
THOMAS MCD. JOHNSTONE

Constable (1909-1934)

*Written & researched by John Burchill
July 15, 2022. Winnipeg Police Museum*

MANITOBA FREE PRESS, WINNIPEG, THURSDAY, DECEMBER 9, 1920

19

John Albrecht Captures North American Police Wrestling Championship



In one year from today, the 2023 the World Police and Fire Games is set to begin in Winnipeg. This biennial athletic event, held since 1985, is open to all active and retired law enforcement and fire service personnel throughout the world. The games attract as many as 10,000 entrants.

Wrestling is one of the premier events of the World Police Fire Games, held every year since the games began. In a nod to the upcoming games, we look back 110 years to the beginning of “world” police wrestling in Winnipeg when Thomas McDonald Johnstone ruled the mats here.

Born on January 19, 1889, in the Rural Municipality of Strathclair, Johnstone grew up on a farm in the Gilbert Plains area with seven brothers and sisters. At 6’3½”, 210 pounds, Johnstone made an imposing figure and was quickly hired by the Winnipeg Police on March 17, 1909.

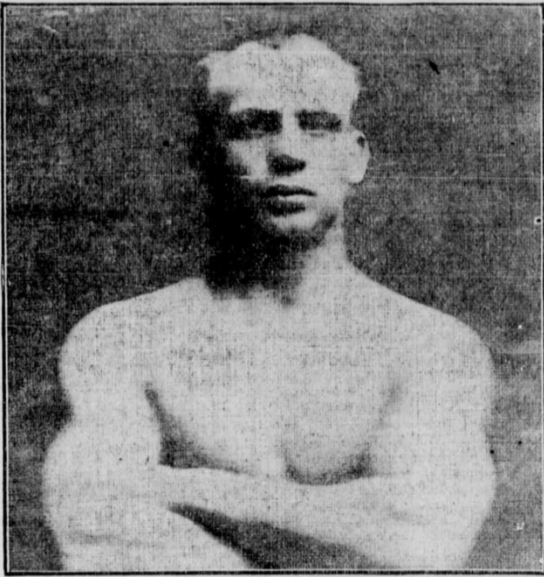
Johnstone’s first match as a wrestler was on July 8, 1910, at the Arena Rink promoted by the Red River Athletic Club. Ticket price for the event was \$1.50 (ringside). About 600 people were in attendance to see Johnstone take on Max Schultz. While the match ended in a draw “*Johnstone made a splendid showing, giving the German one of the most interesting events of his career*”.

Johnstone’s next registered event was on December 19, 1910, against Clarence Eklund – Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan’s, “Homestead Terror”. Eklund took the match two falls out of three. Although he lost the match, Johnstone had now established a reputation for his grappling skills. Unfortunately, it wasn’t long before war in Europe intervened.

On August 15, 1915, Johnstone joined the 79th battalion, an infantry battalion of the Canadian Expeditionary Force during World War I. The 79th Battalion recruited throughout Manitoba and was authorized on July 10, 1915. Johnstone embarked for England, arriving on October 5, 1915, where he joined the Canadian Military Police in Shorncliffe. On February 24, 1917, he was

transferred to the 107th Pioneer Canadian Engineers, promoted to Sergeant and spent 21 months in France and Belgium. He was Discharged on April 28, 1919, and rejoined the Winnipeg Police on May 6, 1919.

While at Shorncliffe, England, during August 1916, Johnstone, claiming to be champion heavyweight wrestler of Manitoba and Saskatchewan, issued a public challenge to all comers for wrestling bouts.



CLARENCE EKLUND
"Homestead Terror," Who Meets Tom Johnstone Tonight.

**HUSKY LOCAL POLICEMAN WILL
WRESTLE "HOMESTEAD TERROR"
ON TRADES HALL MAT TONIGHT**

Tom Johnstone, the bulky policeman, will tonight strive for recognition in wrestling circles when he tackles Clarence Eklund, the homestead terror, on the Trades Hall mat.

Johnstone, according to report, has been spending most of his spare time in the gymnasium at the police station and incidentally tossing his brother cops about like so many corks.

Tom is particularly anxious to make a good impression, for unless he does he realizes that it will be heavy plodding on the grappling road.

Against Max Schultz last summer Johnstone made a splendid showing, giving the German one of the most interesting events of his career.

As it is his first appearance here,

Eklund wants to make himself solid with the public on the jump. The homestead artist, while many pounds lighter than his opponent, is confident that he will take the measure of Johnstone, should Eklund make a good showing it is likely that he will be given a match by Charlie Gustafson.

