

IRISH-BORN MEDAL WINNERS IN THE EARLY OLYMPIC GAMES

BY SÉAMUS WARE

Introduction

As with many other small European nations which were ruled by the Great Powers until after the First World War, Ireland did not have the opportunity to enter an official team in the Olympic Games until 1924. However, counting those competitors who entered as individuals in the early Games and also a number of athletes who travelled from Ireland independently of Great Britain in 1904 and 1906, together with those born in Ireland and who competed on teams representing Great Britain, USA, Canada, and South Africa - the record of Irish-born competitors in the pre-World War I Games is very impressive. Following the above criteria, Ireland (i.e. the whole island, which is the entity represented by the Olympic Council of Ireland since its foundation at the start of the 1920s.) was represented at all the early Olympic Games. That record has been maintained unbroken down to the present, and thus we can claim to join Australia, Greece and Switzerland in the elite group of countries who have had competitors at all the twenty-four Summer Games.

I have analysed the National Medal Totals given by David Wallechinsky in the 1996 edition of his "Complete Book of the Summer Olympics" for a number of countries with 'small' populations (i.e. less than c. 10 million at the period in question), for the first six Olympic Games (including 1906). These countries, most of whom (except Finland) competed in all the early Olympics (except 1904 in some cases), and including all Irish-born competitors (irrespective of what team they represented) as "Ireland", shows the following totals of medals won.

Greece 90, Ireland 54 (24 G., 20 S., 10 B.), Hungary 43, Denmark 36, Finland 35, Norway 30, Switzerland 29, Australia 21.

Notes: (1) I have followed Wallechinsky's definition of "gold", "silver" and "bronze" by the modern usage, right from 1896; (2) Greece's medals were accumulated mainly in the two Games held in Athens; (3) Finland only competed from 1906; (4) Wallechinsky's credit of 1 Gold and 1 Silver medals to Great Britain in 1904 relates to two Irishmen - Daly (steeplechase) and Kiely (all-round championship). Kiely was invited to compete for Britain but refused; he and Daly travelled independently to St. Louis as Irish representatives.

The total for Ireland (population c. 5 million) was only surpassed, apart from Greece, by four major countries: USA, France, Great Britain and Germany. Full details are available in an appendix to my book: *Laochra na hÉireann agus na Cluichí Oilimpeacha 1896-1996*, which contains a full list of

all Irish-born medal winners to date.

For non-Irish speakers, I have done an English version of this list, which I am willing to send to anyone interested on receipt of postage cost.

Track and Field Athletics

In the last quarter of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, Ireland produced many world-class athletes. From 1873 onwards, Irishmen set 'world-best' marks (equivalent to World Records in the years prior to National Associations and the IAAF) in the high, long, and triple

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jumps, and shot, discus, and hammer throws. Although it was in the jumping and throwing events that they were most successful, there were also some top-class Irish sprinters and distance runners in that period who figure among the Olympic medal winners. Several of these early world record holders were past their prime by 1896 and others did not get the chance of going to Athens.

I give here under details of the results for Irish-born competitors in the jumping and throwing at the early Olympic Games. Because of the predominance of Irish throwers, most of whom had to emigrate to America, I have extended the period under consideration for throwing events. I use the notation “G, S, B” for Gold, Silver and Bronze medals respectively. Several 4th to 6th place finishes are also on record for our representatives at those Games.

Year	High Jump	Long Jump	Triple Jump	Standing Jumps (H=high, L=long)
1900	P. Leahy(S)	P. Leahy(B)	-	
1904	-			
1906	C. Leahy(G)	P. O'Connor(S)	P. O'Connor(G)	Sheridan(2S H&L) C. Leahy(S)
1908	C. Leahy(S)	-	T. Ahearn(G)	M. Sheridan(B-L)

(Pat and Con Leahy, from County Cork) were the first brothers to win Olympic medals in athletics.

