

# THE TOM TAIT STORY

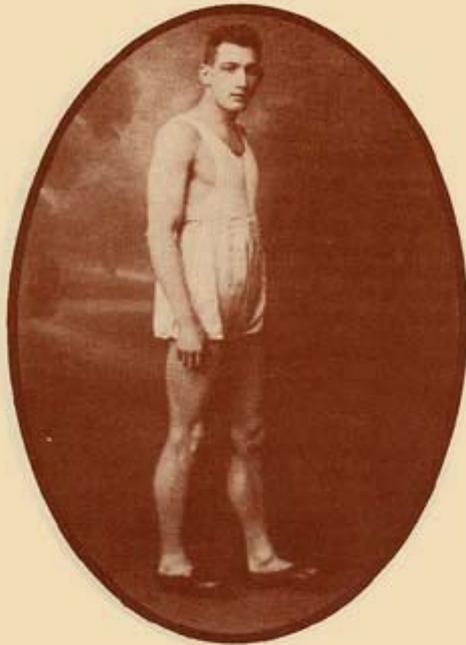


by  
**Jim Forster**

## FOREWORD

The Tom Tait story was written by Jim Forster as his entry to the Prestonpans Local History Week's Memoirs competition, and a shortened version was published in the Scots Magazine in 1986. The Community Council are delighted to be able to publish a full illustrated version and hope that you will all enjoy reading about one of the great heroes of Prestonpans.

G. O'Brien  
Chairman  
Prestonpans Community Council.



Tom Tait  
after his Powderhall victory,  
1931



Jim Forster with his son, Tooy (far right) and Tom (centre) with their medals.

## THE TOM TAIT STORY

### **The Medal**

On Sunday, August 3rd 1986, a race was run over 110 metres, approximately 120 yards, for the ninth time at the Prestonpans Professional Games and Fair. It is called The Tom Tait Sprint.

Three hundred pounds and a gold medal were presented to the winner.

The names of famous modern day sprinters who have won this event, include:- J. Motion (Innerleithen), D. Ledingham (Galashiels), A. Tait (Jedburgh), G. Wilson (Macmerry), G. McNeill (Tranent) former world champion, P. Melrose (Edinburgh), A. Steede (Jedburgh), D. Clarke (Edinburgh).

I wonder if these sprinters know of the sentiment behind this medal. Perhaps if they read this story, then the medal sitting in their own display unit might mean a lot more to them.

### **Harlaw Hill**

As the passengers on the tramcar, all bound for Port Seton, passed the old houses at the bottom of Harlaw Hill, some of them looked at the plate on one of the houses which stated: 'Sir Walter Scott (poet) spent some time here'. They were unaware that a baby boy was about to be born in that same house, and he would create a piece of history in his own way, a boy destined to put Prestonpans to the fore in the world of professional sprinting, a boy who in the future would be one of the best sprinters Scotland ever produced.

The boy was christened Tom Nisbet, and spent the next year or so lying in his cot listening to the sound of wooden clogs banging on the cobbles as all the workers poured out of Fowler's Brewery, hurrying home after a hard day's work.

Strange as it may seem, a hundred yards north of that house, there lived a gentleman dairy farmer, who, in twenty-four years time, would team up with this baby and form a partnership that would be most successful in the art of fast sprinting over the distance of 130 yards.

Tom was born on the 3rd of April, 1905, and spent a happy childhood at Hariaw Hill.

Eventually the family moved to the west end of Prestonpans and lived in one of the houses that had been built for the coalminers, at Middle Street, Cuthill, locally called The "Kittle".

When Tom reached the age of five, he attended the small primary school, situated on the edge of the Firth of Forth next to Matheson's carrier yard.

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### **The Double Dykes**

**Tom** spent about three years at the Primary School. One day the whole class was walked along the main street in twos, to the far end of the town, to the grey school, opposite the town clock, where their education would continue.

For the next four-and-a-half years Tom had to make his way along the double dykes pathway to school, then make the same journey back in the evening to the "Kittle".

After two years in the grey school he moved over the playground to the red school. This is where he would finish his education. It was during this period at the red school that people began to notice that Tom had a great ability to move fast around the playground.

Looking for something to do in the evenings, Tom joined the Boys' Brigade. Mr Crichton, the bank manager was captain of the BBs at that time and he was to become a great influence on Tom's life.

The bank was situated between Willie Wilson, the draper, and Agnes Bagnell's small sweetie shop. Mr Crichton played rugby for an Edinburgh High School team and had a mania for keeping fit.

One evening at the BB meeting he asked Tom if he would like to come down to Port Seton three times a week in the mornings and do some keep fit training. Tom agreed, and arranged to meet him on the golf course.

So at half past six in the morning, Tom would stagger out of bed, put on his clothes, grab his running shorts and plimsoles, run down to the Co-op store and catch the tram down to Port Seton terminus. Mr Crichton was always there waiting, resplendent in his shorts and red and black hooped rugby strip, and off they would set, twice round the nine hole golf course, stopping now and then to do a few exercises. Mr Crichton would lecture Tom on the importance of keeping himself clean, mainly keeping his teeth clean; in fact, one day when he met Tom on the street, he took him into the chemist shop and bought him a toothbrush and toothpaste and instructed him to brush his teeth morning and night and after every meal.

After every training session, Mr Crichton would take Tom back to his house (he lived next door to Dr Black), at the back of which he had a wooden shed with a shower in it, so Tom would have a shower, dress, then hurry to catch a tram back to the "Kittle", get a quick breakfast, then rush along the double dykes to be in time for school.

This went on for a few months and Tom was getting very fit for a boy of thirteen. Every race he ran for the BBs he won easily, and he also ran races for the Prestonpans Boy Scouts - there was not a boy in the area to touch him for speed over a short distance.

Mr Crichton asked Tom if he would like to run in the boys' marathon at Powderhall Stadium in Edinburgh, but Tom said he didn't fancy that, he had no liking for long races.

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Eventually that partnership came to an end, for Mr Crichton emigrated to South Africa.

### **Newbury in Fife**

Tom left school at thirteen-and-a-half and moved to Newbury in Fife, where his grandparents (Taits) had two grocer shops on the main street. Tom worked in one and his older brother, 'Jt@k', worked in the other. Tom spent a year and a half doing this and during that time he ran in a few boys' races at Newbury games. His potential was seen there - he won every sprint he ran in.

However, by this time, Tom was a little homesick, so it was back to the "Kittle" and his family, where he managed to get a job at the Grange Pit leading a pit pony. This helped to keep him fit.

