

Limerick's 1920 Olympic hero

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IN 1897, fourteen-year old Paddy Ryan attended the athletic sports meet at Old Pallas near his county Limerick home and returned with a new hero and a new mission in life.

He witnessed the great Tom Kiely deliver one of his characteristic performances when he won several events on the day's programme. Kiely's hammer throwing in particular impressed the young Ryan.

Later in the evening, Paddy Ryan fashioned his own makeshift hammer and began a weight-throwing career that culminated in Antwerp on 18 August 1920 with a victory in the Olympic hammer final representing the USA.

Ryan, a young man with extraordinary natural strength, made remarkable progress and in 1902 won his first All-Ireland hammer title, throwing from a 9 foot circle, at the Markets Field in Limerick with a throw of 41.45m (136'0") and in doing so inflicted a rare Irish defeat on his idol.

This became a double defeat, when he also won the unlimited run and follow hammer throw with a heave of 46.20m (151'7") almost three metres beyond Kiely's best. Paddy Ryan won ten more national titles and represented Ireland twice in the annual international against Scotland before he emigrated with his considerable potential unfulfilled.

The apparent misappropriation of talent attracted the ire of some commentators with a writer in Sport observing after his 1908 GAA title victory 'Ryan has been hovering around 150 feet for years - why he does not improve we cannot understand.

We thought when he appeared a few years ago he would run up big things in the hammer'. Part of the reason for this was a less than monastic dedication to training practised by Ryan.

He 'was one to speedily turn his trainer grey-haired' athletics historian Bill Dooley wrote in his book *Champions of the Athletic Arena*. 'What John L. Sullivan was to boxing Ryan was in athletics, almost to the letter.'

All this changed when Ryan emigrated in 1910. He delivered 'the big things' in style after his move to the USA, a move that transformed his athletics career.

Ryan arrived in the USA on 18 September 1910 having crossed the Atlantic on the Arabic liner which sailed from Queenstown on 11 September.

In New York, Ryan, who stood 6 foot 2½ inches and weighed between 270 and 300 pounds, became the latest recruit to the Irish Whales, a group of Irish-born weight throwers who represented the USA with considerable distinction in Olympic competition winning a total of 12 gold, 8 silver and 2 bronze medals between 1900 and 1924.

Unlike his fellow Whales, Ryan did not join the police force but was employed as a labour foreman by the Edison Energy Supply Company but he did become a member of the Irish American Amateur Athletic Club (IAAAC).

The competitive environment, the club dynamic, systematic and scientific training, improved equipment and endless opportunities to engage in competition and his rivalry with Matt McGrath all contributed to the Ryan metamorphosis.

'America trains her athletes as she does her race horses', the Los Angeles Times reported in 1908. 'Our athletes are filed with technicalities and minute points of which the British athletes do not dream.'

Paddy Ryan marked his entry into American athletics with a personal best throw of over 50 metres (165') at an exhibition at Travers Island the home of New York Athletic Club. In 1911, he broke the 170 foot barrier and won the New York Metropolitan area championship with a throw of 53.44m (175'4") and defended this title in 1912 with a massive throw of 55.77m (182'11¼").

This was achieved according to the New York Times with 'Three perfect pivots with a slow first move, followed by a gradually increased speed until his delivery, which was well-nigh perfection, served to give him the wonderful distance.'

He won the first of his eight AAU titles in 1913, at Forbes Field, Pittsburgh, after progressing from third and second in the two years previously.

The payment of travelling expenses and entry fees to competitions was a standard benefit gained from membership of a major New York athletic club.

Paddy Ryan won his AAU hammer titles in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, San Francisco,

Newark (New Jersey) St Louis, Philadelphia, Cambridge and Pasadena.

He successfully defended this title each year until his retirement in 1921 with the exception of 1918 when he travelled to France in July 1918 with the American Expeditionary Forces.

Paddy Ryan was ineligible to represent the USA at the 1912 Olympic Games as he had yet to obtain USA citizenship and did not do so until 1917; his form in 1913, Ryan's annus mirabilis, indicates an opportunity missed.

Apart from winning his first AAU title, he set the first officially recognised IAAF world record for the hammer when he threw 57.77m (189'6½") on 17 August at the Eccentric Fireman's Annual Handicap Games at Celtic Park, New York. The record survived until 1938 and remained as an American record until 1953.

