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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Bill Halfpenny's Feats Recalled

By NEIL A. MATHESON

A MANUSCRIPT passed to me by my friend, Bill Reid has a most interesting reference to Bill Halfpenny, the world-quality pole vaulter of another era who was inducted into our P.E.I. Sports Hall of Fame last July.

The story was written by James MacEachern, a man who pole vaulted about the time Halfpenny was retiring, and received some tips and assistance from the Island's greatest track and field athlete.

It was passed on to Bill Reid by James' brother Rev. Vincent MacEachern who now is at the Priory of the Blessed Sacrament, 5041 Ninth Avenue Northwest, Seattle, Washington, 98105.

Incidentally James MacEachern – he was an eye doctor here once on Sunnyside – is living in Escondido, California.

Here is MacEachern's interesting story on Bill Halfpenny. It ends up with his competition against Leonard MacDonald of Pictou. Well I'll let the story unfold as you read the column. From this point on you are reading James MacEachern.

"At the Maritimes Provinces Track and Field Championships held in 1901 at Halifax, Nova Scotia, Bill Halfpenny of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, won the pole vault and set a new Maritime record of 11 feet, 1 inch.

Feat Attracts Wide Attention

"THE EVENT had been won at the Olympic Games in 1900 with a vault under 11 feet, and this performance by Halfpenny, a young man from a small town who had had no coaching, attracted wide attention.

"Soon after, Halfpenny was invited to join the Montreal A.A. for which he competed for many years and developed into one of the world's best vaulters.

"He won the event at the World's Fair in St. Louis in 1906, he once held the indoor record and he represented Canada at the Olympic Games in Stockholm in 1912. He was one of three left when his pole broke, injuring him and he could not continue.

"In the first two decades of this century when television and radio were unknown and movies and the automobile just gaining a foothold, track and field meets were among the most popular forms of entertainment in the summer months. All events were hotly contested and winners even in small events, attained prominence. Their performances may not seem impressive by today's standards but they did not have the advantage of the excellent coaching, the training methods, and the good equipment now so widely available.

"TO GET a vaulting pole in those days one hiked, with an axe, to the woods looking for a dead spruce tree, as light as possible to sustain one's weight. Usually several were cut and taken home for further evaluation, and the one chosen was taken to the blacksmith to have a spike placed in the end and a ferrule around the bottom.

“Later the spike was replaced by a knob and a heavy box to receive it was placed beneath the bar. Bamboo poles came next, followed by steel, then by aluminum, and the present-day fibreglas pole have all played an important part in the greater height reached by today’s vaulters.

“Mattresses placed on the ground instead of landing pits and runways of dirt, which a shower could make slippery were sometimes used.

“Is the pole vault not the most spectacular and one of the most demanding events in competitive athletics? It takes stamina to stand the length of time which it usually takes to run off. It is said it is as taxing as a fast quarter-mile speed, great strength in the arms, shoulders and legs, a quick surge of energy, a high degree of co-ordination and timing, lightning-like reflexes, and superb confidence.

Vaulters Excel As Athletes

“A CANADIAN study of athletes in many branches of sports showed that vaulters excelled all others in all-round athletic ability.

“About 1920, Halfpenny returned to his native Charlottetown and would occasionally work out with us at the local track but he did not compete in meets. Modest and friendly, his advice was helpful to us.

“In 1922 Leonard McDonald of Pictou, Nova Scotia, who earlier had won the pole vault at 12 feet at the Canadian Championships, won the event at the Maritime Championship with a vault of 11 feet, 3 ½ inches, beating Halfpenny’s record which he had set in 1901. This caused quite a stir among the many Halfpenny admirers who said if Halfpenny had been there he would have won. Another meet was to be held a few weeks later in McDonald’s home town of Pictou and Halfpenny was urged to enter.

“A great debate began between the fans and sports writers throughout the Maritimes. McDonald, young and at the top of his career, was the favorite. His followers pointed out that Halfpenny was 43 years old and had not competed for a number of years. Halfpenny who had been prominent in the athletic world for so long did not lack admirers. As the time for the meet approached the clamor grew for a meeting of the two men, and Halfpenny entered the meet.

“Our team left Charlottetown at 6 a.m. on a tugboat for the four or five hour journey to Pictou, a town of about three thousand persons. Because of the great interest in the featured event, the enthusiastic crowd from many distant areas numbered many.

“McDonald, tall, lean, his long pompadour held in place by a hair net, a home-town boy with the prestige of a national championship, made a striking figure and was the favorite of the crowd.

A ‘Great Natural Athlete’

“HALFPENNY, a beautifully built man of about 155 pounds and 5 feet, 11 inches in height graying around the temples, his face reflecting his age, but his graceful vaulting style and the way he moved and carried himself, bespoke the great natural athlete that he was.

“As the event progressed all were eliminated except the two rivals. Each had missed twice at 11 feet, four and one-half inches. The tension reached a climax as Halfpenny

slowly walked to the start for his third and last try. Although he had come close on his two other attempts, I thought that his chances were small on his third.

“His age, the long tiresome day – he had been up since daybreak and it was now late in the afternoon – and his two misses must have lowered his energy and his confidence.

“As these thoughts ran through my mind, I was pessimistic as Halfpenny sped down the runway, planted his pole and cleared the bar with one of the most graceful and perfect vaults. For a few moments the silence reflected the surprise of the crowd but the loud applause following must have been heartwarming to him. McDonald missed on his third try and Halfpenny was the winner. At 43 he had broken the champion of Canada and set a new Maritime record 21 years after he had set his first one.

“I was third with the best vault of my career,” James MacEachern concludes.

That ends the interesting comment from Father MacEachern, a longtime friend of Bill Reid, Eunice and family.

The ‘Most Modest’ Athlete

AS I said last summer when I had the honor to do the presentation for Bill Halfpenny’s entry, I knew Bill well in his later years. I had the privilege of having him as coach at Mt. Allison in the late 20’s and often talked with him. Sometimes we went for long walks together.

But never once did Bill ever tell me anything about his own great vaulting feats and he ranked with the best in the world at the time.

On my part I did not know enough about his starry career to ask the right questions.

My thanks to my friend Bill Reid and also through you, Bill, to Father MacEachern, who made this story on Halfpenny available to this paper.