Two preliminaries are on the programme. In the first Ernie Sunberg and John Hafedisson will wrestle for thirty minutes, while in the second Kid Titus and Young Smith will box five rounds. Sunberg will referee the match between Johnstone and Eklund.

Tickets have been on sale at Frank Morris' news stand. A band will be in attendance and a good evening's sport is promised.

Wrestling and other sports were often sponsored by junior officers during the war who believed in the moral values with which sport instilled in young men and as a means of testing their leadership abilities, building cohesion and as an alternative social evils.

While there is no record of Johnstone's success in the ring during the early years of the war, his military file shows he broke his hand in a boxing match in July 1917. Furthermore, on his return to Winnipeg after the war, Johnstone was promoted as "*the champion heavyweight of the Allied Command for four years*".

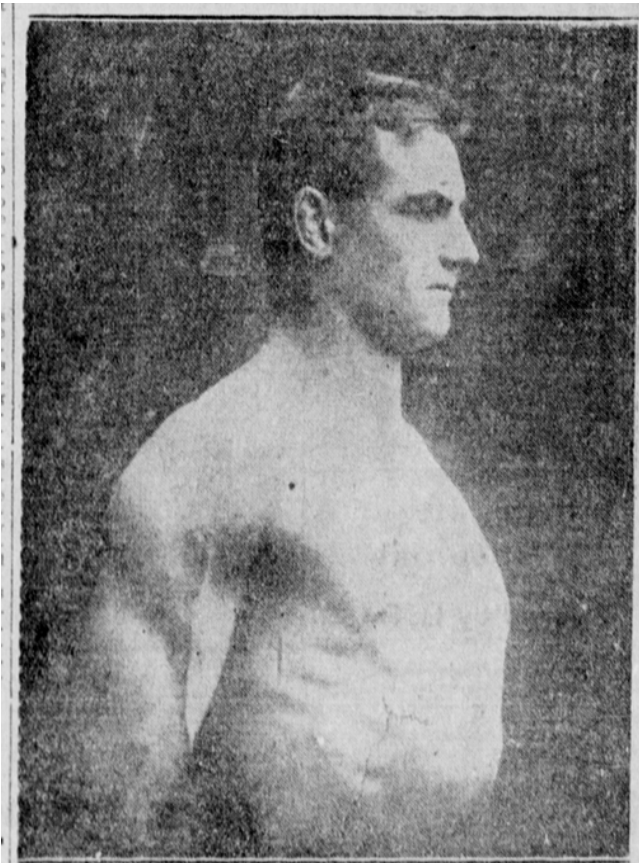
In late December 1917, however, the Canadian General Staff proposed the formation of a Canadian Military Athletic Association (CMAA) to encourage and facilitate military and athletic sports and competitions between the various Canadian Units in Great Britain.

On Dominion Day, July 1, 1918, Canadian wrestlers competed at the Canadian Corps Championships in France before 30,000 spectators. Among the first place winners reported by the CMAA was Winnipeg's own heavyweight wrestler Tom Johnstone.

Like 228 other members of the Winnipeg Police Force, Johnstone was dismissed shortly after returning home on June 10, 1919, for refusing to sign an Oath of Allegiance to not strike and recognize the Police Commission as their only authority. Johnstone was re-hired on June 26, 1919, at the conclusion of the General Strike.

In March 1920, wrestling was revived in Winnipeg with the promotion of a match for the heavyweight wrestling championship of Manitoba between Johnstone and Charles Gustafson. Born in 1886 in Halmstad, Sweden, Gustafson came to Winnipeg from the United States in 1907. He made his first appearance in the Winnipeg ring on October 4, 1907. Over the next few years

he secured numerous victories over both local and visiting wrestlers, securing both the Manitoba and Canadian middleweight titles in November 1907 and November 1909, respectively.



T. McD. JOHNSTONE

After not having had the opportunity of seeing a wrestling match for nearly four years, local fans will be provided with a contest March 25 at the Board of Trade Building. Charlie Gustafson, who has taken part in many high-class bouts here and who is one of the best mat artists in Canada, will stack up against T. McD. Johnstone, a local policeman. Johnstone did considerable wrestling while overseas with the Canadian army and won several championships.

There is a movement on foot to determine the heavyweight wrestling champion of Canada. The winner of the Gustafson-Johnstone match will be declared Manitoba's champ and he will then be pitted against other men in a series of elimination bouts. Both men are training faithfully and a good contest should be the order.