That July, after Tom came back from Fife, the Prestonpans town council decided to run a gala and sports day and to hold it in the park behind the Grange Miners' Institute, just along from the "Kittle". This was in 1920, just two years after the war, the purpose being to collect money donations from the public to enable the town council to erect a monument at the bottom of Ay res Wynd, to honour the men of the town who had fallen in battle.

### **The McGintys**

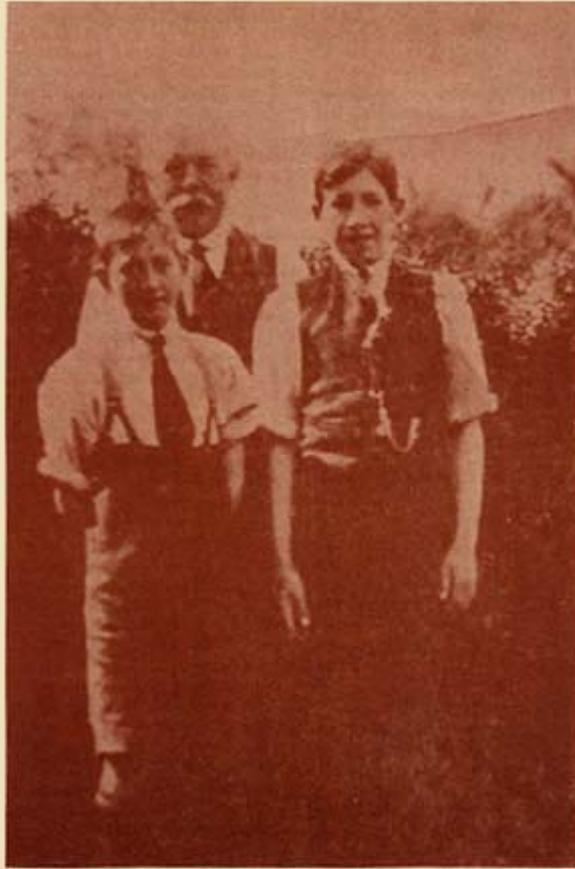
At this gala there was a race for youths seventeen and under, for which a local farmer had donated the prizemoney. Tom was just over fifteen but he entered the race. When he had a look at the opposition, he was doubtful if they were all under seventeen, and thought he didn't have much of a chance. There was one particular youth in the race, all dressed up in kilt and big bow tie, his face all painted and a huge pair of heavy boots. Big Rab (Ratler) Porteous. Rab wasn't worried about winning, he was just having a great time fooling around and the crowds of people were enjoying it.

At last, the starter managed to get some sort of order and got seven runners on the starting line, including Ratler. Off they went to the drop of a handkerchief, running East to West, and when they got to the finishing line, Tom was surprised to find himself first. He felt so good, having beaten these older lads. 2/6d he got for his prize.

Within minutes of winning the race he was approached by two men who introduced themselves as Michael and Danny McGinty. "How would you like to run in the sprint at Powderhall?" Michael asked. "I've a notion to do that," said Tom. "You will have to do a lot of hard training and learn the proper style." "That's fine by me," said Tom.

### **The Straight Walk**

Tom met the McGinty brothers at the park gates on the Monday



Tom (left) with brother Jock on holiday in Fife at grandfather Tait's.

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evening as had been arranged - he had thought of nothing else all weekend! A chance to run at the famous Powderhall.

"You will meet our trainer up at the straight walk." Off they set through the park, round the edge of the golf course, past the old quarry, right to the far end of the wood, just over the manager's brae, there it was - the straight walk, a path through the trees for one hundred and eighty yards, six feet wide and as level as could be.

"This is Whytie Arnot our trainer," said Michael, introducing Tom. "Here is where you hang your clothes," said Whytie pointing to a nail in a tree, "now we will see what you can do." He set about digging out two set of starting holes then scored a line on the path. "You put your feet in the holes and your fingers on the line; when you get the order to 'Get Set', you straighten your knees and hold it there until you hear a crack, then you run like hell. The crack by the way, will be two pieces of wood banged together. Mind and wait for it. First you will race Danny over 80 yards." So off went Whytie down to the finishing line.

Tom's head was all fuzzy - here he was going to race men six years older than him. What was expected of him? Both the McGintys had been in the army and were very fit.

"To your marks," called Michael. Tom and Danny went forward, put their feet in the holes, hands on the line, "Get Set", Tom straightened his knees, waiting, 'Crack'. Danny was away, Tom had slept in his holes. However, off he set, seeing Danny's back and heels in front of him, ten yards to go, Tom made a panic stricken effort and just got to the line with Danny. Walking back up the track Tom looked at Whytie's face to see if he looked pleased, but he showed no emotion whatever.

"We will have another one in fifteen minutes," said Whytie, "this time against Michael. You will have to lift a bit quicker this time. You see, Danny is a half miler, but Michael is a sprinter." Tom looked at Michael, a strapping young man, and wondered how he could get in the set position for starting. Michael's left hand was not what it should be; during the war for he had been shot in the arm just below the elbow and the tendons had wasted away so that his hand would not function. However, Tom was

soon to find out.

The order came from Danny, "Get to your mark," and as Tom settled on his mark, he glanced across at Michael and could see that most of his weight was on his right hand. "Get Set," Tom was now busy concentrating on himself, 'Crack', they were off - flying down the track together, but Tom just could not pass Michael at the finishing line, and finished behind half a yard.

Tom felt down. That was the first time he had been beaten in a straight race but as he turned to jog back up the track, there was Whytie jumping up and down, all excited. "A great run, Nisbet." "But I got beat," said Tom. "Never mind that," said Whytie, "Michael is a good sprinter with plenty of experience. Come here and I will show you

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something." Whytie called Michael over. "Take your shoes off and let Tom see them." When he had a look, he could see the six small spikes in the sole of each shoe.

"You were running in sandshoes." When you put on a pair of running spikes you will run three yards faster, and by the time I train you to start better and lift your knees higher and keep your head still, you will run another two yards faster." After hearing all this, Tom didn't feel too bad. He made up his mind to train hard, and - the first thing on his list was a pair of running spikes.

