

**ÉTIENNE DESMARTEAU**  
**CANADA'S FIRST OLYMPIC GOLD MEDALIST**

*by Glynn A. Leyshon*

In the annals of the modern Olympic Games, the first Canadian to win an Olympic gold medal was George Orton. Orton, from Strathroy, Ontario, was a student at the University of Pennsylvania at the time he conquered all in the 2,500 metre steeplechase at Paris in 1900. Orton, however, ran on the U.S. team, and despite his citizenship, the victory was credited to the U.S.A.

The Olympic marathon in the 1904 Olympics in St. Louis was won by Thomas Hicks who was also reported to be a Canadian although he ran in U.S. colors [Cambridgeport YMCA, Cambridge, Massachusetts]. The *Montreal Star* of the time claimed he was from Fredericton, New Brunswick, and that he trained on the road between Peniac and Marysville, New Brunswick. Hicks, who was born in England, at this time lived in Cambridge and his athletic laurels were claimed by the U.S. once again.

It remained, therefore, for one Étienne Desmarteau to be acclaimed as the first officially recognized Canadian to win an Olympic gold medal in track & field athletics. [*Editor's Note:* The Canadian lacrosse team, The Shamrocks, won a gold medal in lacrosse in 1904 almost two months prior to Desmarteau's gold medal.] This he accomplished in the 56-pound weight throw with a distance of 34' 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" (10.48) at the St. Louis Games in 1904.

The event and the Games in general in 1904 were unusual by today's precise and exacting athletic standards. The 56-pound weight itself, no longer used in any major competition, begs for an explanation. Why not a round number like 50 pounds or 60 pounds? The size apparently derived from the English measure in which a stone equalled 14 pounds. A so-called hundred-weight by that measure actually did not weigh a hundred pounds, but 112 pounds, or eight stone [50.91 kg.]; a half-hundred-weight, therefore, was 56 pounds [25.45 kg.] or four stone.

The delivery of the stone was freestyle. Get it as far as possible any way possible short of rolling it. The event was marked by a lack of grace. Often the burly contestants stood facing away from the direction of throwing, swing the weight between their legs, and with a grunt, arched backward flinging the stone overhead. Another method was to spin as do modern throwers of the discus and hammer. It was also possible to cast the stone, with its attached handle, using an unlimited run and follow. The latter approach gave the object more momentum, and the throw was measured from the point of release wherever that was judged to be. Unlimited run and follow was a definite advantage since the thrower could run or stumble several yards after release.

Not satisfied with throwing for distance, the contestant also often vied for the title of highest thrower. An old rule book lists the regulations for this outdated sport as follows:

1. A wooden disc 3 feet in diameter must be suspended horizontally in the air.
2. The judge will decide at what height the disc will be to start.
3. Throwing will be done from inside a circle 7 feet in diameter.
4. To count, a throw must hit the disc. The thrower must remain inside the circle until the hammer hits the disc.
5. The method of competition shall be the same as for the high jump, i.e., three attempts at each height.

Desmarteau was as adept at throwing for height as he was at the throw for distance. In Ottawa in August of 1904, a month before his victory at the Olympics, he managed a heave for height of 14'8" [4.48] after setting a Canadian record in the distance event with a throw of 36'6½" [11.14]. In the same meet he also won all the remaining throw events: the 16-pound hammer, the discus, and the 16-pound shot put for a total of five firsts.

The throw for height was not contested at the St. Louis Olympics, and also there was the imposition of a restraining rule on the throw for distance. The weight had to be thrown from within a 7 foot [2.13] circle for the first time. Unlimited run and follow, therefore, would not be possible. Since the American champion, "Genial" John Flanagan had recently established a world record of 40'2" [12.24] using this method, he probably felt the restriction more than Desmarteau.

The Olympic Games of 1904 were an odd mixture of events and spectacle. Originally the International Olympic Committee awarded the Games to Chicago, but they were later moved to St. Louis as part of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. The Olympic Games became part sideshow as a result and every type of bizarre contest carried on from May through to November of that year was labelled an Olympic event. There were an astonishing 309 of them and each of them was provided with Olympic medals.

One can only speculate as to how, for example, the winners of the Olympic mud fight were adjudged. Anthropological days, were contested between native peoples, and in one of these, pygmies and North American Indians dodged and engaged in a mud fight. These events were billed as a kind of aboriginal Olympics and contributed to the sideshow atmosphere which continued to cast a shadow over the real athletic contest.

