

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."

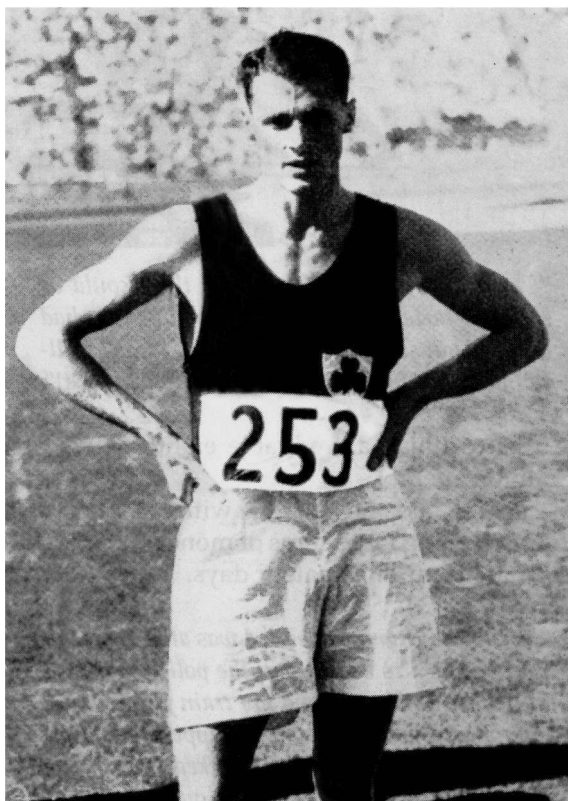
"There were no tracks or anything to train on and I tried to get my legs back in order by running around the south downs."

"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."

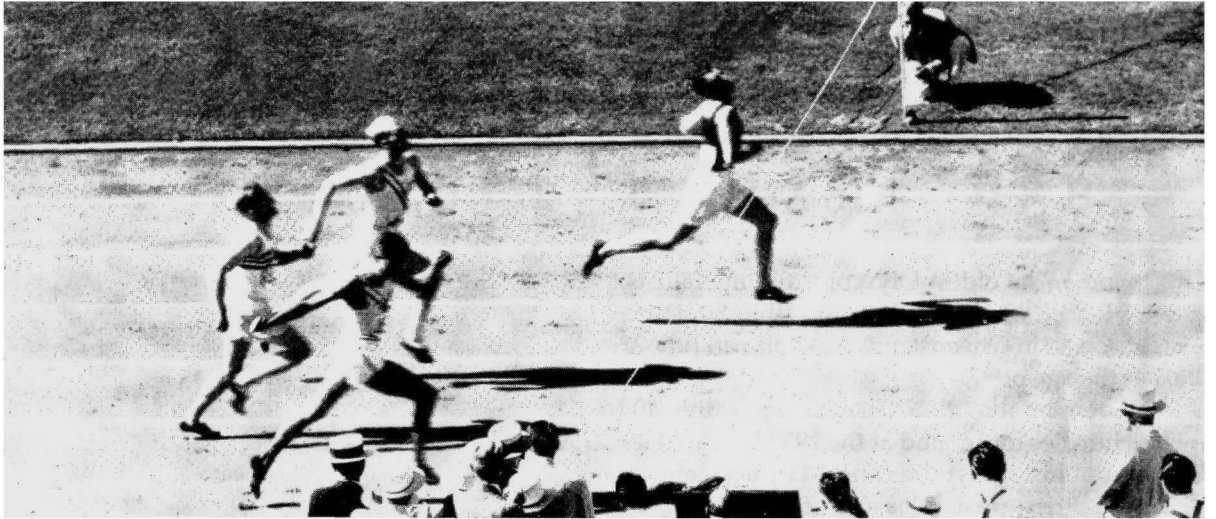
The final proved to be an extraordinary race for in the six man field were no less than four past or future winners of the event.

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