### **Nom de Plume**

Tom trained hard for the next six weeks. Coming home from work at the Grange pit, he would have a very light meal of scrambled eggs and toast, then fill a basin with hot water from the kettle, carry it upstairs and give his legs a good wash, then call on his mother to give his back a wash. Tom thought back, "If only I had a shower like Mr Crichton." As it was, he had to empty the basin, before getting out his running gear including his spikes, which were now his pride and joy - he was flying with these on @ he would then meet Whytie and the McGintys at the park gates, also another runner who had now joined them, Peter Keenan. Peter worked in the Co-op as a grocer.

They all made their way up to the straight walk for two hours' training. By this time, Whytie was taking Tom home with him and massaging his legs and body with olive oil and wintergreen.

Whytie said to Tom one night, "There is a meeting at Powderhall in two weeks time, it's on a Saturday afternoon. They have whippets running, and between the dog races they have races for men. Would you like to have a run?"

"I would like that," said Tom, so next day Whytie sent off an entry form; the name on the entry was "Tom Tait, Prestonpans."

All professional runners were allowed to use a nom de plume, for various reasons, never fully explained. Tom was happy just to use his mother's maiden name.

On the day of the race, the four of them made their way to Powderhall on the tramcar. Peter couldn't manage, he had to work in the Co-op on a Saturday afternoon.

It was a 220 yard race for sprinters that day and when they looked at the programme, they saw that Tom was in the third heat along with another fourteen runners. In the same heat was another man from Prestonpans, Big Dave Downie. Dave was a pay clerk at the Grange pit.

Tom was given a novice mark off 18 yards, two yards up on big Dave. As Tom stood waiting for the gun to go off, he felt a panic, here he was, not yet sixteen, running against the best sprinters in the country, how would he perform. "Get Set", "Bang", Tom forgot all about nerves and just ran as fast as he could. He finished third in the heat, he still had a lot to learn.

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Learning the proper technique came easily to Tom natural athlete and after a few years training it was beginning to show.

By this time, the golf course next to where they trained was beginning to expand - it now took in the pony field at the end of the straight walk. This was a piece of ground fenced off to put the pit ponies to graze when the pit was on holiday. Now they were getting a lot of young people coming along the walk, not for the purpose of training, but for standing around waiting on a golfer hitting his ball off the tee. They would then run out from the trees, run off with the ball and later try to sell it to another golfer,

claiming they had found it.

Soon the golf club employed a huge fellow, Mr Grant, gave him a uniform and got him to patrol the woods.

The Ranger as he was called, soon appeared at the straight walk "What's this then? You will have to move, this is private property." Whytie looked at him. "We are not moving, we have trained here for years and have done no harm to anyone."

"We will see about that," said Ranger Grant. "I will get the police and you will be prosecuted."

A night or so later a police Sergeant appeared. Sergeant Dixon from the Pans. "I've had a complaint about you lot." Whytie and the lads complained to Sergeant Dixon what the situation was, saying that they had trained there for years, had looked after the walk, had caused no harm to anyone, and found it difficult to find another place to train.

Sergeant Dixon, being a sensible and generous man, when he heard the situation in full, said, "Leave things to me, you just continue your training, I'll see the golf club committee. If anyone should say anything to you, just refer them to me."

So the training continued on the straight walk. In the meantime they looked around the area for other places for example a cinder path in the field next to the cemetery. This was risky, for the field belonged to David Lowe the market gardener and he didn't take too kindly to people jumping over his gate and running about on his property.

Next they tried the cinder path down the side of the Red Burn, but they were in danger of falling into the ditch or knocking a pedestrian into the water because it was a very busy pathway to the main road. They tried the red cinder pathway along the high road but the cars and other heavy traffic were too dangerous and too much of a distraction, so it was back to the straight walk.

During all this time, Tom was gaining a lot of experience turning out in races over distances of 75 yards, 100 yards, 130 yards and 220 yards. It was being noticed by the running fraternity, that here was a young man to be noted for the future.

#### **Pit Strike**

In the year 1926, Prestongrange pit was on strike. Tom was left with



Tom with D. Graham (Edinburgh) and T. B. Bennet (Prestonpans), August 1925.

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plenty of time on his hands, so he started training twice a day, morning and evening. He was 22 years old at this time and had grown to six feet but was still streamline slim, not one ounce of fat, long legs with strong muscles, and years of hard training behind him. He was now giving his training companions eight yards of a start over one hundred yards and beating them. A few weeks on strike, not being down the pit, did nothing for his pocket, but did wonders for his running.

After training one morning, Whytie said to Tom, "This is the best that I've seen you running, I think we should go for the Shawfield in Glasgow. It has the most prize money next to Powderhall and also a gold medal - you could do with the money." "That's fine with me," said Tom.

So off went the entry form for the Glasgow meeting on August 21<sup>st</sup> 1926, "We will have to run at a small sports meeting prior to Shawfield," said Whytie, so the following Saturday they went to the Gifford games.

Tom ran easy and came in second in the final - it was a few pounds for his pocket.

The following Wednesday, they went to the shopkeepers' meeting at Northfield, just past Portobello. This meeting was promoted by Bob Sinclair and handicapped by Barry Brown. Both owned draper shops, and it was said if you won a Barry Brown handicap you were more likely to get a suit of clothes than money for a prize.

Tom again ran second in this sprint. On the way back through the tape, he foolishly asked Barry if it was a good run. Barry answered, "You broke the watch." (meaning it was a great run) "But I didn't win," said Tom. "I'm not sure you tried to win," said Barry, so Tom just shut up, went on his way, on with his clothes, into the tramcar and home.

### **Shawfield, Glasgow**

On Saturday morning, August 21<sup>st</sup> 1926, the Prestonpans school of runners set off for Glasgow - tramcar to Edinburgh, train to Queen Street Station, bus to Shawfield Stadium - hoping that their man,

Tom Tait, would come out winner of the 120 yard sprint.

Tom went off to find the changing rooms; meanwhile Whytie and the McGintys put up £3 each, and went around to see what the bookies were giving their man on the long odds, "7/1 against Tait" shouted the bookies. Tom was by no means favourite, but at the same time, they didn't intend to take too big a risk on his winning, having come all this way from Prestonpans! There must be something on! How right they were.

Tom was off 11 yards that day, the race being over 120 yards. There were sixteen heats with seven runners in each heat. Tom was in the fifth heat, which he won easing up, and was in the first cross-tie, which he also won in comfort.

By this time the bookies had made Tom equal favourite with a runner from Lanark.

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The huge crowd were showing a lot of excitement when the runners appeared for the final.

All went quiet in the stadium when the starter called for the runners to get to their marks. Why tie and the McGintys were standing at the far end of the track, biting their fingernails with excitement; after all, they didn't have much money, and most of it was on Tom.