Year	Shot Put	Discus Throw	Hammer Throw	Misc. Throwing Events (1=discus Greek style; 2=stone throw; 3=shot put-two hand total; 4=561b throw)
1900			J. Flanagan(G)	
1904	-	M. Sheridan(G)	J. Flanagan(G)	J. Flanagan(S-4) J. Mitchell (B-4)
1906	M. Sheridan(G)	Sheridan(G)	not onprogramme	Sheridan(S-2)
1908	D. Horgan(S)	Sheridan(G)	J. Flanagan(G)	Sheridan(G-1) M. McGrath(S) C. Walsh(B)
1912	P. McDonald(G)	-	M. McGrath(G)	P. McDonald(S-3)
1920	-		P. Ryan(G)	P. McDonald(G-4) P. Ryan(S-4)
1924	-		M. McGrath(S)	-

Highlights of Throwing Events

(1) With his six medals in the throws, plus three in the standing jumps (total nine), Martin Sheridan (from County Mayo) is the most successful Irish Olympian of all time, and ranks high in the list of “most medal winners”.

(2) Sheridan (discus in 1904, 1906, 1908) and John Flanagan from County Limerick (hammer 1900, 1904, 1908) were the first to achieve three successive wins in any throwing event.

(3) The three Irishmen who shared the medals in the hammer in 1908 (the runner-up was Matt McGrath from County Tipperary and the third place man was Con Walsh from County Cork) were the first natives of one country to make a ‘clean sweep’ of the medals in this event, and the only other country to have achieved the same feat in this event is the USSR (1976, 1980, 1988).

(4) Matt McGrath - hammer champion and twice runner-up - was either 45 or 48 years of age when he won his second silver medal. This makes him almost certainly the oldest Olympic medal winner in a throwing event. His Olympic record set in 1912 lasted for twenty-four years.

(5) If we extend our study of hammer throwing to 1928 and 1932, we note that Pat O’Callaghan (another Corkman) representing Ireland won successive gold medals. This gave

Irishmen seven out of the first eight Olympic titles (the exception being Fred Tootell of the USA in 1924). The only other country to have produced seven Olympic hammer champions is the USSR (with about fifty times greater population) from 1960 to 1992.

Other Sports

(a) Tennis: While the Irish have not achieved any international prominence in this sport for many years, the country produced some highly-ranked players at the end of the 19th century and start of the 20th century. The Irish Olympic successes are as follows: John Pius Boland (Dublin, who competed as an individual) - Gold in Singles and Men’s Doubles in 1896; Harold S. Mahony (County Kerry) - Silver in Singles and Mixed Doubles, and Bronze in Men’s Doubles - all in 1900; James Parke (County Monaghan) - Silver in Men’s Doubles in 1908.

(b) Multi-Sport Competitors: P. Joseph Lydon (County Mayo) - Silver in Football (soccer) and Bronze in Boxing - both in 1904. Is there any other exam-

ple of someone winning Olympic medals in both these sports?

Edmond Barrett (County Kerry) - Gold in tug-of-war, and Bronze in Wrestling - both in 1908 (an interesting additional achievement of Barrett is that he is the only Olympic medal winner to have also won an Irish Hurling Championship medal, which he achieved with a team from London in 1903); he also competed in several throwing

events at the 1908 Olympics.

(c) Teams representing Ireland, as distinct from being part of a British team, were allowed to compete in certain sports in 1908. The Irish teams won Silver medals in Hockey and Bronze in Polo.

(d) The first Irish woman to win an Olympic medal was Beatrice Hill-Lowe (County Louth) in Archery in 1908.

(e) Facilitated by the proximity to London, and the large numbers of Irish who competed on British and American teams, the 1908 medal 'haul' by Irish-born competitors (all

sports) is impressive by any standards - Gold 9, Silver 6, Bronze 6 - total 21. As an Irish saying puts it: ní bheidh a leithéid arís ann (= their equal will not be seen again)!

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