

Police Athletes of the Past:

MATTHEW J. McGRATH

WHEN Matthew J. McGrath passed away on January 29, 1941, the New York Times front page carried the story of his life which started as follows:

"Inspector McGrath was one of those huge iron muscled athletes that have been Ireland's glory. For more than twenty-five years, as a brawny immigrant boy and as a middle aged giant, he led the world hurling the sixteen pound hammer and heaving the fifty-six pound weight."

Underlying his great ability was a promise to his mother when he left his home in Ireland to find fame and fortune in the United States. She impressed on him that "your body is the temple of your soul, take care of it." He followed this advice to the extent that at the age of fifty, he was able to enter the tryouts for the 1927 Olympic Games, getting into condition by sweating off twenty-five pounds.

Born on a small farm in Ireland in 1876, Matt McGrath was the oldest of eleven children. He developed strength as did many of his country-men by helping his father to plough the land, and reap the harvests. For recreation, he had only outdoor life and some books to read. For excitement, he would get into a paddock with a bull to race him and tease him until he charged. Then Young Matt would experience the thrill of scaling the fence in a hurry to escape the angry animal.

The limited library of the McGrath household contained a couple of books about the Olympic Games and Greek mythology. They offered adventure and romance to otherwise long dreary winter evenings. Some evenings, his parents would relate tales of Irish folklore. Matt was particularly fond of one story about a landlord who was challenged by one of his farmhands to throw the sledge and was soundly beaten by his employee.

(Throwing the sledge, was the forerunner of the hammer throw.) The victory of the underdog gave impetus to McGrath's desire to be a hammer thrower. His strong competitive spirit made him challenge any and all men in every sport which included wrestling, boxing, jumping, running or weight throwing.

When he was nineteen, he left home for the United States. He was six feet tall and weighed 180 pounds. His luggage for the trip was light—a carpet bag with one shirt and a pair of stockings. His working capital when he landed in New York was six-pence but he wrote his parents that he had the world before him. The world though was a horrifying one. For the first week, he lived in fear that the tall buildings would



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fall on him and, if they missed, that the "el" trains would jump their tracks and finish him off.

His first job was one that kept him busy thirteen hours a day, seven days a week. Despite these hours, he still found time to visit the neighborhood blacksmith where he exercised by lifting the anvil. In order to practice his hammer throwing, he rigged an old mattress against a brick wall and tossed a home-made weight.

After about a year of this makeshift gym, he joined the Pastime Athletic Club and practiced when he could. Then one day, he found himself entered in his first field competition at Celtic Park. It was considered an exhibition match for John Flanagan, the current champion, who had beaten all comers for years. Matt McGrath, an unknown, was lightly regarded as a competitor.

However, about one hour later, the great John Flanagan had passed into athletic oblivion to make way for Matt McGrath who had thoroughly outclassed his rival. At the end of the games, the president of the A.A.U., James Sullivan, steered the young win-

ner to the New York Athletic Club and a career in which he was to capture twenty-one National Championships in weight throwing and compete in four Olympiads between 1908 and 1928.

In the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden, he experienced a number of obstacles and seemed headed for certain failure in the games. First, his shoes were misplaced. Then, he was given a two handled hammer instead of the American standard one handled hammer. This threw him off stride. His resultant nervousness caused him to foul twice. After his second foul toss, Prince Gustaf Adolph summoned Matt to the Royal Box to tell him that even though his two tosses were foul, he was very much impressed with his ability. With that he wished the American champion luck on his next attempt. His confidence restored, Matt McGrath fired the hammer 179 feet 7½ inches to break the world's record. This mark stood for twenty-four years until Karl Hein of Germany broke it in 1936.

IN the meantime, Matt McGrath married Loretta Smith whose father was a police captain with precinct quarters on the present site of the Sixty-Ninth Regiment Armory, at 25th Street and Lexington Avenue. His father-in-law impressed the new member of the family with the desirability of a police career and shortly after, Matt McGrath joined the department. His ability in weight throwing, stood him in good stead in 1913. While walking his post, he was notified that a murderer had taken refuge aboard a barge. Patrolman McGrath headed for the vessel and was greeted by gunfire. Crouching low behind a pile of bricks, McGrath fired them at the murderer's hideout. Not too long after, the felon threw out his weapon and surrendered. When examined, his body bore the marks of the accuracy of the Police Department's Champion weight thrower.

As he developed his body, Matt also kept an alert mind by constant studying for promotion. His record in the Police Department was one of a steady rise. He was promoted to sergeant in 1917; lieutenant in 1918; captain in 1927; deputy inspector in 1930 and inspector in 1936.

THE McGraths had one child of their own, a girl, Elvira. She commanded much of their time and all of their love. It was with heart

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Matthew McGrath

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breaking suddenness that she died at the age of twenty-two.

This great loss did not steal from Matt and his wife, the great kindness that marked both of them. Years later, they proved their generosity of spirit and kindness when they sought and received the guardianship of a Chinese youngster.

While on vacation in the Adirondacks, the McGraths came to know the boy who was the chef's son, and whose mother had deserted both of them. A great bond of affection grew between the boy and the McGraths. When they were leaving, they told the boy's father that if he were in difficulty to come to them for help.

Two years later, Inspector McGrath was visited in his office by the youngster's father who was unemployed and living in the Chinese section of the city. The Inspector was distressed to hear of the hardships that the boy and his father were enduring. As a result, Inspector McGrath asked if he might bring the boy home for a couple of weeks and take care of him while the father obtained employment. It was so agreed. The couple of weeks stretched into a couple of happy years during which the McGraths were appointed guardians of the boy. Then Mrs. McGrath became ill and care of the boy became impossible for her. The McGraths reluctantly had to give up their charge but boarded him at the Maryknoll Monastery near Ossining where they visited him regularly. Today, the boy is going through a military academy near Baltimore from which he will graduate shortly. At about the time of his graduation, he will fall heir to a small legacy that the Inspector set up for him to be received when he reached his 18th birthday. Mrs. McGrath will be in Baltimore to see him receive his diploma and once more renew their friendship.

In 1927, while watching the fifty-one year old Inspector toss the hammer 163 feet, $6\frac{3}{8}$ inches, George Currie, a well known sports writer, said in a syndicated story:

"In all the history of sport, we have never had a man like Matt. He is nearly too legendary to be true.

"The strong man at least has held his own against the demands of youth to be served."

It was thus that an immigrant boy brought fame to his adopted country and kindness to an adopted child.



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