**HENRY ALEXANDER (Sandy) GRAY 1929-2017**

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enry Alexander Gray (Sandy), was born 2 March 1929, at East Eninteer, Leochel-Cushnie, the son of James Gray (1890-1975) and his wife, Isabella Dawson Clark (1899-1985).

Educated at Cushnie School, Sandy was third of a family of five. He left school age 14 to help his father and brother, Norman, on the farm. In their leisure time the brothers and other local lads, with no specialist coaches or sophisticated training regimes, threw weights for fun.

These informal weight training sessions led Sandy, in August 1947, to Craigievar Highland Games. The games, held by laird, Lord Sempill and Lady Semphill, were confined to local entrants. Sandy Gray won 2nd prizes in throwing heavy hammer, tossing the caber, and running the 100-yard race, as well as 1st equal with another three competitors in high jump.

Tarland show beckoned and again Sandy had a successful day, getting even better when he met Lady McRobert of Douneside, patron of Aboyne Games. Lady McRobert told him to go immediately to Mr Blackhall, master tailor and outfitter at Tarland, and have a kilt made at her expense. This was perhaps the earliest form of sponsorship in the athletics world and the words “at her expense” must have been music to Sandy’s ears.

In 1949, Sandy, aged 20, entered Aboyne Games, but, overawed by thousands of spectators, embarrassment of his new kilt, and unfamiliar with the whole professional atmosphere, he won nothing. It was a bad start to his career, but one man did not write him off – George Clark, who had been winning prizes at Braemar before Sandy was born. He saw huge potential in this raw beginner and later approached him to give advice and encouragement. He saw the big hands with 4½ inch palms, often acknowledged as the strongest hands in Europe, the frame that would mature into 6ft 6ins, and weigh-in at 19 stones of bone, muscle and sinew without an ounce of fat. Sandy was to become the biggest and strongest of heavy athletes on the Highland Games circuit for a quarter of a century and more.

With occasional coaching from Clark, Sandy improved his techniques and soon became a major prize winner. His best events were real strength events – heavy hammer, weight for distance, weight for height and the caber. In 1953, on a very wet day, Sandy broke Clark’s 18-year-old heavy hammer record at Aboyne by throwing the heavy hammer (24 lb.) 95ft 5in. to beat the 94ft 4½in. set up by Clark in 1935. The following year, 1954, again at Aboyne, he broke the record by throwing it a distance of 96ft 8½in.

In 1954 he was awarded the championship Gold medal at Dornoch Highland Games. At Crieff, Sandy thought he had broken a further two records. The first record was in the 22lb hammer throw when he gained a distance of 99ft 4in., beating the previous record of 94ft 11in. The other record was initially thought to have been for throwing the 56lb weight over the bar, a distance of 13ft 7in, beating the previous record by one inch. This was later disqualified after the previous holder provided details of all his scores.

Also, in 1954, the Aberdeen Spartan Physical Culture Club organised a challenge in the Music Hall for carrying the lighter of the Dinnie Steens (340lbs) across the stage for 20 yards, with a prize of £20 for anyone who could do it. Sandy came nearest to emulating Dinnie’s feat. Using his left hand he carried the “Steen” just over 19 yards, and in view of this performance it was agreed to award him the prize.

Sandy continued winning medals and breaking records. Between 1956-1958 he won gold medals at heavy events at Aboyne. At both Aboyne and Oban he broke records for weight over the bar with equal throws of 15ft 6in. At Blackford Games he won the heavy events trophy outright, having won it three years in succession, and for five successive years he triumphed in tossing the huge 19ft 9in., 132lb Braemar Caber and winning the extra £10 prize each time.

Having started off at Craigievar in 1947, he still won fourth prize in the caber at Aboyne in 1973. His contemporaries agreed he was undoubtedly the strongest man that competed in his time and they describe heavy cabers lifted and tossed by Sandy in wet west coast weather – cabers they could not even lift. He seldom trained, nor did he ever lift weights, and one can only speculate what might have been achieved had he done so.

About the end of the war, the road mill had been thrashing at Eninteer and a load of bagged grain was ready to go away. The lorry arrived when they were at their dinner (dinner in Aberdeenshire is lunch in the rest of the world). Jim Gray, Sandy’s father, told the driver to go to the steading and he would put the loons (boys) over to give him a load. The loons, Norman and Sandy, by this time were well through their teens. With the vision of young lads struggling with one and half hundredweight bags of corn and expecting to do most of the work himself, the lorry driver was far from pleased and made his feelings known. Norman and Sandy strode out knowing their ability had been questioned. The poor driver quickly realised his mistake as he struggled to build his load, and the loons piled the bags on to the tail end of the lorry. In later years it was his favourite story – how he had once questioned Sandy Gray’s ability to handle one and half hundredweight bags of corn.

In 1974 Sandy retired from competitions. He moved smoothly into judging and officiated at the twelve Grampian Games for over 40 years. He was always smart, punctual and fair, and much loved by the games committees, sponsors, and revered by the young athletes.

He was made an Honoured Life Member of Braemar Gathering, Honorary Member of both Lonach and Aboyne Highland Games, and Honorary President of the Grampian Games Association. Lonach, Oldmeldrum, Braemar and Aboyne Highland Games all recognised his fifty years association with their Games.

Had Sandy been aggressive or bad tempered, he would have been a truly intimidating man, but he positively radiated good humour and benevolence. However great his achievements, Sandy was modest by nature, and completely lacking in killer instinct. Not for him the gamesmanship, one-upmanship, or the playing to the gallery so practised by lesser men. Sandy Gray was a farmer who took part in athletic events, rather than a heavy events athlete who also farmed.

Sandy’s wife, Mary, passed away in 2001. Sandy died at East Eninteer on 23 July 2017. The couple are interred in Leochel-Cushnie Churchyard.