

The Amazing Donald Dinnie: The Nineteenth Century's Greatest Athlete

Frank Zarnowski



Ed Note: Special thanks are due David Webster for permission to reprint several images from his classic text, *Scottish Highland Games*. Watch for Webster's response to this article in a future issue.

Donald Dinnie's comin' here,
Donald Dinnie's comin' here,
Spread the news baith far and near,
That Donald Dinnie's comin' here.¹

When Donald Dinnie initially toured the U.S. Caledonian circuit in 1870 he created a sensation and earned a small fortune. At thirty-three, Dinnie was already acknowledged as Scotland's greatest athlete, having competed for sixteen Highland Games seasons in his native land. Such was his reputation for feats of strength and versatility that American Caledonian clubs amended their calendars and paid heavy appearance fees to Dinnie to compete at their Gatherings. And so, in July, 1870, Donald Dinnie, the world's greatest athlete and the first superstar of sport, came to America.

North Americans flocked to Highland Gatherings not only to watch Dinnie compete, but simply to "see" Dinnie, an incredible specimen. Trim-waisted, Dinnie stood 6' 1" and possessed a forty-eight inch chest. He weighed fifteen stone (218 pounds), had 26 1/2" thighs, but sported no discernible fat. He was dark in complexion with a sharp, piercing eye, and "the kilt, and nothing but the kilt, is the only covering of his stalwart limbs."² It was said that when Dinnie appeared, resplendent in kilt (and at times wearing flesh-colored tights), he made men's hearts, and women's knees, weak.

Donald Dinnie was not the first traveling professional athlete in search of a living. Yet, in the nineteenth century, no one traveled so much, competed so frequently and won so often as the big Scot Dinnie toured

the English speaking world creating a sensation wherever he appeared. There seems to be no lack of local newspaper accounts of his visits. After competing at all the important Highland gatherings in Scotland and England, Dinnie tramped the world displaying his strength and versatility. He started at Caledonian Games, which featured events native to Scotland, but just as frequently he wrestled in tournaments or simply gave dumbbell-lifting (and later Highland dancing) demonstrations at dance halls. He toured Canada and the U.S.A. on three occasions, then steamed off to Australia and New Zealand in the 1880s, and later touted South Africa. At one stretch he was away for sixteen years, returning to Scotland in 1898 at age sixty-one.

Dinnie satisfied all the conditions of a twentieth century superstar: widespread fame, success, and riches. Over time Dinnie carried the label "World Champion Wrestler," and acquired the unofficial titles of "Greatest Athlete in the World," and "Strongest Man in the World"³ [Editors' Note: Although Dinnie was a fine wrestler and a wonderfully strong man, he was never at the very top of these two fields. He never reached his potential in either wrestling or lifting because of his preference for the profits to be had as a great all-rounder.] The bulk of his career preceded that of boxer John L. Sullivan and baseball star Mike "King" Kelley. But his reputation was every bit their equal

The sporting public flocked to Highland gatherings in the years immediately following the Civil War when prize fighting, the turf, pedestrianism, and cycling also filled the free time of American spectators. So did baseball, which by 1869 had its first professional team,

the Cincinnati Red Stockings. The following season, when Dinnie made his initial American tour, the Red Stockings were the darlings of America. Boston's Wright brothers (Harry and George) had accumulated the nation's top ballplayers, toured them from coast to coast and paid them handsomely. The previous year, the Red Stockings' fifty-seven game unbeaten streak (it eventually matched sixty-six) had made baseball the "national pastime."

Yet for all the notoriety of the Red Stockings, the top sporting attraction in 1870 was Donald Dinnie, who outdrew the nation's top ball-team and every other sporting event on the continent. In a forty-nine day stretch Dinnie appeared in a dozen cities. While the Red Stockings averaged a "phenomenal" 3500 spectators per contest,⁴ Dinnie's crowds were triple that. He drew twenty thousand spectators at the New York Caledonian Games, fifteen thousand in Toronto, and thousands more in smaller towns. Over his lengthy career it is likely that somewhere between three and five million spectators watched him perform.

And he was ungodly successful. Dinnie was one of the world's most powerful men yet he was also the most multi-faceted athlete of his or any other day. On his 1870 tour he attempted seventy-five Caledonian throwing, running, and jumping events at annual club meetings. Remarkably, Dinnie won sixty-eight of them and placed (top three) in the remaining seven, collecting several thousand dollars in prize money.⁵ One Highland Games authority estimates that Dinnie won over eleven thousand contests in a professional career which

began as a teenager and carried into his seventies.

