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New York Local News

Irish 'Field of Dreams' kept alive by Queens historian

By Kristen Hamill

The Irish American Athletic Club, once comprised of some of our nation's greatest athletes, is now little more than a collection of trophies, faded photographs, and memories passed down through generations.

Even the club's stadium, built in 1898 to host 30 years of track and field events, baseball, Gaelic football and hurling games, is now gone, replaced by the Celtic Park apartment complex, named after the famous athletic venue.

Ian McGowan, a resident of Celtic Park, began researching the Irish American Athletic Club shortly after moving into the building. What started as curiosity developed into six years of research and campaigning to keep the IAAC's memory alive.

"Celtic Park was the premier venue for Irish athletic events in the early 20th century," said McGowan, "it's now all but forgotten. In 2008 I formed the Winged Fist Organization as a pledge to preserve the legacy of the IAAC."

McGowan, alongside New

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York Gaelic Athletics Association chairman Larry McCarthy, will present a lecture titled "The Irish Contribution to Amateur Athletics in Early 20th Century New York: The Irish-American Athletic Club and the Gaelic Athletic Association," at the American Irish Historical Society on May 27.

The Irish American Athletic Club was formed as an alternative to the New York Athletic Club, which discriminated against Irish as well as Jewish and African American athletes, all of whom were welcomed into the club.

The club competed in the Olympic Games from 1900-1920, including the controversial 1908 London Olympic Games that was plagued by corruption on the judge panel, tension between UK and American athletes, and was the first time

America refused to dip the flag to royalty, a tradition that is still practiced today. Out of the 120 American Olympic team members that year, 20 belonged to the IAAC, and out of the 24 gold medals awarded, twelve were earned by IAAC athletes.

The IAAC dominated in field events, particularly those that involved weight throwing, earning a group of the athletes the nickname "the Irish Whales."

"They were nicknamed the whales not only because of the impact and domination that they had in sports, but also because of their size, and their appetites," McGowan laughed, adding that other Olympic athletes were amazed by the amount of food the "whales" could consume prior to competition.

Aside from his research, McGowan fields a number of emails from descendants of IAAC athletes, looking to find or sometimes provide information about the club's former members.

"I was contacted by the great grandson of Patrick Sheehan, he had a medal that they had kept in the family and found a

reference to a record [Sheehan] set, but they weren't sure what it was."

McGowan did some digging and discovered that the medal was for a race Sheehan had won in 1909, setting a world record. The information was exactly what the family needed to induct their great grandfather into the U.S. Track and Field Hall of Fame.

"That's one case of how I've been excited to have people reach out with photos and memorabilia of former members," said McGowan, who encourages anyone who thinks their relative might have been part of the IAAC to contact him.

"I want to get people to say 'hey, wasn't Grandpa an athlete, didn't he compete in that event?' and get in touch with me," said McGowan. "It's sort of like an Irish 'Field of Dreams.' If I build it, they will come."

To learn more about the IAAC and the Winged Fist Organization, visit www.WingedFist.org. For more information on the American Irish Historical Society lecture visit www.aihs.org.



'Irish Whales.' John Flanagan, Martin Sheridan, James Mitchell.



Melvin W. Sheppard, 1908 Olympic Games.