

IRELAND'S RECORD IN HAMMER THROWING

MEMORIES OF LATE JOHN FLANAGAN

GREATEST OF ALL

By P. D. M.

THE man who took the world's record in hammer-throwing from 156 to 187 feet, bringing an old Irish pastime of the crossroads into the forefront of international athletics, died at the home of his ancestors during the week—at Kilbreedy, Kilmallock, Co. Limerick. The Davins and Kielys, of Carrick-on-Suir, had blazed the trail, but it was John Flanagan that built the city.

From 1898 to 1908 he was the biggest attraction in American athletics, winning a score of championships; a headline on every athletic bill from St. Louis to Toronto, and from San Francisco to New York.

East Limerick and the Tipperary border had a tradition of weight-throwing wending back to penal days. Their blend of Celtic and Norman blood in Ormonde produced a race of giants—Davins, Kielys, Ryans, Dalys, Purcells, McGraths, Reals, O'Gradys, Colls, Roches, O'Flanagans, Bresnihan's.

Weight-Throwing Was in His Blood

Compared with his father, Michael O'Flanagan, of Kilbreedy, champion weight-thrower in the 60's and 70's, John Flanagan was a small man, smallest of his brothers in point of height—Denis, Tom, Richard, Patrick, William were all six-foot men. John was little taller than 5ft. 9in.; but he made up in symmetry and power what he lacked in height. He was built like the trunk of an oak tree, suggesting power and speed all

over; handsome head; black, curling hair; chest like a barrel, arms and legs like the pillars of a gate.

At twenty years of age he was winning sprints and jumps without number at local sports. When he came to man's estate he took to all-round weight-throwing as a duck to water. Weight-throwing was in his blood—O'Flanagans and Kinnealds from the mountain foot of the Ballyhouras, on the borders of Limerick, Cork, and Tipperary.

He played hurling with the famous Kilfinane team, and took a hand at Gaelic football; but when his measurements extended he took up hammer-throwing seriously. He studied Davin and Kiely; his clever brain evolved methods far in advance of either. He got in a remarkable throw at Clonmel in 1896.

His English and American Conquests

Crossing to England John Flanagan won the A.A.A. hammer championship at Northampton at 131 feet 11 inches—reads moderate nowadays. Yet this was with the plain cane handle and straight grip.

It was his uncle, Eugene Kinneald, of New York, prominent in municipal affairs, that induced John Flanagan to emigrate. He joined the New York Athletic Club and the New York Police, opening an athletic career that put Irish athletics in the world forefront. Under skilful coaches, the Co. Limerick man reached superb physical condition; he established records with all manner of weights from the 56 lbs. down—some of them held to this day—56 lbs. around head, and 14 lbs. winding weight.

But it was as a hammer-thrower he made his name. The 9-foot circle and then the 7-foot circle were established. A wire handle took the place of cane.

Then came ball-bearing swivels and double grip. Flanagan was responsible for the popularity of these evolutions. He pioneered the "three turns" in the circle. He touched astonishing figures.

Olympic Triumphs of 1900-4-8

There can be no doubt about his doubling attendances at athletic meetings in the American Continent. He filled the headlines as he stretched the figures from 157 feet to 170 feet, and finally to 180 feet—unprecedented at his time.

He won the Olympic Championship at Paris in 1900—167 feet 4 inches, and came over to London to win the A.A.A. title at 4 feet less. At St. Louis in the Olympic Games of 1904 he retained his title at 168 feet 1 inch, and preserved his form to establish a record of continuity when he won the Olympic title for the third successive time—in London in 1908, with new Olympic figures—170 feet 4 1/4 inches.

John Flanagan visited Ireland that year and made a new world's record at the D.M.P. Sports, Ballsbridge—173 feet 10 inches. He competed at many meetings here. Shortly after his return to America he astonished the athletic world in taking the record to 184 feet 9 1/4 inches. He returned to settle down in Ireland in 1911—laden with honours.

Set a Standard for the World

Flanagan's successors in record-breaking—fellow-countrymen in Matt McGrath, of Nenagh, and P. J. Ryan, of Pallasgreen, were six-foot men. They built their style on the Flanagan mode, and made new records—P. J. Ryan's 189.6 1/2 still holds.

Dr. O'Callaghan also took lessons from John Flanagan, and all his big throws had their foundation on the Flanagan style. Our recent performers—W. Britton, D. Coyle and B. Healion, all conform to the same basic technique. Flanagan established a cult which other nations were glad to copy, and he was always anxious to instruct and encourage youth.

In private life John Flanagan was simple and modest—almost shy; hospitable in his home to a fault. A progressive farmer, he was loved and respected by neighbours at home and by sportsmen in far distant places. In a period of Irish athletic brilliancy, he was a shining star.

A distinguished Irish-American friend once said to me:—"We all loved Flanagan—a white man. He had the sunshine of America on his back for a dozen years, yet he never changed." Irish athletics owe him a debt of deep gratitude.—R.I.P.



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