



Interview with an 1896 Olympic Champion

Note by Séamus Ware: The following is taken from a (rather poor) photocopy of the *Evening Herald* (Dublin) of 2 May 1896, which I came on. I tried to check microfilms of this newspaper in the National Library in Dublin, but unfortunately they were missing for the relevant period.

Lawn Tennis - Our Olympian Champion - Mr. J.P. Boland

Ever zealous to maintain the prestige of the "Evening Herald" for earliest and best interviews with celebrities of the world of sport – especially with those who are victorious sons of Erin – your correspondent waited yesterday on Mr. J.P. Boland, the Olympian Lawn Tennis Champion, at his town residence, No. 29 Upper Leeson Street.

Broad-shouldered and finely made, as he stood to receive me, he towered well nigh six feet two inches. Here indeed was a supple athlete, capable of excellence in any game. An under graduate of Oxford, one of its best cricketers of the day, he regards lawn tennis, the game in which his everlasting distinction has been won, as decidedly second to England's national pastime – cricket.

But for his illness Oxford would have had him in time to take his place on her first eleven. As the nephew of Bishop Donnelly, he passed a period of his boyhood at the Oratory of Cardinal Newman, where the advantages and enjoyment of good court and good practice, together with his aptitude for all games, soon rendered him a comparative proficient at lawn tennis, and this qualification, though it received but little further cultivation at Oxford, enabled our youthful hero, then staying in Germany, to respond to the invitation issued by the revivers of the Olympian Games - their desire to have the games up-to-date having led to the inclusion of lawn tennis in the list of events.

"Then you had very little opportunity for training in preparation for the contest?" True, said Mr. Boland, but I understood that the reestablishment being a project the success of which many felt inclined to doubt, would attract very few of the well-known champions of the game, such as Dr. Pim, and in any event I wished to see the classic locality, and behold the monuments as it were of its glorious antiquity. His nephew entertained me at the house of the great German explorer, Dr. Schliemann, now dead. I saw many things of surpassing interest to a classical student. "That

must indeed have been nice", I chimed in, "and I suppose you went from Germany through Austria?" Yes, he added, by Vienna, Graz, Trieste, and the boat from Bari. "How delightful", I exclaimed, "how did you find Athens and the Greek people?" The Greeks, he said, are a splendid race; with all their fine instinct for sport well preserved; hospitable, enthusiastic, unjealous, fair and impartial. Athens all alive and quivering with emotion to make the celebration of the Olympian games worthy of the past, the city gay decked with bunting, the competitors and visitors from all parts of the world intent on the greatness of the occasion; M. Averoff, the native millionaire, the donor of £100,000 for the restoration of the Stadium and the revival of the contests, was there, surrounded by many others; engaged in the laudable enterprise of furnishing modern Greece with the ancient title of fame.

"Was the weather propitious?" A little cold, and on the day fixed for the distribution of prizes, as we would call it, rainy.

"Had the Greeks much tennis before?" Well, I found courts in three or four places, but I fancy most of their good players were Anglo-Greeks or Greeks who had been in England.

"In the singles, who was your chief opponent?" Traun of Hamburg, from whom I only won by 2 sets to 1. Next I would fancy Kasdiaglis, Petrokinos, and Akrapopolous.

"Wasn't Traun your partner in the doubles?" Yes, but we had little play together beforehand, and the Greek combination was pretty good. However, we won, and this enabled me for the second time to have Ireland accredited with victory.

"I observe that there were only two entries from Great Britain besides your own. Can you tell me if any of the Americans who entered were Irish?" Well, their names would rather denote that, but it was the American spirit of travel, perhaps, that most accounted for their presence at Athens.

"What was the most exciting event?" The Marathon Race of 26 miles. On the winning of this the Greeks had set their heart; it was really a glorious spectacle - the whole country watching with eager anxiety. . . . The morning of the prize distribution was wet and the crowning ceremony was therefore postponed till Wednesday. The King, accompanied by his Royal Consort and several of the Princes, awarded the honours. He is an excellent linguist, and addressed each successful competitor appropriately in the language of that competitor's native country. To each he gave an olive branch, as was done in days of yore, and to each also a grand diploma. Here is mine, and thereupon Mr. Boland produced a most artistic work of art on thick cardboard, with authentic signatures in an appended certificate. I may add, he said, that we were very well entertained, and now that the success of this great international gathering on neutral and classic territory has been established, it would be a pity if on the next occasion some dozen or so of the best athletes from Ireland didn't go forward to take their share and mead of honour as they well can do. A great impetus has been given to sport in Greece. In every direction new clubs have been started, and the new games are being practised. The next meeting has been fixed for 1900, after which it will be regularly quadrennial.