

OBITUARIES

Robert Morton Newburgh Tisdall

* 16 May 1907 † 27 July 2004

One of the oldest Olympic gold medallists, Robert TISDALL died on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia on July 27 2004 at the age of 97.

The remarkable Bob TISDALL won the 400 metres hurdles for Ireland at the 1932 Los Angeles Games, but his victory was almost by accident.

I had the great pleasure of recording a television interview with Bob just prior to the Sydney Olympics in 2000 and in this day and age of professional sport, his story is almost unimaginable.

Bob was born and raised near Tipperary, Ireland and was at *Cambridge University*, England during 1932 in the months leading up to the Olympic Games.

He had no intention of competing, as not only was he studying but had a job to provide him with an income.

"My Cambridge friends told me that the Olympic Games were coming up in about three month's time and that I should give them a go. I said that I would have to give up my job, but they talked me into it, so I gave up my job and went to live in a railway carriage in Sussex."

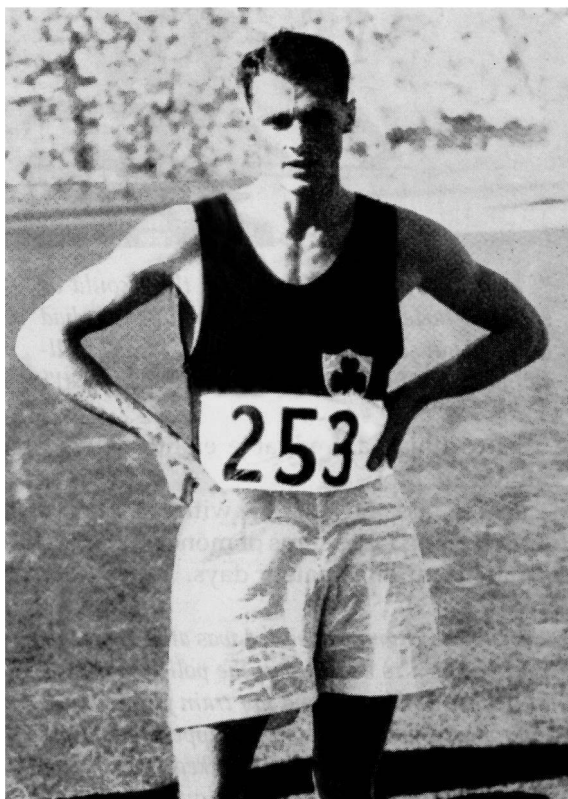
"There were no tracks or anything to train on and I tried to get my legs back in order by running around the south downs."

"The story goes that I trained by hurdling sheep. Well actually I did. I did hurdle over one sheep and all the others ran away!"

The two week sea voyage to the United States was very rough and Robert had lost much of his fitness by the time he arrived in Los Angeles. However he surprised even himself by winning his heat in 52.8 and equalling the Olympic record which had been set by American Glenn HARDIN in the first heat. The final was only TISDALL'S seventh run over the 400 metres hurdles and he won in a time of 51.7 but under the rules of the day the world record was credited to HARDIN who took the silver medal in 51.9.

"You could knock two hurdles down and win the race but to break a record you had to clear them all and I hit the last hurdle and staggered," explained TISDALL.

"It certainly cost me a couple of yards and the committee then decided that it is obviously a hardship knocking down hurdles, so you can knock them all down now if you want to, but



if you do you'll be last, no doubt about that. Especially hurdles like those, they were great big timber things which came up under you. Now they just flop down in front and they are made of a light material."

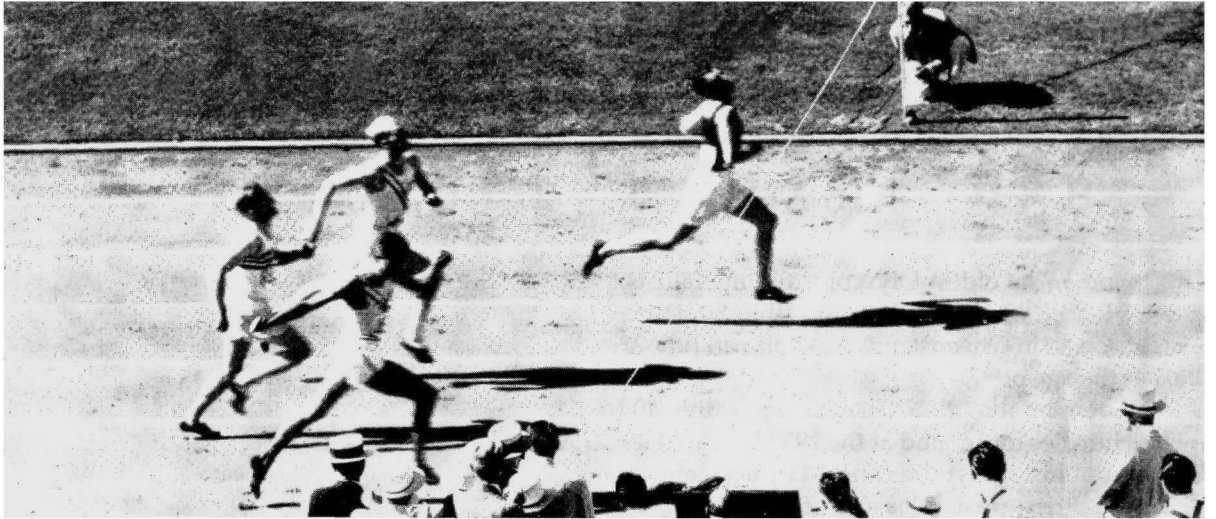
The final proved to be an extraordinary race for in the six man field were no less than four past or future winners of the event.