And Dinnie made a pile of money. In 1870, for example, not only did he win prize money at Caledonian gatherings, but the clubs paid his transportation and provided appearance fees (e.g. Chicago Caledonian Club paid Dinnie \$100 to appear, Montreal \$50). When these fees were added to his winnings Dinnie easily exceeded the unrivaled \$1,400 annual salary of Cincinnati star George Wright.⁶ It was a handsome return for the eldest of ten children who had started as an apprentice mason. Expressed in the purchasing power of today's money, Dinnie's life time earnings exceeded \$2.5 million.⁷



THE SCOTTISH HIGHLAND GAMES ARE AMONG THE WORLD'S OLDEST SPORTING EVENTS. THIS NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGRAVING SHOWS AN EARLY HAMMER-TOSSING COMPETITION.



Dinnie was born at Balnacraig, near Aboyne, Aberdeenshire, Scotland on 8 July 1837. His father, Robert, was a mason and local strongman. Donald was one of six gifted athletic sons, all of whom grew to six feet and weighed over two hundred pounds. All went into masonry work except Walter, who became a Scotland Yard detective. There were also four daughters.

Although a sharp student, Donald left school at age fifteen and became interested in athletics. He turned professional at age sixteen but split his time between athletics and masonry until 1867. For the next *forty-three* years Dinnie, attracted by the monetary lure, unfailingly appeared at Highland Games in his homeland, England, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa.

What is most unusual about Dinnie's is that

he was one of the nineteenth century's top athletes in at least three separate sports: track and field wrestling, and weightlifting. This article will investigate his career in each. Dinnie was initially a track and field strongman. Competing in as many as ten Highland events in a single day was standard for him, and one Scottish Highland Games claimed that Dinnie once won sixteen events in a single day—the entire track and field card. Even on his American tours, Dinnie attempted as many as a dozen events per meeting. In the early 1860's, by winning numerous events at the Coatbridge Highland Games, Dinnie upset William Tait and won the "All-Round" championship, laying claim to the title, "Champion of Scotland" Dinnie kept the title for virtually twenty seasons. Scottish all-rounds evolved into the nineteenth century American All-Around, the forerunner of the twentieth century decathlon whose champion is called the "World's Greatest Athlete."⁸ For the second half of the nineteenth century there was no doubt who was the world's greatest athlete. It was Donald Dinnie.

Few doubted that Dinnie was the world's greatest athlete in 1870. One who did, however, was Thomas Campbell, a fine Canadian athlete who criticized Dinnie publicly. But Donal' was not one to take criticism lightly, so he issued a challenge to Campbell, any Canadian, or anyone else to meet him in a nine event contest for \$1000. Dinnie's "all-around" contest included the standard Highland events:

1. Putting the Heavy Stone
2. Putting the Light Stone
3. Throwing the Heavy Hammer
4. Throwing the Light Hammer
5. Tossing the Caber
6. Throwing the 56 lb Weight for Height
7. Wrestling
8. Running
9. Leaping

The challenge shut Campbell up. In fact no one took up the challenge. Good thing, since Dinnie was virtually unbeatable on his North American tour. In one stretch he won twenty-one consecutive events including heavy throws, jumps, and sprints. At the Brooklyn Caledonian Games, Donald entered seven events and won them all. A week later, in Boston, he went six for six. Then he won six of eight in New York and eleven of twelve in Scranton. Dinnie had a 4-0 record against America's most versatile athlete, George Goldie, the Princeton coach and won fourteen of seventeen events against Canada's finest athlete, Peter Fraser of Toronto. In two Caledonian meets (Toronto and Brooklyn), Dinnie was presented with "championship medals" for the best all-around athlete.

Two years later Dinnie returned to North Amer-

ica,¹⁰ bringing friend and fellow-athlete James Fleming with him. Again Dinnie drew big crowds but early in the tour, in Buffalo, he badly injured his shoulder in a vaulting accident. Unwilling to cancel the tour (and forfeit the appearance fees and prize money) Donal' continued to compete with his left arm in a sling. In spite of the handicap he entered fifteen meetings and still won fifty-eight of seventy-seven events, including a 16-3 show vs Goldie.¹¹

Dinnie was so proficient that athletes often complained that he won most of the prize money. Prizes usually varied from \$4 to \$20 per event, depending on the wealth of the host club. Since Dinnie always won most of the prize money his appearance at some Highland gatherings was not always appreciated by fellow athletes. Host clubs frequently had to offer a second set of prizes to pacify non-touring Scots. A popular Dinnie ditty of the day went:

He's springy, elastic and light when he's running,
Comes up to the mark in time and to spare;
His opponents can't match him or beat him in
cunning.

