

O'Callaghan, Patrick ('Pat')

by Paul Rouse

O'Callaghan, Patrick ('Pat') (1905–91), Olympic champion athlete and world record holder, was born 15 September 1905 at Derrygallon, Kanturk, Co. Cork. He attended the RCSI in Dublin and qualified as a doctor at the age of 20. He joined the Royal Air Force medical corps in 1926 on a short-service engagement, before moving to Clonmel, Co. Tipperary, to work as an assistant medical officer in St Luke's Mental Hospital (1931), later setting up as a general practitioner in that town. He continued to practise there until the late 1980s.

While in university, he developed an interest in the hammer, having seen the country's top hammer-throwers practise at the UCD grounds, then at Terenure. At home in Cork for the summer, he did not have access to a hammer, so he collected an old cannon ball from Macroom Castle which he felt might approximate to the required 16 lb (7.25 kg) weight, had it drilled at a foundry in Mallow and fitted with a handle and wire, and used it to train at the family farm. In 1926 he won the Munster title in the 56 lb (25.4 kg) shot and followed that with an Irish hammer title in 1927. Victory the following year in that same championship qualified him for the Olympic games in Amsterdam, which he entered as a complete unknown with a previous best of 166 ft 11 in. (50.87 m), as against three other contenders who had each thrown well over 170 ft (51.8 m). The hammer event was staged on 30 July 1928 and, lying third after four rounds, he threw 168 ft 7 in. (51.38 m) with his penultimate attempt, to defeat the Swedish favourite, Ossian Skjold, by 4 in. (10 cm), with the American contenders Edmund Black and Frank Conner, still further behind. He became the first athlete from the Irish Free State to be crowned Olympic champion. Less than a fortnight later, he won the Tailteann games with an Irish record throw of 170 ft 2 in. (51.87 m).

Over the following years he won events across Ireland and Europe and continued to achieve pioneering feats, not least in 1931, when he won six Irish titles in one afternoon: hammer, shot put, discus, high jump, 56 lbs with follow, and 56 lbs over the bar. On 1 August 1932 he defended his Olympic title at Los Angeles. With just one throw left in the competition, he trailed second behind the Finnish champion, Ville Porhola. With his last throw, he claimed the event with a distance of 176 ft 11 in. (53.92 m), becoming the only Irish person in history to win two gold medals at the Olympic games. He seemed in prime condition to defend his title for a third time at the 1936 games in Berlin, but a dispute in the athletics world brought the suspension of the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland by the International Amateur Athletic Federation. The subsequent decision not to send a team to Berlin by the Irish Olympic Council denied him the opportunity to win a hat-trick of gold medals.

He remained a dominant force in athletic circles, however. In 1934 he set the record for the hammer on European soil with a throw of 186 ft 10 in. (56.95 m) at Enniscorthy, Co Wexford. He later achieved an unofficial world record in the hammer in 1937 in Fermoy, Co. Cork, with a remarkable throw of 195 ft 5 in. (59.55 m), breaking the old record by more than 6 ft (1.83 m). As the IAAF still refused to sanction the NACAI, the record was not ratified, ensuring that the then twenty-four-year-old record of his compatriot, Patrick Ryan (qv), who competed for America, remained in place. In total, as well as his two Olympic gold medals, he also won six Irish championships in the hammer, four Irish championships in the 56 lb shot, three Irish championships throwing the 56 lb weight over the bar, and one Irish championship in the discus. He also won the American hammer championship in 1933 and the British championship in the same event the following year. Despite his size, he jumped 6 ft 2 in. (1.88 m) in the high jump and was Irish champion on three consecutive occasions (1929–31).

After an accident in which a child was killed by a flying hammer, he emigrated to America just before the second world war and took up professional wrestling. Attempts were made to set up a match with world wrestling champion Dan O'Mahoney, but this never occurred. He had a high profile, however. Sam Goldwyn offered him the film role of Tarzan and he played handball with Bing Crosby before returning home to Clonmel, where he became a prominent member of Clonmel Commercials Gaelic football club and managed that club's senior team to three county championships (1965–7). He was later chairman and honorary president of the club. In 1984 he was made a freeman of Clonmel, a town where he was known as 'the doc' or 'Dr Pat' and revered as a humble, charming, jovial man, with a reputation for particular kindness to his poorer patients. At 6 ft 1 in. (1.855 m) and sixteen stone (101.6 kg), he was a larger-than-life figure and the focal point of innumerable stories confirming his status as a living legend. In 1960 he was the first person voted into the newly conceived Texaco Hall of Fame. He lived for many years at Roseville, Western Road, Clonmel, and died there on 1 December 1991.

He was survived by three sons and one daughter. His younger brother Con represented Ireland in the decathlon at the 1928 Olympic games and won that event at the third Tailteann games in 1932.

---

'Carbery', *50 years of Irish athletics* (1944); David Guiney, *Ireland and the Olympics* (1976); *The Nationalist*, 7 Dec. 1991; Linde Naughton and Johnny Waterson, *Irish Olympians* (1992); *Ir. Times*, 29 June 1993; *Fyffes*; Peter Matthews and Ian Buchanan, *The all-time greats of British and Irish sport* (1996); Boylan (1998 ed.)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Wed Dec 02 13:34:14 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.