

THE OLYMPIC COUNCIL OF IRELAND

by David Guiney

Whether or not J. J. Keane played any part in Tom Kiely's decision to travel to the third celebration of the Olympic Games at St. Louis in 1904 is not known but the likelihood is that he did. By then Keane had become the most powerful voice in the Gaelic Athletic Association's government of track and field athletics, he was well-known to all of the G.A.A.'s top athletes and his influence in athletic affairs, which had become an irritant to many of the time, was, of course, to lead to the establishment of the Athletic Council within the structure of the G.A.A. in 1905.

Tom Kiely was then Ireland's most famous all-round athlete and, like Keane, was utterly loyal and dedicated to the G.A.A. Obviously they would have known each other extremely well and it must be close to certain that Keane did talk to Kiely about his possible participation in the third celebration of the Games and probably helped to raise the money to cover Kiely's expenses in travelling to and living in the United States.

Between 1892-1908 Tom Kiely of Ballyneale set up a remarkable record in Irish sport by winning more than 70 gold medals in Irish, British, American and World championship events, ranging from the hammer and hop-step-and-jump to the 120 yards hurdles and the sprints. Had he competed at the Olympic Games of 1896 and 1900, he would, without any doubt, have won several medals. As it was, his only Olympic appearance was at St. Louis in 1904 - and that to a subject of much confusion which took many years to unravel.

The 1904 celebration of the Olympic Games was a chaotic affair, lasting from 1 July to 21 November and, to a considerable extent, was confined to American athletes. The records and results of this celebration were badly kept and, indeed, it is on record in most of the Olympic histories that many of those who took part did not become aware for many years later that they had become Olympic medal-winners. And through a most extraordinary omission, the name of Tom Kiely, for many years, was missing from the Roll of Honor in 1904. Fortunately, through the good offices of the Olympic historian, Dr. Ferenc Mezó of Hungary and with a little help from the author, this was rectified in 1968 and Kiely's name was restored to the list of Olympic champions for 1904.

In early 1904, Kiely was invited by the New York Athletic Club to take part in the Olympic Games at St. Louis and obviously, at the time, the New York A.C. had hopes to win that year's All-Around championship which was also to be an Olympic championship. When news of this got out, the Amateur Athletic Association in London promptly offered to pay all of Kiely's expenses to the Games, provided, of course, that Kiely would represent the United Kingdom. Kiely declined this invitation by the A.A.A. and subsequently, with the aid of his admirers in Ballyneale and in the counties of Tipperary and Waterford and certainly with the help of the Gaelic Athletic Association, he paid his own passage to America.

On his arrival there he again turned down offers of financial assistance and in a newspaper cutting in one of his scrapbooks, kindly lent to me by members of the Kiely family, there is the following extract from a Waterford newspaper of 1904. "He entered the competition as Tom Kiely of Ireland and Tipperary. Despite the tempting offers to compete in the Olympic Games under the banners of the powerful American associations, notably the New York Athletic Club, the Irish-American Athletic Club and the Chicago Athletic Association, he never failed in adherence to his native country."

And it was as a competitor representing Ireland that Tom Kiely took part in the All-Around championship at the Olympic Stadium in St. Louis in 1904. Prior to this the All-

Around championship had been an American championship only but in 1904, because of the third celebration of the Olympic Games, the title was recognized as an Olympic championship.

In St. Louis, Kiely found living quarters with John Flanagan and Martin Sheridan, both representing the United States and he was joined by John Holloway, another athlete from Tipperary, and John J. Daly, a native of Ballyglunin, County Galway, who had come to America at the invitation of the Irish-American Athletic Club.

On 4 July 1904, Kiely and Holloway, both wearing green singlets with large Shamrock crests, competed in the one-day all-around championship against five of America's most versatile athletes - Ellery Clarke, Truxtun Hare, Adam Gunn, John Grieb, and Max Emmerich. Both Clarke and Hare had been American champions in this event and Hare had also taken an Olympic silver medal behind John Flanagan in the hammer at Paris in 1900.

Kiely started badly with last place in the 100 yards and he was also to finish last in the mile but he went on to take first place in the 120 yards hurdles and 880 yards walk, fourth place in the high jump, second in the long jump, third in the pole vault and he finished with two further first places in the hammer and 56 lb. weight-throw. The final result was: 1. Tom Kiely (Ireland), 6,036 points, 2. Adam Gunn (USA) 5,907, 3. Truxtun Hare (USA) 5,813, 4. John Holloway (Ireland) 5,273, 5. Ellery Clarke (USA) 2,778, and 6. John Grieb (USA) 2199.

