

Sport and self-determination - making Ireland's case for Olympic recognition

By Mark Duncan

Maybe the International Olympic Committee had invested too much in the branding, had gone too far down the road of designing logos and producing the signage, t-shirts, mugs and all the other sell-able bric-a-brac to do any different.

Tokyo 2020 it was and Tokyo 2020 it will remain, even if, courtesy of the cursed Coronavirus, it'll be Tokyo 2021 when it all eventually kicks off - to what will be saturated media coverage and a certain public scepticism born of the athletic scandals of recent decades.

The Olympic Games are of course all about sport and very little to do with sport.

A mere glance at the list of big name sponsors lined up to support next year's event (titans of the globalised economy the lot of them) is sufficient to underline just what a commercial juggernaut they've become.

They are intensely political, too. Always have been. Despite a founding vision for the Olympics that sport might transcend political disputes and better promote international peace, the very fact of nations being represented on a global sporting stage meant otherwise. It ensured that from its very inception the modern Olympics served as much to expose and amplify international political tensions as conceal and lessen them.

So it certainly was when Ireland made its own historic pitch for Olympic representation. Indeed, had this summer's games gone ahead as scheduled it would have coincided neatly with the centenary of the establishment of the Irish Olympic Council (IOC) - a forerunner of the current Olympic Federation of Ireland - and the beginnings of formal efforts to secure Ireland's right to compete as a separate country.

That the emergence of the IOC - it was founded at a meeting Gresham Hotel in April 1920 - overlapped with the Irish war of independence was no accident.

Following Sinn Féin's extraordinary success at the 1918 Westminster election and the subsequent establishment of Dáil Éireann, republican political activity was largely focussed on the assertion of its legitimacy - and not just at home. To impress upon the world Ireland's claim to independence, consuls were established in a number of European capitals, while Sinn Féin President, Eamon de Valera, embarked on a lengthy tour of the United States to raise funds, publicity and popular and political support for the right to Irish self-determination.

What de Valera was aiming to do in the international political arena, the Irish Olympic Council sought to do in its sporting sphere. The endgame was essentially the same: international recognition for Ireland's right to stand apart as an independent state.

For Irish athletes, there had been no prior barriers to participation in competitions like the Olympics games. They had done so as individual competitors since 1896 and once it fell to national Olympic committees to enter athletes from 1906 onwards, they did so under the banner of other countries, most notably Great Britain and the United States. Only once - and famously - did this give rise to serious political protest: at the 1906 Intercalated Games in Athens, Peter O'Connor, incensed at the ceremonial hoisting of a union jack to honour his silver medal for the long jump, scaled the flagpole to wave a green flag bearing the message 'Erin go Bragh' as fellow Irishmen Con Leahy stood guard below him.¹

For Irish athletes competing and winning in the vest of the United States there was no inclination to attempt demonstrations of this spectacular kind. The absence of a political quarrel with America was an obvious reason for this. So too, however, was the inclination to imagine the Olympic achievements of men like John Flanagan and Martin Sheridan as reflecting almost as gloriously upon Ireland as the country they actually represented.

Eamon ('Ned') Broy, best known as Michael Collins's intelligence agent in Dublin Castle during the war of independence and for his subsequent posting as Garda Commissioner, recalled how cuttings from American newspapers highlighting the world-beating performances of these Irish-born athletes would be sent home to Ireland from relatives resident in the U.S.

According to Broy, their achievements 'kept Irish prestige high before the nations of the world. Whilst Ireland, unfree, could not participate in world competition, her athletic "patron saints" in

¹ Tom Hunt, *The Little Book of Irish Athletics* (2017) p. 41-42; Paul Rouse, *Sport and Ireland* (2015) p. 260-261

America did the next best thing by putting up the Stars and Stripes at the Olympic Games and leaving nobody in doubt as to the land of their birth.’²

Broy would himself serve as President of the Irish Olympic Council from 1933 to 1950, but it was his predecessor, J.J. Keane who spearheaded the campaign for Irish athletes to contest as a right for their own country of birth.

A Limerick native, Keane was a champion athlete and two-time All-winner footballer with Dublin club Geraldines; more significantly, in this context, he headed up the athletic council of the GAA, which made him, athletics writer Dave Guiney once asserted, the ‘most influential man in Irish track and field athletics’.³ Keane’s profile and influence was extended further when, following a meeting in the Gresham Hotel in Dublin on 27 April 1920, he was elected to chair a Provisional Committee of the newly-established IOC.

