

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE



KENNEDY KANE McARTHUR (1881-1960)

Track & Field Athlete – Marathon Gold, Stockholm 1912

Kennedy Kane McArthur was the second of five children. After attending the National School, 'Big Ken' became a postman, famed for sprinting on his round, and for racing against the trains on the narrow gauge line to Ballymoney. Around 1900 he emigrated to South Africa as a volunteer member of the Baden-Powell South African Constabulary, and after the Anglo-Boer War he joined the South African Police. He seldom went on patrol on horseback, preferring to walk the huge area of his patch. He left the SAP as sergeant in 1931.

A tall man (6ft 3in), McArthur only took up running as a sport when he was in South Africa. In the 1900s he consistently won handicap races in the Transvaal and Pretoria, as well as winning many national cross-country medals. Marathon racing came to South Africa in 1907, and in 1908 McArthur won his first marathon in Johannesburg. Further successes followed in Cape Town and Durban where in 1909 he won in the astonishing time of 2 hrs 44 mts 36 sec. The world record then stood at 2 hrs 44 mts 31 sec. He celebrated his win by smoking a big bowl of his favourite Boer brand tobacco. Honing his speed by running track races, he set national records in 1911 for 5 miles and 10 miles.

With Christopher Gitsham, McArthur was one of two entrants for South Africa in the Marathon at the Stockholm Olympic Games in 1912. The reported temperature on the day of the race, Sunday July 14th, was 32 degrees [90 Fahrenheit] in the shade. 68 runners from 19 countries took part. In sweltering heat McArthur and Gitsham battled it out for the lead, but when Gitsham stopped briefly for water, McArthur ran on, encouraged, it is said, by a voice in the crowd shouting: 'Come on Antrim – come on ye boy, ye!' On winning the gold medal, McArthur said: "I went out to win or die, and it was worth two and a half years working and waiting for". McArthur's time was 2 hrs 36 mts 54.8 sec, with Gitsham finishing less than a minute after his teammate. No other country since has ever produced first and second in the Olympic Marathon. After Stockholm, McArthur visited Ballymoney for a hero's welcome.

Back in South Africa, an unfortunate injury to his foot ended his running career about a year after his triumph. On retiring from the police, McArthur came back to Dervock with his wife, Johanna Louw, and from 1931-1936 they settled on the family farm. They then returned to South Africa, where McArthur died in Potchefstroom on June 13th 1960. The McArthur Memorial Marathon is run annually in Dervock in his honour.

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