They say we were beat because Dinnie was
there.¹²

Caledonian Games reached their American peak in the 1870's, then declined in popularity. Dinnie returned to help revitalize them in 1882 and, even at age forty-five, still won the majority of events. Afterwards, he continued to tour the world wrestling, throwing, running, and jumping against all comers. His age did not seem to matter. Eventually he settled in Australia, finally returning to England in 1898. He lost all of his money through ill-advised investments and, as a result, had to compete until he was well past his best. By the early twentieth century he was the grand old man of the Highlands Games, still winning special competitions



It may be useful to examine Dinnie's career in what have become three separate sports: athletics (track and field), wrestling, and weightlifting. In Dinnie's day the distinctions were not as sharp and one might find a Highland meeting which featured all three sports.

Athletics

In the sport of track and field Dinnie was rivaled only by amateur runner Lon Myers (1858 - 1899), whose eleven year career was fleeting when compared to that of Dinnie's and whose total for career victories was as scrawny (relative to Dinnie's total) as Myers' physique.¹³ One historian credits Myers with 240 career victories, a wonderful total and certainly higher than that of any other

nineteenth century amateur. Yet Donald Dinnie's career was five times as long and his wins exceeded those of Myers by a factor of forty.¹⁴

Some sport historians have claimed that perhaps the English pedestrian Captain Robert Barclay [**Ed note: See: Scott Crawford, "Captain Barclay: Extraordinary Exerciser of the Nineteenth Century, *Iron Game History* 1(March 1991): 22-44]** or the native American distance runner, Deerfoot were the sport's premier performers of the nineteenth century. They were not by a long shot, and for the same reasons given above in the Dinnie/Myers comparison. No sport is more dominated by statisticians than track and field. Naively they consider unlisted records of little value. So if Dinnie's name doesn't grace their record books, how good could he possibly have been? Frankly, the answer is, better than anyone "in the books." For the following reasons he has to be regarded the sport's top athlete of the nineteenth century.

First, the length of his career is perhaps unparalleled in the history of that sport: Dinnie competed at a national and international (today's terms) for fifty-five years—from 1853 to 1908. Even past age seventy, his hammer distances were first rate. He ducked no one and met the top athletes four continents had to offer. Dinnie attended all the principal games in Scotland and England. He toured North America on three occasions, and spent the better part of fifteen years barnstorming New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa.

Second, the number of Dinnie's career victories (in all forms of sport) is unmatched in history. David Webster estimates that Dinnie's victories exceeded a phenomenal eleven thousand, a number not even approached by twentieth century jockeys.¹⁵ Consider the meaning of the eleven thousand figure. The National Football League has yet to play 11,000 games in its history. No Major League Baseball franchise has accumulated that many victories in the entire twentieth century. It took Michael Jordan nearly six NBA seasons to score 11,000 points. And he got thirty a night A victory on the average of one per day would take over thirty years. In sporting terms the mark is stupefying.

Third, the margins of Dinnie's victories were gaudy. He dominated his competition normally winning hammer competitions by twenty feet or more, and stone

tosses by five feet. And ~ margins could have been more. Unconcerned about "records," Dinnie would take one toss or put which was good enough to win. The other competitors would throw as often as the rules permitted while he went away to compete at some other event. Dinnie (and his opponents) came only to win prizes¹⁶ and no one won more.

Finally, and probably most importantly, Dinnie's unique range of ability—from events requiring strength to those requiring spring and speed—has not been duplicated in track and field history. For example, no one ever was, concurrently, the world's top high jumper, *and* shot putter, and hammer thrower, and also ran within one or two ticks of the 100 yard dash record, *and* was a top hurdler. No wonder he was consistently tabbed the world's "All-round Champion." In the twentieth century, Dinnie would have been a decathlon man. A comparison of personal records with twenty

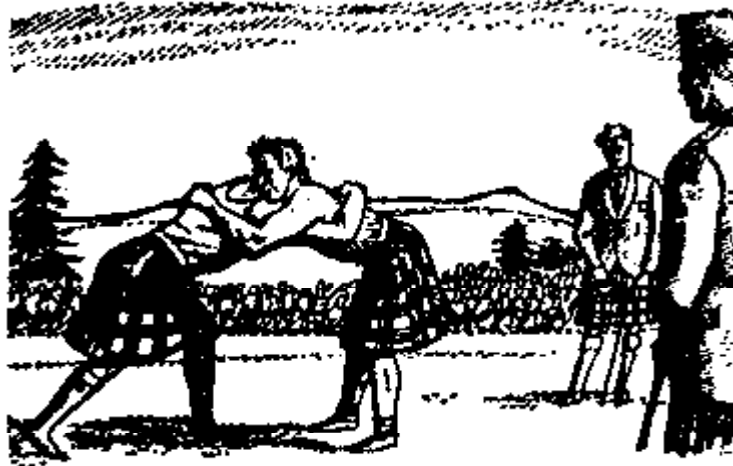
century counterpart Jim Thorpe, in the five events common to both men, finds Dinnie on top, 3-2.¹⁷

