

THOMAS F. KIELY - A BIOGRAPHY

by Frank Zarnowski

In 1997 a small county museum in Clonmel, Ireland, presented a remarkable exhibit on the sporting life of Thomas Francis KIELY, a local who not only had been Ireland's top athlete around the turn of the 20th century, but was likely to have been the greatest athlete in the island's history

Because KIELY'S name appears infrequently in early Olympic chronicles, he is, outside Tipperary, a forgotten figure. Yet he compiled a record unmatched in amateur athletics history. Not only did he win nearly 3000 track and field prizes over 21 years (1888-1908) but he won over 70 (!) national championships in Ireland, England and America. He was unbeaten in six career all-(a)rounds including one conducted several months before the 1904 Olympic Games in St. Louis KIELY was so versatile and so successful over such an extended time period that old timers treat him the way Scots pine for Donald DINNIE or Brits recall the exploits of C. B. FRY In County Tipperary he is remembered simply as "The Champion Kiely."

Tom KIELY, the eldest child of a large family, was born on August 25, 1869 at Ballyneale, Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary. As a young boy he had an advantage over other young Irish athletes since he grew up on a farm near that of the famous DAVIN family. Some accounts, unverified, have the Maurice and Pat DAVIN training young KIELY. The DAVINS may not have coached young KIELY but they certainly provided inspiration. However prepared, Tom KIELY would, for nearly two decades, dominate his nation's major spectator sport.

When Tom began an athletics career, at age 18, neighbour Patrick DAVIN had just won a popular "all-round" victory over George GRAY of the *New York Athletic Club* at Ballsbridge, Dublin. Tom entered mostly local meetings for the first few years and established a modest reputation in sprinting, jumping, hurdling and tossing weights. He appeared at his first nationals in 1889 at Kilkenny and won four runner-up prizes.

In 1890, at the annual Carrick-on-Suir Sports where Patrick DAVIN had set the world long jump record a decade before, young KIELY waltzed away with seven first prizes. Ireland's prizes at this time were functional. Besides gold medals Tom won everything from ceramic pots to tweed suits to

photograph albums to clocks. To a young farmer like KIELY these proved valuable items.

His career took off in 1892. At the annual Carrick-on-Suir meeting he placed in virtually every event, winning nine (!) prizes including six firsts. At Durrow, a few weeks later, KIELY shattered Dan SHANAHAN'S world record in the hop step and jump (later disallowed since the runway was not level), captured all three weight throws, won the 220 and long jump and placed second in the 100 yards and hurdles.

Well used to competing in numerous contests on a single afternoon, KIELY announced for the Irish All-Round in August. Held at Ballsbridge, in front of a huge crowd and with defending champion T.M. O'DONOVAN in the field, KIELY contested 8 of the 9 events, won 6 and easily captured the title. In the early 1890s the U.S. was the only other nation to offer an all-around contest and the Irish and AAU events were amazingly similar. By comparing his 1892 marks with those produced at any of the next five AAU meets in the U.S. it is easy to see that KIELY, even at age 22, was the world's top multi-eventer, a position he would maintain well into the 20th century.

But KIELY was not yet finished with the 1892 season. A month later, at Jones Road (later Croke Park), Dublin, he entered the GAA nationals and captured 7 (!) national crowns. Besides winning the shot, the 28 lbs, the 7 lbs, the long jump and hammer, KIELY topped world record holder Dan SHANAHAN, in the hop, step and jump (the Irish event actually incorporated 2 hops and a jump) registering 49-7 (15.11m). He then faced R. PEDLOW, the IAAA hurdle champion. After four hours of competition in other events KIELY broke the tape in 16 4/5 seconds, a second off Henry WILLIAMS (USA) world record

KIELY had won an unprecedented seven championships in a single day, a record unlikely surpassed anywhere in the history of the sport. It may be misleading to believe that KIELY'S accomplishment is somehow diminished since his wins occurred in a small nation like Ireland. But recall that, with the possible exception of America, Ireland was the world's premier amateur track and field power in the 1890s. Irishmen held many of the world's best jumping and throwing marks and many of their



Thomas Francis Kiely (Tipperary S.R. County Museum in Clonmel, County Tipperary, Ireland)



Thomas F. Kiely throwing the hammer
(Tipperary S.R. County Museum)

top athletes emigrated to America. The British may argue this point, but the facts are plain enough.