"Get Set" - Tom could see the runner from Lanark out the corner of his eye, he was one yard up on Tom - 'Bang', the gun blasted in Tom's ear, his whole body tensed, and yet the important muscles in his shoulders and legs seemed to feel relaxed. All he could see was a tunnel between two strings and a tape at the end. Like an arrow, he lifted from his starting holes, high up came his knees, his legs felt wonderfully light, straight up the track he went, seeing nothing, but feeling himself passing struggling runners, passed the tape with hands held high, winner by a yard. The roar of the huge crowd was in his ears, Whytie and the McGintys hugged him.

He had won his first golf medal, also £60 in prizemoney, which was most welcome. When Whytie had collected the winnings from the bookies, he split it four ways and gave Tom a quarter, it was with much jubilation that the runners and their trainer returned to Prestonpans that evening in 1926.

### **Bob Buchannan**

For the next three years, Tom attended the highland games and ran at the weekly meetings at Powderhall.

By this time, he was back down the pit, working hard at the face, up to the knees in water all day.

As any miner can tell you, this is not the best of conditions for a sportsman.

Many a good footballer of senior quality would have come from Prestonpans if it had not been for the hard work and poor conditions down the pit. They were just too exhausted to train, preferring just to sit and rest with a pint at the Goth or the Black Bull.

Tom persisted with his training on the straight walk, by this time with only Whytie and Tom. Another young man was training besides them but he was a miler. He ran around the perimeter of the woods, and had a small dog that never left his side - it even went on training runs with him. The young man's name was Jock (Bowser) Russell. Jock told Tom that he was going on a preparation the following Friday for the Powderhall mile. On the Tuesday, poor Jock had a fatal accident down the pit.

On Tuesday evening while training, an incident happened that was to change Tom's way of life. Whytie was giving Tom some short runs at the top of the track. When they heard a car stopping over on the managers brae. Two men crossed the railway cutting and came up the steps at the top of the track. They stood and watched, and after about ten minutes,

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Whytie got a bit annoyed. He didn't like people taking too much notice of how he trained runners. He recognised one of the men. Jock Gilmour, a butcher at the east end of the Pans. Jock was a runner himself and competed at Powderhall. Whytie went over to them and asked them what they were after.

Jock introduced the man with him. "This is Bob Buchannan he gives preps to professional runners. With that, Bob walked down the track to where Tom was doing some exercises, "I hear you are quite fast," said Bob. "I won Shawfield," said Tom. "Do you think you could win the Powderhall sprint?" "I'll win

Powderhall," said Tom.

With that, Bob made his way back up the track, collected Jock and off they went.

"What was all that about?" asked Tom. "Well," said Whytie, "Jock Gilmour's mother works for Bob, Jock told his mother to let Bob know that there was a fast sprinter training up the woods, so he just came to have a look."

Tom and Whytie didn't give it much more thought, they just got on with their training.

The following Tuesday, Bob appeared again, and asked Whytie if Tom would run down the track for him. Whytie agreed to let Bob time Tom over 80 yards. After the time trial, Bob nodded and said, "That's good," and then proceeded to ask Tom where he worked. Tom told him, the Grange pit. "Right," said Bob, "tell the gaffer tomorrow that you won't be back, say nothing more, and don't you worry about money, I'll pay you your wages."

Wednesday morning Tom went to Tammy Bogie his gaffer and said, "I'm finishing up work after this shift, I won't be back." Tom was trembling by this time, here he was, giving up his job in the pit, but would he get another job if this didn't work out? The gaffer took it very well, and with a laugh said, "I bet you are going on a prep for the New Year sprint." "I wish I was," he said, trying to hide his true feeling. Hard to pull the wool over the eyes of these Paners, he thought.

At the end of the shift, Tom said goodbye to Tammy Bogie, collected what money was due, and that was him finished with the Grange pit.

### **Galashiels**

On the following Monday morning, Tom packed his bag with some clothes and his running gear. His mother asked him where he was going - she knew that he had given up his job at the pit. "I don't know where I am going," said Tom, "I'm just to train for running and you won't be hearing from me for the next eight weeks, but do not say a word to anyone."

So Tom set off for the dairy at the top of Harlaw Hill as had been arranged the previous week. When he got there, Bob took him into his house and gave him a huge breakfast. "Eat up" he said, "we have long journey ahead of us."



Team training Prisoner Athletics between 1964-68.  
Photograph reproduced by courtesy of Edinburgh Evening News.



The Prestonpans War Memorial.  
Tom ran in the Gala and Sports Day organised by the town. The money raised paid for the stone.

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After breakfast they set off in Bob's black car was puzzled and felt confused, wondering where he was going.

Eventually, Bob said, "I'm taking you down to Galashiels and you will be trained by some friends of mine. They have a fruit and vegetable business, you will stay there right up to the time for Powderhall, you will do whatever they tell you, and eat what they give you, you won't see me for another five weeks. I don't want anyone following me down here, do not write a letter home or the postman will see the postmark and may tell someone where you are and the next thing, the spies will be down."

Reaching Gala, Bob introduced Tom to his friends, got him settled in his room, had a chat about running for half an hour and then set off home, leaving him to the tender mercy of his new trainer.

For the next two days, Tom just strolled about the area, doing very little. This was the period for getting to know his new family, and for them getting to know Tom's likes and dislikes.

The trainer and his son were out every morning on their business round and were never home till three o'clock in the afternoon. This was to be the format for the next five weeks.

Tom would have a good breakfast, go for a walk, long enough to work it off, come home, collect his running gear and make his way down to the cinder track near the rugby pitch, do some stretching exercises, short runs and high knee lifts, just as Whytie had shown him. How he wished Whytie was here, just to get on to him if he did things wrong.

Then it was back to the house, a huge lunch of fresh chicken or a large steak, then off to bed to have a lie down for two hours.

In the evening it was back down to the track with his trainer to do some more exercises and short runs over 80 yards, after an hour of which, it was back to the house for a massage, then a huge dinner, a sit around for an hour or so, then off to bed.

Day in, day out, this was the format, until Tom was really getting very bored with the whole thing. This is not what he thought it would be like at all, no one to talk to in the mornings, a little bit of training in the evenings, then off to bed early.

However, Tom remembered Bob's instructions to do what he was told; after all. Bob was paying his wages, and he was fed on the best food money could buy.

Five long weeks passed and eventually Bob turned up at the house. "Right men, into the car, I've arranged a place to run a trial."