One way to gauge Dinnie's immense ability would be to track how long it took the world to catch up to his marvelous performances. His sixteen-pound shot put (stone toss) record was not surpassed for thirty-nine years. It took eight seasons to better his hammer mark and eight years to top his high jump best.¹⁸

A comparison of Dinnie's best performances to the winning and placing Olympic marks (the Modern Games were renewed in 1896 when Dinnie was 59), indicates how far ahead of his time Dinnie was.¹⁹ The evidence appears overwhelming that Dinnie was the century's top track and field performer.

Wrestling

At age sixteen, Dinnie won his first wrestling match for money—one pound—at a festival in Kincardine O'Neil.²⁰ He wrestled frequently but it wasn't until his touring days in the 1880s, when he took on all comers, that his international wrestling fame spread. At age forty-five, while on his third American visit, the nimble Dinnie, combining unmatched power with many unknown holds and grips won three significant matches to lay claim as the world's premier wrestler.²¹ First, in Plainfield, NJ., he won the mixed styles championship of America (and massive gold medal) in a tournament sponsored by the



Police Gazette, a major sporting publication of the day. Among his victims were American strongman Duncan C. Ross and Irish champion James C. Daly.²²

Soon thereafter, Dinnie arranged a match with William Muldoon, then America's champion Greco-Roman wrestler. Muldoon had ducked Dinnie for months and finally agreed to meet Donal' for fifty pounds and half the gate, but only if Dinnie could win twice as many falls—five Greco-Roman and ten Cumberland style—in a timed match Muldoon regularly applied strangling holds in the Greco-Roman portion, and Donal, unknowing of the rules and unwilling to break Muldoon's fingers or wrists, conceded each of the first five bouts. Needing ten Cumberland style falls for victory, Dinnie threw his opponent nine straight times before the gong sounded ending the match.²³ Thus Donal' lost the bet by one fall. But it is doubtful any wrestler could have duplicated this feat Dinnie then engaged to compete at the major Caledonian Games in San Francisco where he defeated the American wrestler, Farrel.

Dinnie then crossed to Australia where he met Professor William Miller, longtime Australian champion, in feats of strength and then wrestling.²⁴ After surpassing Miller in almost every strength feat only to be given a "draw" by the referee, Dinnie attacked his opponent with gusto. He made certain that there would be no draw by lifting Miller and throwing him so violently that the latter broke his leg.²⁵ Astonishingly, one Australian reference work claims that the famous match was a draw.²⁶

Crawford claims that, since Dinnie was one of the top wrestlers of the nineteenth century, in order to entice competitors, he had to be willing to lose more than others would lose.²⁷ Even so, Webster estimates that, in Dinnie's lengthy career, he won over two thousand wrestling matches.²⁸

Weightlifting

How strong was Dinnie? One story should suffice. Outside the hotel in Potarch, Scotland, next to the River Dee, there are two large, unwieldy boulders which in bygone days had been used in tethering horses. The smaller weighs 340 pounds and the other 445. A round iron ring is fastened in the top of each weight, large enough to fit the grip of a single hand. The story (surely apocryphal) is that Dinnie's father, Robert, was able to lift the 445 pound stone onto a 3 1/2 foot wall. What is irrefutable is that Donald himself, in the presence of many spectators, carried both stones a distance of five to six yards. By putting the both stones together, keeping one stone in front of him and the other behind while straddling



THIS RARE PHOTOGRAPH OF DONALD DINNIE WAS TAKEN IN APPROXIMATELY 1895. HE WAS THEN IN HIS LATE FIFTIES

—TODD-McLEAN COLLECTION

them, Dinnie was able to lift and haul both simultaneously.

In Scottish folk-lore this feat virtually canonized Dinnie. Once referred to as the "Stones of Dee," and now known as the "Dinnie Stones" carrying them appears to be, century and one half later, an unduplicated feat Dinnie, an ideally proportioned big man, fused great arm, shoulder and leg strength with agility. While On tour he challenged all comers to dumbbell lifting.²⁹ Dinnie won over two hundred worldwide weightlifting contests in his long career, all before the 1900-1930 era of strongmen began.



