



# Reconsidering Donald Dinnie

**A Response to Frank Zarnowski's  
"The Amazing Donald Dinnie" published in  
*IGH* Vol. 5, No. 1.**

***David P. Webster***

Frank Zarnowski's recent interesting article has stimulated most welcome discussion on the amazing Donald Dinnie, truly the nineteenth century's greatest athlete, as the title of the article proclaimed. Knowing of my extensive Highland Games research over the years, our esteemed editors and a couple of others have asked me to respond to the article, probably feeling I might wish to challenge a few of the statements on the number of Dinnie's hammer wins and on two dates. They may also have thought I would react to the fact that Mr. Zarnowski described the great Donald as being avaricious and riding roughshod over officials while "Webster, for example, goes overboard to maintain that Dinnie was a first rate sportsman, that is, an inspiration to all who met him."

Frankly, I enjoyed every word of the well researched article and agreed with almost all of it. My response therefore is mainly to set the record straight on some of these points. Personally I thought Mr. Zarnowski quite lenient, as my books from which he quoted were about Scottish Highland Games in their entirety and not about Donald Dinnie exclusively, and I was unable to go into more detail about his life and character. This situation has now been rectified by the completion of a new book which has much more information and covers the complete life story of Dinnie and his amazing relatives. I have done

this in conjunction with Gordon Dinnie, who has a marvelous collection of documents about his distant relative.

Most important at this stage is to clarify the phenomenal number of prizes and victories won by Donald Dinnie. Frank Zarnowski states that I took the ten thousand Dinnie victories from a 1913 life history in *Health and Strength* magazine. Back in the 1950s when I wrote my book, *Scottish Highland Games*, for Collins Publishing, I did not have the magazines he mentioned and amongst my sources was a much earlier one. I got the specific 10,000 statistic and other similar information from Donald Dinnie's wonderful championship belt, which was assayed in 1899—almost 100 years ago.

This silver belt by far surpasses in beauty and value other comparable sporting awards. Whereas many championship belts have medallions mounted on a leather strap this one links together ten lovely molded and engraved plaques depicting Dinnie's greatest achievements. The moldings in relief and combined with the informative summaries provide a most illuminating testimony to this wonderful athlete. An extremely important aspect of this award is that Dinnie's best efforts quoted on the plaques were recognized by his contemporaries. The award was endorsed by first class professional athletes including George Davidson and Charles McHardy, as well as by "The

Gentlemen Amateurs.” This is significant as some Scottish athletes resented Dinnie’s successes and the press adulation he received. Their discomfort is easy to understand when one reads papers such as the *Aberdeen Herald* reporting on the Speyside Gathering in 1878. “The most popular athletes of the day were present, topped by the redoubtable Donald Dinnie, with whom all competitors at feats of strength appeared as pygmies.” As pygmies indeed! Can you imagine how a six-foot-plus strongman weighing a muscular 270 lbs. would feel being described as a pygmy? Others say: “There was amongst the competitors one Scottish Giant, Donald Dinnie, whose performance was worth all the money to witness. It seemed also child’s play to Donald to do things the others strove so hard to do.”<sup>1</sup>

While Dinnie was appearing at the Folly, in Manchester in 1881, the *Manchester Echo* enthused: “Donald Dinnie’s performance is certainly wonderful and bonnie Scotland can pride herself on having produced THE MAN OF THE CENTURY. Compared with other strongmen, the Lion Athlete for instance at Mayer’s circus, Donald Dinnie is as a mastiff contrasted to a half starved terrier.”<sup>2</sup>

Any records claimed for, or by, Dinnie, which could not be substantiated, would rapidly be denounced by the athletes subjected to derogatory comparisons in newspapers, yet the authenticity of specific distances and weights detailed on the champions belt and widely published in the press at that time, does not seem to have been a source of controversy. As a young man I would often go with Alex Thomson, my training mate and well known to many readers, to see and enjoy this magnificent belt, so I saw and studied, many times, original contemporary material. Charles McHardy, who was one of those endorsing the award was a police chief of great integrity. I feel I had valid information for the statistics which gave most concern. Dinnie had his detractors, particularly his brother-in-law William McCombie Smith, a mediocre Highland Games heavy athlete and prolific writer on the subject. Smith never missed an opportunity to criticize Donald and he would most certainly have challenged any claims that could not be substantiated.

I can well understand a reluctance to accent the number of victories but I thought Frank Zarnowski’s article went a long way in explaining the nature of Highland Games and the very professional way in which Dinnie

maximized the situation. I can perhaps add to this. There are currently some 135 Highland Games in Scotland every year. At the height of the season a professional can compete in a different Highland Games every day of the week. At many of these Games there are events specifically for local athletes and others which are open to all. Some of the greatest Games were, and still are, in North-east Scotland where Dinnie was born and bred and there were a great many more Games there then than there are today. He could compete in these, doing local events in the morning and open events in the afternoon. He did not confine himself to the heavy events but also competed in several of the light events and has even been known to take prizes in Highland dancing.