In their bout at the Board of Trade building on March 25, Johnstone proved the superior wrestler over his Swedish opponent with "*Gustafson yield[ing] the second and final falls to Johnstone, who some ringside spectators also viewed as his superior in 'strength and science'*". The match brought Johnstone's skills back to the public's attention and helped stimulate a revival in the sport in Manitoba as he took the provincial championship from Gustafson.

According to the Winnipeg Free Press the following day, "*In a snappy and interesting bout, which took three falls to a decision, Tom Johnstone, the Winnipeg policeman, secured the verdict over Chris [sic] Gustafson, the veteran grappler, at the Board of Trade Building last night, the heavyweight wrestling championship of the province to the winner. Lack of condition told its own tale on the former middleweight title holder. Chris, failing to stall off the attack of his tall opponent in the second and third. Gustafson secured the first in 8 mins., but the second and third went to Johnstone in 13 2 and 26 2 minutes respectively.*"

A follow-up match later that summer against Sergeant John Albrecht of Minneapolis, for the "*police championship of America*", on August 5, 1920, attracted approximately 2,000 spectators to Winnipeg's River Park stadium.

"After wrestling two hours and forty-five minutes the match ended in a draw when it was stopped at 1 a.m., by agreement, both wrestlers having registered one fall. The bout was of outstanding importance, and attracted a crowd approximating 2,000 to the ball grounds, the police championship of America hanging on the result".

The Winnipeg Free Press continued "*The Winnipegger achieved the first fall after 50 minutes grueling work, with a double arm and leg lock. The second fall went to the Minneapolis policeman, the fall coming after 1 hour and 5 minutes, the result of a scissors and bar hold. The third had been in progress for an hour without either being able to secure the mastery, when it was decided to call the match a draw.*"

**CHAMPIONSHIP
Wrestling Match
RIVER PARK
Friday, August 7th,
8.30 P.M.
TOM JOHNSTON
(Canadian Champion)
JOHN ALBRECHT
U.S.A. Champion
Police Gazette Rules to a Finish
GOOD PRELIMINARIES
Prices: Centre Grand Stand, \$2.20
(Including War Tax)
General Admission, \$1.10
(Including War Tax)**

On December 8, 1920, a rematch was scheduled between Albrecht and Johnstone at the Board of Trade building. Tickets were as much as \$3.00 (ringside). To promote the match, the event was advertised in newspapers as far away as Ohio, Kentucky, Michigan, New York and Massachusetts.

The attendance was “large”. However, hometown favorite Johnstone lost to Albrecht in the second and third falls. The Winnipeg Free Press reported that *“the local [Johnstone] took the first fall in 34 minutes and 58 seconds, but Albrecht carried the attack to Johnstone in the second, securing the fall after subjecting the Winnipeg man to gruelling punishment in 13 minutes 54 seconds. The third was slightly more protracted, but proved conclusively that the visitor was the more experienced and versatile wrestler, victory going his way after 35 minutes and 47 seconds of strenuous work”*.

While this event was hosted by the Winnipeg Attractions Club as a “professional” match, Johnstone wrestled the majority of his opponents between 1920 and 1923 as an amateur under the auspices of the Winnipeg City Police Athletics Association (WCPAA).

In 1920 the WCPAA became actively involved in promoting both boxing and wrestling in the city not only among its own members, but the community at large. As police officers were not allowed to form a trade union after the 1919 Strike, the WCPAA supported its members in other ways – focusing on athletics, amusements and pastimes for its members. As an organization, active involvement in sports made sense for WCPAA membership as it promoted job related skills, camaradare, as well as fundraising opportunities for the membership.

The inaugural event was held on April 8, 1920, at the Board of Trade building. The main event was a wrestling match between Johnstone and Constable Walter Hughes.

In its early years the Association promoted many sporting events and even became one of the provinces’ main sponsors of high profile wrestling competitions. However, the WCPAA not only organized the events, they also produced a number of outstanding wrestlers including Joseph Mulholland (1924 middleweight champion), James Paddison (1925 light heavyweight champion), Stewart Sinclair (1929 middleweight champion), and Water Hughes (1921-23 Manitoba boxing champion).

**ALBRECHT'S CRAFT PROVES MORE
THAN MATCH FOR TOM JOHNSTON**

After Winning First Fall, Local Grappler Succumbs Before Cunning of Minneapolis Star — Dandy Dillon's Victory Over Buzza Winds Up Riot of Knockouts

WRESTLING BOU
John Albrecht (pounds), Minneapolis, beat Tom Johnston (pounds), Winnipeg, out of falls.