Today one wonders why Dinnie is not better

remembered. There are many reasons, some of which have to do with the modernization of sport. But others deal with socio-economic factors and his personality. Here are a few.

First, sport has become “record conscious.” And today, Dinnie’s name cannot be found in the record books. While Dinnie was at his track and field peak (say 1865-1880) the sport converted from one in which prize money was the focus to one in which non-monetary prizes were the goal. Athletes competed for “honor” in an amateur world. This mutation blazed both in the British Isles and North America, and it caused many people to look askance at traveling professionals like Dinnie who competed as a means of making a living, even though many of their performances were far superior to those of the amateurs. This may have been, in essence, an attempt at class distinction.

As a result, professional performances were ignored for record purposes. Track and weightlifting marks made by professionals were looked upon as dubious. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century record keepers like William B. Curtis (New York Athletic Club and editor of the *Spirit of the Times*) and James E. Sullivan scorned professional marks, often claiming they were both fraudulent and achieved by the wrong type of people. In reality no culture kept more accurate records than the Scots who maintained meticulous records up and down Scotland and in North America. But the professional marks were simply ignored. Incidentally, there has only been a minor effort to dig up these records by twentieth century statisticians.

More portentous than record keeping is the issue of economic status. Track and field was class distinct during Dinnie’s era and his mercenary track, wrestling, and lifting feats were not suitable outlets for many. It was improper for gentlemen to rub elbows with the working class “professionals.” For many years nothing was recognized as a track record in America unless it was made by the right sort of person (read: amateurs from the elite clubs or colleges), and made in the proper geographical region (read: East Coast). Since Caledonian feats qualified under none of the amateur standards, they were ignored in America for record purposes. The same was true in the British Isles.

But there are other reasons for Dinnie’s lack of present. The Caledonian/Highland Games movement declined in popularity in North America after 1880, perhaps a victim of its own success. Crowds, and therefore prize money, became modest. By the beginning of the twentieth century the Caledonian Games, both in Scotland and America had diminished relevance.

What’s more, Dinnie was a victim of wanderlust, a sporting soldier of fortune whose frequent foreign jaunts left his homeland reputation somewhat lessened by the

early twentieth century. After three successful Caledonian tours of America (1870, 1872, and 1882) Dinnie tromped to New Zealand and Australia, touring, performing, and living there. In all, he spent nineteen prime years away from Scotland.

Also, most of Dinnie’s performances occurred before the standardization of modern sport. This is particularly true in track and field and weightlifting, where today throwing implements, starting blocks, and even barbells are standardized. Dinnie’s performances have been relegated to footnote status. Even more significant were rule changes.

Dinnie’s top Caledonian events were the caber, putting the stone, throwing the hammer, and high leaping. No one was able to turn the huge logs he was able to turn but the event was never embraced by amateur track and so his caber records have been neglected. Standardization and alteration of equipment have also kept him off the record books in both the shot and hammer. For example, each Highland Games offered several stones to toss, and although these stones were used for long periods, they were not identical from meeting to meeting. Most gatherings offered a heavy stone, usually ranging from sixteen to twenty-five pounds, and a light stone, somewhere between fourteen to eighteen pounds, to put Dinnie was nearly invincible as a shot putter and held many gatherings’ record. But the lack of a standard weight has kept him off the record books, especially after amateur track settled on a “16 pound shot” as the heavy tossing event. Even so, Dinnie recorded an accurately measured 49’6” effort at Kinoull Perth, Scotland in 1868 with a stone meticulously weighed at 16 pounds, 2 ounces. Note that amateur shot putters, competing in an event virtually indistinguishable with the Highland stone toss, did not surpass his “stone record” for thirty-nine years. **[Editors’ Note: Also significant is that a stone weighing sixteen pounds is considerable larger and thus harder to throw than a sixteen pound metal shot. Clearly, Dinnie could have put a metal shot of sixteen pounds much farther than a stone of equal weight.]**

Even more detrimental to his reputation were significant rule changes in the hammer event. Traditionally each Highland Gathering offered a “heavy” (sixteen to twenty-four pounds) and a “light” (twelve to sixteen pounds) hammer, most often an iron ball attached to a 3 1/2’ wooden handle. When the amateurs (in the late 1880s) modified the event with a longer and more flexible wire handle, longer distances resulted and all previous wooden handle records vaporized. But the Caledonians/Highlanders continued to use the wooden-handled hammers of various weights. Statisticians, unwilling to keep a record for every possible weight and handle length, threw up their hands. As a result Caledonian hammer records never got much credit after 1880. It should be

noted that Dinnie's best 16 pound hammer throw with a four foot wooden handle and two turns was 144 - 1/2',³⁰ a mark amateurs did not surpass even with their wire models until 1892.³¹ Dinnie had no chance at today's long throwing events, the discus and javelin, which were virtually unknown in his lime.

