

The Leahys of Cragane made their mark in world athletics

By Sean Murphy

IRELAND has produced many great sporting families amongst the names that come readily to mind being in hurling - the Whelans and Dooles (Offaly), the Fennellys (Kilkenny), the Connollys (Galway), Rakards (Wexford) and our own Bennis family, in football the Maguires of Cavan, Spillanes of Kerry and the Rennicks of Meath, the O'Flanagans of soccer and rugby fame, the McCormacks and Ingles in boxing and the Ryans of Cappamore in cycling to mention but a few.

Limerick's and perhaps Ireland's most famous athletic family were the Leahys from Cragane, near Colmanswell. There were seven brothers in all, who were unsurpassed as jumpers, be it high jump, long jump or hop step and jump. Their names were Pat, Con, Joe was a 23 feet long jumper, Tom, Michael, Tim who led the World Ranking in

1912 and John of whom Pat and Con were best known because of their international and Olympic successes.

Con Leahy was born on April 27, 1876 in Cragane and died in the USA where he had emigrated in 1921. In a top class career, ranging from 1899 to 1908, he won four successive British AAA titles at the High Jump (1905/06/07/08) and also won the American title in 1907.

The four year interval between Olympic Games, was not adhered to in 1906 to allow Greece to celebrate to the games held in that country 2,000 years previously. Athens was again the venue, three Irishmen J.P. Daly (Galway) five mile flat, Peter O'Connor (Waterford) triple jump and Con Leahy (Limerick) high jump completed the Irish trio attended the games entirely at their own expense and were Ireland's first team at the Olympic games.

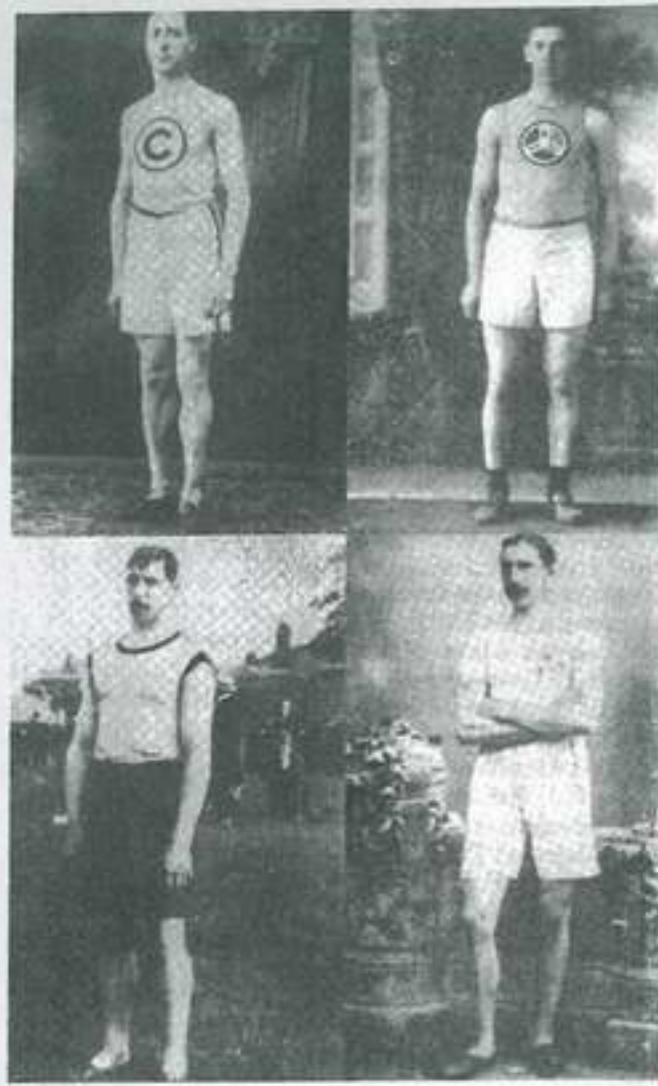
Con Leahy won the high jump, O'Connor the long jump with Leahy runner-up and Daly drew the standard medal in his race. The recognised flag of Ireland, under British

rule at the time was a sunburst on a green background and the words "Erin Go Brath" in gold, and the Irish trio had this in their possession.

