

Ballyneale's Tom Kiely: a legendary all-rounder

As a youngster, when trips to Slievenamon were a regular and wonderful feature, the family wagon made the occasional incursion into the village of Ballyneale, just three miles from Carrick-on-Suir.

Opposite the parish church, which faces directly onto the famed South Tipperary mountain, stands a monument, dedicated to one Thomas Kiely, the outstanding Irish athlete of the early 1900s.

Erected in 1978 and funded by public subscription, its inscription reads: "Thomas F Kiely, World All Round Champion, St. Louis, 1904."

Kiely's many feats have, like those of his contemporaries, been superbly recalled in Cappoquin author Kevin McCarthy's 'Gold, Silver and Green', the definite account of Ireland's Olympic exploits between 1896 and 1924.

McCarthy writes (with deference to Waterford's Peter O'Connor), that "Kiely was the closest Ireland had to an individual sporting hero in 1904".

The author adds: "Indeed, given the flux and state of torpor that Irish politics found itself in during these last years of Tory rule, it is not unrealistic to argue that he was a national hero in ways beyond the sporting field too."

Kiely was the eldest son of William and Mary, who farmed 70 acres of leased land in Curraghdobbin, a short walk from Ballyneale. From an early age, Tom helped his father on the land, which partly explains how he developed such tremendous physical power.

In 1888, aged 19, Kiely entered his first athletic event in Clonmel and he happily entered every available track and field competition, including weight throwing.

Coming home that evening, young Tom could scarcely have imagined that he would help foster a great Irish tradition in field athletics in the early 20th century, a mantle later proudly carried by Dr Pat O'Callaghan.

Within a few years, Kiely began to make a name for himself at meetings across South Tipperary, winning seven events in Carrick in 1890 and 33 at eight different meets the following year.

By career's end (he competed until aged 37), Kiely had won a staggering 3,000 prizes – to think of the riches he would have earned in the professional era.

The year 1904 was significant for Kiely, then aged 34, the holder of 36 Irish track and field titles and an astonishing 28 world record marks, for it included a significant transatlantic journey.

His solitary appearance at the Olympic Games would be in St Louis, an event more widely known at that time as the 'world championship'.

With the Union Jack still furled across the entirety of this island, Kiely travelled to St Louis as an independent entrant in the 'all-round' competition, though very much representing Tipperary and Ireland.

In 1997, author Bob Withers ('Tom Kiely: For Tipperary and Ireland') wrote that Kiely funded his trip to the States by selling many of the prizes claimed during his illustrious career.

His steadfast determination to remain free of any competitive affiliation other than his own choosing was commented upon by The Cork Examiner.

"(Kiely) acted very differently from many Irish athletes who went before him. He preferred that the old country should have the honour, whatever it might be, of the great contest."

On a wet and muddy July 4th 1904, Kiely duly won Olympic gold in the 'all-round championship', now known as the decathlon - with all 10 events held on the same day, it should be noted.

Of the 10, Kiely emerged victorious in four - the 880-yard walk, the 120-yard hurdles, the hammer and the 56-pound weight throw, the latter an event that has remained popular in Tipp to this day.

And he was not the only Tipperary man to compete in the all-round event: John Holloway of Bansha, who had emigrated some years previously, finished fourth that day.

But Holloway stands alone in Irish sporting history, given that he became the first man to ever don the shamrock emblem in an Olympic arena.

Confusion initially reigned over whether Kiely's success was an Olympic title or not, given that the main athletics element of the Games was not held until the following month.

But, as McCarthy states, the inscription on the medal presented to Kiely, now a treasured item in Clonmel's South Tipperary Museum, clearly settles the dispute: "St Louis Exposition: Olympic Games."

In a submission to the Waterford News, CP Redmond wrote: "Wherever throughout the wide world an Irish athlete has found a home, or where there exist admirers of magnificent athleticism, the name of Thomas F. Kiely is familiar and esteemed.

"There will be none, we fancy, ready to gainsay that in the person of the subject of our sketch, the premier county has given to the world one of the finest all-round athletes of recent times, in addition to a characteristic specimen of an Irishman of the best type - upright and amiable, generous and trustworthy and a sportsman from sole to crown."

Til his death in 1951, Tom Kiely was proudly championed in both his native Tipp and neighbouring Waterford. His monument in Ballyneale, coupled with Kevin McCarthy's magnificent book, ensures that his remarkable sporting prowess shall never be forgotten.

'Gold, Silver and Green: The Irish Olympic Journey 1896-1924' is published by Cork University Press