Usually he would compete in 16 lb. and 22 lb. stones, 16 lb. and 22 lb. hammer, 28 and 56 lb. weight for distance, 56 lb. weight for height, the caber toss, the pole vault, the high jump, the sprints, the long jump, the triple jump (often a hop, hop and jump) and novelty events such as obstacle races. A little simple arithmetic, adding local and open events, will begin to gain acceptance of the extraordinary sporting statistics rightly attributed to Donald Dinnie. He once took twenty prizes in one day at a Highland Games.

In his younger days Donald would often compete in two events at the same time, throwing and jumping alternately. At Luss Games one year Dinnie had two consecutive failures in the high leap and a third would have meant elimination from the competition. For his final attempt he whipped off his kilt and this time cleared the bar with ease. There was a mixture of cheers and laughter, many being amused at the briefness of his tartan underpants. I well remember how surprised I was in my first participation in a Highland Games when at Banchory I entered the pillow fight, sitting on a caber supported between stands. I found myself facing some of the most formidable top heavies who soon made short work of me! Many of these professionals entered each and every athletic event with a cash prize. Such novelty competitions are rarely mentioned in official results or newspapers. Dinnie was a workaholic, competing all the year round. He toured in other countries and, totally unlike most of the strongmen of that era, he thrived on challenges, reveling in all-round competition. The other, often overlooked aspect, is the length and breadth of his competitive career. He won his first cash prize in 1850 and on 10 Aug. 1910 he was

still included in the Naim Highland Games prize list at 73 years of age!

As a strongman he appeared at the London Aquarian, the Mecca for professional strongmen such as Samson, Sandow and Louis Cyr. Dinnie appeared there long before these legendary figures and his standard lifts, such as a 168 lb. one hand snatch and lifting two dumbbells overhead, with 128 and 112 lb. (and 132 and 102) simultaneously beat all professional lifters of the time including McCann, conqueror of Sandow. As a weightlifter Donald Dinnie was unbeaten at his own specialty. Nobody has ever equaled him in holding for time a 56 lb. weight at arm's length in line with the shoulder. In 1884 at Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, he won a gold medal for a single hand hold out. Fifty-six pounds was placed on the palm of his hand and he then held it with arm parallel to the floor for 45 seconds. This was probably his most outstanding single feat. He used this as a regular challenge to all weightlifters and strongmen and although this oft quoted record in 1884 is his best, many other exceptional times were recorded.

Dinnie was the inspiration of the very first World Weightlifting Champion, E. Lawrence Levy, who more than once expressed his admiration for Dinnie's weightlifting abilities. He had seen the Scot topping the bill in Myers Circus some time before Sandow made his British debut and Dinnie was still appearing as a strongman in London music halls long after the Blonde Teuton's stage career was over. Donald was also a fighter of great repute although he won more honor than medals with his fists. On one occasion, at a show in Stonehaven, he fought and beat the noted champion boxer, Jem Mace. The Dinnie brothers were all handy with their fists if the occasion demanded and when a railroad was being built in northeast Scotland the rough, tough laborers one day descended on the village of Aboyne looking for trouble. The terrified locals sent immediately for the Dinnies who put an abrupt end to the hooligans. After that the village was given a wide berth by the railroad workers.

Donald was a very outspoken character, some times clashing with Highland Games officials and amateur committees. Usually local games committees did, and still do, only one games a year. With ever-changing, though well-intentioned volunteers, the level of expertise could often have been improved. If equipment or condi-

tions were not good for athletes Dinnie was the spokesman. This explains some of his complaints to organizers. It seems to me unfair to accuse him of trying to "run rough shod over games committees," and to be specific about his reluctance to use the hammers of the Caledonian Club. It should be remembered that a proper wooden shafted throwing hammer would go some 20 feet further than a short thick shafted sledgehammer. If a newspaper published a result showing Dinnie had won with a hammer throw of only 90 feet it would impair his reputation, for the throwing implement would not be described. Most athletes today would take Dinnie's side in all the incidents related, including the incident where he asked to be paid for tossing the caber before Royalty. The committee could well afford the expenditure on such a royal occasion and *they* should be criticized for putting him in a difficult position, resulting in him having to go unrewarded for tossing the caber when all others had failed.

