
The Legendary Deerfoot

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In 1856 several runners from the New York City area, including the leading claimant to the title of Champion of America, John Grindell, journeyed to Buffalo, New York, to participate in competition with the Seneca Indian runners from the nearby reservations. The results of the competition were a surprise to Grindell and his backers; for a tall, lithe Seneca running under the name Deerfoot easily vanquished the champion.

Lewis Bennett, alias Deerfoot, continued to win races for the next few years until he was persuaded by a promoter to travel to England for a series of races in 1861. It was in England that Deerfoot made his reputation as he defeated the best that that nation could produce in long distance running. Celebrated in lithographed sporting prints and in poetry, Deerfoot was the lion of the hour, attracting large crowds to the race tracks. The Prince of Wales was among those who honored the young Indian runner, presenting him a purse after one of his victories. Two of the records set by Deerfoot on his English tour, that for ten miles and the

record for one hour, stood for many years. Accusations of fixed races diminished his reputation, and he returned to America with his earnings in April 1863. He continued to race for a few years; but his triumphant tour of England was the high-point of his career, the period upon which his legendary reputation rests. This paper will review Deer-foot's career as an athlete; and it will attempt to appraise his records in comparison with those of his contemporaries and runners who have followed him.