

Sporting Life

with Bernard O'Neill



Pat O'Callaghan at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles

Hammering the Opposition, Munster Style

IT'S still not unusual to find some websites maintaining that Ireland shunned the 1936 Olympics in Berlin because of objections to Adolf Hitler and Nazism. Paddy the ethical!

However, the truth is a lot less noble than that. Ireland didn't darken the door of the 11th Olympiad because of a row between the governing body for sport on this island and its counterpart across the water. The argument was about flags and anthems and who had jurisdiction over our old friends, the six counties. It all ended in tears.

Granted, it's a lot more nuanced than the above, but, life being so brutally short, its best to restrict it to one paragraph – or your budgie will end up nailing himself to the bars of his cage. Maybe you could social media it: "Irish/English fightin' again – Unionists/Shinners involved" or tweets to that effect.

So, Hibernia, which first entered the Olympics independently at Paris 1924, remained at home sulking into its collective pint. It's probably just as well, given the

1936 Games are known as the Nazi Olympics, a tournament Hitler was using for propaganda purposes.

It's commonly acknowledged of Berlin 1936 – unless you're inclined toward goose stepping in front of the mirror with your finger under your nose like John Cleese in *Fawlty Towers* – that African-American athlete Jessie Owens, who won four gold medals, running a horse and carriage through Hitler's master race myth was a glorious thing.

However, while some writers correctly highlight Owens' astonishing achievements as a stunning riposte to the diminutive Reich chancellor with the twitching moustache, thus implying that the matter was settled, most neglect to mention that Germany did top the table with 89 medals, 33 of which were gold. The USA finished second with 56 gongs, 24 of which were gold. So, from a Nazi perspective, Berlin 1936 served its distorted purpose – its *raison d'être*, as they say in parts of Cavan.

Moreover, 49 countries competed, the highest entry of the modern Games up to that point.

The Nazis had originally announced that Jews and Blacks were banned from competing, but, threatened with a mass boycott, they compromised.

The *New York Times*, enamoured by the organisation and "spirit of the Games", the Nazis and temporarily toned-down the anti-Semitism, reported that Germany was "back in the fold of nations." However, a handful of journalists did their job and highlighted what the tournament represented, a facade hiding the most violent death cult in the history of humanity.

From an Irish sporting perspective, the regret was that Pat O'Callaghan, who was coached by Limerick's three-time Olympic champion, John Flanagan, didn't get the opportunity to target his third successive gold in the hammer throw. The Nazis were particularly interested in Cork-born O'Callaghan.

Flanagan, meantime, "lit out", as Mark Twain might say, for America from his home in Kilbreedy, Limerick in 1897 and won treble gold for the USA at the 1900, 1904 and 1908 Games in the hammer

throw event. The Shannonsider, who perfected the three-point turn technique, was part of an Irish-American club known as the Whales, a nickname given to them by a beleaguered waiter because, they, giants of men, never stopped eating. "It's whales they are, not men," he sighed.

If you frequent a restaurant and order "un demi-porc, 12 pommes de terre, des tas de choux et une douzaine d'œufs", a regular snack for the Whales, you'll impress your friends, but it's still half a pig, a dozen spuds, heaps of cabbage and a dozen eggs. Would you like some fries with that?

The Whales, mostly members of the Irish-American and New York Athletics Club, were Limerick's John Flanagan and Paddy Ryan, an Old Pallas native and also an Olympic champion, Tipperary pair Matt McGrath and James Mitchell, Clare's Paddy McDonald, Simon Gillis, Martin Sheridan and Con Walsh.

The legends of American sport in their day, between them they dominated the Olympic weight-throwing events in the first two

decades of the last century, claiming an astonishing 10 gold, 5 silver and 3 bronze for the USA and Canada.

Flanagan, who set 17 unofficial world records, returned to Limerick in 1911 and competed internationally for Ireland. After he hung up his hammer, he coached O'Callaghan and helped steer the Leesider to Ireland's first Olympic gold at Amsterdam 1928. O'Callaghan completed the double at Los Angeles 1932. Tipperary's Bob Tisdall also won gold in the 400m hurdles there.

In the build-up to the 11th Olympiad, the Nazis were aware of just how prolific the Irish were, whether representing the USA and Canada or the "auld sod", in weight-throwing events, and sent a camera crew to Ireland to record footage of O'Callaghan at a training session, according to Brian Walsh, curator of the County Museum, Dundalk, at his exhibition, 'Patriot Games: Ireland and the Olympics 1896-2010'

"The Irish and the Irish-Americans were very proficient in the hammer throw in the early Games,

from 1896 to 1932," said Walsh. "First-generation Irish and second-generation Irish athletes were dominating this event."

Walsh also discovered a newspaper article which reported that the Nazis invited O'Callaghan to Hamburg in 1934 to film his technique again and X-ray his shoulders, although it's unlikely, as is claimed, that Leni Riefenstahl, who shot the infamous Nazi propaganda movie *Triumph of the Will*, was involved.

Meantime, O'Callaghan did attend the 1936 Games as a private citizen. The two-time Olympic champion watched glumly from the stands as Germany's Karl Hein struck gold with a throw of 185ft.

The winning effort was 10ft short of the competitive throw O'Callaghan made in 1935. The only Irishman to win successive gold at the Olympics would also have noticed that Hein's technique looked familiar.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, they say. The Nazis had studied the videos – and O'Callaghan's and Flanagan's three-point turn – well.