

# AN IRISH OLYMPIC DIVING LINK

By Colm Murphy

**When you trace the many and varied connections that Ireland and the Irish have had over the years with the Olympic Games and the Olympic Movement you are constantly discovering fascinating facts and stories. Sometimes these stories are quite fantastic. To me, the most fantastic involves Olympic divers: the 1948 and 1952 champion Sammy Lee, the 1928 silver and bronze-medallist Farid Simaika and my old coach, Irishman Jim Ryan.**

The story came to me in a recent letter from Dr. Sammy Lee, the first Asian-American to win an Olympic gold medal. His letter drew my attention on two levels. First, there was the Irish connection. But second there was also the military connection, and I've always had a keen interest in things military.

Sammy's letter concerned Jim Ryan, the required Irishman, and Simaika, the Egyptian who, after winning diving medals at the 1928 Olympic Games in Amsterdam, became a citizen of the United States and served as a pilot in World War II. That's the military connection.

Before I give Sammy's account of what happened in the war, I first need to provide few words on my three main characters.

Sammy's biography is published in this issue of the Journal of Olympic History and his relation with Jim Ryan is mentioned there. Simaika won the silver in platform diving and the bronze in the springboard event in 1928, as mentioned. His silver medal had to have been a big disappointment to him because at first he had been declared the champion

over "Pete" Desjardins, who had won the springboard event. Simaika was announced as the winner and the Egyptian national anthem was played. But then it was discovered that a mistake in scoring had taken place. It was, after all, the total points that decided the outcome, not the ordinals (place-figures). For little "Pete" Desjardins, he stood five-foot-three, it turned out to be his second gold medal.

In 1928 the men's diving results were as follows:

#### Springboard Diving:

1st Pete Desjardins	5	185.04 pts
2nd Michael Galitzen	14	174.06 pts
3rd Farid Simaika	13	172.46 pts

#### Platform Diving:

1st Pete Desjardins	6	98.74 pts
2nd Farid Simaika	9	99.58 pts
3rd Michael Galitzen	15	92.34 pts

When, in March 1942, Simaika became an American citizen, he joined the United States Air Corps as a pilot. Sadly, he was later shot down over New Guinea.

I am partial to the Irish since my diving coach was a 6'4", 275 lbs Irishman, Jim Ryan. Jim, coached several Olympic gold medallists. Dutch Smith, for example, who won the gold in platform diving at the 1932 Olympic Games, and, of course, the Egyptian named Farid Simaika, who for a scant several hours in 1928 had clutched the gold medal he thought was his. The moment the error in scoring was announced, all hell broke loose. It was then that Jim Ryan vowed that someday he would return to the Olympics as coach of the first non-white diver to win gold.

When World War II broke out, Simaika volunteered to fight, much to the protests of Ryan. Jim cursed him, saying that he was not an American and that he did not have to go! According to Sammy, Farid had

told him that his happiest time was when he was living in America and if he died he wanted to die for America.

With this background information, we now go back to Sammy Lee's letter:

Unbeknownst to Sammy, Simaika had in 1939 predicted to Egyptian officials that an American-born Korean would win the next gold medal. Sammy recounts that after his gold-medal performance in 1948, the Egyptians came to him said, "You have made Simaika a prophet!" They then explained his prediction of 1939. As it turned out, Sammy Lee was that American-born Korean and he had won the next Olympic diving gold medal.

The Egyptians then asked Sammy, "Is it true that Farid was beheaded by the Japanese?" Sammy answered that he had never heard that story, but if he found out he would let them know.

It was during the Korean War that, according to Sammy, he found the grisly truth.

He was walking down the hallway of an Army hospital when an U. S. Air Force colonel asked asked him, "Are you Sammy Lee?"

The following is verbatim from Sammy.

" 'Yes, I am', I replied. The Colonel then asked me if I knew Farid Simaika? I said that he had been one

of my heroes and that I had heard a rumour that the Japanese beheaded him. The Colonel said that he [Farid] had been beheaded and I asked him how he knew for sure. The Air Force Colonel then told me that he had been Farid's commanding officer. He had been the one to send Farid out on his last mission. Farid had indeed been shot down. An Australian Olympic swimmer\* later recognised Farid's head on a bamboo pole outside the latrine of the compound that was the prisoner-of-war camp! I immediately wrote to the Egyptian Olympic Committee to inform them that Farid had been beheaded. Farid had died as an American pilot, so that others like me could compete on the bloodless battlefield of the Olympic Games."

As a postscript Sammy Lee recalled that three years ago he had been in Egypt and had stood on Farid Simaika Avenue!

My thanks go to Sammy Lee for the information above!

*\* Harry Gordon, one of Australia's foremost Olympic authorities and associate editor of the Journal, questions whether it was indeed an Australian prisoner-of-war who saw Simaika's head on a bamboo pole. No Australian Olympic swimmer was captured by the Japanese and held as a prisoner-of-war during World War II.*

## LEGACY OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

The 5th Symposium of the International Chair in Olympism will be devoted to "The Legacy of the Olympic Games 1984-2000" and will be held at the Olympic Museum, Lausanne, from 14-16 November 2002.

Organised by the IOC Olympic Studies Centre and the Olympic and Sport Studies Centre of the Autonomous University of Barcelona, this symposium aims to bring together academic experts in Olympic studies, leaders of the Olympic Movement and professionals involved in the organisation of the Olympic Games.

The Symposium will deal with eight main themes :

1. Understanding Olympic Legacy and its Historical Development

2. Urban and Environmental Legacy of the Olympic Games
3. The Sporting Legacy of the Olympic Games
4. Olympic Economic and Tourism Legacies
5. Political Legacies of the Olympic Games
6. Cultural, Social and Communication Legacies
7. Olympic Education and Documentation Legacy
8. Organising and Planning the Future Olympic Legacy

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Or the Symposium web site :  
<http://blues.uab.es/olympic.studies/olympiclegacy/index.html>