Later in the Olympic programme, John D. Daly, also wearing a green singlet with the distinctive Shamrock crest, took the Olympic silver medal in the 2,590 metres steeplechase and John Flanagan, in the hammer and tug-of-war, and Martin Sheridan in the discus took Olympic gold medals. Flanagan of County Limerick and Sheridan, a native of Bohola, County Mayo were, of course, representing the United States of America.

But Tom Kiely was always adamant that he represented Ireland at the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis and, happily, nowadays, his gold medal victory at the third celebration of the Games is credited to this country. Without any doubt, his victory, was to lead to the protest by Peter O'Connor and Con Leahy at the Intercalated Olympic Games of 1906 in Athens.

By 1906, the Athletics Council within the G.A.A. had come into being, J. J. Keane by now was the most influential man in Irish track and field athletics and significantly Con Leahy, then one of Ireland's greatest champions in the high jump, was a member of the Athletics Council.

Again in the absence of records - and the G.A.A. minute books of 1905 or 1906 do not refer in anyway to the matter - it has to be assumed that when Keane heard of the proposed Intercalated Games in Athens, he decided that the G.A.A.'s athletes would be represented there and that it would be an appropriate time to draw attention to the sad fact that Ireland's athletes could compete in an Olympic Games only as members of the United Kingdom team.

Ireland's representation of athletes, even as part of a United Kingdom team, was small at Athens in 1906 and the newspaper accounts of the time indicate that only four athletes travelled to Greece - Peter O'Connor, Con Leahy, John D. Daly and John McGough. Peter O'Connor, a native of Ashford, County Wicklow but a resident of Waterford for most of his life, was 34 at the time of the Athens celebration and definitely in the twilight of his great athletic career. He had set his first world record of 24'7" in the long jump in 1900, had then improved it to 24'9" and on 1 August 1901 had cleared 24' 11³/₄" which was to endure as a world record for 20 years and is still the Irish national record in 1996.

In Athens, in controversial circumstances, O'Connor placed second in his favorite event, the long jump but later in the Games came back to take the gold medal in the hop-step-and-jump. In the hop-step-and-jump, Con Leahy, who had won the gold medal in the high jump, took second place to O'Connor. John McGough, a native of County Monaghan, won the Olympic silver medal behind James Lightbody (USA) in the 1,500 metres.

However, the real story of Ireland's participation in the Intercalated Olympic Games of 1906 - and one that emphasizes Ireland's dissatisfaction at having to compete in Olympic

events as members of an United Kingdom team - is told by Peter O'Connor himself. Shortly before his death he was interviewed at great length by the G. A. A. historian, Seamus O'Ceallaigh of Limerick and the following was published in *The Limerick Leader* of 25 August 1956.

“Con Leahy and myself were supplied with lovely green blazers, bound with gold braid around the sides, cuffs, collar and lapels with a gold shamrock on left breast and green caps to match with shamrock on front, also with green flags with a gold harp and the words ‘Eire go Brath’ measuring about six feet by four feet . . .

“On arrival I found that Leahy, Daly and myself were described as British in the published programme of the athletic events. On the advice of the President of the American Athletic Committee, I wrote to the Olympic Committee about this . . .

“I have a copy of that letter making a strong protest and stating emphatically that we represented Ireland, that our expenses had been paid by Irishmen and that we objected, if any were successful, to our wins being recorded in any way as points for England. My letter came before the Olympic Committee, but on a vote the British scored a victory, the Greek delegates supporting the claim on the former that Ireland was then part of the United Kingdom.”

O'Connor goes on to point out that the British judges resented the Irish attitude and subsequently refused to be present when the long jump contest took place and adds that “I was robbed deliberately, in consequence, through Halpin, the American trainer, acting as sole judge in measuring each competitor’s jump.” O'Connor duly protested to Prince George of Greece without success. “I then found the two English judges who should have acted,” he says, “but they curtly told me that owing to my letter repudiating England they would not act.”

That Peter O'Connor was enraged over the judging in the long jump, which was won by Myer Prinstein (USA) by a matter of six inches, is evident. “If my wife had not been present looking at the contest, which restrained me,” he says, “I would have been beaten Halpin to a pulp.” However, in tracing the history of Ireland’s participation in the Olympic Games prior to this country’s recognition as a separate nation at Paris in 1924, the end of O'Connor’s interview is significant.

“The limit, however, was reached when the officials hoisted on the Olympic masts the three flags indicting the nationality of the first, second and third winners of the long jump - the British Union Jack being flown for my being second.

“I was an accomplished gymnast in my youth and my active climbing of the post excited the spectators. At a height of about 20 feet I unfurled my big green flag and remained aloft for some considerable time waving it vigorously. Con Leahy assisted in the demonstration by keeping fighting guard at the foot of the pole, meantime waving his green flag and defying every effort of the officials to prevent the demonstration which caused a great sensation.”