

THE GREEK DISCUS EVENT

BY COLM MURPHY

Very little has been written on technique or the rules governing athletic events in years gone by. Athletic histories invariably chronicle personalities, clubs and organisations or are general histories. What technique athletes used or under what rules they had to perform is often ignored in these histories.

What is of interest in the contemporary era is how various techniques and styles, and therefore differing rules, have developed independently in various parts of the world. With the throwing events, the shot, discus, javelin and hammer have long established rules; it is with less established events that variances in rules and techniques are readily evident. The 56lbs for instance is one such event that has completely differing rules for throwing; swung between the legs from a stand as in Ireland and thrown hammer-style elsewhere and this despite the fact that both styles were developed in late 19th century Ireland!

An event that is less practised is the Greek Discus; an Olympic event in 1906 and 1908, since dropped from the athletic programme. The 1906 Olympic title was claimed by Werner Jarvinen with a throw of 37,17 m.; he subsequently placed third at the London Games of 1908 with 36,48 m. He, of course, was the father of the trio of Jarvinen's who competes at the 1932 Olympic Games. Fourth in 1906 was the Olympic Champion of 1908, Martin Sheridan. He holds the Olympic record, such as it is, with 38,00 m. David Wallechinsky in his "The Complete Book of the Olympic Games" [Penguin Books] states that "contestants threw the discus from a pedestal that sloped forward, and they were required to follow a restricted set of movements. The discus had to be released from a standing position, with no spinning allowed." It would appear that it was a 2kg. Discus that was used at both Olympic Games. Martin Sheridan was, of course, the greatest athlete of his generation; he was a noted thrower and jumper and the first exponent of the discus - Olympic champion thrice. Born in Bohola, County Mayo in the west of Ireland, he was part of the group that wallowed in the title, "The Irish Whale." His physique was of more modest proportions than his fellow "Whales" with Tom Kiely, the 1904 Olympic All-round champion of similar proportions of that particular generation of Irish throwers.

So it was with a mixture of awe and historical destiny that I entered for the Greek Discus event at the European Throwers' Cup Championships in Tata, Hungary last August (1997). Here was a former Olympic event with a measurable distance in competition. Sheridan's throw of 38,00 m. was undoubtedly the Irish record or at least the

best recorded by an Irish born athlete. Being a former discus specialist with a best exceeding that of Sheridan by many metres, I thought of the possibility of bettering that 38,00 m. The eventuality was, of course, quite something else. Historians will be aware of the legend that surrounds Robert Garrett, the Olympic Champion of 1896. He trained for that discus competition with a much heavier implement, believing the one he was using in training to be the same weight as that to be used in Athens. Attempting to follow in Sheridan's footsteps, I fell into Garrett's in reverse! I trained with a 2kg discus to discover on arrival in Tata that it was a 5kg that was to be used [so much for reading the entry form!]. So Martin Sheridan's record survived my assault! Returning to the theme of technique, there does remain one query as to what the judge's requirements are at the European Throwers' Cup Competition. Mention should be made at this point of the fact that my wife, Catherie, and I are researching at present for an intended book on the history of Irish throwing and throwers, with a view to publication next year.

Some interesting information has come to light in the course of the research for same and that concerning the Greek Discus is of particular interest. When Garrett competed at the Olympic Games of 1896 he did so using a stand as did his fellow competitors. This practise was to change over the following decade as exponents of the event began experimenting and so the turn was developed with Martin Sheridan taking advantage of the new developments. Commentators at the time - the opening decade of the century - expressed concern over what was then, the new practise of using a turn, wanting what they considered the classical pose, a standing throw.

The turn became too popular though and at the 1906 Olympic Games both the latest practise and what was regarded as the classical pose ensured two events as it did in London two years later. *The Illustrated London and Dramatic News* (page 550) of June 6th, 1908, reported on the "as at Athens" method of a number of throws to include the discus. The report noted that "the so-called as at Athens style compels the athlete to throw from a pedestal, as shown in the illustrations, and go through the bodily movements depicted, before discharging the discus. The measurement of the throw is made from the point where the ground is first struck."

The article also mentions the fact that the "discus is made of wood and metal and weighs nearly 4 lb". Martin Sheridan may not have been a true "Irish Whale" as regards size, but the athlete [one cannot really label him a thrower] modelling the technique is not the Champion himself! He is of course, in the illustrations from *The New York Times*, (October, 1906).