So off they set, right to the gates of "Powderhall". Not many runners got this opportunity. Bob must have slipped money into someone's hand.

Tom got himself ready, the trainer used his trowel to dig out the starting holes in the cinders, then Bob and the trainer made their way to the finishing line, leaving Tom and the son at the start.

"Get to your mark" Tom got his feet comfortably in, hands on the line scored in the cinders.

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"Get Set" At the crack of the gun, Tom was away, a good start, but he didn't have a very good feeling for running.

After going through the tape, Bob called over to Tom, "That's good, we will have another in fifteen minutes time, keep yourself warm."

After ten minutes, Tom made his way back to the starting line, "I'll feel a bit better this time" was the thought in his mind, as he tried to psyche himself up.

"Get to your mark", "Get Set", Tom exploded out as the gun went off but running up the track, he just didn't have that light feeling in his legs, the feeling you get when you know that you are running well.

After the trial, Bob came over and took Tom by the arm and said, "Let's take a walk." Off they went, round the track. "Strange," said Bob, "your second trial was slower than your first, that just shouldn't be, there is something wrong."

At this point, Tom lost his temper, which was unusual for him. "I don't think this type of training has suited me. I like to work a bit harder, I like company, I've been bored stiff, I've had no trial horses to run with, I'm just fed up."

Tom was taken aback when Bob said, "I agree with you, what would you say if I suggest we leave it for next year."

"That will do me," said Tom, "If I'm going to get a chance at the 'big sprint' let's make it as sure as we possibly can."

So that was settled, not 1930, but 1931, would be the year.

So off round the track to the trainer. "I'll take Tom home," said Bob, "I'll collect the rest of his gear when I come down to see you."

For Tom, it was back to Whytie and the straight walk - he felt happier now that he was back on familiar ground.

He didn't need to worry about work, because Bob was going to pay his wages just to train.

When Whytie saw Tom running he said, "That's the poorest running I've see you do for years."

The New Year Sprint came and went, won by A. Morgan, Llangewydd. Tom didn't perform very well.

1930 was going to be spent doing a lot of hard training, morning and evening, getting a massage three times a week from Whytie.

It was to be a great partnership for the next eight months, Tom, Whytie and Bob.

On Saturday the 2nd of June they decided to attend the games at Gifford, near Haddington, where Tom would have a run in the 220 yards. It was a run just to stretch his legs and give him a little competition.

Near the end of the meeting the organisers announced that they would have a relay race, four runners to a team and the runners were to pick their own team.

A young man came over and asked Tom if he would join their team.

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Bob gave Tom a nod, so Tom agreed on condition that he would run second man. This way, he would not have to show too much.

Four teams entered the event, the race finishing with Tom's team the victors.

Tom and Bob were very impressed with the young man who had asked Tom to join their team. They went over to have a chat with him and arranged with him to be a trial horse for Tom in the near future. His name was Johnnie Grant from Ormiston.

The following Saturday, Bob and Tom went to see the Selkirk Games. Tom was beaten in the cross-tie of the sprint. The promoter wasn't pleased about something but Tom didn't wait to see or hear what it was all about.

The Saturday after Selkirk they headed for the 'Beltane Games', at Peebles. When Bob got hold of a programme, he saw that Tom had been pulled a yard in the sprint. By this time, Tom had his jacket and shin off, ready to put on his running vest, when Bob said to him "Away over off, ready to put on his running vest, when Bob said to him "Away over and ask Lynch why you have been pulled a yard from the Selkirk sprint."

Tom set off across the track to where Mr Lynch the handicapper was sitting at a table, resplendent in his black homburg hat and dark suit, a very dapper man indeed with a pencil thin moustache and a stern look. Every runner on the circuit treated Mr Lynch with the respect due to a powerful man.

Tom approached the table. "Mr Lynch, why have I been pulled a year?"

Mr Lynch slowly looked up from the papers on the table, gave Tom a long look, then quietly said, "Tait, you are a damned fool, you haven't given me a decent race yet. Get out there today and let me see how you can really run. Then, maybe I'll give you back the yard." With that, his attention turned back to the papers on the table.

Tom made his way back to where Bob was standing and repeated what Mr Lynch had just said. Bob stared angrily across at the handicapper, then turned to Tom, "Get your clothes on, we are going home."

### **Charlie Chambers**

At the beginning of July, Bob said to Tom, "Come along to my house early tomorrow, I'm going to take you on a day trip. We won't be back till late." So next morning when Tom arrived at Harlaw Hill, the car was sitting waiting, and off they set, heading for Edinburgh. Bob drove right into Waverley train station, parked the car and set off for the ticket office. "Two returns to Newcastle," said Bob.

They found an empty compartment and settled down for the long journey. Up till now, nothing had been said about the day trip, but now Bob turned to Tom. "I'm taking you to meet a man who has the reputation of being a great trainer. His name is Charlie Chambers, he owns

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a pub called 'The George', on the outskirts of Newcastle. Whatever you say, do not mention your second name."

Reaching Newcastle, Bob hired a taxi and gave the driver an address, and soon, they were dispatched outside the pub. "I've never met Charlie," said Bob, "only corresponded with him. You see, we never use telephones in this game, you never know who could be listening."

The pub was closed so Bob gave a loud bang on the door. When it opened, there was this large gentleman blocking the door, his waistcoat buttoned tightly over an ample stomach. "My name is Bob Buchanan," said Bob holding out his hand. "And I'm Charlie," said he taking Bob's hand and shaking it vigorously. "Come in," he added closing the door. He then pointed to a table with chairs round it, "Take

a seat and I will bring you a drink."

When they were seated round the table. Bob said, "I would like you to train a sprinter for me, to be ready for the New Year sprint in Edinburgh." Charlie looked thoughtfully at Bob. "Anyone I know?" "I don't think so" said Bob, "he hasn't had a run down this way, but he has a good lot of experience in Scotland. He is about the same height and build as Tom here." Charlie gave a knowing nod. "Okay," he said, "how long a prep do you want him to have?" "Four months," said Bob. "Fine, that's settled," said Charlie, "would you like to see where I train my runners? I've got three training at the moment, they are with the minder at the track."

Off they set in Charlie's car to a track next to Newcastle race course, where they sat and watched the runners. Tom recognised one of them: it was Jimmy Dodds, who ran under the 'nom de plume' of James of Jedburgh, a very good runner indeed who had won a few sprints around the Scottish games. The other two were both English, Wilson of Bedwell and Thomson of Chathill.

