

THE MAN BORN JIM CREGAN

On Monday, September 5th 1966, the British morning papers carried banner headlines — "Hogan strikes gold", "Marathon for Great Britain". The newsmaker was one Jim Hogan who had become champion of Europe the day before, leaving thirty six of the world's best athletes in his trail as he entered the winners enclosure in Budapest. And believe it or not the same Jim Hogan was none other than Jim Cregan, son of Ballinrea man Michael and Margaret Cregan and born, bred, and reared at Coolboy, Athlacca.

What's more, this historic win — the first Irishman to win a European Championship — was no flash-in-the-pan, if that were conceivable at this level of competition. He had completed (in an Irish singlet) in the European Championships the previous time in Belgrade. He had come third in the British A.A.A. over 6 miles — a race acknowledged to be one of the greatest races ever run at the White City — it was won in a world record time. He had waged a gallant battle with the great unbeatable Ethiopian Abebe Bikila, in the Tokyo Olympic games. Two years earlier he ranked 4th in the world over 10,000 metres. This was the gradual build-up that Jim had, since he went to work in England in 1960.

Jim had spent a long hard apprenticeship at home in Athlacca for ten years before that, winning over 200 prizes at sports all over Ireland, clocking up County and Irish titles with almost monotonous regularity — he won ten Irish championships between 1952 and 1959 at distances ranging from two to ten miles. But he hadn't the opposition to help him raise his standards. It is interesting to speculate what he would have achieved if he had international competition at this time, indeed he eventually achieved a time better than that of the reputed greatest ever Zatopek and his successor the brilliant Kuts, who reigned in the fifties. Actually his best times for the 5,000 and 10,000 metres would have won him the Rome Olympics. Yes, Jim was world class in any age and by any standards. He had no coaches or training schedules, no school competition or athletic scholarships, not even an athletic club or a number of local enthusiasts to spur him to greater endeavours. He had to climb to the top alone. He can't give any obvious reason why he began. He just decided at 18 years of age that he would like to be a runner. He recalls how he cut a track out around a field near the house and got his sister Betty to time



Jim Cregan winning the European Marathon in Budapest.

him as he churned out lap after lap, a ritual that was to become a six day a week fact of life for him for the next twenty years. Small wonder then that he should think little of doing 7 miles a day over Kempton Park race course years later as he prepared for the Mexico Olympics.

Yet there was no obvious reason why Jim Cregan should want to succeed in the athletic arena. There was no athlete in the family — although the fact that there were always horses on the farm in training, and that his father was an excellent judge of bloodstock meant that the right sort of advice was readily available to him. The fact that he was reared in an area with athletic tradition must have influenced him too. He must have heard old people talk of the great sports and athletic prowess of other days, in places like Dromin, Kilmallock, Holycross, Bruff or Elton, on the annual Sports Day, as recalled by competitors Dan O'Dwyer of Caherguillamore, one of the best sprinters in Ireland about 1920, and Jack O'Donovan, New Road (before he died some months ago). The latter did a good $4\frac{1}{2}$ minute mile in his day, while Tommy Sullivan, Newtown was a useful long jumper. Maybe Jim had heard of the legendary world class long distance runner Longboat who was employed by the Cable Company to run his own marathon from Limerick to Kilmallock — indeed a picture of the American of Indian extraction, taken as he passed through Bruff on that occasion hangs in O'Dea's pub in Athlaccra, as does that of another all time great hammer thrower John Flanagan of Dromin; as a matter of fact Flanagan is reputed to have brought Longboat to Ireland to prepare for the Olympics, but Irish liquid hospitality is alleged to have upset calculations!

The grit and determination that Cregan displayed in abundance during his long career was no doubt fired by stories of the runners of other days and what they endured in order to compete, men like the Fitzgerald Brothers of the town of Bruff who were noted back about 1880-90. Tom in the 100 yds., Maurice in the 440, and John in the mile. They were known to have got up at 3 a.m. to train in Bevan's Field before going to work. Indeed a relation of John recalled for the writer how he walked to Parteen, Co. Clare one Sunday to compete and had to walk back that night.

Jim, no doubt had heard of Mick Creed of Elton, and Bruff, only 5' 7", but able to jump 6 inches over his own height, a colourful character on and off the field, or of Jim Condon, the great cyclist from Lough Gur, or his own mother's first cousin, Ned Caulfield.

Jim retired from serious competition in 1968, shortly after the Mexico Olympics, his last race was a special meeting at Crystal Palace, though he did make a brief comeback in 1971 for a professional presentation in Earl's Court. The blistered feet, inflamed by the cobblestones of Budapest and the sandpaper-dry throat of the 'Marathon survivor' over those tortuous 26 miles are now but a cherished memory. He can look back over his active years with justifiable pride, and can have few regrets after such a colourful career. Would he have capped it all with an Olympic gold medal if he had been born elsewhere? if he had a more even temperament? if . . . ! The only possible area of regret might be the fact that he wasn't wearing an Irish singlet in his hour of glory. And Jim puts the blame for this fairly and squarely on the intransigence of Irish 'officialdom', which he alleges failed to provide him with the encouragement and international competition so vital to progress nowadays. A little regret too maybe that he hadn't gained world wide recognition as Jim Cregan. (He changed his name when he went to England under the mistaken impression that he couldn't compete legally in England, having competed in Ireland under N.A.C.A. rules — an Association outlawed by the World Controlling Body).

But on reflection, these possible regrets are incidental in such a successful and colourful career. He is rightly proud of his European medal, proud of the celebrity status he achieved after it — luncheon with the Queen at Buckingham Palace, a B.B.C. T.V. appearance, a reception from the Prime Minister. Jim now lives with his wife, the former Mary Murphy at Wellingborough, Northants and returns every year to visit his parents and brother at Coolboy, looking as fit as ever, and with the many pictures and trophies in the sittingroom together with a well filled scrap book to take him back memory's lane — Jim Hogan, European Champion 1966.