

BRITAIN'S FIRST OLYMPIC CHAMPION: LAUNCESTON ELLIOT

by Ian Buchanan

Not only does Launceston Elliot have the distinction of being Great Britain's first Olympic champion, he is also one of the more interesting characters in British sporting history.

The fascinating family story begins even before Launceston was born. After his father's second wife met her death by falling from a hotel balcony in Australia in rather mysterious circumstances, Gilbert Wray Elliot returned to the hotel and married the receptionist, Ann Mason. Launceston was the issue of this third marriage and was given his unusual name as, although born in India on 9 June 1874, he had been conceived in the capital city of Tasmania.

The Elliot family was an established part of the British aristocracy with Lord Minto being head of the family which had strong connections with India. The 4th Earl Minto served as Viceroy of India (1905-1910). Launceston was the grandson of Sir Charles Elliot, the one-time governor of St. Helena, and his father served as magistrate with the Indian Civil Service. In 1887, Gilbert Elliot gave up his post in India and took his family to England where he began farming in Essex. The 13-year-old Launceston, an exceptionally well-built youth, who was seeing England for the first time, immediately came under the influence of the great Eugen Sandow and soon developed into an unusually talented lifter. In January 1891, aged only 16, he performed creditably at what is now recognized as the first British Championships held at the fashionable Cafe Monico in Piccadilly, London. Three years later he was the winner of the championships at the Royal Aquarium, Westminster.

Continuing success encouraged the 21-year-old Elliot to travel to Athens for the first modern Olympic Games and he was one of a small group of Britons who sailed from Marseilles aboard the Congo on 26 March 1896. The others in the British party destined for the Games included Elliot's father, the hurdler, Grantley Goulding, and Lawrence Levy, who had entered for the weightlifting events and was also reporting on the Games for the *Birmingham Post*. Also on board was the Frenchman, Albin Lermusiaux, who was to place third in the 1,500 metres and was described by Lawrence Levy, who had watched him training on deck, as "somewhat diminutive and anything but a physically developed youngster."

The SS Congo arrived in Athens on the evening of Sunday, 28 March and the passengers went ashore the next morning to begin their week's final preparation for the Games. Elliot's busy Olympic program began on Monday, 6 April, when he was eliminated in the heats of the 100 metres. While he probably did not entertain hopes of winning the event, his early exit must have come as a disappointment as he had undertaken special sprint training in London under the great professional runner, Harry Hutchens.

The 21-year-old Elliot entered the Olympic record books the following day when he took part in both weightlifting events. At the time, there were no internationally accepted rules or classifications for weightlifting and the 1896 Olympics added further to the huge variety of classes contested on the contemporary scene.

Dumbbells were used for the one-handed lift, with competitors required to "snatch" from ground to arm's length with no stopping at the shoulder, and for the two-handed lift a barbell was used. The absence of a two-handed event with dumbbells caused considerable resentment among the athletes and after being advised by Prince George of Greece that the conditions of the contests were immutable, Lawrence Levy was among those who withdrew. This, however, was not the end of Levy's involvement as he joined Prince George of Greece as one of the judges of the competitions.

The two-handed lift came first on the program and, after a long drawn out contest, Viggo Jensen of Denmark and Elliot had both lifted 110 kg., but Prince George awarded the Dane first place for having done so in better style. Jensen's lift was accomplished with a superb clean lift whereas Elliot had certainly encountered difficulty but to award the Olympic title on the basis of "style" was a decision to which Lawrence Levy, understandably, took exception. Levy's main objection was that, as both contestants had lifted the same weight, they should now each be given the chance to lift a heavier weight in accordance with all known weightlifting protocol. Prince George then agreed with Levy's view but the decision was rendered academic by the rider to the judgment that there were, in fact, no heavier weights available. Levy stood his ground and eventually plates were screwed onto the barbell and lifting was resumed. After Jensen had raised the bar, Levy again objected, this time on the grounds that Jensen's method was not in accordance with the rules. Again Prince George sided against Levy and once more lifting was resumed, by which time most of the spectators had left but they didn't miss a great deal as, eventually, the original result based on "style" was allowed to stand. By contrast, the one-handed event was a short, sharp event. Elliot declined Prince George's courteous offer of a rest break but he asked that he might this time lift after Jensen, as in the two-handed event the Dane had the advantage of lifting after Elliot. The request was granted although the order of lifting was not to have a material effect on the result. Elliot raised 71.0 kg. without difficulty whereas Jensen, who had injured his shoulder trying to raise 112.5 kg. in the two-handed event, could only manage 57.2 kg. and Britain's first Olympic champion was crowned.

