

Unveiling of the Memorial Statue of Paddy Ryan

Olympic Gold Medallist, 16lbs Hammer, Antwerp 1920
Olympic Silver Medallist, 56lb Weight, Antwerp 1920
World Record Holder, 1913 - 1938

*at Pallasgreen, Co. Limerick
on Saturday 24th July, 2004*



by Ronnie Delany,

Olympic Champion, 1500 metres, Melbourne, 1956

in the presence of Paddy Ryan's daughters:

Mrs. Josephine Killian, New York, U.S.A.

Mrs. Bernie O'Dwyer, Cashel, Co. Tipperary

Mrs. Mary Weatherhead, Pallasgreen, Co. Limerick

Mrs. Catherine O'Grady, Kiltteely, Co. Limerick

Mrs. Chrissie O'Donovan, London, England.



Organising Committee:

Back Row, L/R: Ger O'Connell, Hon. Secretary; Liam Long, Hon. Treasurer; Fr. McSweeney, John O'Grady, Brian O'Neill, Donal Ryan, Jimmy Fanning, Jack Ryan, Peter Weatherhead, Chairperson.

Front Row: Bernie O'Dwyer, Catherine O'Grady, Mary Weatherhead, Mary Harty, Vice-Chairperson. Inset: Joe Cosgrave.

The memorial was organised by the Paddy Ryan Olympic and World Champion Memorial Committee with the support of public subscriptions.

- Limerick County Council, Main Sponsor -
- Mr. John F. Lawlor, U.S.A. -
- A.I.B., Hospital Branch. -
- St. Ailbe's Credit Union -

Sculptor and Casting:

Seamus Connolly, Kilbaha, Kilrush, Co. Clare.

Plinth:

Raymond Kelly, Monumental Works, Tipperary Town.

Stone work:

Dick Brennan, Barna & Donal Ryan (L), Pallasgreen.

The Early Days

Paddy Ryan was born on the 20th of January 1883 at Bunavie, one of five boys that included Con, Jack, Mick and Ned, and three girls Bridget, Ellen and Mary, little did his parents Patrick Ryan and Bridget nee-Hayes know that they were to become parents of a sporting legend. But Paddy didn't have it all his own way as brother Con Ryan became another sporting hero when he broke the world record for the Shot Putt in 1901 and also won three all-Ireland GAA medals.

Few could have foreseen that Paddy Ryan was to become the greatest of the great men who strode the world stage. He was naturally a strong man, with powerful hips and shoulders and stood at 6 foot 4 inches and weighed in at 19 stone.

Paddy Ryan's activities covered a period crowded by splendid achievements which brought him world renown.

His earliest association with the hammer goes back to 1897 when he attended his first sports meeting at Old Pallas. At that meeting was Tom Kiely of Ballyneale who was the greatest all-round athlete of his time and who won nearly every event on the programme that day. His strength and ability that day particularly with the hammer impressed the then 15 year old Paddy Ryan, and this was the moment that changed the sporting world.

Paddy Ryan's quest begins

After the sports meeting Paddy Ryan went home and made himself a make shift weight and began training, he trained hard and had mastered the skills of the hammer. At the age of twenty two he was competent enough to compete against his idol Tom Kiely, this took place in Cork in June 1902 but he proved no match for the master who won with a throw of 140 feet, but in September of that year Tom Kiely had been beaten in a championship contest for the first time with a throw of 136 feet and Paddy Ryan went on to win the first of nine All Ireland medals. He became the undisputed king of Irish hammer throwing during 1902 to 1908; it was surprising that he was not invited to take part in the fourth Olympiad in the new Shepherd's Bush Stadium, London in 1908.



America is conquered

He emigrated to America in 1910 at the age of twenty-eight and within a few months he had been signed on as a member of the Irish-American club. At an exhibition at Travers Island he threw over 165 feet, the best of his career up to then, that throw was his entry into American Athletics. He was the new star to come out of the East to renew the lustre of the Gaelic Galaxy that had long illuminated the world. In 1911 threw over 170 feet and won the New York Championship with a throw of 175 feet 4 inches.

