

Hamilton Athlete Biography: William D. Sherring

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PED 201
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Friday April 9, 2010

As a diverse and cultured country, Canada has produced many phenomenal and successful athletes in the past and present. Athletics is not a new concept to Canadians, as citizens have been participating since its beginnings. Hamilton has long since been a hot spot for producing elite athletes. Among these athletes is William (Billy) Sherring, an Olympic marathon runner. Throughout his lifetime in the 1900's, Billy participated in many events including the Olympics, the Boston marathon, and Hamilton's renowned Around-the-Bay road race.

Born September 18, 1877 in Hamilton, Ontario, William (Billy) D. Sherring's roots are tightly linked with the Hamilton area.¹ Billy began his running career at a young age with the Y.M.C.A. Boy's Club. With a small body frame and weighing only 98 pounds, Sherring quickly shone in his sport. He started competing in his early teen years at various county fairs. At the age of twenty, Sherring achieved his first major success. In a great athletic display, Billy defeated his opponents in a race at Bartonville in 1897.²

Bartonville was only the beginning of Sherring's many eminent successes. Two years later, at the age of 21, Billy Sherring won his first of two Around-the-Bay marathons. This marathon began on Christmas Day in 1984 and is the oldest road race in North America.³ Sherring was not without competition in this marathon. One of his constant and closest competitors was Jack Caffery. Each of these men won two Around-the-Bay races in their running careers. Today, the Around-the-Bay marathon is also known as the Billy Sherring Memorial Road Race.

Billy Sherring did not limit himself to participating simply in Canadian road races. Shortly after running in the Around the Bay marathon, Sherring, along with Caffery, ran in the Boston Marathon. This marathon began in 1897 with the vision to

promote physical culture and to encourage all sports.⁴ In the early 1900's the Boston Marathon proved to be a Canadian battle, with both Sherring and Caffery running. Caffery stunned the world in 1900 by being the first Canadian to win the Marathon. In this same race, Sherring placed second with another Canadian Fred Hughson taking third.⁵ Caffery came back and won the Boston marathon again in 1901. However, Sherring did not participate in this race but continued to prepare for a contest that would raise him a level above Caffery, his constant competitor.

For Billy Sherring, the Olympics were his ultimate goal. However, he had to overcome many obstacles to reach the pinnacle of his athletic career. Instead of being chosen by athletics clubs to represent Canada at the 1906 Athens Olympics, he himself expressed sincere desire to participate. People viewed Sherring as a man with fierce determination, deserving admiration for his efforts. Yet, the public consensus did not expect spectacular results from this one man. As a result, Sherring saw little support from the public as he headed to the Olympics. In fact, when he left the Hamilton train station on his way to Athens on February 15, only about 40 people came and showed him their support. Financial problems also plagued Billy during his Olympic journey.⁶ Sherring worked at the Grand Trunk Railway to finance his journey to Athens, but only managed to earn \$45 to \$90, which was an insufficient amount for his Olympic financial needs. Taking a risk, Billy bet on a horse named *Cicely* and fortunately won enough money to cover his travelling expenses. Arriving in Athens seven weeks before the opening ceremonies, Sherring worked as a porter at the Athens railway to support himself.⁷ Seven weeks later, Sherring's determination and hard work paid off as he raced the marathon.

While many were labelling Billy Sherring as a “mild type of sporting maniac”⁸, they were not expecting the phenomenal performance he produced on May 1, 1906 at the Athens Summer Olympic Games. Leading the 26-mile marathon almost the entire way, the 28-year-old Sherring won the race in a time of 2:51:23.6, defeating some other 55 competitors.⁹ Billy’s performance was so significant that Prince George of Greece ran the last 50 meters alongside William. After this gold medal victory in 1906, Sherring’s status changed overnight. Where he left with limited support and funds, upon his return to Canada over 40, 000 people were waiting to greet him and congratulate him on his success.¹⁰ Among this group was the chief dignitary of the city and its representative men. This high class greeting for the new Canadian Olympic champion was grander than the greetings even royalty received. Moreover, William Sherring received \$5000 from the Hamilton city council and an additional \$400 from the city of Toronto. Upon achieving the ultimate prize for every athlete, Sherring retired from athletics and marathon running. Instead he worked in the city of Hamilton as a customs officer until his retirement in the year 1942.¹¹

Although Sherring passed away September 5, 1964, at the age of 87, his legacy continues to live on in Hamilton and across the nation. In addition, to having the Around-the-Bay race renamed after him, there is also a Billy Sherring Park in Hamilton, displaying the pride of the citizens for one of their most famous athletes.¹² Throughout his entire career, William Sherring not only raced in many elite events, including the Olympics, and won, but he also set the stage in Hamilton for many other young athletes. Sherring’s story of determination, perseverance, and success, despite limitations and

people's unbelief, is enough to inspire any rising athlete, that their dreams and determination is enough to achieve any set goal.

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- ¹ Alan L. Brown. *William Sherring 1877-1964*. (Ontario's Historic Plaques, 2010)
<http://www.ontarioplaques.com/index.html>
- ² Ibid. Pg. 1
- ³ Around the Bay Road Race. *Around the Bay Road Race History*. (Around the Bay Road Race, 2010)
<http://www.aroundthebayroadrace.com/history.htm>
- ⁴ Boston Athletic Association. *B.A.A. History*. (Boston Athletic Association, 2010)
<http://www.bostonmarathon.org/BostonAthletic/History.asp>
- ⁵ Around the Bay Road Race. *Around the Bay Road Race History*. (Around the Bay Road Race, 2010)
<http://www.aroundthebayroadrace.com/history.htm>
- ⁶ The Spectator. *Hail to the Victor*. (The Hamilton Spectators, 2009, October 28).
<http://www.thespec.com/article/661768>
- ⁷ Absolute Astronomy. *William Sherring*. (Absolute Astronomy.com, 2010)
http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/William_Sherring
- ⁸ The Spectator. *Hail to the Victor*. (The Hamilton Spectators, 2009, October 28).
<http://www.thespec.com/article/661768>
- ⁹ Database Sports. *William Sherring*. (Database Olympics, 2006).
<http://www.databaseolympics.com/players/playerpage.htm?ilkid=SHERRWIL01>
- ¹⁰ The Spectator. *Hail to the Victor*. (The Hamilton Spectators, 2009, October 28).
<http://www.thespec.com/article/661768>
- ¹¹ Absolute Astronomy. *William Sherring*. (Absolute Astronomy.com, 2010)
http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/William_Sherring
- ¹² Ibid. Pg. 1

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