The following season Kiely broke records for both the 16 lb hammer and 56 lb weight. Although his name cannot be found on the IAAF's *Progression of World Performances and Official IAAF Records*, the omissions are easily explained. Around the turn of the century the weight of the hammer became standard at 16 lbs, but the length of the handle (usually 3½ to 4 feet) and its composition (from wooden to wires) varied. As well, the size (7 to 9 feet) and shape of the throwing area (circle to square) differed from nation to nation, even meet to meet. Many different hammer records existed simultaneously. The same can be said for the 56 lb weight throw, an event where not only did the shape of the implement and throwing areas differ, but records were kept for various throwing styles (one-handed, two-handed, from side, with and without follow through). The number of permutations for just these two events boggles the mind. When the IAAF produced a progression of world bests/records a few years back, all of KIELY'S marks for this myriad of combinations were discarded. The same fate befell his records for the Irish version of the hop-step-jump.

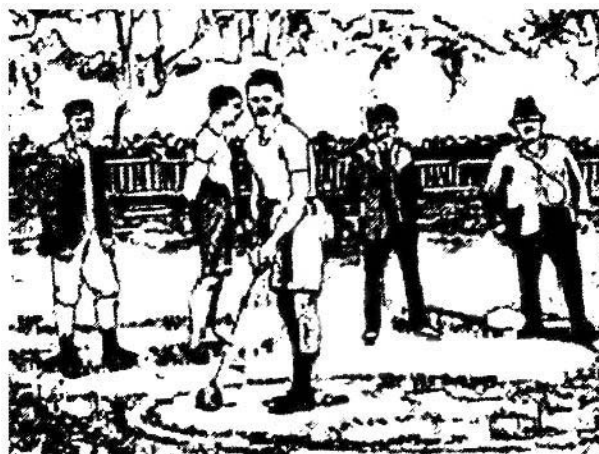
But make no mistake. In his day KIELY legitimately was considered a recurrent record breaker.

It is likely that KIELY and Scotland's Donald DINNIE were the only two track and field athletes in history to concurrently hold world best marks in both jumping and throwing events,

Irish-born athletes (whether competing for Ireland or America) dominated the hammer and weight tosses for two generations. For example, for the modern 16 lb hammer, Irish-born athletes held every world record from 1885 through 1938! And Tom KIELY, sans the event's typical bulkiness but with superior speed and technique, was one of Ireland's best. In 1894 he set 8 different hammer records, and, adopting a throwing style of spinning the 56 lb weight around his body, eventually (1898) made a record of 38-11 (11.86m). Tom won the English hammer championships five out of six years from 1897 to 1902, losing only in 1900 to John J. FLANAGAN, an Irish citizen who took USA citizenship in 1901 after representing the USA in the 1900 Paris Olympic Games.

At his physical peak KIELY stood 6-2 and weighed between 182 and 196 pounds. He was lithe, sinewy, broad shouldered, very strong and often brandished a full mustache. In 1893 Kiely won his second Irish All-Round (this time with just 7 events) and three-peated in 1894 in spite of suffering leg injuries while playing Gaelic football during the previous winter.

The year 1895 (much more than 1896) was a vital season for international track and field. For example, an American all-star team (representing the *New York Athletic Club*) demolished a national British team (representing the *London AC*) in New York in September, by winning every event, several by enlisted Irish immigrants. But it was also the year of the first international contest between Ireland and Scotland, held at Celtic Park, Glasgow. KIELY'S last minute long jump heroics, which won the contest for Ireland, made him a legend. With the dual meet tied at 5 wins apiece



Newspaper drawing of Tom Kiely in competition
(Tipperary S.R. County Museum)

and with Scottish jumpers leading in the final event, Irish officials appealed to KIELY who was finished for the day and dressing in his tent. Rushing to the event without even lacing his shoes, Tom took one desperate leap winning the event and day for Ireland. Of such stuff Tom KIELY was made. With Tom routinely serving as captain of the national team Ireland won 8 out of the first ten internationals with Scotland