### **Tom's Own Track**

On the way back to the pub. Bob said, "I don't want my runner to train there, it's too open." "It's the best track around here," said Charlie. "You could make one," said Bob. "Get some men who are on the dole to dig out a track somewhere near the pub and I will pay for it."

On the train on the way home Bob said, "We will have to give Lynch the handicapper a good run and see if we can get that yard back for the New Year."

Two weeks later, Tom turned out at Innerleithen, and won his heat and cross-tie fairly easy. There were five runners in the final and none of their times were very fast. "All right," said Bob, "this is it, you won't have to run your best to win."

Tom won the final, making it look very difficult when in fact it was quite easy. Would it do the trick? They would just have to wait and see. That's your last competitive race until the New Year," said Bob.

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### **The Preparation**

At the end of August, Bob instructed Tom to make his way to Newcastle and put himself in the hands of Charlie Chambers.

Tom arrived at The George on the 1st September, 1930, and was taken straight upstairs to his room. Very soon, Mrs Chambers arrived with a lovely tea of fresh eggs and toast, showed Tom where to put his clothes and where the bathroom was, then told him that Charlie would be up soon.

Finishing his tea, Tom lay on top of the bed. He thought, here he was, in a strange room, neither his family nor his girlfriend, Jessie Crow, knew where he was at this moment, nor even Whytie who had trained him for so long. Tom had been told by Bob that he could write one letter to let his family know he was all right. The letter had to be posted by Charlie, and to be addressed to Bob's brother who owned the large house at the top of Harlaw Hill.

Bob's brother had won the Irish Sweepstake a few years earlier with a horse called 'Sandwich', owned by Lord Rosebury. He got a prize of many thousands of pounds.

When Charlie appeared later, he asked Tom if he would like to see the track which had been made on the spare piece of land just behind the pub. It was 90 yards long and three yards wide, covered with a fine black ash and rolled very smooth. Bob had paid a lot of cash to get this track made. Tom's only hope was that he would make it all worthwhile.

Tom was keen to get started training, but it was not to be, just yet. "I've booked us into a hotel at Whitley Bay for five days, you will just rest, get used to the air down here, and eat plenty of nourishing food."

Next day, they made their way to Whitley Bay, and what was for Tom five long days, eating, walking along the sand and sleeping a lot.

Tom was glad when it was time to get back to the pub and get down to the business of training.

### **Joe the Minder**

For the first two weeks, his routine was: getting out of bed at nine o'clock, having breakfast of fresh eggs, toast, fruit juice, and honey, going for a walk with Charlie, back to the garage at the side of the pub, doing half an hour with the punchball.

Some people say that the punchball is a modern method of training thought of in the late sixties.

Here was Tom doing it in 1930.

Then it was on to the table for a massage, afterwards back out for another walk, then in for lunch of chicken or steak, with plenty of fresh vegetables.

After lunch, Tom was allowed a cigarette; he smoked four a day and this was the one he enjoyed most.

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Tom with trainer Charlie Chambers, 1930.

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Then Charlie would say, "Now off to bed with you," and Tom would go to bed for two hours. The amazing thing was, he always managed to fall asleep and had to be wakened. Then it was down to the track for two hours, then high knee lifts for 40 yards - at the end of two hours, Tom would feel satisfied, he had used up some excess energy. Back now for tea, more meat and vegetables, all boiled or grilled, nothing fried, a cigarette, a chat with the family, then on to the table for another massage, out for a short walk with Charlie, back to the pub for half a pint of beer. Tom didn't like beer, but Charlie insisted that he took the half pint each night, after which he listened to the radio for a little while, then off to bed.

After a few days of this, Charlie had to give up walking with Tom, it was just too much for him. "I'll have to hire a minder." So he hired a lad who played football for Whitley Bay. His name was Joe. Joe never let Tom out of his sight, the main topic of conversation all the time they were walking being Communism, in which Joe had a strong belief. Tom got really mad with him at times. Just for a change, Joe was told to take Tom to a pub up the road, for his half pint in the evenings.

The second evening they were there, the band which played in the pub had an occasion to play "God Save The King", Tom like everyone else in the pub stood to attention, but not Joe - he remained seated. This caused an argument, which almost ended in a battle. That was the end of outings to strange pubs.

After five weeks of this training, Tom was taken to the New Victoria running track, to run a trial with Joe. Charlie was satisfied with the run.

The next day, Charlie started Tom doing two sessions a day on the track. There were no track suits in 1930, so it meant a lot of time changing clothes - long Johns and a heavy sweater were the order of the day.

### **The Trial**

December 22nd was the day set for the final trial, but on the 18<sup>th</sup> Tom caught a slight chill. A telegram was sent off to Bob Buchannan. Bob arrived on the 19th, took Tom for a run in his car, down to Whitley Bay, where they had a nice quiet walk along the sands.

"How are you feeling?" asked Bob. "I'm all right, my legs and arms are strong, it's just a cold in my head."

"Will we go ahead with the trial?" "Do you feel fit enough?" asked Bob. "I'll be all right, let's give it a go."

"Fine," said Bob, "I've arranged to bring James of Jedburgh and Johnnie Grant down to be your trial horses."

December 22nd was not a very nice day, very overcast and a cold air with a flurry of snow.

Charlie, Joe and Tom set off for New Victoria running track. When they arrived they saw Bob and the trial horses on the track with another man. The time was 2.45 pm, the first trial was set for 3 pm, the second was set for 20 minutes later with James of Jedburgh.

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At 3 pm precisely, Tom was sitting on his mark, *Wz* yards, Johnnie was on 11 yards. Joe and James were at the side, ready to shout encouragement to the runners. Charlie had a colt 45 calibre gun – the blanks would give a huge flash for the benefit of the watchholders of whom there were two - Bob and Tommy Lawson. Tommy was renowned for his accurate timing and Bob had asked him to come along.

"Get to your mark," "Get Set" They were off clean, to the crack of the gun. James and Joe shouted from the side of the track.

Tom felt great, no effect from the chill whatever, straight and true he ran, into a slight breeze, caught Johnnie at the 120 mark and cruised through the tape.

Looking at the faces of the watchholders, Tom could see a pleased expression as they came down the track behind the runners, muttering and whispering to each other - one thing they never do is to tell a runner what time he has done in a trial.

After Tom had put on some warm clothes, Bob took him inside and told him that it was a good run "But, the next race, I want you to run right through the tape, do *not* ease up if you catch your man early."