BOXING BOUTS
Young Carrier (lbs.), St. Boniface, defeated Charlie Lester (lbs.), Winnipeg, K. O. in second round.
Dickey Buck (lbs.), defeated Barney McGinnis (lbs.) K. O. in second round.
Dandy Dillon (lbs.), Minneapolis, defeated Percy Buzza (lbs.), Winnipeg, K. O. in ninth round.

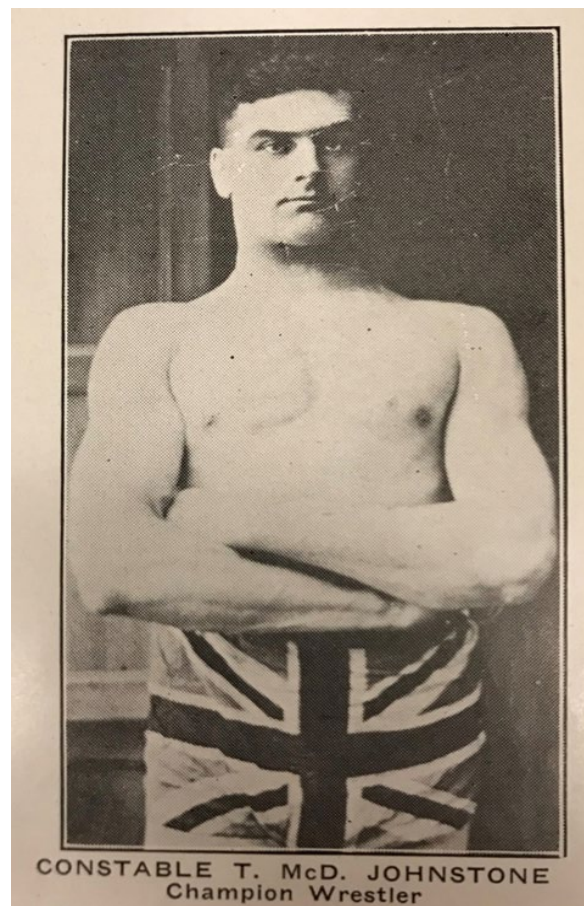
gained confidence as the round progressed, and finished strongly. He carried the attack to his opponent in the second, subjected McGinnis to severe pummeling, and with 2 minutes 26 seconds of the round gone, Barney was sent to his corner to save him from unnecessary punishment. Young Carrier, of St. Boniface, knocked out Charl. Lester of Winnipeg, in the second round of their four round curtain-raiser, the bout being a melange of crudeness and wildness, in which Carrier sent his opponent to the carpet for a count of nine, before administering the haymaker. Particularizing on the wrestling bout, there was absolutely no doubt as to it being on the square. The principals worked hard throughout, and while the pace was not so fast as that put up by the same contestants at River Park, last summer, there was little complaint on this score, last night. Albrecht exhibited a sterling defence, and a greater variety in offence, than did Tom Johnston, who seemed a little too finely-drawn to give of his best. The Minneapolis man had Tom in difficulties twenty minutes after the start, but the local made a brilliant recovery, and tried to down the visitor with a treacherous hold. Changes in leadership were sudden

However, the most accomplished police wrestler during the period was Constable William Lloyd McIntyre. During his career McIntyre won the Manitoba and Canadian wrestling championships in 1927, 1928, 1929 and 1930 in the light-heavyweight class. He was also the Manitoba heavyweight champion in 1927, 1928 and 1929. In 1930 he won the light-heavyweight class at the inaugural Commonwealth Games (then called the British Empire Games) held in Hamilton. I [have previously written about McIntyre here.](#)

While Johnstone never faced off against McIntyre for the Canadian title, he would later serve as a referee for WCPAA events involving McIntyre in the late 20s. Nevertheless, Johnstone did have the opportunity to wrestle Jack Taylor in a match for the Canadian Heavyweight Championship on October, 18, 1923, at the Board of Trade building. Unfortunately, Johnstone proved no match for Taylor and he was pinned twice in under five minutes.

While Taylor and Johnstone had a rematch on November 18, 1923, the results were the same. This would prove to be one of the last sanctioned wrestling matches that Johnstone was involved in.

Johnstone retired to pension on May 10, 1934. He died in Vancouver on February 3, 1939. He was survived by his wife Lilly and their five children.



NOTE: Anyone wishing to recognize a police member they feel made a substantial contribution to the world of sport in Winnipeg and its surrounding municipalities is asked to send me their name and a brief description of their accomplishments so we can recognize them during the year.