

## NENAGH HONOURS THREE OLYMPIC CHAMPIONS

by Séamus Ware



The town of Nenagh, County Tipperary, Ireland, with a population of c. 6,000, proudly claims connections with three Olympic track-and-field champions.

John Joseph "Johnny" HAYES, winner of the famous 1908 Windsor-London Marathon, was the son of Michael and Ellen HAYES of Silver Street, Nenagh. The late David GUINEY (former ISOH member) was mistaken in stating in his book *Gold, Silver, Bronze* that Johnny was an infant when the family emigrated to U.S.A. – he was born in New York. Matthew "Matt" MCGRATH, hammer gold medallist 1912 and silver medallist 1908 and 1924, was born at Curraghmore, just outside Nenagh in 1875.

**The memorial to the three Olympic Champions with Nenagh roots.**

Robert M.N "Bob" TISDALL is thought to be the oldest surviving Olympic champion, at least in track-and-field events (400m. hurdles 1932), was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), but has strong links to



HAYES,  
McGRATH,  
TISDALL

Nenagh. From the age of five when his parents returned to Ireland (his father, William Newburgh TISDALL, was from County Cork), he lived firstly at Summerhill, Nenagh (from where his mother, Meta MORTON, originated), then at Monsea House (in a house reputed to be 400 years old), and finally at Hazelpoint, Dromineer a few miles outside the town, until he went to Cambridge University.

Nenagh has long been aware of its Olympic heritage, and the people of the area are determined to keep the tradition alive. The local athletic club, founded in 1955, is called Nenagh Olympic, and they succeeded in building what is still Ireland's only indoor athletic arena, where national indoor championships are held. A local man, Ger RYAN, was instigator of the project to erect a memorial to the three Olympic champions, and he went to New York to raise funds. Local support was also forthcoming and the Tipperary Olympic Gold Memorial Committee was formed in 1999. The Chairperson of the committee was Máire Hoctor, who was in May 2002 elected to the Dáil (Lower House of Parliament of Republic of Ireland), and a member was Seán Naughton, manager of the Irish athletics team in the Sydney Olympics. In this country, there is a requirement with major public works projects that a small proportion of the capital cost be devoted to a public work of art; here the National Roads Authority had recently completed a major by-pass of Nenagh, and they were willing to become the main sponsor of the three memorial statues.

On a beautiful sunny day in September 2002 there was held, as an editorial in the local newspaper (*The Guardian*) put it, "An Occasion

to Remember". The memorial was erected in the spacious grounds of Nenagh Courthouse on Banba Square. There was a separate life-size statue for each of the three Olympic champions, all designed by sculptor Jeanne RYNHART of BANTRY, County Cork, and cast in bronze. The ceremony was attended by relatives of the three champions, athletes – local, national, and Olympic – and a large number of local people. The family members were:

- (a) two first-cousins of Johnny HAYES, Mary-Ellen RUSSO-JASINSKI and Joanne RUSSO, from Connecticut, USA (HAYES' only child Doris died in October 2001).
- (b) a nephew (and also namesake) and niece of Matt McGRATH, from County Tipperary, as well as a grand-nephew and grand-niece from New York; (Matt McGRATH died in New York in January 1941, without having married).
- (c) Bob TISDALL, who was born in May 1907, is of course alive in Queensland, Australia; he was represented by two of his daughters – Sally-Ann DOUGANS from South Africa and Nena (note name!) TISDALL from Australia, together with a grand-nephew Peter HOOKER from England.

The unveiling of the statues was performed by another Olympic champion, Ronnie DELANY (1500m. 1956), assisted by the relatives. While on such occasions the "platform party" can often be overloaded with politicians and other local dignitaries, the committee took care that did not happen on this occasion. It was a nice touch, with encouragement for future generations, to involve young athletes

and local school children – in one case two young boys who are attending the primary school at Boher which Matt McGRATH attended. Ronnie DELANY in his speech stated:

*"The linkage of sport and art is so important. The Olympics are about the art of athleticism, but also art is about the wonderful physiques that one sees on the athletes. The Olympics inspires athletes to represent their country, and it was remarkable that the history of the Olympics inspires the athletes of today."*

He recalled that Nenagh Olympic Athletic Club had been in existence in 1956, when it welcomed him to Nenagh after his Olympic win in Melbourne.

After the ceremony at the Courthouse we travelled a few miles from the town to Dromineer Bay Hotel at Lough Derg on the River Shannon. Refreshments were provided before proceeding with Part 2 of the Ceremony. I was fortunate to have an invitation as I had composed brief inscriptions in Irish for the bases of the three statues. Committee members gave short talks on each of the three Olympic champions being honoured. I learned that Irving Berlin composed a song about Johnny HAYES; he (born and lived in New York) visited Nenagh in 1908 following his triumph in London, and in 1962. About the former occasion he wrote: *"We left London to visit my grandfather in Nenagh. We were met at the train by a delegation from the Urban Council and I was carried on the shoulders of the immense throng"* Bob TISDALL had been invited to the celebration, but his health (at the age of 95) did not allow him to make the journey, and he sent a short video with a special message; he said: *"I have never been paid such a tremendous compliment in my life; after all. I am not dead yet and here's a statue unveiled to me"* A specially compiled film, with old footage of the Olympic victories of the three champions and interviews with relatives, was shown. Copies in video form are for sale, together with

miniature versions of the statues (E125 each); contact: Ger RYAN, Hon. Secretary, 3 Mitchel St., Nenagh, Co. Tipperary, or Peter GLEESON, P.R.O., *The Guardian*, Nenagh.

#### **Addendum: Conversations with and about Olympians**

At the commemorative occasion in Nenagh (Sept. 2002), I had the opportunity to mix with several Irish people connected in various ways with the Olympic Games. In particular, I had interesting conversations with Maeve KYLE and her husband Seán, who made the long journey from Ballymena, County Antrim. This couple, who are now aged in their 70s., have a long record of involvement with track-and-field athletics, and are still active in coaching. Maeve was the first woman athlete to represent Ireland in the Olympic Games and is among the small number of Irish women to have represented their country in three Olympics.

Seán KYLE told me that, as a student in 1948, he helped during the London Olympics. Among his duties was to clean the living quarters of the Czechoslovak team, and as a result he got a ticket to the 10,000 final where he saw Emil ZATOPEK win. In 1960, he went to Rome as a spectator and (security being more lax than it is now) he was admitted to the Olympic Village as his wife, Maeve, was on the Irish team. He was sitting on a deckchair when a man approached who asked: *"am I near the Irish quarters?"* KYLE answered: *"you are, Mr. Tisdall"*. Bob TISDALL asked: *"how did you know me?"* and the reply was: *"from photos"*.

Later Seán KYLE met with Bob TISDALL again and walked with him on the Via Veneto and through an underpass. They saw a man coming towards them whom KYLE recognised as the great ZATOPEK. Seán said to him: *"Colonel, I would like you to meet Bob Tisdall, a 1932 Olympic champion"*. ZATOPEK replied: *"I know, he is my hero, I have his photo at home!"*