Morgan TAYLOR of the USA had won at Paris in 1924 and took the bronze medal in both 1928 and 1932.

The popular David BURGHLEY, or to be more precise Lord David George Brownlow Cecil BURGHLEY, was the victor at Amsterdam in 1928 and took leave from his position as a member of the British Parliament to compete in Los Angeles where he finished fourth.

Glenn HARDIN who took the silver medal and world record in 1932 was to be the gold medallist at Berlin in 1936.

TISDALL thought that his Olympic campaign was over after his 400 metres hurdles victory, but while he was out celebrating, the Irish Olympic committee decided that he should compete in the decathlon which he had never contested.



"They came to me and said that there could be sixteen starters in the decathlon but one had dropped out so because they thought I was an all-rounder they had put me in and that was that!"

He was to finish a creditable eighth at his first decathlon attempt.

TISDALL had no qualm with modern day athletes making large sums of money but it is a far cry from his purely amateur days.

"Before the Olympics while I was at Cambridge, I was invited to compete in the police sports up in Belfast. Well they paid my train fare up there and when I got back home to Tipperary I found an English five pound note tucked into the toe of my running shoes. I pulled it out and showed it to my father and he told me that I had better send it back as quickly as possible because if they found out I would never be allowed to run again."

After the Olympic Games, TISDALL moved to Africa where he spent twenty years as a farmer before shifting to Nambour on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia in 1957.

Until not long before his death, Bob was a regular at the hilly Nambour Golf Club where he would play nine holes twice a week and walk the whole way.

And still his most treasured possession was the 1932 Olympic medal surrounded by a silver wreath which was presented to him by Irish Prime Minister Eamon De VALERA.

But the interesting thing was that the medal was the same colour as the wreath ... bright, shiny silver.

"I had it on the wall of my home in Tanganyika in Africa and the African house boy loved it so much that he couldn't resist polishing it and he's polished all the gold plate off and now it's a silver medal" said Bob with a laugh.

Robert TISDALL was a great character and will be sadly missed by everyone in the Olympic family. With his passing goes one of the last links to the Olympic Games of a bygone era.

John McCoy



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Editors received a Letter from Séamus Ware dated August 5th, 2005. In fact a reaction on the article by MCCOY, John J., "Robert Morton Newburgh Tisdall - * 16 May 1907 † 27 July 2004", in: *Journal of Olympic History* 13(2005)2, pp. 73-74

As someone who met and spoke to Bob Tisdall on his last visit to Ireland in 1997, when he was a very healthy-looking 90-year-old, I was naturally very interested in the obituary of him written by John McCoy. Since the author of that obituary had done a T.V. interview with Tisdall before the 2000 Olympics, it gives a first-hand account. However, there are one or two errors or omissions which I like to correct.

Bob Tisdall was not born in Ireland, but in Nuwara Eliya, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). His father, William Tisdall was from Bantry Country Cork, and the family were living in Ceylon when Bob was born.

Incidentally, I learned recently from the newly-published book by ISOH-member Tony O'Donoghue *Irish Championship Athletics 1873-1914* [see also the Book Review on p. XY] that William Tisdall was also an athlete and came third in both the 100 and 220 Yards at the Irish A.A.A. Championships held in Dublin in 1887 (the second place finisher in both those races was Daniel Bulger, one of the two Irish representatives at the inaugural Olympic Congress at the Sorbonne, Paris in 1894). When Bob was a young boy, the Tisdall family returned to Ireland and settles in the native district of the mother, Meta Morton, near Nenagh, County Tipperary. Note that Bob's second name was Morton. Apart from primary (elementary) schooling, Bob received nearly all his education in England. However, he never forgot that he was an Irishman, and in 1932 when he had graduated from Cambridge University and had married, he "selected himself" for the Irish Olympic team! He wrote to General Eoin O'Duffy President of the Olympic Council of Ireland, suggesting that he should be entered for the 400 metre hurdles at the Los Angeles Games, even though he had only run that race once - on a trip to Greece with the

Achilles Club (Oxford and Cambridge students and graduates) in 1930. General O'Duffy replied inviting Tisdall to run in the Irish Olympic trials in Dublin in June. Bob Duly ran (in a 440 yard race) but did not reach the stipulated standard; he was given another chance at the National Championships fortnight later and this time won in a satisfactory time.

On reaching Los Angeles, Tisdall spent the two weeks before competing resting after the long journey, without doing any training. While General O'Duffy, who was chef de mission with the Irish team was concerned, Bob knew what he was doing and his record-breaking win in now history. Regarding his attempt in the Decathlon, his time in the 400 metres was 49 seconds, which was a Decathlon Olympic Record. In a chapter he wrote in the 1956 book *Olympic Odyssey*, Bob mentioned that his first thought after winning the 400 metre hurdles was sadness that his father did not live two years more to share the joy with him.

On return to England after the Olympics, Tisdall was unable to get a job despite having a degree in agriculture from Cambridge. He and his wife decided to emigrate to her native country, South Africa. While there, he taught for a period, ran a gymnasium, and during the Second World War he spent five years in the South African Irish Regiment. After the war the Tisdalls went to Tanganyika (now Tanzania) where he farmed, and worked on developing sports facilities. His first marriage broke up and Bob moved to Australia where he continued farming, and re-married. In attendance at ceremonies in Nenagh honouring Olympic Champions in 2002 were two of his daughters, one each from South Africa and Australia, both of whom were active in sport.

I agree with John McCoy that Bob Tisdall was a great character, and his determination to stay active was shown by his participation in the Lough Derg Regatta on the Shannon, near his boyhood home at Nenagh, at the age of 90!

Yours Sincerely
Séamus Ware