At twenty minutes past three, Charlie told James to sit on 14 yards, then he turned to Bob and said, "I think we should sit Joe in this one. What about putting Joe on 18 yards, just in case Tom catches James quicker than we think?" Bob agreed, then set off to the finishing line with Tommy. Charlie took Tom aside, "I'll give you an extra cigarette if you catch Joe." "Get it ready," said Tom, "I'll catch him."

"Get to your mark," "Get Set," Tom looked away up the track at Joe in the set position and thought about that extra cigarette, "Bang". Tom rose like a bird, all his training showing fruition, his legs felt so light, so easy to move, he caught James with still five yards to go, Joe was a yard in front, struggling a bit when Tom flashed past him to take the tape. "Never in the bloody world," shouted Joe in his northern accent, "I never thought it possible." Tom was laughing, happy with the thought of that extra cigarette, bribery indeed. Tommy Lawson came over to Tom and whispered, "Tom my boy, you will win the Powderhall sprint."

For the remaining nine days, Tom was put on light training, plenty of rest and good food, with a massage twice a day.

Charlie got the Edinburgh Evening News on the Saturday and found that Tom was back on his nine yards handicap. They were not too pleased to find that a sports' reporter was tipping T. Tait, Prestonpans, to win the sprint. Seemingly the betting had started in the Border area and a huge bet had been placed on Tom.

At breakfast next morning, Charlie's young son Cecil, who had been looking at the Evening News, suddenly looked at his dad and said, "I know who Tom is!" Before he could say another word, Charlie said, "If you know who Tom is, keep it to yourself, and if Tom wins this big race, I will buy you a billiard table."

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### **Second Gold Medal**

On Tuesday morning, December 31st, Tommy Lawson ran Charlie and Tom into Newcastle railway station. While they were waiting on the platform. Tommy produced three large bottles of champagne, gave one each to Charlie and Tom then went over to the station master and gave him one also, whispering in his ear. When the train came in for Edinburgh, it was "The Flying Scotsman", a good omen.

The station master came over and showed them to a empty compartment and said, "You won't be disturbed in here." They had the compartment to themselves all the way to Waverley station. Tom was able to get stretched out on the seats.

When they arrived, Charlie hired a taxi and gave the driver the name of a hotel: The Scotia, King's Street.

Arriving at the hotel, they found Bob waiting on the pavement, looking very agitated. "I thought I told you to book a room on the ground floor, they have given Tom a room on the first floor and there is no lift. Well, my runner is not climbing any stairs, book in somewhere else." "Hold on," said Charlie, "give me some time and I will see what I can do." Fifteen minutes later, he appeared with a big smile and looking pleased with himself. "I met an old army colonel who is resident here and has a room on the ground floor. He has agreed to give us his room for the occasion, all we have to do is get another bed in for me."

The room was decorated with crossed swords and other relics from the war, a nice room indeed, Bob was quite happy again and set off home to Prestonpans to await the next day.

At evening time after a nice meal, Charlie said, "Let's take a nice easy walk before you go to bed." Off they set, down to Princes Street, and along to the Waverley Market. Charlie would not let Tom go down the stairs so they just walked round the balcony and looked down on all the people enjoying the New Year's Eve celebrations, then a slow walk down Leith Street towards the Playhouse Theatre. "Hello, there Tom, looking forward to the sprint?" It was Sanny Campbell, a local bookie from Prestonpans. "Your mother is in the queue for the Playhouse, I have just seen her." Charlie gripped Tom's arm, and as quick as he could, headed back for the hotel. Soon, Tom was in bed. He thought it would be difficult to fall asleep, he knew that he was a bit tense; not a bit of it, Charlie looked over to find Tom fast asleep.

January, 1st 1931, a nice clean day without any snow, but a very keen frost. Tom was feeling a bit nervous as he sat down to breakfast. This is what he had been waiting for since the day he started training with the McGinty brothers on the straight walk.

Today it was the heats of the Powderhall Sprint, and all sort of things crept into his mind as he sat at breakfast. What if he slept in his starting holes? What if he fell during the race? What if he was so nervous that his legs would not move? All would be lost, even before he got to the final

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the next day. He could hardly bear to think of it.

Charlie, sitting across the table from Tom, knew from experience what Tom was going through, he had seen it all before; some runners could handle it, but for others the strain was just too much and they

gave in under the pressure. Charlie also knew that it was his job to see that Tom did not have too much time to dwell on these possibilities, so he kept chatting away about any topic he could think of other than running.

The taxi drew up at the door of the hotel at 11.45 am. It had been ordered for 11.40 am. Not to worry, the heats began at 12 noon. Tom was in heat number 17, there was no need to rush.

They were dropped off at the main door of the stadium. Crowds of people were still going in, hurrying to get to the bookies to lay their bets on the long odds.

Nobody took any notice of Charlie and Tom as they slipped in and round to the hut provided for the runners and their trainer.

Inside, Tom got ready, and Charlie gave his legs a rub with wintergreen to keep the heat in. He then lay on a bench resting, covered in blankets.

Hearing no. 15 away, he was on his feet to do some stretching.

"Runners on track for heat 17," the voice came loud and clear over the loudspeaker. Tom made his way over the small bridge on to the famous cinder track, waited for his mark of 9 yards to be scored on the ash, then taking his trowel he took out his starting holes.

He was backmarker in his heat, giving away starts of seven yards - the only man behind him in the whole handicap was the great Willie McFarlane from Glasgow, the best ever professional sprinter in Britain, the man who a few months previously had beaten a race horse over a hundred yards' race.

"Get to your marks," "Get Set," off they went to the sound of the gun, a clean start, all nerves gone, Tom ran straight and true, passed the tape first. Seconds later, a loud cheer came from the crowd as the time was announced - it was the second fastest of the day so far; the only one faster was the great man himself, Willie McFarlane.

Charlie allowed Tom a short walk about the stadium with strict instructions to speak to no one. Soon the taxi arrived to take them back to the hotel.

Around 6 o'clock pm, after a substantial meal, Charlie and Tom were sitting in their room discussing things in general, when the door burst open and in rushed Bob. "A great run Tom, it's all over, I know you can find another yard easily. I've got you backed to win £6,000."

At this, Charlie jumped up, got hold of Bob by the scruff of the neck and rushed him out, slamming the door behind him. Tom could hear him yelling at Bob. "Never do that again to any man that I am training, we don't want to know anything about money just now, off you go and don't show up again till after the race, come what may."



