

McDonald, Patrick Joseph ('Babe')

by Patrick M. Geoghegan

McDonald, Patrick Joseph ('Babe') (1878–1954), Olympic athlete, was born Patrick Joseph McDonnell 29 July 1878, in Co. Clare, son of a poor farming family; his parents' names are unknown. He emigrated to the United States in 1901; his surname was misunderstood at Ellis Island and from then on he was known legally as 'McDonald'. Interested in athletics, in 1905 he joined the New York police department, following the example of numerous other Irish-American Olympians such as John Flanagan (qv) and Matthew McGrath (qv). Standing 6 ft 5 in. (1.96 m) and weighing 300 lb (136 kg), McDonald received the ironic nickname 'Babe' from the New York Athletic Club, which he joined to become a hammer- or discus-thrower. He struggled to make an impact in either of these events, however, and reluctantly decided to try the shot-put. An immediate success, he began competing in national championships, but lost repeatedly to Ralph Rose from California. In 1911 he took the national title when Rose was absent, and retained it despite all expectations the following year when his rival returned. At the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm McDonald won the gold medal with a throw of 50 ft 4 in. (15.62 m), beating Rose into second place. The throw was an Olympic record that stood for sixteen years, and was McDonald's finest achievement, and one he never bettered. At the same Olympics he took silver to Rose in the combined shot-put event. After Rose retired later that year, McDonald became the leading shot-putter in the United States. He won the national championships in 1913, and six American titles in 1914, a feat that was hailed as 'one of the most remarkable in athletic annals' (*ANB*). Adding the 56-lb (25.4 kg) weight to his repertoire, he won national championships in both this and the 35-lb (15.9 kg) event in 1919 and 1920. At the 1920 Olympic games in Antwerp he won gold in the 56-lb event, but only came fourth in the 35-pound. Because of his reputation, he was selected as an honorary member of the 1924 American team for the 1924 Paris Olympics. Still competing in American championships, he won national titles in the 56-lb event in 1926, 1927, 1928, 1929, and 1933. In total he won six American Athletic Union titles in the 35-lb event, and ten in the 56-lb event.

McDonald was a traffic policeman at Times Square, New York, from 1905 till 1920; because of his intimidating physique one writer compared him to a living Statue of Liberty. Promoted to sergeant, and then lieutenant in 1926 (the year he saved two children from drowning), he ended his career as a captain (1936–46). He retired 3 April 1946; the following day the *New York Times* called him 'one of the premier heroic figures of American field sport'; the *New York Herald Tribune* simply called him 'a living legend'.

He died 16 May 1954 at New York City. He married Mary McMahan; they had one son.

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David Guiney, *Ireland and the Olympic games* (1976), 51–3; Naughton, 7; Fyffes;  
*ANB* ('McDonald, Babe')

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