At home KIELY continued to rewrite the record book. In October, 1898 he entered his fourth (and final) Irish All-Round and convincingly won over



Thomas F. Kiely in action (Tipperary S.R. County Museum)

a terrific field which, by comparison, far outclassed the entries for the 1898 AAU All Around in America. Because of the constant bickering between its two national federations (GAA and IAAA) Ireland discontinued its national all-round contest after 1898. Yet KIELY remained a profligate competitor. One newspaper account tells of KIELY competing in four meetings on four consecutive days, catching a train each evening bound for the next day's venue

At the turn of the century Kiely was the major celebrity of Irish sport. Yet there has always been a question as to why he never competed in the any of the

many accessible Olympic Games (1896, 1900, 1904, 1906, 1908) during his 21 year career. The answers are varied and complicated. First, the GAA gave little consideration to sending Irish athletes to Athens in 1896 concluding that these new games were expensive, inconvenient (in April !) and, candidly, of little importance. Virtually none of the world's better athletes paid them any mind. But for 1900 (Paris), 1904 (St. Louis), 1906 (Athens) and 1908 (London) KIELY'S absence is almost certainly explained by his reluctance to represent Britain instead of Ireland, then still under British control. Many of the day's great Irish athletes either immigrated to America and represented the USA or simply stayed away from the Olympic arena. For Tom KIELY, with a farm to run at home and no desire to honour the Union Flag, the Olympics were simply out of the question.

Whether KIELY, in fact, participated in the 1904 St. Louis Olympics has been long debated but the question is no longer a close call. The track and field portion of the Games, which themselves were subsumed into the even larger *Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (World's Fair), were held in late August and early September of 1904. The *Amateur Athletic Union*, responsible for conducting all sports at the Fair, Olympic and otherwise, offered its annual All-Around championship on its customary July 4th date, eight weeks before the Games athletics portion. Yet the AAU, from its news releases in 1903 to its official reports published in 1905, never once referred to the AAU All-Around as "Olympic" in any sense. Granted, to spruce up the event, James E. SULLIVAN, Secretary General of the AAU, did attach the appellation "World's Championship" to the annual American All-Around. This title certainly did not make the affair "Olympic." SULLIVAN'S act was a common American practice in many sports. The 1904 St. Louis All-Around was nothing more than the annual USA championships. There is absolutely nothing in any of KIELY'S correspondence, records, documents and files to remotely suggest that he participated in an Olympic Games. To do so would have required him to represent Britain. KIELY himself always understood that he had won an American and "world", (not an "Olympic") title

In point of fact, no daily St. Louis Newspaper (there were three) ever mentioned the word "Olympic" while reporting the event

For half a century no one (including the later organized *International Olympic Committee*) even considered the St. Louis All-Around as part of the 1904 Games. But an appeal from an Irish journalist, relying on misinformation about the medals awarded, the informality (read confused) state of the 1904 Games and the international character of the field, all served to convince Olympic historians and the IOC to embrace the 1904 All-Around as part of its official record. And

so, in 1954, a half-century after the fact and 3 years after he had died, Tom KIELY, without ever competing at the Olympic Games, became an "Olympic" champion. Likely no athlete ever more deserved to be an Olympic champion. But the belated honour made no difference to his reputation. He was, in his day, the world's best athlete. Everyone knew it. Period.

What actually happened in 1904 is this. An important US club, the *Irish-American AC*, invited the well known 34 year old KIELY to compete in St. Louis and several other American clubs also appealed to him to represent them. There is a charming, yet apocryphal, yarn that the British team offered to pay KIELY'S fare and expenses if only he would represent Britain in St. Louis. As the story goes, Tom, turned them down flat, and went on his own to represent his native country of Ireland. In fact Ireland was not an independent nation in 1904 and had no Olympic committee. And the British sent no team, not even a single athlete, to St. Louis in 1904. Even the Olympic founder, Baron de COUBERTIN failed to attend.