The meeting itself was an impressively high profile - and exclusively male - gathering: while Sinn Féin’s Arthur Griffith and the Dublin’s Lord Mayor, Laurence O’Neill, sent their apologies, the attendance did include Douglas Hyde, Oliver St. John Gogarty, and Dr. Denis Coffey, the President of UCD. Attendance was nevertheless dominated by leading members of the GAA, among them the Association’s full-time Secretary Luke O’Toole; Leinster Council Secretary and then IRA man, Jack Shouldice; 1916 veteran and Leinster Council Chairman, Dan Mc Carthy; Sinn Féin MP and former Cork County Board Chairman, J.J. Walsh; the aforementioned J.J. Keane; and Andy Harty, the Dublin County Board chairman who was elected as the IOC’s first secretary.⁴ All of these men would eventually serve on the first Olympic Council, a 31 member body on which the GAA President James Nowlan was also represented, alongside, *inter alia*, Arthur Griffith, the Archbishop of Cashel and the Mayors of ten Irish towns and cities, including Cork’s Terence McSwiney who would die on hunger strike in Brixton Prison later in the year.⁵

That the GAA should assume such a central role in the incipient Irish Olympic movement was hardly surprising. The Association had its origins, in part, in a contest for control for Irish

² BMH, WS Ref #: 1280, Witness: Eamon Broy, IRA Intelligence Agent in British Police, Dublin Castle <http://www.militaryarchives.ie/collections/online-collections/bureau-of-military-history-1913-1921/reels/bmh/BMH.WS1280.pdf#page=15>; see also Pauric J. Dempsey and Shaun Boylan, Broy, Eamon (‘Ned’), in Dictionary of Irish Biography (RIA)

³ Marie Coleman, J.J. Keane, Dictionary of Irish Biography; David Guiney, The Olympic Council of Ireland, Citius, Altius, Fortius, Autumn 1996

⁴ Freeman’s Journal, 19 August 1920. Arthur Griffith had been invited to attend, but sent his apologies.

⁵ National Archives of Ireland, DE/2/71. Tom Hunt has described this Mayoralty involvement ‘as purely cosmetic’ as it was designed to afford the impression that the IOC had broad support. Nor did any of the Mayor actively participate in the Olympic movement.

athletics and, notwithstanding its growing focus on Gaelic football and hurling, it continued to organise athletic competitions and operate as a rival to the Irish Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA), a body which effectively functioned as a sub-committee of the British AAA.

But why then the push for Olympic recognition?

Was it a concern over the control over Irish athletic destiny and a GAA response to an IAAA decision, taken at its AGM earlier that same month, to pursue the matter of separate Olympic representation for Ireland?⁶

Or did the enterprise have a principally political purpose? That no IAAA figures were involved at the IOC's inception is striking and suggests, as Kevin McCarthy, Ireland's Olympic historian, has written, that the new organisation was designed to be 'representative of the separatist tradition only'.⁷

Adding weight to this perspective is J.J. Keane's claim, made more than thirty years later, that prior to establishing the IOC, Arthur Griffith and Michael Collins had invited him to a meeting in Vaughan's Hotel on Parnell Square where they were said to have set out their desire to seek international Olympic recognition?⁸

But if politics influenced the establishment - and composition - of the IOC, so too, undoubtedly, did timing. When that first meeting in the Gresham was held, the staging of the first Olympic Games in seven years and the first of the post-World War One era was less than four months away. It was due to commence in Antwerp, Belgium, in August 1920. With that in mind, a circular was issued out of the Gresham gathering announcing the new Council's conviction that 'a full statement of Ireland's claim - based upon racial, geographical and athletic grounds - formulated by a representative National Committee would not now be rejected by the International Committee.'