In 1912 he became the third man to beat the 180 foot mark with a throw of 182 feet 11 inches, only two other men had passed 180 feet - John Flanagan and Matt McGrath.

World record tumbles

The longest standing record in athletics history was about to be unfolded in the Fireman's Athletic games Long Island 1913, when on the 6th of February Paddy Ryan threw a gigantic world's best of 189 feet 6 inches - a record that stood until 1938 and remained unsurpassed in the States until the fifties. Of the throw had made athletic history, Paddy said *"I spat on my hands and picked up the hammer, it was now or never, I put everything into that throw, and as the hammer left my hands I knew Matt McGrath's record was gone forever, the hammer soared up into the blue sky, glinting golden as the evening sun caught it in flight, dropped and tore into the green turf ahead of the world record flag"*. Paddy Ryan became the undisputed king of hammer throwing. He won the American Championships in 1914, 1915, 1916, and 1917 and it was in this year that his sporting exploits were interrupted as had served with the United States expeditionary force in France, but he regained his American title in 1919 with a throw of 175 feet 5 inches and again in 1920 with 169 feet 4 inches.



Olympic Champion

1920 was Olympic year and the venue was Antwerp Belgium, it was the fifth Olympics and it proved to be very significant. It was the first Olympics that the Olympic flag was unfurled, and the Olympic Oath was introduced.

After qualifying for the finals the conditions were wet and unsuitable for hammer throwing, he threw a 173 feet 4 inches and as no other competitor succeeded in passing 160 feet he was declared 1920 Olympic Champion. He improved a further inch and that was almost thirteen feet beyond the silver medallist, Carl Lindh of Sweden. A few days later he won a silver medal by finishing second to Pat McDonald in the 56lb event and at thirty-seven, became the oldest man to win an Olympic hammer championship title.

He returned to America to an adoring public and a year later at thirty-eight won his last American title with a throw of 170 feet 7 inches.

Having achieved almost everything in America he returned home to Pallasgreen and settled down with his wife Johanna Mary (nee King) and family on the farm at Moymore, Old Pallas.

He died on the 13th of February 1964 at the age of eighty-two and his final resting place lay in Old Pallas Cemetery under the shadow of Knockgrean Hill.

Paddy Ryan's Major Achievements

Irish Championships won - 1901, 1902, 1904, 1905, 1907, 1908, 1909,
(3 titles in three different events)

1912 - won New York Championship with a throw of 182 feet 11
inches.

1913 - August 17th breaks World record at Fireman's Athletic Games Long
Island, his throw 189 feet 6 inches, a world's best for twenty five years.

American Championships -1914, 1915, 1916, 1917, 1919, 1920, 1921.

July 17th 1920 - won Olympic Gold and Silver Medals at the Antwerp
Games in the Harvard Stadium in the Hammer Throwing and 56lb
event respectively.

He was just more than an Olympic Champion and great athlete

He had a rich warm personality, was a glorious storyteller and an extremely lovable and homely character.

He had a tremendous zest for living and missed the excitement and glory of the days when he was known from one end of the world to the other. He said to his good friend and writer Dave Guiney. *“Sure I miss every day of them, they were great days and I enjoyed them thoroughly. I’m sorry I can’t live my life all over again.”*

“An immortal of Irish athletics”

Some of the stone used for the memorial site has very special links to the area; stone has come from Bunavie where he was born. Also there is stone from Old Pallas where he reared his family; some has come from Moymore - the townland of his wife Johanna Mary (nee King) and Garrynachara, the townland of his Aunt.



Today the Olympic spirit continues in Pallasgreen when in 2003 the Special Olympics World Summer Games came to Ireland, Pallasgreen was host town to one of the smallest groups taking part in the games, “Kyrgyzstan”, who had no fewer than four athletes competing.

Pallasgreen were represented at the games by a talented lady, Rebecca Bourke of Reask, who competed in three different events in table tennis. Rebecca took part in Ladies Singles, Ladies Doubles, and Mixed Doubles and in the process won Gold, Silver and Bronze medals respectively.

Rebecca, a special person with special talents, is hoping for more success and enjoyment when she begins her qualification process next year to represent Ireland for the Special Olympic World Summer Games to be held in China in 2007.