Tony Forster  
Winner of Skol Sprint at Meadowbank in 1979

Back in the room, he went over, put his arm around Tom's shoulder and said, "Forget everything you heard just now, you just go out tomorrow, and win for Charlie."

They went for a nice easy walk along Princes Street, then back to the hotel for half a pint of beer and a cigarette, then off to bed. Charlie sat reading the paper for a while, making sure that Tom was not disturbed.

When Tom was asleep, Charlie got into bed to lie and think of the best way to approach the final on the morrow.

### **The Final**

The second of January began clear and crisp, with a slight breeze from the west. It would be in the runners' faces. Tom did not mind that, he knew that he was running strongly and the breeze wouldn't affect him.

The cross-ties were at 2 pm - the taxi was ordered for 1.15 pm they had to be sure to be there on time.

They showed their pass to the policeman and he allowed them into the stripping hut. A little wintergreen on the legs, on with the long Johns and heavy sweater, out behind the hut for a few high knee lifts, a little prancing up and down, and Tom was ready for the race of his life.

He was in the third cross-tie. There were six altogether.

This time, Charlie was allowed on the track with Tom. While Tom had a few short runs up the track, Charlie began to dig the starting holes with his trowel. The cinders were quite hard with the frost, but he managed a neat job.

When the order came for the runners to get stripped off, Charlie took Tom's clothes, and his parting words were, "Head still, knees up, and you will win."

"Get to your mark," "Get Set" Tom could see the runners in front in the set position, he concentrated on getting himself ready, "Boom," they were all away to a clean start with the crunch of spikes on the hard ash ringing in Tom's ears, he made on one runner, then the next, until there was only one in front of him ten yards to go, and Tom whipped past him to take the tape. A tremendous roar came from the top end of the stadium where a large group from Prestonpans had gathered. Now, the Pans people had something to shout about; earlier, they had been disappointed when another Prestonpans man Jock Gilmour had been beaten by a fraction in a previous cross-tie. They had been looking forward to having two Pans' runners in the final.

Back in the stripping hut, Charlie had Tom lying on a bench covered with a blanket, giving his legs a massage, when the policeman who was on duty at the door came over, got hold of Charlie by the arm and asked him to come outside. There was a bit of a fracas going on. "Perhaps you could calm it down before we have to make an arrest."

It was Tom's dad, trying to get past the other policeman on duty at the small gate. He was shouting, "I just want to wish my son good luck."

Charlie went down to Tom's dad, and said, "I'm Tom's trainer, I'll

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Tom and his wife celebrate their Golden Anniversary, 1981.

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give him your good luck message." Tom's dad was satisfied with this and left to watch the final.

At 3.45 pm Mr A. M. Wood, the promoter of the sprint, walked into the hut, went to the six finalists and shook each by the hand, wishing each one the best of luck. With that over, he said, "You have five minutes to get on the track; if you are not there, the race will go on without you."

The six runners with their trainers trooped over the bridge onto the track, the loudspeaker announced each runner by name and the number they were wearing on their vest, and each one got a rousing cheer from the crowd.

Tom was lane five, on his left, in lane six, was Willie McFarlane on 8<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> yards, in lane four was Tommy Murdoch, Edinburgh on 12 yards.

Charlie set about digging out the holes. The cinders were hard on top and the side of the holes were lifting a bit and Tom put his foot forward to press the ash down. "Don't you dare, you might hurt your foot, where would we be then? I'll do it," said Charlie with a laugh. When he was satisfied that the holes were firm he asked Tom to try them.

The runners were given a few minutes to loosen off, then they got the order to strip. The trainers were asked to leave the track, Tom got a handshake and a clap on the shoulder from Charlie who went off with Tom's clothes.

Tom turned to Willie McFarlane, shook hands and nodded. That was all the preliminaries over, now to concentrate on the business.

"Get on your mark," Tom walked forward, he could feel the breeze on his face. "Get Set," he could see the other four runners ahead of him, only one behind him and he didn't want to see him at all.

In Tom's head, rang over and over the words "Win for Charlie".

The whole stadium was absolutely silent, not a whisper.

The gun thundered like a cannon behind the runners, Tom exploded from his holes, head steady, knees high, looking straight ahead, the noise from the crowd was thunderous.

Over it, Tom could hear the powerful crunch of McFarlane's spikes on the cinders to his left. Tom felt so light as though he was just skimming over the track. Gradually, the other runners seemed to be coming back to him, thirty yards to go, Tom was still in front, but still that crunch on the left, the bookies were shouting the odds, even money McFarlane, evens, Tait.

It flashed into Tom's mind how impressed he had been when he saw McFarlane winning at Shawfield in Glasgow, so powerful over the last twenty yards.

Tom concentrated hard to keep his form, five yards to go there it was, the tape - he could now see McFarlane out of the corner of his eye - through the tape hands held high in triumph. He had done it, he had won for Charlie, for Bob, Whytie, the McGintys, for Prestonpans.

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Willie McFarlane came right over, took Tom's hand. "The best run I've ever seen," he said, thumping him on the back. The loudest roar came from the huge group at the top of the track - it seemed that most of Prestonpan's population was there.

Soon, Tom was summoned by all the familiar faces, everyone wanting to shake his hand and clap him on the back - he felt sure he was going to be all black and blue. He didn't care, it was worth it: His second Gold Medal and one hundred pounds in prize money, and from what Bob had said, over six thousand pounds in bets.

By the time Tom had collected his prizes, got all the photos and story told to the newspaper reporters, and had a little walk around to settle himself, it was time to go back to the Scoria Hotel.

When Charlie, Bob and Tom stepped out of the taxi there was a loud cheer; the pavements were thronged with friends and relations and Jessie, who had been very patient all these past years. Now, at last, they might manage to get married.

They all went into the hotel, where a celebration had been prepared.

Tom had a special word for the colonel who had given up his room.

Jessie would have to be patient for a while yet, because it was arranged for Tom to go right

back to Newcastle with Charlie to "train down" for a further week. However, Jessie was invited to come down for the last three days, to keep Tom company, all expenses paid.

Tom and Jessie were married that year. Shortly, they received a house from the council at 26 Polwarth Crescent, where they have lived ever since.

Both are now eighty years old and live an independent life. Tom's two gold medals are proudly displayed in the china cabinet.

On this day of writing, Thursday March 7th, 1986, Tom is going into hospital for an operation on his left foot. I hope all goes well.

Jessie is almost blind, but still remains in good humour and loves to have family and friends call in and have a chat about times gone by.