

PADDY RYAN - OLYMPIC HAMMER THROW CHAMPION

by David Guiney and Bill Dooley

“Paddy” Ryan, born on 4 January 1887 in Pallasgreen, County Limerick, Ireland, won his first Irish hammer title in 1902 when, as a virtual novice, he beat the great Tom Kiely for the championship. In 1910, Ryan emigrated to America and, after placing third in the hammer at the 1911 AAU meet, improved to take second place in 1912 before taking his first AAU title in 1913. Apart from 1918, when he was in France with the American Expeditionary Forces⁶⁸, he then won the hammer title up to 1921, when he retired.

Ryan was not eligible to represent the U.S. at the 1912 Olympics, but the following year, at the 1913 Eccentric Fireman’s Games (17 August 1913) he set the first official IAAF world record with a throw of 57.77 metres (189’6½”⁶⁹), which was to remain a world record for more than 25 years and was not beaten as a U.S. record until 1953.

Ryan⁶⁹, in his hey-day, was endowed with a magnificent frame, his build, from the knees up, depicting a strength in every line and course while, in addition to this, he was gifted with a pair of small and shapely feet which would do credit to a ballet dancer - a rare combination.

In 1920, Paddy Ryan won the Olympic title by the widest margin on record, beating Carl Lindh⁷⁰ of Sweden by almost 4½ metres (14½ feet). At the time of the Antwerp Olympics,⁷⁰ he was 37 years old and his 1.91 metres (6’3”) was carrying a great deal of excess avoirdupois, his weight being somewhere in the region of 18-19 stone (115-120 kg. [250-265 lbs.]).

Imbibing rather freely of French and Belgian wines the night before the hammer throw, he greeted Lawson Robertson, the American coach, who called him on the morning of the great day with the rather discouraging remark . . . “I’m dying.”

The one and only Lawson knew that if he could get Paddy to the Stadium, the latter would do the rest and with certain admonitions, sent him on his way. But Paddy needed a helping of “Irish” or “Scotch”⁷¹ to counteract the effects of the weaker vintages and made for the first available saloon in which he and another member of the American team tarried a little longer than they had first intended.

In a last-minute rush for the Stadium Ryan halted a lorry in the streets of Antwerp and sitting in the tail with his legs dangling out, drove in state to the scene of action. Arriving there, Paddy discovered he had forgotten his shoes and sent his comrade to the dressing room for the loan of a pair with good spikes in the heels.

Those were forthcoming and Paddy marched on the ground where a few flags were already fluttering in the breeze to denote the distances attained by the other aspirants for the hammer crown, in the early rounds.

Paddy’s next request was one of the most extraordinary. . . “Young fellow . . . would you mind standing a few yards beyond the best mark. I want to use you as a target for I can’t see those flags.”

⁶⁸Of note, Ryan did not participate at the Inter-Allied Games of 1919 which were an international sporting contest among members of the expeditionary forces which had fought in Europe during World War I.

⁶⁹Ryan was always known as “Paddy” and never “Pat.”

⁷⁰His closest friend in Antwerp was John B. Kelly

⁷¹Paddy was always a beer or Guinness drinker. I remember he said once to me, “I wouldn’t wash my feet in Scotch whiskey.”

Ryan wore a pair of baggy trousers and a cap, too small for him, hung at a rakish angle and in this quaint garb, his appearance was described as positively mountainous. Throwing the cap aside and slipping the suspenders⁷², he laid hold of the hammer and forced his living target to duck with a throw of over 173'⁷³ (to be precise 52.875 metres, or 173'5³/₄") which won him the Olympic gold medal.

Ryan also competed in the 56-lb. weight throw at the 1920 Olympics, in which he finished second to Pat McDonald. While in New York, Ryan worked as a labor foreman, but in 1924 he returned to Eire to take over the family farm and remained there until his death on 13 February 1964 in County Limerick.

(Extracted from an article on Paddy Ryan by the late Bill Dooley, probably written in the late 1930s or early 1940s, with notes provided by Dave Guiney. Supplemented with biographical notes from *Quest for Gold: The Encyclopaedia of American Olympians*, Bill Mallon and Ian Buchanan [New York, Leisure, 1984])

⁷²Pictures of Paddy Ryan at Antwerp show him in U.S. singlet and shorts (admittedly "baggy" ones) and there is no trace of suspenders.

⁷³In my own interviews with Paddy about Antwerp in 1920, his major story was always about how he managed to get Tom Nicolson (British), an old friend, into the final six in the hammer final. Nicolson had arrived late for the preliminaries and Paddy staged a minor "revolt" to get Tom included in the final six without qualifying.