One does find several of Dinnie's Highland Games marks still considered in the progression of the world's high jump record.³² At the time his 5'-11" scissors-style clearances at Turriff (1859) and Montrose (1860) were the best ever recorded. But too many on lookers witnessed his precisely surveyed and logged 6'-1" leap at Turriff, Aberdeenshire, in 1868, for it to be ignored. He leaped 6'-1" again at Kinoul Perth that same season yet neither mark has found its way into modern record progression lists. It took almost eight years for an amateur, Oxford student Marshall Brooks, to top Dinnie's mark.³³ And there are numerous reports that Dinnie was unnerved by the loss of his "record" to an amateur.³⁴

Another factor which has influenced his ongoing reputation is that in his day Dinnie was not universally liked. Normally softspoken, Dinnie could and did, gall others. There appears to be an attempt by some modern writers to protect Dinnie's competitive reputation. Webster, for example, goes overboard to maintain that Dinnie was a first rate sportsman, that is, an inspiration to all who met him.³⁵ At times he was. But Dinnie certainly was not perfect and it must be recognized that he had a mercenary streak, and, after he made a decision to be a full-time professional in 1867, all of his energy was focused on maximizing a financial return.

On one occasion he refused to take part in a caber toss unless guaranteed a two pound appearance fee. It seems that all the contests had ended before royalty appeared. This time it was Prince Albert at the Mar Lodge Games and the Games Committee appealed to Dinnie to go back out and toss the caber. "Aye," said Donal, "I'll gang oot, but I want twa pound." Dinnie continued, "I pay me taxes and win no' take less." Persuasion was hopeless and the other Highlanders took the field without him. When none was able to turn the caber Dinnie pushed his way through the crowd and tossed the huge log easily.³⁶ That was Dinnie. Avaricious. But he wouldn't have his sport humiliated by mortals either.

He was blunt and straightforward, simply seeing himself as a super athlete, with gifts mere humans may not have possessed. He could be testy. Most reports of Caledonian/Highland gatherings do not report Dinnie incidents. But a few do. On his first visit to Canada, for example, Donald complained bitterly after a foot race, displaying a scratch on his neck as evidence and demanding compensation. Most eyes rolled. But for Dinnie it was important since he expected to win the \$10 as first prize and not his \$2 for third place.³⁷

A few weeks later, on his initial New York Caledonian Club meeting, the *Spirit of the Times* reports that Dinnie, "behaved himself with regard to one or two matters more like a spoiled child than a grown man..." When informed that he must use the host club's hammers instead of his own longer handled ones he pouted and refused to compete. Only coaxing and soothing of his wounded spirit restored him to the arena.³⁸ It was well known among Caledonians that longer wooden-handled hammers resulted in superior marks. Other newspapers also describe Dinnie's attempts to run roughshod over games' committees in spite of having an enormous strength advantage.

The fact is that Dinnie was a fierce competitor. His psyche and pocketbook couldn't afford a loss. So it should not be unexpected that, over fifty years and thousands of contests, he became unglued at times.

However, he *was* the best athlete of his age, regardless of egomania or conceit. Some have faulted Dinnie for rather inconsistent performances at times. For example, in 1871 at Aboyne he won the high jump at a petty 5'-1" and the long jump with a trifling 16'-6."³⁹ But for Dinnie, only the victory was important. He would often take one throw, then wander off to another event if his toss was challenged he'd be back soon enough for a second effort. And, if not, he'd won the prize. In other words, at times, Dinnie just went through the motions to win.