Ryan is the only Irish-born athlete to set an IAAF recognised world record in a weight event. He followed this with three world bests on 1 September in non-standard weight events at the IAAAC Games in Celtic Park.

He followed this with three world bests on 1 September in non-standard weight events at the IAAAC Games in Celtic Park. He whipped the 16-pound hammer from a 9' circle out to 57.68m (189'3"), the 42-pound stone with follow to 8.83m (28'11¼") and the 35-pound weight for distance 17.39m (57'0") in what was an extraordinary display of strength and technique.

There was more to come. In October, at the fall weight throwing programme of the IAAAC at Celtic Park, he threw the 12-pound hammer 65.16m (213'9") to establish another world best for the lighter implement.

Personal rivalries between athletes that challenge the conventional boundaries of their events is a central part of athletics history. In the 1910s, the rivalry of Matt McGrath and Paddy Ryan dominated the hammer event.

The man from Tipperary and the man from Limerick battled throughout the decade at distances that were far ahead of their contemporaries and those that came later.

Between them they won twelve of the thirteen AAU hammer titles between 1910 and 1922 with Ryan winning eight to McGrath's four. Con Walshe from Cork won the other title in 1912.

Unlike the other Irish



Pictured at the life-sized statue of Olympic champion Paddy Ryan, pictured below, in his native Pallasgreen are, back row, left to right, partly hidden, Seamus Connelly, sculptor, Christina O'Donovan (daughter) Ronnie Delaney, 1956 1500m Olympic gold medalist, Mary Weatherhead (daughter), Peter Weatherhead. Front row: Rebecca Burke (Gold Medal Special Olympics) Bernadette O'Dwyer (daughter), Catherine O'Grady (daughter) and John O'Grady

Whales, Paddy Ryan joined the American Expeditionary Forces and saw service in France in 1918 during the final stages of World War 1 where his unit comrades included the future world heavyweight boxing champion, Gene Tunney.

On his return journey to the USA, he visited Limerick and won the Irish Amateur Athletics Association hammer and 28-pound weight throwing titles. He regained his American hammer title in 1919, successfully defended it in 1920 and won two Olympic trials to secure his place on the US Olympic team.

At this stage the IAAAC was in decline, and Ryan's final competitive years were made as a member of the Loughlin Lyceum, Brooklyn.

The 1920 Olympic hammer competition was held on 18 August 1920 and was expected to be a showdown between Ryan and McGrath, the two senior citizens of the event. In the final, McGrath suffered a knee injury and had to retire after two throws.

In his absence, Paddy Ryan had an easy victory: his best throw of 52.874m (173'4") was 4.445m (14'7") ahead of Carl Lind (Sweden) in second place. It is sometimes stated that Ryan's winning margin was the greatest in Olympic history but this honour belongs to Matt McGrath who won the 1912 title with an Olympic record throw of 54.74m (179'7") and a victory margin of 6.35m (20'10").

It is part of the folklore associated with this final that Tom Nicholson arrived a day late for the event and that a



deputation of athletes led by Paddy Ryan refused to throw in the final until Nicholson was allowed to participate.

Nicholson was a veteran Scottish athlete and well known to Irish athletes as he had competed in the annual international against Ireland since 1901

Nicholson however did not arrive a day late as the qualifying round took place in the morning and the final in the afternoon but it is perfectly plausible that Nicholson arrived after the qualifying round and was facilitated for the afternoon's final.

There is also a version of the occasion that is in keeping with the gregarious life and times of Paddy Ryan. According to Bill Dooley in *Champions of the Athletic Arena*, Ryan enjoyed copious amounts of French and

Belgian wines on the eve of the final and reputedly greeted Lawson Robertson, the USA coach, who called him in the morning of the competition with the immortal words . . . 'I'm dying'.

Three days after his Olympic triumph, on 21 August, Paddy Ryan won his second Olympic medal when he finished second behind Pat McDonald in the 56-pound weight throwing event.

Paddy Ryan returned from New York to his native Pallasgreen in 1924, where he lived on the family farm until his death in February 1964.

On 24 July 2004, Ronnie Delany unveiled a life-size statue to Paddy Ryan in his native village of Pallasgreen. In 2014, Paddy Ryan was inducted to the USA Track & Field Hall Of Fame.