The British team tried to claim the victories achieved by these great Irishmen but the trio refused to recognise the Union Jack, and presented the Irish flag to King Tino of Greece whose royal function was to hoist the flag of the winning nation, and to present the Olive crown to each victor.

It was a bold bid for international recognition. It did not succeed as King Tino refused to recognise Ireland as an independent nation, having to parliament of its own and was dependent on England. He expressed his regret, but with their permission he would hoist the Union Jack for each of their victories.

The Irish team would not agree and instead marched around the stadium carrying their own flag an action which aroused enthusiasm amongst the huge crowd and eventually excitement grew to fever pitch.



This was still more intensified when the American spectators snatched the flag and marched in victorious parade. This action drew tremendous applause from everybody except the British.

It was the first time that international recognition was sought for the flag of Ireland, and it is a tribute to the three men who composed the team from this country that they saw the circumstances provided a great opportunity and if the attempt failed technically, their action brought before the entire athletic world, Ireland's perilous position at the time. It was truly a patriotic action, and was applauded by the Press of the World, and even in England it found support, in the more democratic newspapers. For the first time the Irish flag was raised in 1928 when Dr Pat O'Callaghan won the gold medal in Amsterdam, and in 1932 defended his title in Los Angeles.

Con Leahy in the 1908 London Olympic Games, finished joint second in the high jump clearing 6ft 2ins. This was Great

Britians last high jump medal at a major championship until 1993. A month after the London games, Leahy jumped an unofficial 6ft 4ins at Adare.

Pat Leahy was born on May 20, 1877 at Cragane, and died in the USA in 1926. He won two British AAA titles in the high jump in 1898 and 1899, and, held Irish, British and European records in this event. As an Irishman representing Great Britain, he won two Olympic Medals achieving a silver medal in the high jump in Paris in 1900 behind the great Pennsylvanian athlete J.K. Baxter who beat him by a quarter of an inch! Leahy cleared 5'-10" having reportedly broken 6ft 4ins at least six times in training in Ireland and cleared an unofficial 6ft 5ins in 1898. Pat Leahy won bronze in long jump (jumping 22feet 9inches) and at the same games he finished 4th in the Hop, Step and Jump, clearing 44 feet, whereas he had bettered that by five feet the previous year. He thus gained the reputation of not being able to show his real talent outside Ireland. Pat also

completed in the High Jump at the 1908 Olympic Games.

Together with Con, they made up the set of brothers that won more Olympic athletic medals than any other family.

All the Leahy brothers practised in their own private Sports Stadium, an unpretentious little field on their farm at Cragane, which straddles the Cork/Limerick border but is definitely in County Limerick. Their training was not the gruelling schedule which present day athletes endure, which makes their achievements more remarkable if not amazing.

There are only two families of Leahys left in the South Limerick area. One is Patrick McDonogh are family from Cappanahane, Ballygran where the athletes mother came from and the other is Michael Leahy from Avondale, Charleville. Doctors John and Harry Leahy in Limerick city are also relatives.

Colmanswell and surrounding areas are extremely proud of the Leahy brothers and their feats, and John O'Sulli-

van P.C., chairman of the Colmanswell Community Council told me that a resolution proposed by Nicholas Kenneally, chairman Castletown-Ballygran GAA that Con Leahy Cragane should be honoured in the Olympic Year of 2000 and a booklet on the Leahys was produced. It was also agreed that a bronze plaque be erected in the school room where the Leahy family received their first education.

"The former Colmanswell N.S., is completely renovated and now acts as a community centre which is always a hive of activity. It is also a heritage centre for future generations to enjoy", said Mr O'Sullivan.

The Leahys of Cragane can be truly acclaimed as the greatest athletic family ever, who brought fame and honour to their country, and Limerick can feel justly proud of them.

With John Flanagan commemorated in his native Martinstown and Paddy Ryan likewise in Pallasgreen, wouldn't it be nice to remember that 1906 incident in Athens during the Centenary Year of 2006.