Donaldson neatly summed up Dinnie's pugnacious disposition, "had he lived in primitive times (he) would have been much like the old chief who on his death bed, when asked to forgive his enemies, said he had no enemies, he had killed them all."⁴⁰

It seems to me that all this made Donald Dinnie a thoroughly modern athlete. For example, NBA stars today are not called for some fouls to keep them on the court. And some teams and athletes are given better seeds to assure tournament advancement. It was the same in Dinnie's day. He *was* the feature and he expected star treatment. He was earning a living. This is not an excuse for the brooding demeanor of a superstar. But it should not be unexpected nor hidden either. It was, albeit minor, apart of the Dinnie legend



After retuning to his homeland in 1898, to a less than gratifying welcome, Dinnie was forced to continue his athletic career. Ill-advised investments and the great slump of the 1890s absorbed most of his fortune. At various times the splendid and vain Scot operated a hotel, an undertaking business, and a fish and chips shop. The grand old man competed in something akin to a master's section at Highland Games through 1910. As Dinnie approached his seventy-fifth birthday *Health & Strength*

magazine sponsored a fund-raising benefit in honor of their champion. Donald Dinnie died in London in 1916.⁴¹

In summary, Donald Dinnie was an athlete of singular rank. He was so invincible in his heyday, and such a compelling personality, that the press made a considerable fuss wherever he traveled. His feats of strength and versatility: tossing cabers; lifting, carrying and tossing stones; throwing hammers and weights; leaping, hurdling; and sprinting were the fabric of legends. No one can deny that he was the best all-around athlete of the nineteenth century. His life was unique for its Chamberlain-like (but verifiable) number of triumphs, his fame, and his fifty-seven years of sustained reputation as a champion.

Notes:

1. Dinnie's presence inspired poetry. This stanza by Alex H. Wingfield, Hamilton, Ontario, was the opening of a lengthy poem which reminded Americans of Dinnie's initial Caledonian tour. *Scottish-American Journal*, 11 August 1870, 5.
2. There are many descriptions, but few photos of Dinnie in his prime. Most are remarkably consistent. This one dates from Charles Donaldson, *Men of Muscle* (Glasgow: Carter & Pratt, 1901), 22.
3. Scott A. G. M. Crawford "Donald Dinnie in Dunedin," *New Zealand Journal of Health, Physical Education and Recreation*, 9 (1) 1976: 12.
4. Baseball histories variously report the Red-Stockings season attendance between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand. I've been generous here in acquiescing to the latter figure, making their average attendance a bit over thirty-five hundred for fifty-seven contests. Dinnie, on the other hand, drew more than one hundred thousand in just twelve contests.
5. A weekly New York newspaper, *The Scottish-American Journal*, both advertised and extensively reported the results of virtually every North American Caledonian meeting. This statement is a compilation of Dinnie's successes. Often Dinnie would compete in ten or more events per meeting, in essence doing "decathlons" weekly.
6. David P. Webster, *Scottish Highland Games* (Glasgow: Collins, 1959), 101. Webster took his estimate of 10,000 Dinnie victories from a 1913 life history in *Health & Strength* magazine.
7. Dinnie's winnings and fees for seven weeks during the 1870 tour exceeded \$1,400. In current (1998) purchasing power this amounts to approximately three hundred thousand dollars.
8. Webster conservatively estimates Dinnie's cash winning at approximately twenty-five thousand pounds before proceeds from strength promotions. Other estimates, converted by an exchange rate factor (it was approximately \$4.83/pound in 1890) have been published at one hundred thousand dollars. Using private and public Consumer Price Indices from 1890 to the present we find that consumer prices, on average, are 20.6 times those of 1890. In today's purchasing power it would seem reasonable to estimate Dinnie's career winning as being in excess of \$2.5 million.
9. Frank Zamowski, *Decathlon: A History of Track and Fields Most Challenging Event* (Champaign, IL: Leisure Press, 1989).
10. *Scottish American Journal*, 1 Sept. 1870, 5.
11. Unfortunately there is much misinformation about Dinnie's North American tours. For instance Webster's and Redmond's claims (Gerald Redmond, *The Caledonian Games in 19th Century America* (Rutherford, NJ: FDU Press), 63-66, and Webster, *Scottish Highland Games*, 93-101, are incorrect in claiming that Dinnie toured the US in 1871 and 1877. His actual American tour years were: 1870, 1872, and 1882.
12. It is relatively easy to compile results from North American Caledonian Games during the Dinnie tours. *The Scottish American Journal* religiously advertised most of the meetings, normally including a list of events and appropriate prize money by place. Then, several weeks later *SAJ* would publish the results, often three or four deep by event, frequently with marks. It was the beginning of the modern sporting page.
13. Webster, *Scottish Highland Games*, 93
14. Don Potts, *Lon Meyers* (Mountain View, CA: Tafnews Press, 1993). Potts has recreated an amazingly accurate record of Myers' feats which dominated middle distance running from 1878 to 1888. Myers was a true amateur superstar who officially turned professional in the late 1880s. Potts' appendix lists 188 meetings, 377 contests, and 240 career victories (including heats) for Myers.
15. Webster, *Scottish Highland Games*, 101. There have been some historical concerns about Webster's accounting, especially in the number of his estimated hammer wins. But it makes little difference; even if he is a thousand wins off, who cares? Even in the long and storied careers of modern day stars, such as Carl Lewis and Jackie Joyner Kersee, their combined career wins do not exceed three thousand, less than a third of Dinnie's total. So if Webster is a bit generous, who cares? The track & field victories alone exceeded eight thousand. Incidentally, the all-time riding victory leader, with a bit over 8800, is Bill Shoemaker, whose career as a jockey was about as long as Dinnie's.
16. Donaldson, *Men of Muscle*, 29-30. *The Scottish-American Journal* reported results of all Caledonian Games during Dinnie's three American tours. His margins of victory, especially in the heavy events, were phenomenal.
17. A comparison of the five events both Dinnie and Thor-