One feature that stands out from the judging of the competition is the inherent courtesy exercised by Prince George throughout the proceedings. Despite the constant protests of Lawrence Levy, the Prince sought him out that evening at an illumination display at the Royal Palace, and smilingly enquired "Are you calmer now, Mr. Levy?"

Understandably, the rest of Elliot's Olympic campaign was an anti-climax. He took two days rest after his weightlifting exertions but failed to make an impact in the rope climbing and wrestling events. He withdrew from the rope climbing contest in the early stages of the event and he suffered a surprise defeat in his opening bout of the wrestling competition. By virtue of his vast physical advantage Elliot was expected to enjoy a comfortable victory over Carl Schuhmann of Germany but Schuhmann proved a more formidable and versatile opponent than anyone had anticipated. He had already won three gold medals in gymnastics, placed third in the weightlifting and after pinning Elliot he went on to win the wrestling competition. Uncharacteristically, Elliot took his defeat badly and after refusing to accept the judge's decision he had to be escorted from the field by the Royal Princes.

Despite this lapse in behavior, the Greeks clearly took a great liking to Elliot. One source reported "This young gentleman attracted universal attention by his uncommon type of beauty. He was of imposing stature, tall, well proportioned, his hair and complexion of surprising fairness." Another wrote of ". . . the finest man of English birth" and he received an offer of marriage from a "highly placed lady admirer."

Elliot declined the offer and the year after his return from Athens, he married Emelia Holder, the daughter of a Kentish vicar. As a wedding present, Launceston's father gave his son a stud farm in Hertfordshire but he never passed on the deeds and some three years later he was forced to sell the farm to meet his Stock Exchange losses. Launceston who, quite reasonably, thought that he was the owner of the farm, took great exception to this development and a serious family rift developed. Launceston and Emelia moved in with her father at the vicarage in Kent. In 1900 Elliot made a second Olympic appearance when he took part in the discus. With a throw of 31 metres (101' 8") - probably an approximate distance - he finished somewhere around 10th place and this gave him the initial British record for an event which was still in its infancy. He was, however, denied the opportunity of defending his Olympic title in his specialty event as weightlifting was not on the program at the Paris Games.

On his return to England, Elliot found that the financial crisis, so unexpectedly thrust upon him by his father, had not improved, so he took the decision to turn professional. Since his victory in Athens, he had set four new records at the 1899 Amateur Championships and, as a prominent figure on the British weightlifting scene, his financial success was virtually assured. With the help of Bill Klein, a German circus performer, who had coached him before his Athens' victory, Elliot devised a spectacular and lavish act which was an instant success. There were about ten permanent members of the troupe, including some black performers engaged to highlight the contrast with Elliot's exceptionally fair complexion. They all traveled regularly with the act which included a popular display featuring Elliot and a partner named Montague Spencer. The two strong men performed amid scenery representing the Roman arena and, bedecked in the garb of gladiators, they engaged in a mock contest using the cestus, trident, net and other appropriate impedimenta. At the end of the show Elliot gave exhibitions of strength, the favorite of which was to support across his shoulders a metal bar from which, at each end, was suspended a bicycle and rider. With this load Elliot would start revolving, slowly at first, but finally at such speed that the "riders" would be swung into a horizontal position, pedaling furiously for additional effect.

The popular strongman toured Britain and the Continent and once took his act to South America. There are unconfirmed reports that he also appeared in the United States and, in view of his visit to South America, it seems quite likely that he traveled north on the same journey. By this time he had added twelve attractive girls to his act and perhaps for this reason, his wife always accompanied him on tour. Women certainly found Launceston Elliot unusually attractive; they formed a large part of his audiences and he was never short of invitations to meet them after the show. Possibly, Emelia's decision to accompany her husband was influenced by the fact that Launceston's first coach, Eugen Sandow, also had a host of lady admirers and he accepted their "invitations" with such frequency that after his death, his widow refused to mark his grave with a headstone and, further more, she refused permission for a sporting magazine to erect a headstone in memory of the legendary strongman. However, Elliot apparently remained happily married and fathered three daughters.

With the act established as a success, Launceston and his father were reconciled and they both settled in Nottingham where the children stayed with their grandfather while Launceston went on tour with Emelia. The act remained immensely popular until the outbreak of War and after a few post-war appearances, Elliot, who was now approaching the age of fifty, decided to retire. He carried on farming in England for a few years before settling in Melbourne in 1923. He became a respected member of a group of old-time athletes and died of cancer of the spine on 8 August 1930, aged fifty-six and he is buried in the Fawker Cemetery in Melbourne.

Discus thrower, sprinter, wrestler, caber tosser, rope climber, bodybuilder, and weightlifter, Launceston Elliot was clearly never a specialist and the only sport, involving trials of strength, that held no appeal was professional wrestling.

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