To further confuse things, an elaborate handicap system made an understanding of the results of legitimate and recognized events very difficult. A Toronto paper *The Globe*, for example, recording the events in St. Louis indicated that the 56-pound weight throw was won by A[lbert] Johnson of the U.S. with a throw of 25'8" [7.82] and a handicap of 11 feet [3.36]. Desmarteau was listed as second with a throw of 34'4¾" [10.49] and a handicap of 6 feet [1.84]. The official report of the Games in the *Montreal Star* of 2 September 1904 listed the event as throwing the 56-pound weight (handicap) - Albert Johnson [Central YMCA, St. Louis] won 35'3" [10.74], with E. Desmarteau [Montreal] listed as 4th, with 34'10¾" actual throwing and a 6 inch [15.2 cm.] handicap.

Into this confused maelstrom of athletic contest and sideshow events came French-Canadian strongman and Montreal cop, Étienne Desmarteau. There had been a long tradition of French-Canadian strong men, Louis Cyr being the most prominent and Desmarteau lived up to it nicely, although he was not a huge man by any means. He weighed just over 200 pounds and stood about 6 feet tall. The original family name was Birtz and they first settled in Boucherville in 1757. The first colonist, Étienne Birtz, was said to have herculean strength, and was a blacksmith. His sign advertising his trade bore crossed hammers which earned him the nickname "Desmarteaux" (literally, "Mr. Hammer"). With the final "x" chopped away this eventually became the family name, and seemed a fitting one for the 1904 Étienne who threw the hammer in competition. He had three brothers: Elezar, Frederic, and Zachary. The latter often finished a close second to Étienne in competition, and he accompanied him to St. Louis.

Desmarteau's preparation for the Olympic Games was not elaborate nor extensive by today's standards. It took the form mainly of competition in meets over a period of years. There was no supplementary weight training, no sport psychologist in attendance, and no dietician. Simply throw the stone as often as possible.

Desmarteau, according to a Comité d'Organisation des Jeux Olympiques (COJO) release of 1976, worked for a period of time for the Canadian Pacific Foundry (a holdover to his smithy roots, no doubt) and then, at age 28, joined the Montreal Police Force in 1901. It was then that he came into his own as an athlete representing the Palestre Nationale de Montreal as well as the Montreal Police Athletic Association. He won Dominion titles in 1902, 1903, and 1904, but it is unclear in what exact events he held these championships [*Editor's Note*: he was Canadian champion in 1902-03 in the 56-pound weight but is not listed with any other Canadian championships in *Canadian Athletics* 1839-1992 by Bill McNulty and

Ted Radcliffe]. He competed extensively in eastern Canada and the U.S.A. in Police Games and in open competition.

While the police force was happy to have the modest, amiable strong man throw things on weekends, giving him leave to go all the way to St. Louis for a week to two was out of the question, Olympics or no Olympics. If he left without permission, it would be a breach of discipline and he would be dismissed. His request for a leave of absence was refused.

For Desmarteau it was a heart-rending decision. Should he give up his job to compete in St. Louis, or retain the security of a good position and allow his chief rival, John Flanagan, a New York cop, to win unopposed? It was not an easy decision but Desmarteau chose to go to the Games, and take a chance on his future. His job was lost.

The famous Montreal Amateur Athletic Association helped to sponsor him when he turned to them for assistance, and, in return, he wore their winged-wheeler crest in the contest. (All the athletes in the Games wore their individual club colors, not the national symbols of their respective countries.) The amount of the sponsorship was unspecified, but a return excursion fare by train, Montreal to St. Louis, was \$19.50. By way of further comparison, the Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier, was paid a salary of \$8,000.00 per annum in 1904. It did not take a king's ransom to support an athlete for a week or two,

In St. Louis, "Frenchy" as Desmarteau was known to the milling crowds of American athletes, stood out as one of the few foreigners in the entire competition. Most countries ignored the Games. There were no entries, for example, from either Britain or France. [*Editor's Note:* There were Irish competitors, however, and Albert Corey, who finished second in the marathon representing the Chicago Athletic Association, was still a French citizen.] It was an All-American show. Of the 22 track & field events, the Americans won 21 and in many cases swept the first three places. Desmarteau was the spoiler of a clean sweep for the U.S. in track & field. He was not only Canada's first Olympic gold medalist, he was the only non-American to win an event in athletics.

The weather for the Games was extremely hot and that sapped the strength of the big men. Desmarteau, however, had the added burden of his decision and wrangling that had preceded his departure. Dr. J. P. Gadbois, writing in *La Presse* on 2 September 1904, noted that:

"The American [Flanagan] had a host of advantages on his side: thanks to his team, he had reached St. Louis without an difficulty, was well-coached, and enjoyed all the benefits of a rich and powerful organization. Flanagan had not spent the previous weeks tom between hope and disappointment; he did not have to suffer a refusal before being given the chance to compete in the Games. Flanagan had everything on his side except the power to beat Desmarteau: the American had the experience, the ability, and the coaching, but our champion had the strength characteristic of the athletes of our race."

