

LIMERICK PRODUCED A THREE TIME OLYMPIC MEDAL WINNER

By JOHN O'SHAUGHNESSY

With the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul only a few weeks away, this is the opportune time to recall the magnificent feats of one of Limerick's most famous sons, John J. Flanagan, the first Olympian to win three gold medals for the same event in successive Games. A native of south Limerick, he represented America in the Paris, St. Louis and London Olympics. He died in 1938 and is buried in Ballingaddy, Kilmallock.

Ireland may not have collected many medals at the Olympic Games in the past century, but it does have one claim to fame - it produced the first athlete to win three Olympic Gold medals for the same event in successive games.

County Limerick-born John Flanagan notched his first success in Paris in 1900, retained his crown at St. Louis four years later, and completed the 'hat-trick' in London in 1908.

Flanagan, who died in 1938 and is now buried at Ballingaddy, Kilmallock, represented the United States at the hammer and his Olympic achievements crowned a hugely successful career in his chosen sport. In fact, he was reported to have the largest collection of sporting trophies in the world, and it is believed that many of them are stored away for safe keeping in a Cork bank.

John Flanagan came from a family that made sporting history. His father, Mike, was an Irish record breaker

in hammer throwing and jumping and his brother, Tom, broke two world records for throwing the 12 lb hammer.

Another brother, Patrick, held the Junior Championship of America for throwing the 16 lbs hammer.

Before he left for the United States in 1894, John Flanagan had already broken the record for the 16 lb hammer throw in Ireland. In Kilmaree, where he came to from Moorstown as a boy, he learned to become one of Ireland's best all-round athletes, and even in his youth his prowess on the sports field had become a local legend.

But it was in America that this Irish, English, United States and Olympic champion climbed to world fame.

He brought the hammer record from 140 ft 11 ins to 184 ft 4 ins, and his feats with the 56 lb hammer weight were remarkable too.

At his first public appearance in New Jersey he created a new world's record in the throw, and it was an indication of the great things that were to come.

he took part in the English AAA Championships in London where he won the hammer title - an event he also won in 1896.

Four years later, in the St. Louis Olympics, the competition was an All-American affair. Flanagan won from a field of five with a throw of 168' 11"

Though he was nearly five feet below his world record set a month before, he won with over 3 ft to spare. At the same Olympics, he was second in the 56-lb weight throw - a foot behind the Canadian Desmarreau - and fourth in the discus.

He went on to become the hammer champion of England in 1896, with a throw of 131 ft 11 ins, and his introduction of the new style hammer with a steel wire handle literally left old world record figures yards behind.

John Flanagan's third Olympic victory was in 1908. Here he was opposed by his great rival Matt McGrath who had deprived him of the world record the previous September and who had won the American title that year.

After the qualifying rounds, McGrath led the field with a throw of 167' 11" to Flanagan's 165' 2". But McGrath was suffering from an injured ligament and could not improve in the final rounds, while Flanagan did.

His throw of 170' 4 1/2" was a new Olympic record, and with it, he won his third gold medal at the age of 35. Standing 5'9", this 18 stone of bone and muscle won countless minor trophies and held nine American Championships for his uncanny skill with the hammer.

And to prove his versatility, two of his many wins with the discus are recorded on gold medals in the collection of trophies.

One, inset with a diamond, is for a throw at the Championships organised

by the St. Patrick's Athletic Association, Wilmington, Delaware.

Another, from the A.U.U.S., tells how he won the championship of the United States in 1907 with a record throw of 111 feet.

Ranking with the most ornate of the medals is the Dowling Trophy for Points, presented by the Greater New York Irish Athletic Association, 1902. Fashioned from solid gold, this triple pendant has the Irish and American flags, beautifully embossed in enamel.

But not all of the trophies tell of serious trials of skill on the sportsfield.

One huge cup which he bore away in 1904 must have had many a laugh in the winning.

Weight

It is the Louis F. Haffen Cup, presented by the Policemen's Benevolent Association of the Borough of the Bronx for the Fat Man's Race. The distance was 100 yards and every competitor had to weigh over 15 stone.

In between the Olympics of 1904 and 1908, many cups and medals tell of John Flanagan's achievements. There is the Points Trophy for the athlete scoring the most points in the United States, presented by the Hon. John F. Ahern, President of the Borough of Manhattan, 1905; Police Field Day, 16 lb hammer, 1906; Deputy Commissioner, Arthur J. O'Keefe Trophy for Police Field Day, 1906 and the Glebe Trophy for 56 lb hammer.

They are but a few of the many. For John Flanagan, 1908, was a year of glory.

Many of the massive silver cups and heavy gold medals tell of the glorious days of that year that could never fade in his memory. But one of the least elaborate was the most prized.

It was the simple Olympic gold medal, briefly inscribed "Hammer record J. J. Flanagan, 170ft 4 1/2 ins

the Olympic Games, 14th July, 1908".

