



Joe Scott – World Champion Athlete

By Helen Gilmore

Dunedin race walker Joe Scott, largely forgotten now, was New Zealand's first world champion athlete and world record-holder. In the years between 1875 and his death in 1908 he was a household name.

Long-distance race walking, or pedestrianism, was an extremely popular sport at that time, both in Britain and the United States, offering lucrative prizes and attracting crowds of spectators. These races were not held on outdoor tracks but in hot and crowded halls, and were gruelling work for competitors. Thirst and lack of food often caused digestive and other health problems and Scott often suffered from nausea, vomiting and cramps during long races.

Joe Scott, who was born in Ireland in 1860, came to Dunedin with his family as a baby. He made his public debut at the Caledonian annual sports meeting in 1874. At just three feet six inches tall and weighing under 4 stone, he entered the two miles open championship walk against sixteen of the country's best athletes and out-walked them. This astonishing performance resulted in his being presented to the governor, Sir James Fergusson, who is reputed to have told him: 'Some day you'll be champion of the world!' It also brought him into contact with Alfred Austin, an athletics handicapper, who became his trainer.

Over the next decade, Scott's career blossomed. In 1879 he became New Zealand champion after walking 106 miles (170km) in 24hr against eight other competitors at the Garrison Hall in Dunedin. In 1885 he defeated the visiting British champion, Arthur Hancock, at the Garrison Hall, and broke the world record by eight minutes in

a solo walk of 100 miles in 17 hours, 59 minutes. In 1886 he was declared champion of Australia.

Scott's greatest achievement was to earn the world championship title in a 72-hour match against the best walkers of Europe at the Royal Agricultural Hall in London in May 1888. He covered 363 miles 1,510 yards - 'the best performance on record'. He received £100 and the R. Lewis Champion Belt. After touring England, he returned to a hero's welcome at the Caledonian sports of 1889, where he was paraded around the ring wearing his championship belt, while the band played 'See the conquering hero comes'

Although he had won many large prizes, Joe Scott remained a poor man. Most of his winnings went to cover his expenses, and to his manager and backers. He had married Isabella Jarvis in 1881 and the couple had seven children. The family had survived during his trip to England by selling his cups and medals, and there were still outstanding debts when he returned. In 1889 he was declared bankrupt. A boot-maker by trade, Joe eventually became ill with a throat infection, thought to have been caused by his habit of holding boot studs in his mouth while working, and developed cancer. He died on 9 February 1908, leaving his family "in poor circumstances", and unable to provide a headstone for his grave. However, his many admirers formed a committee and over the next two years collected from a variety of subscribers the sum of forty-five pounds to raise the distinctive heart-shaped headstone standing in the Northern Cemetery as a tribute to the memory of 'the world's champion walker'.

Prepared for the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust of New Zealand

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Sources: Issues of *Otago Witness* and *N.Z.Truth* www.paperspast.natlib.govt.nz;

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