Paying his own way, Tom KIELY did locate Missouri. He arrived in the U.S. in early June and stayed awhile in New York with William PRENDERGAST, a former GAA secretary who had immigrated to America five years earlier. PRENDERGAST made a fortune in real estate and built Celtic Park on Long Island, a facility which became one of America's early prominent tracks and the site of subsequent record setting all-arounds.

In St. Louis KIELY faced six all-around opponents: old Tipperary friend John J. HOLLOWAY who had emigrated to the U.S.; defending champion Ellery H. CLARK of Boston; two-time winner Adam GUNN of Buffalo; Penn's football and hammer star Truxtun HARE; and a pair of Turners, John GREIB and Max EMMELRICH.

St. Louis was hit by a daylong downpour on July 4th. Winds ranged from 10 to 17 mph. The new 1/3 of a mile track at Washington University was a sea of mud. Regardless, the event went off as scheduled in atrocious conditions. Clark was never a factor and (after 6 events), as he often did, simply quit. KIELY battling GUNN and HARE, took the lead for good with a world class 29-3 effort in the 56 lb weight toss (8th event) and coasted home with 6036 points. His margin over GUNN was 129 points with HARE another 94 in arrears.

KIELY'S victory was greeted with enthusiasm by Irishmen both in the States and at home. His public prestige was at its peak. Poems were composed and the press began to refer to him as "*The Champion Kiely*". He returned to Ireland and, surprisingly, continued to compete. In 1906 he returned to America to win the AAU All-Around a second time. In Boston, at age 36 and well past his prime, he nevertheless ran up a terrific 6274 score.

Tom had no trouble topping John BREDEMUS and Ellery CLARK but found the latter's sportsmanship enigmatic. For years Tom was fond of recalling that while he was chatting with some friends between events the all-around hurdle race was called.

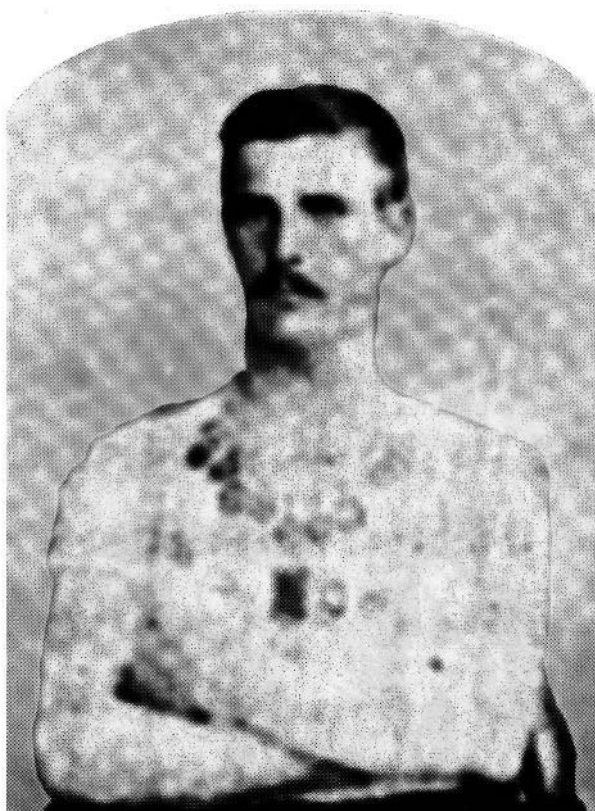
"I wanted to take a half a minute or maybe a minute to change into my other shoes. Your Boston man Clark said no and I ran the hurdles in me stockin' feet. And I beat 'em. In me stocking feet! I beat him in the All Round of course. Ye should be proud of him here, the poorest specimen of a sportsman that I ever met."

A few minutes after KIELY won the hurdle event, CLARK, finding himself well behind, predictably quit.



Newspaper drawing of the All-Rounder Kiely (Tipperary S.R. County Museum)

KIELY'S saw another "near" Olympic experience at the tail end of his career. The London Games were held in mid-July 1908. Originally planned for Rome, the Italians balked for financial reasons and the Games were re-awarded to London. Although these Games were basically well organized the hosts set records for bickering. And, to compound ill will, the Brits insisted that any Irish stars wear British uniforms. Virtually all refused. Those Irishman who did compete had become American citizens. For example, the USA hammer sweep was accomplished with a trio of Irish-born emigrants unsurprisingly named FLANAGAN, MCGRATH and WALSH.