A New York policeman - he emigrated to America when he was 24 years old - John Flanagan travelled from the London Olympics of 1908 to test his strength against that of his colleagues in the D.M.P. An inscription one one of the

medals in the Cork bank tells how he got on: "Presented to John J. Flanagan, World Champion hammer thrower, by some of his admirers in the Dublin Police, per Denis Carey, on the occasion of his breaking the world's record with the 16 lb hammer at their sports, Ballsbridge, 3rd August, 1908". Coincidentally, Denis Carey was also a native of Co. Limerick, born at Kilfinane.

Another gold medal, inset, with a diamond, tells of another honour conferred on his return to the United States.

"Columbus's greeting to J. Flanagan. Presented by the citizens of New York, commemorating the 'homecoming' of the victorious American team from the Olympic Games, London, 1908".

Many other medals, recording the many honours, include: Irish-American Athletic Club, N. Y., 56 lb weight, 1908; the Pittsburgh Press, inset with diamond; Field day, Danbury Conn, throwing the 16 lb hammer, June 1909; Eccentric Association of Firemen, for 56 lb weight, 1909; East Shore Amusement, 16 lb hammer throw handicap, 1909; Clan na Gael, Rhode Island, 57 lb weight championship; Amateur Athletic Union of the U.S. champion throwing 56 lbs weight, 1909, etc.

A few words about John's famous brother, Tom, will not be out of place here.

Tom chose Toronto, Canada as his adopted home and did tremendous work for the promotion of Gaelic Sports there.

Instituted

He had the distinction of being first "paleface" who was formally instituted a member of Gayuga Indian tribe. As a weight-thrower, he was a world record breaker with a one hand throw of 128'7" (12 lb hammer). He trained and managed many famous athletes, including the

marathon Indian runner, Tom Longboat, and was also associated with the success of the Olympic runner, Johnny Hayes.

Tom Flanagan was manager and trainer of the world-champion boxer, Jack Johnson. He brought several Irish athletes to Canada and had them trained there.

John Flanagan closed his brilliant athletic career in 1911 and later took up farming in Kilmaree East, Kilmallock. During his years in America he coached in Harvard and Princeton Universities.

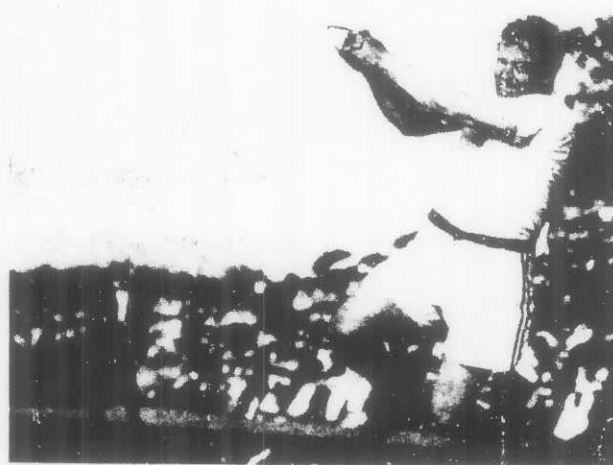
He helped to turn out many well known athletes here, too, including Willie Britton, who won a number of British and Irish championships for throwing the hammer.

John Devoy, the noted Irish patriot in one of his last letters, paid him a fitting tribute:

"It is one of my most pleasant memories to stand in Celtic Park watching your splendid figure as you whirled the hammer around and sent it flying in to space ... you have done more credit in the athletic field than any other man, except, perhaps, Martin Sheridan, and I always held you as the fresh type of the old Galloglass ... winning glory for Ireland."

Unfortunately, many of John Flanagan's achievements are forgotten to-day. Perhaps some day his admirers will recognise fully his greatness.

John J. Flanagan is one of Limerick's most famous sons, and deserves to be remembered accordingly. He has many relatives in the area.



Athletics:

Limerick athletes in form at big events

FOLLOWING the National Senior Track and Field Championships last week, the hectic pace continued on Bank Holiday weekend with the Munster

Templemore was the venue for the Southern Region (Munster) U21 T. and F. championships on Saturday, and because of the bank holiday weekend, and the Michael Jackson concert, entries were low,

chance of going through as they presently are in 4th place overall, and their pool is not quite as strong on this occasion. The finals take place in Tullamore on Sunday, 21st August, and we will keep our fingers crossed that both teams will

(5,000m). Paul O'Callaghan (5,000m). Carlos O'Connell (decathlon). Conor McCulloch (hammer). Brendan Quinn (sleeplechase), and the following selected from the national marathon trials, John Woods, Dick Hooper, Marie Murrain, Rolline and Ailish Smyth.



World champion Stephen Roche, now back in training following his knee injury, has signed an agreement to ride the Nissan International Classi

