding athlete on an elite level—a national champion in 1926 at the age of 50—something almost unheard of," he explained. "To do this nowadays is almost unthinkable!"

The U.S.A. Track & Field Federation and the U.S. Olympic Committee are not alone. We, too, are very proud of our four-time Olympic hero!



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