Although Desmarteau had defeated Flanagan at the AAU Indoor Championships in New York two years previously, the big Irish-American was the favorite in St. Louis. A phalanx of American big men were also contenders including Ralph Rose of California (eventually 6th of 6 competitors) and two others, Jim Mitchel (3rd place) and Charles Hennemann (4th place).

John Flanagan had won the 16-pound hammer throw in the 1900 Olympics in Paris, and had already duplicated the feat here in St. Louis. (A curious aside is that his brother, Tom Flanagan, was a hotel keeper in Toronto, and became the manager of the famous Canadian marathoner, Tom Longboat.) Flanagan, in addition, held the world in the 56-pound throw, albeit under a different set of rules (unlimited run and follow). He was a formidable opponent competing on friendly grounds. Of the American "whales," he was the pick.

The competition began. Rose threw first and fouled, being unused to the restraining circle. Desmarteau was next and, using a single spin, launched the stone in what was to prove the winning distance, 34'4¾" [10.49]. Flanagan's effort was 33'4" [10.16] with Mitchel a scant inch behind. The trio plus Hennemann advanced to the finals.

The finalists had three more throws in St. Louis. As the day grew hotter, none had much hope of bettering earlier marks. Under the rules, the best throw of the day was to count regardless of whether it was made in the preliminaries or the finals. Desmarteau, Mitchel, and Flanagan could not better their qualifying marks; Flanagan actually had five fouls and only the one fair throw. When no one could better Étienne's first prodigious throw, it stood as the winner. Canada had its first official Olympic gold medal in track & field athletics.

After the final stone was cast Desmarteau was paraded around the field on the shoulder of the others, both Canadian and American. The supporting cast included a small contingent wearing the winged-wheeler crest of the Montreal AAA who had competed in others events, brother Zachary Desmarteau, half-miler John Peck, miler Peter Deer, and sprinter Frank Lukeman.

*The New York Times*, commenting on the competition, was less than gracious:

"The results of the 56-pound weight throw proved a disappointment. It was confidently expected that Flanagan of the Greater New York Irish Athletic Association would break the Olympic record and possibly the world record. The New Yorker was in poor form and not only did he fail to surpass the records made by himself at former meets, but he was beaten by a clean foot by E. Desmarteau of Montreal. The latter's best throw was 34'4¾", 2 feet below Flanagan's Olympic record." [Editor's Note: This is incorrect. The event had never been held before at the Olympics.]

No mention was made of conditions or of the new rule requiring the stone to be delivered from within a circle. The Montreal paper *Le Samedi* cast the victory in a kinder light:

"Le constable Étienne Desmarteau de Montreal, l'un des concurrents dans les jeux Olympiques a triomphe de la fine fleur des athletes Americaines et emporte la titre de champion dans la concourse pour lancer le poids de 56 livres. Il a battu le redoutable Flanagan par un pied, affermant d'une façon incontestable sa superiorité sur le ancien champion."

The triumphant homecoming usually awarded such heroes as Desmarteau appeared that it would be marred by the fact that Desmarteau had no job to return to. Or would it? There is nothing like a spectacular victory to affect the memory of bad events. Somehow, Étienne's dismissal notice was lost. A bit of fast bureaucratic side-stepping and station number five, Rue Chenneville of the Montreal Police Department was decked out to welcome the conquering hero who would, of course, be ready to resume his duties in a few days.

There were many eulogistic speeches at the reception and Lieutenant Morin presented Desmarteau with an illuminated address in memory of his feat. It read in part:

“Your brilliant success, your dazzling victory over some of the world’s best athletes have brought you honor and glory in the eyes of those who live south of the border. The many laurels you have earned so gloriously have brought joy to all of Canada and particular honour to French Canada, and consequently to your comrades on the police force of the Dominion’s greatest city.”

Desmarteau continued to compete, but disaster loomed. After a meet in 1905 at which he set a new record for the throw for height with 15’11” [4.86], he came down with a fever. The exact diagnosis is unclear but speculation was that it was typhoid fever. Within a few days, Étienne Desmarteau was dead at age 32.

The 56-pound weight throw was discontinued as an Olympic event, except for a brief renaissance at the 1920 Olympics, and then dropped again never to reappear. Forms of the event in which a heavy stone, often without a handle, is cast as far as possible, still exist in various forms of Highland Games to this day.

Étienne Desmarteau was inducted into Canada’s Sports Hall of Fame in 1955 under the automatic induction criterion, i.e., anyone winning a gold medal in the Olympics is an automatic inductee. It was 51 years after his brief appearance on the world stage. He was a bachelor at his death and died without issue.