

TOM LONGBOAT

Inducted September 13, 2014

Before there was a Wayne Gretzky, Bobby Orr or Maurice Richard, and even before there was a National Hockey League, Canada had an enduring sports legend. Tom Longboat, who wore running shoes, not skates, was the fastest man of his day. This past summer marked 65 years from the year of his death, the record setting member of the Onondaga Nation that is part of the Grand River Reserve near Brantford, Ontario. He was born there on June 4, 1887. His talent was spotted early by a Mohawk coach from Ohsweken, Ontario, named Bill Davis, who had placed second in the fledgling 1901 Boston Marathon. Longboat started breaking Canadian records from his third competitive race and, at various times in his career, he set every Canadian record for running a mile or longer.

In the autumn "Around the Bay Race" in Hamilton which was considered his breakthrough, he destroyed the field. Ten days later, he won a 15-mile race in Toronto by three minutes, and before the year was out he smashed a 10 minute mile by 2 1/2 minutes. It was an era when the foot races were major sports entertainment spectacles. In November of 1908, Tom Longboat became a professional runner, with huge purses featuring the best runners of the day and from

all parts of the world; he was only 21. Longboat entered the professional ranks with almost unanimous blessing of family, friends and admirers. Newspapers forecast that his feet would carry him to a fortune of twenty thousand dollars in his first professional race, and they were right. After that race his feet were insured for a million dollars. Tom Longboat had several managers over the course of his career, but the best he got along with was a personal friend of his, Tom Claus, a Mohawk from Deseronto, Ontario. Tom Claus had set up a five mile race in Kingston on Nov. 11, 1908. Longboat took an early lead winning the race by 13 laps. Among those who were in the audience was a Mohawk woman named Laurretta Maracle. Two weeks later, on Dec. 28, 1908, she and Longboat were married in Toronto. The wedding and reception that followed was held at Massey Hall and brought considerable interest to bear on the woman who had married her hero. The Globe noted with approval that she was an educated woman and took heart that she seemed very happy. The last person to show up at the reception was a monstrous man that stood well over six feet tall, an iron worker from the city of Toronto, named Thomas James Maracle, Laurretta's brother. Every guest that went to the reception had to pay \$10 each at the door, and there was such a turn out that the bride and groom raised \$30,000.

The World Professional Marathon Championship was held on Feb. 5, 1909, at Madison Square Gardens between Alford Shrubbs and Tom Longboat. Shrubbs, the English long distance champion had been professional for three years and was considered the essential runner to defeat. The race began and very quickly Shrubbs was in a 16 mile lead in a 25 mile race, and very rapidly the race approaching the final mile mark, when the crowd turned on the Canadian, booing him. Then the tide began to turn. Longboat's



legendary endurance gradually prevailed over the fading Englishman. One by one Longboat won back the laps he had lost until, with less than a mile remaining, he caught and swept past Shrubbs also setting another Canadian record.

Starting in February of 1912, Longboat ran his three best races in Edinburgh as a professional and earned an estimated \$17,000, a lifetime of earnings in many jobs of the day. Promoters and handlers took some of the money but Longboat retained a significant share to buy his mother a house.

What vestiges of professional racing remained were extinguished with the outbreak of WWI in 1914. Longboat volunteered in 1916 and served in England and France, assigned to various regiments including the 180th Sportsman's Battalion. Popular as both a soldier and an athlete, he competed in military races and was once assigned the dangerous job of carrying messages from one battlefield post to another in France. He was wounded and reported dead, leading to a jolting personal experience on his return to Canada in 1919. Thinking he was dead, his wife Lauretta had remarried. The development was wrenching for both of them but, as happy as she was to see Longboat alive, Lauretta decided to remain in her new marriage. Longboat, accepted the loss and not long after he married Martha Silverheels, a woman from his own Six Nations reserve, and sister to actor Jay Silverheels. Tom and Martha had four children together. Longboat sought work where he could find it. He held several mill and factory jobs in southern Ontario and once even travelled west in hopes of establishing himself as a farmer. He found work as a farm hand but it turned out to be an unhappy period for the Longboat family. Times turned so bleak in Alberta that he pawned his racing medals to make ends meet. Moe Lieberman, an Edmonton lawyer and sportsman who bought the mementoes, kept them for a number of years, hoping that someone would care enough to redeem them on Longboat's behalf. No one did and most of them were melted down for their gold content. Eventually, Longboat returned to Ontario where he found permanent work with the city of Toronto. He ended up as one of Toronto's first postmen. Evenings he put out the garbage and did janitorial work at city hall, and he remained an employee there for nearly 20 years.



This past summer Tom Longboat was remembered in his home community 65 years after his death in 1949. His fame and deeds were buried for a time under the weight of a personal life that turned upside down, a series of meaningless, menial jobs and ultimately a society that once honoured him as a hero, now discarding him as an ageing aboriginal. In the fall of 1945 he came down sick and decided to move the family to the place of his birth. In the summer of 1949 Tom Longboat developed pneumonia and died at the age of 61. The last of the Longboat family died June 10, 2014 at the age of 97. Longboat was inducted into Canada's Sports Hall of Fame in 1955, and in 1999 Macleans Magazine called him Canada's top sports figure of the 20th Century. Both Canadian Historical Plaque and Ontario Historical Plaques were dedicated to Tom Longboat at Ohsweken on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford.

Tom Longboat was inducted into the Bay of Quinte UEL Hall of Honour on September 13, 2014 by James Maracle, relative of the first wife. Article courtesy of James Maracle.