pe contested, using standard distances or weights, finds Dinnie on top in the shot put, hammer, and hundred yard dash. Thorpe had better marks in the long jump and high jump. Differences in all other events belie comparison, 18. It is easy to forget that some of Dinnie's best events (for example: caber toss, heavy stone, heavy hammer) have not survived the modern Olympic program. Regardless, a comparison of those events that do remain give us an insight to his range of ability.

| Event | Mark | Better winning mark/place in top 8 |
|---------------|---------|------------------------------------|
| High Jump | 6-1 | 1900 Paris/1908 London |
| Shot Put | 49-6 | 1912 Stockholm/1948 London |
| 16 Lb Hammer | 144-1/2 | —/1924 Paris |
| Sprinting | 10-2/5 | 1900 Paris/1920 Antwerp |
| Hop-Step-Jump | 44-?? | —/1906 Athens |

comparisons made with David Wallechinsky's *Complete Book of the Olympics* (New York: Penguin, 1988). Dinnie's best hundred-yard time has been adjusted to one hundred meters.

19. "The Life Story of Donald Dinnie," *Health & Strength* (30 November 1912): 301.

20. Crawford, "Dinnie in Dunedin," 36.

21. Donaldson, *Men of Muscle*, 30.

22. Ibid, 30.

23. The term "professor" was not an academic one. Miller (born in England in 1846) professed to know all there was to know about sports, hence the self-ordained title. He was a fine athlete and at 5'-10" and 196 pounds, claimed to be the "world champion athlete." He was living in Australia in the 1880s. He died in Baltimore in 1939.

24. Donaldson, *Men of Muscle*, 31.

25. Deidre Morris, "William Miller" in *The Makers of America's Sporting Traditions*, Michael McKeman, ed, (Melbourne University Press, 1993), 174. There are many references to Dinnie's victory over Miller. One Australian author, astonishingly enough claims that Miller

actually drew the match with Dinnie, and unnecessarily embellishes the "Professor's" fine career, although it was nothing like Dinnie's.

26. Crawford, "Dinnie in Dunedin," 15.

27. Webster, *Scottish Highland Games*, 101.

28. Crawford "Dinnie in Dunedin," 12

29. David P. Willoughby, *The Super Athletes*, New York: A.S. Barnes, 1970), 165.

30. Dinnie's sixteen pound shot mark was eventually surpassed by the ponderous Ralph Rose, by half an inch at the AAU Championships in Norfolk, VA, 7 September 1907. See: Ekehard Megede and Richard Hymans eds., *Progression of World Best Performances and Official IAAF World Records* (Monaco: IAAF, 1995).

31. "The Life Story of Donald Dinnie," *Health & Strength* 15 February 1913: 42.

32. Ireland's James S. Mitchell tossed the sixteen pound hammer 145'-3/4" to win the New York Athletic Club Fall Games at the Polo Grounds on 8 October 1892. See Megede & Hymans, *Progression*, 182.

33. Brooks' 6'-2 1/2" leap came in London on April 4, 1876. Ibid, 141.

34. Crawford, "Dinnie in Dunedin," 12-13. Crawford states that Dinnie was so upset that he voiced his concerns in a local newspaper

35. Webster, *Scottish Highland Games*, 93.

36. Ibid, 100.

37. "Caldonian Society Festival," *Toronto Globe* 9 Aug 1870, 4.

38. *Spirit of the Times*, 10 September 1870, 54. The account then noted what a splendid athlete Donald Dinnie was. He won \$67.50 (equivalent today to over \$1,400) in prizes with six firsts one second, and one third place.

39. Crawford, "Dinnie in Dunedin": 13.

40. Donaldson, *Men of Muscle*, 31-32.

41. "Scotland's Greatest Athlete Dead," *New York Times*, 5 April 1916, 14.