Dinnie came from a culture where participants hated to be "ripped off" on the field or in daily life and Dinnie's associates relished the stories about this aspect of his character. Dinnie arrived in London about two o'clock one morning for an eight o'clock meeting with a colleague. London's horse drawn cab owners were as notorious for overcharging then as some taxi drivers are today but that did not trouble Donald Dinnie. He asked the cabby to take him to his destination, Euston Station, and settled down comfortably in the coach and was soon sound asleep. Noting the snoring, the cabby thought he could put one over on this Scottish hick from the sticks and he too had a cat-nap before continuing on his journey. As dawn broke the journey was resumed and the cabby eventually awoke Donald at Euston, asking for a fare to cover the several hours taken. Donald did not flinch, he simply called to a nearby policeman and asked how much it should cost for a cab between the two railway stations. On being informed, he carefully handed over the exact amount plus a tip. The gloomy cabby took in Dinnie's athletic appearance and the nearby police presence and realized that on this occasion he had come off worst.

Dinnie's success in wrestling has been somewhat overlooked. He won the *Police Gazette* title of World Champion Wrestler and took on all comers including the best that America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Britain had to offer. He beat nearly all of them. Dinnie recognized that there were a great many styles of wrestling

and he could not be champion in all so he challenged all-comers to *mixed wrestling*. He would match them in their favorite style providing they would accept another sstyle in addition. Dinnie's match with William Muldoon, who is sometimes referred to as the Father of American Wrestling, took place in the evening after Dinnie's participation in a very busy and successful day of competition in the Caledonian Club of San Francisco's Highland Games (which still flourish today and attract crowds upwards of 50,000).

Although even a superman like Dinnie must have been tired after such a strenuous day he actually won most of the rounds in his match with Muldoon, the "Solid Man," but in spite of this he lost the bout! In any "level playing field" match Dinnie would have been an easy victor. The terms, which Donald willingly accepted, called for him to throw Muldoon within a time limit *twice as often* as the falls taken by the American champion.

For around two decades Dinnie traveled widely with his own team of professional athletes and wrestlers. For many years he did one night stands, taking on all local and national champions. While he was overseas and earning large sums he had been exceptionally generous over many years in sending money to his relatives in Scotland. This does not sound to me like the avaricious man depicted in the article. With regard to dates, while agreeing there has been much confusion on the dates of Dinnie's American tours, I did correctly state that "In 1870 the wanderlust finally got the better of the Aberdeenshire professional. His first short trip was to America where he was feted and honored like a king." This quote was on page 97 of the first publication of *Scottish Highland Games*, which I wrote in 1957, and I have used similar statements elsewhere. I have now been able to document Dinnie's travels in much more detail and they were considerably more extensive and adventurous than most of us had ever imagined.

As the years went on Dinnie, through no fault of his own, found himself in difficult circumstances. The savings of a lifetime were lost in building and railway investments during a land and property crisis in Australia, but he regained some of this through hard work long after the time when many would have retired. By the time he reached the age of 75 he had been driven to the verge of poverty by a series of misfortunes. Never unwilling to work hard, Dinnie obtained bookings in London music

halls, doing a strongman act. Still tremendously athletic for his age, in part of his act he supported a platform made from a large table and on this two Highlanders danced a Fling! Another of his favorite feats was to hold a 56 lb. weight sideways at arm's length. London County Councilors in 1912, noting that Donald was now in his 76th year, were concerned about the potential damage to the sturdy veteran's health and refused further permission for him to appear on stage with his act. This ruling, albeit humane, put an end to Donald Dinnie working on the stage but he did continue in the field of sport adding to his tremendous collection of medals, many of which I have personally studied. All this has given me an undying admiration of Donald Dinnie, for which I make no apology.

There is no doubt that Frank Zarnowski has presented the facts fairly and has shown some justification for his minor criticisms. He is fully entitled to his opinions and I congratulate him on a most entertaining, and well-researched article.

One final note: Frank states in his article that some sport historians have claimed that perhaps the *English* pedestrian, Captain Barclay . . . . and Deerfoot . . . were the sport's premier performers of the nineteenth century. Well, that really did get to me. The so-called Captain Barclay (Robert Barclay Allardice) was certainly not English. Barclay, Dinnie and I were born only miles apart. He was born about half-way between my birthplace and that of Donald Dinnie. Had we been alive at the same time as the peripatetic Captain, he would have had no difficulty in walking to either of our homes and back again before his breakfast. To call any of us English and pass unnoticed would be as likely as King Herod being nominated "Baby Sitter of the Year," and does about as much for Anglo/American relations as the Charge of the Light Brigade did for recruiting.

*(Editors' Note: We should have caught the error, especially as we published an article in IGH Vol. 1, Nos. 4 & 5 detailing Barclay's career.)*

<sup>1</sup> This quote appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1873. Clipping in the collection of David P. Webster, Irvine, Scotland.

<sup>2</sup> *Manchester Echo*, 1881, Clipping in the collection of David P. Webster, h-vine, Scotland.