

Tom Longboat outdistanced

them all

OHSWEKEN — Sometime in the early 1940s, I vaguely remember a visit to our house by the great marathon runner, Tom Longboat. I was a small boy at the time, so I just have the impression of a quiet-spoken, well-dressed, middle-aged man who was taller and thinner than my father. He shared our evening meal and stayed overnight. My father told us later what a great runner he had been. He was very proud to have known him.

He may have met Tom through my uncle, George Beaver, after whom I am named. He, too, was a long-distance runner, who probably raced against Tom in the Hamilton Round-the-Bay Race. My uncle contracted tuberculosis and died while still a young man, before I was born.

A month or two ago, I saw the story of Tom Longboat on TV. It was researched and written by the Toronto runner, Bruce Kidd. Mr. Kidd treated Tom's story very sympathetically. Being a runner himself, he knew how hard the grind of training and running could be. He also recognized how great Tom's achievements on the track had been.

Tom was an Onondaga Indian who won the Round-the-Bay Race in Hamilton while still living on the Six Nations Reserve. He won several other long races, including the Boston Marathon. In this 26-mile race, he took five minutes off the record. As a result, his record stood until modern times. Once, he raced a horse from Hagersville to Caledonia — and beat it.

Our Town

George
Beaver



As a professional runner, he raced and beat the top professionals of the day, such as Petrie and the Englishman, Alfie Shrubbs.

Bruce Kidd accurately portrayed the discrimination Tom had to face as an Indian. His white managers tried to treat him like a money-making, running machine. When he refused to enter shorter races which were not suitable for him, they told the newspaper reporters that he was lazy and hard to handle.

Tom ran best in cold weather or even in the rain. In the 1908 Olympics, he collapsed under a hot sun before he reached the finish line. It was surprising weather for England. He soon recovered from his sun stroke and again was winning more marathon contests.

In the First World War, he joined the Canadian Army and became a courier. He was a fast runner, but he could not out-run bullets. He

was wounded and after the war he could no longer race like a "wild-fire." In 1950, he was selected as the Best Canadian Runner of the Half Century. This was almost 40 years after he had retired from running.

While he still had some of his winnings, he built a large house on the reserve. It is still standing on Sixth Line at Tom Longboat's Corner.

Like most Canadians, he did not have an easy time during the Depression. Nevertheless, he was not reduced to being a drunken bum, as some writers want us to believe.

During his research, Bruce Kidd uncovered the fact that the City of Toronto still owed Tom several thousand dollars. He shamed them into paying the money to Tom's family, some of whom still live on the reserve.

On a bleak, grey day in 1949, Tom Longboat was taken to his final resting place behind the Onondaga Longhouse. My father and I attended the funeral. We also followed the casket carried by six men on its long trip back to the burying grounds.

There, among some low shrubs and bushes a former world-class athlete was laid to rest.