⁶ Freeman's Journal, 14 April 1920

⁷ Kevin McCarthy, *Gold, Silver and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey 1896-1924* (CUP, 2010) p. 298

⁸ Ibid. p. 257; Tom Hunt, Ireland and the Paris Olympic Games (1924): a difficult journey successfully negotiated, *Irish Studies Review* 2019, VOL. 27, NO. 3, 422-441

The Council committed to setting out that statement and taking the necessary steps to secure 'formal recognition for Irish civilian amateur competitors under the Regulations of the International Committee of the Olympic Games'.⁹

Those steps initially involved Keane writing to Baron Pierre de Coubertain, the founder of the modern Olympics and President of the International Olympic Committee, who referred the Irish case onto the Belgian organising committee, who in turn instructed Keane that recognition of new states not within its powers and that he should take the matter up with the British Olympic authorities in London.¹⁰

That was a route that Keane was unwilling to explore and so in August - when it was too late to enter an Irish team for the 1920 games - he set off for Antwerp to meet with the International Olympic Committee in person to present the Irish case. Before he did, Keane solicited the support of the underground republican government. Writing at the end of June 1920 to Diarmuid Ó hEigeartaigh, secretary to the First Dáil, Keane explained that it would be at the Antwerp meeting of the International Olympic Committee that 'the admission of new nations' was determined and he urged that the 'services and influence' of the Dail's representatives abroad be deployed to advance Ireland's Olympic claim. As Keane understood it, the 'aid and prestige of Dáil Éireann' would be 'invaluable' to the advancement of their Olympic claims.¹¹

No practical help from Dáil was ultimately forthcoming - the IOC never responded to Ó hEigeartaigh when he requested a copy of the 'statement' that had been prepared in support of the Olympic claim - but it didn't appear to matter.

If not exactly triumphant, Keane would return from Belgium expressing confidence that the recognition he had sought had been won.¹²

In an interview with the *Freeman's Journal* newspaper, conducted as the Antwerp games were still ongoing, Keane acknowledged his disappointment at the opposition, bordering on 'antagonism', faced from American Olympic delegates, yet he pointed to the general warmth of

⁹ Freeman's Journal, 19 August 1920

¹⁰ Kevin McCarthy, op. cit., p. 300. McCarthy explained that de Coubertin was sympathetic and referred the matter to the Belgian

¹¹ National Archives, DE/2/71, Letter from JJ Keane to Diarmuid Ó hEigeartaigh, 30 June 1920. Accessible online at <https://repository.dri.ie/catalog/zc7869241>

¹² National Archives, DE/2/71. See letters from to Diarmuid Ó hEigeartaigh to A.C. Harty, Secretary of the IOC, July 15 and July 22, 1920

his reception and the sympathetic hearing he had received from Pierre de Coubertin, President of the International Olympic Committee.¹³

All that was left to be done to confirm Ireland's new sporting status was an official announcement, Keane inferred to his interviewer. An editorial in the same edition of the same newspaper suggested something similar: indeed, the *Freeman's Journal* already began to look ahead to the following Olympics when Ireland would actually be represented and urged that the best way to pay tribute to the 'self-sacrificing labours' of J.J. Keane was to do everything to empower Irish athletes to be the best they could be. Ireland, the paper impressed, 'must see to it that her achievements in the future are worthy of her great traditions'.¹⁴

This belief that the conferral of Olympic recognition was a foregone conclusion would prove misplaced.

Even a proposal that Irish athletes might be able to contest as a distinct group under the British flag was deemed a non-runner, rejected on the strength of opposition from the U.S. member of the International Olympic Committee, Professor William M. Sloane, and the British representative, Reverend Robert de Courcy-Laffan, the latter succeeding in having a decision on Ireland deferred until such time 'when the Irish question would be solved politically'.¹⁵

The decision on Ireland reflected on the conservatism - and prejudices - of the International Olympic Committee and the influence of a small coterie of members on decision-making. And on issues that touched on the political, that decision-making was far from consistent and it was clearly governed by wider racial and political considerations. There was, after all, precedent for countries to compete as distinct national groups even when they were not fully independent.

Finland had done so at previous Olympics, although it was only in 1917 that they secured their independence from the Russian Empire. The Czechs had been also permitted to do so for the 1912 Stockholm games while still under the umbrella of the Austrian empire.¹⁶ What's more, Britain's white settler - and self-governing - colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa had also been afforded the right to compete as independent countries by the International Olympic Committee. So cherished, indeed, was their independent Olympic status that when, in the wake of Britain's poor performance at the 1912 Stockholm games, the idea

¹³ *Freeman's Journal*, 23 August 1920

¹⁴ *Freeman's Journal* editorial, 23 August 1920

¹⁵ Quoted in Kevin McCarthy, *op. cit.*, p. 303

¹⁶ McCarthy, *op. cit.* p. 303

was promoted to form a powerful Empire team comprising Britain and its settler colonies, it attracted little enthusiasm within countries that feared the loss of their identities within the larger Imperial unit. 'Apart from all questions of loyalty to the Empire, there is a narrower local patriotism for Australia', the *Sydney Morning Herald* commented in defence of the dominion's continued separate representation at the Olympics.¹⁷