"The Champion Kiely" (Tipperary S.R. County Museum)

Another "Yankee" star in London was the versatile 27 year old Martin SHERIDAN, who was born in Bohola, County Mayo. SHERIDAN stood 6-3 and weighed 200 lbs and, by 1908, had captured 9 Olympic medals, 5 of them gold. He owned at least 7 world records in the discus. SHERIDAN had set AAU all-around records in 1905 and 1907 and, in London, captured a 3rd consecutive Olympic gold in the discus. By 1908, if there was any Irishman whose star eclipsed that of Tom KIELY'S, it was Martin SHERIDAN'S.

When SHERIDAN stopped in Ireland on the way back to America promoter Frank B. DINEEN got the pair together for an all-round challenge. It was fixed for Sunday, August 16 in Dungarvan, County Waterford and the famous pair agreed on five traditional throwing events: 16 lb shot, 16 lb hammer, 56 lb toss with unlimited run and follow, 28 lb weight put and 7 lb weight toss. After agreeing it appears that SHERIDAN sought to substitute the discus for another event but KIELY rejected the offer.

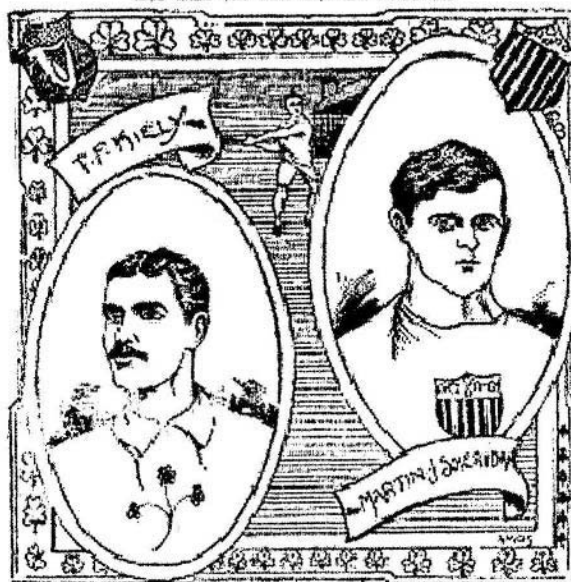
The match, billed as "*the greatest individual athletic contest in Irish History*", demanded special trains to transport thousands from all over Ireland. A huge throng witnessed SHERIDAN win the opening event with 48-5½ (14.77m), a personal record (PR) and just 17 inches shy of the world shot record. KIELY, nine days shy of his 39th birthday, then took the hammer at 154-3 (47.02m), a mark which would

have earned 6th place at the London Games. These guys were serious! KIELY barely won the 3rd event as both posted world class marks, 34-5 (10.49m) to 34-3 (10.44m). SHERIDAN then won the 28 lb put (33-2/10.11m) to tie the score at 2 apiece. Both athletes, perhaps trying too hard, then each fouled 3 times in the light weight. Dineen, serving as referee, declared the event "no contest." Martin and Tom seem to have been affable about the decision and called the contest a tie. It is uncertain whether they these two giants had ever met on the competitive field before. It is certain that this was KIELY'S last big meeting, and at the end of the year, after 21 seasons, he finally retired from active competition.

And what a career! To track and field aficionados KIELY'S 70+ national titles is almost unfathomable. He averaged more than three national championships a year for 20 years! On a single day he won seven national crowns, a record itself. Admittedly, KIELY was aided during part of his career, by a pair of competing Irish federations, each offering an annual nationals. But 70 national crowns! Worldwide, no track athlete comes remotely close to duplicating this feat. For example, the record for most U.S. national titles won (sans race walking) is 21, itself a remarkable figure, by Irish-born hammer thrower James MITCHELL. And, consider that KIELY was unbeaten in his multi-event career. His perfect six-for-six in all-rounds has been surpassed, in the 20th century, by just a single multi-event athlete. 1948 and 1952 Olympic champion Bob MATHIAS went 11 for 11 in career decathlons.

TWO WORLD'S ALL-ROUND CHAMPIONS.