In all twenty-nine countries were represented at the 1920 Antwerp games.¹⁸

Britain's white self-governing dominions were among them. So too, was the new state of Czechoslovakia, which had emerged in 1918 from the post-war wreckage of the Austro-Hungarian empire. So too, for the first time, was Yugoslavia, though its official name at the time was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.¹⁹ Newly independent Finland, having already endured a devastating civil war, was also present and would emerge from the Antwerp Olympics second only to the United States in the medal league table.²⁰

Absent, however, were the representatives of the defeated Central Powers in World War One. And absent, too, in spite of the efforts of J.J. Keane and the newly-established IOC, was Ireland, though Irishmen would continue to compete, as they had done before, in the singlets of other participant countries - and with considerable distinction.

Indeed, the sports historian Tom Hunt has claimed that the Antwerp games were the most successful ever for Irish competitors representing the USA, their medal haul extending to seven gold, two silver and one bronze. Among the gold medallists was Limerick-native and World record holder for the hammer throw, Paddy Ryan, who worked as a construction labourer in New York but had spent last year of the war in France as part of the American expeditionary force.²¹ At the Antwerp games, Ryan claimed a gold medal with ease when his hammer throw of

¹⁷ Matthew P. Llewellyn, Dominion Nationalism or Imperial Patriotism? Citizenship, Race, and the Proposed British Empire Olympic Team, *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Spring 2012), p. 54

¹⁸ For all a full list of countries that competed at the 1920 Antwerp Olympic games, visit http://olympic-museum.de/part_count/olympic-games-participating-countries-1920.php

¹⁹ John Grasso, Bill Mallon, Jeroen Heijmans, *Historical Dictionary of the Olympic Movement* (5th edition) (2015) p. 646

²⁰ Finland fielded a team of 60 athletes, yet returned from Antwerp with 34 medals. See David Miller, *The Official History of the Olympic Games and the IOC: Athens to London 1894-2012*, p. 75

²¹ See profile of Paddy Ryan at <http://www.limerickcity.ie/media/lcBinder12.pdf>. Ryan's career also features in Tom Hunt, *The Little Book of Irish Athletics* (2017) pp. 57-59

52.87 metres was almost four and half metres beyond the distance reached by the Swedish runner-up.²²

In 1924, fourteen years after he had emigrated from Ireland, Ryan returned to Pallasgreen to live out the remainder of a long life on his family farm. That same year, a newly independent, if partitioned, Ireland made its entry into Olympic competition at the Paris games. It came about only after GAA and IAAA were united under the banner of a new athletics organisation - the NACAI - and only after the creation of an Irish Free State had strengthened the Irish claim to separate recognition.²³ The Paris Olympics marked a significant expansion in the Olympics games and more accurately reflected the post-World War One world than the Antwerp games four years previously. Germany were still excluded - politics again - but the field of competing countries had increased from twenty-nine to forty-four.²⁴

For J.J. Keane, the symbolism of Ireland's Olympic presence was sufficient to obscure the reality of what was then a divided island. Speaking at a fundraising drive to support the Paris Olympic enterprise, Keane emphasised the unity of an Irish team that would compete under the name of 'Ireland' rather the 'Irish Free State' and that would 'defend their country against the world in the spirit of sport.'²⁵

What Keane's remarks made clear was that the conferring of Olympic recognition upon Ireland had done nothing to untangle Irish political concerns from the IOC's wider sporting mission. Where the pursuit of Olympic status had initially been bound up with the project of Irish independence, it now, in its achievement, acquired a fresh political purpose: henceforth, Ireland's participation at the Olympics games would be used not only to assert what Irish sovereignty had been won; it would be used to underscore a geographic unity that had been sundered by the Anglo-Irish settlement.

²² The hammer event was expected to be a showdown between Ryan and Matt McGrath, a gold medallist from Stockholm in 1912, who had dominated the sport for the previous decade. However, McGrath got injured after two throws and ended up outside the medals.

²³ National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland

²⁴ The number of competing countries at the Paris Olympics was 44, up from 29 at the 1920 Antwerp games.

See http://olympic-museum.de/part_count/olympic-games-participating-countries-1924.php

²⁵ Irish Independent, 20 March 1924