Compete at DUNDALK SPORTS To-morrow,
AND WILL TRY FOR WORLD'S RECORDS.



Sheridan, America, and Kiely, Ireland.

KIELY married in 1906, at age 37, settled down and raised a family of eight children. He later moved back to Carrick-on-Suir and farmed alongside the DAVIN family. He maintained an avid interest in athletics and could be found officiating at the national championships as late as 1943, at age 74. At the first big celebration of the new Irish Free State, in 1924, the legendary KIELY was given

the honour of leading the opening parade of the Tailteann Games by proudly carrying the national flag. Quite a moment.

Tom KIELY died on November 6, 1951, at age 82 and was laid to rest in his native Ballyneale. A recount of KIELY'S life appeared soon thereafter in the *Gaelic Sportsman* titled "God Be with You, Tom." Ireland has not seen the likes of him since.

Tom Kiely: Career - All-Around Record

Date meet/site

Place points

1892	Irish Champs (IAAA)	hj	561b	100yd	lj	120H	ham	sp	440	mile	
Aug. 1	Ballsbridge	5-5	21-0	----	20-6	18sec	120-0	36-8	55sec	dnr	
1	31pts	(1)	(3)		(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)		
		5	1/6		5/11	5/16	5/21	5/26	5/31		
1893	Irish Champs(IAAA)	sp	100yd	lj	120H	hj	ham	880yd			
Aug.12	Ballsbridge	36-71/2	<12yds	20-61/2	16 4/5	5-4	120-0	2:14			
1	29pts	(1)	(2)	(2)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(1)			
		5	3/8	3/11	5/16	3/19	5/24	5/29			
1894	Irish Champs (IAAA)	sp	100yd	100yd	lj	120H	hj	ham	880		
Aug. 6	Ballsbridge	37-3	<2yds	nt f	20-71/2	16-4/5	5-2	131-7	dnr		
1	21pts	(1)	2H-1	(4)	(1)	(1)	(3)	(1)			
		5		0/5	5/10	5/15	1/16	5/21			
1898	Irish Champs(GAA)	100yds	561b	hj	lj	281b	120H	ham	hsj_		
Oct.16	Tipperary	—	26-8	—	20-51/2	30-5 1/2ntl	42-9	45-0			
1	30pts		(1)		(1)	(1)	(1)	(1)			
		0	5/5	0/5	5/10	5/15	5/20	5/25	5/30		
1904	AAU Champs	100yd	sp	hj	880wk	ham	pv	12dH	56wt	lj	mile
July 4	St. Louis	<5ft	35-6	5-0	3:59	120-7	9-0	17-4/5	29-3	19-6	5:51
1	6036 pts	2H-b	(3)	(5t)	(1t)	(1)	(3)	(1)	(1)	(2)	(4)
		713	448	480	717	706	472	670	684	612	534
1906	AAU Champs										
June 23	Brookline, MA	<3ft	37-10	5-1	3:58 1/5	142-10	9-5	18-2/5	30-9	19-10	6:31
1	6274 pts	(2)	(1)	(2)	(3)	(1)	(2)	(1)	(1)	(1)	(2)
		643	560	512	721	973	552	580	756	646	331
1908	vs Sheridan All-Round										
Aug. 16	Dungarvan	161b Shot Hammer	561bwt	28 lbshot	7 lb shot						
		42-8	154-3	34-5	31-3	3 fousls					
		(2)	(1)	(1)	(2)	(-)					

Lifetime Bests (PRs):

All-Around Score	6274	'06	Shot Put	42-8	'08
100 yards:	10.0 (hdcp 5 yds)		56-lb wt:	38-11	WR'98
120-yd Hurdles	16.0	'02	(disallowed)	40-3	WR'98
440 yards	55.0		7-lb Shot	84-10	'93
Long Jump	23-2	'92	28-lb shot	32-3	'93
Hop-Step-Jump	49-7	WR '92	Hammer	156-2	WR'99
(disallowed)	50-7	WR '92	st triple jump	31-5	
High Jump	5-7		Mile	5:51	'04
Pole Vault	9-6		880-yd walk	3:581/5	'06