

THE GREY-HAIRED HERCULES FROM CLARE

There comes a time in every athlete's career, regardless of the sport or level of play, when the whistle blows for the last time. Although many have tried, Father Time is a proven foe accustomed to winning. But not always, writes Christopher Warner, as he looks back over the life and times of P.J. Bermingham, the Olympian discus thrower from Clare.



*Eviction of the Bermingham family
in 1888 at Moyasta, Co. Clare.*

For P.J. Bermingham, old age presented just another challenge to overcome. The barrel-chested Olympian ruled the discus for nearly two decades, a remarkable span that saw him compete at a world-class standard well into his 50s.

Born Patrick Joseph Bermingham on the ides of March, 1886 in Moyasta, Co. Clare to Thomas Bermingham and his wife Margaret (née McGrath), 'PJ' would experience plenty of triumphs and turmoil throughout his life. But unlike the ill-fated Roman general — the affable Bannerman managed to weather all storms despite the long odds stacked against him.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, scores of families in West and East Clare faced severe agricultural depression and excessive so called rack-rents. Poor farmers not only went cold and hungry but were forced to endure the constant threat of 'crowbar brigades' and battering rams during the so-called 'Land War'.

In 1888, the Bermingham's, a clan that eventually numbered 11 children, were evicted from their home on the Vandeleur Estate. But not without a fight. They barricaded the homestead and dug in, holding off a small army of 'besiegers' comprised of bailiffs, emergency men, soldiers and members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC).

Subsequently, Thomas spent nine months in the Limerick jail for resisting arrest. On his release from Limerick Jail and having no way home, he hitched a ride on a boat in Limerick Docks through the Shannon Estuary to Cappagh Pier in Kiltrush, Co. Clare.

FOLLOWING BROTHERS' FOOTSTEPS

If there was any silver lining to these early hardships, P.J. honed his prodigious strength with rigorous daily farming chores — sweat and toil that ultimately saw him sprout to six feet one inch and tip the scales at nearly 20 stone.

At age 21, the muscular young man

joined his older brothers, Michael and Thomas in the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP). Both PJ and Michael transitioned into An Garda Síochána while Thomas was pensioned off in 1923.

The law enforcement profession also extended to other family members, including two generations in China. John O'Toole, the husband of Bermingham's older sister, Ellen, initially served in the RIC before arriving in Shanghai, where he became the Assistant Police Commissioner. Later, Catherine O'Connell (nee Bermingham) had two daughters marry lawmen stationed in China and her son Michael served in the Shanghai Municipal Police's Gaol Branch.

ACCOLADES IN ATHLETICS ARENA

Bermingham's size, strength and smarts soon led him to the sporting arena, albeit via a rather unorthodox path. His entry to athletics began in 1910 while on his summer holiday away from



P.J. Bermingham with his wife Catherine and family.

Dublin.

At a sports meeting in Knock, he showcased his well-rounded talents by winning the long jump, high jump and 56-pound throw without follow. He continued to impress the following season at the annual DMP sport but didn't find his true calling for another eight years.

Early references to the discus can be found in Homer's 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey'. The throwing contest was introduced as part of the pentathlon in the ancient Olympic Games and immortalised in the 5th century BC by sculptor Myron with his iconic statue, Discobolus.

The modern throwing style involves a graceful whirling motion combined with quickness and explosive power – a discipline ideally suited for the multi-talented policeman.

Bermingham described his introduction to the event in the 'Garda Review': "In 1919, at the approach of the Irish Championships, something prompted me that I could throw the discus."

He practiced heaving the platter in an open field for the next three nights after work. His hunch paid off. With less than a week of training, the raw novice captured his first of ten national discus titles (an accomplishment never surpassed).

Six weeks later, he broke the Irish

record with a throw of 126' 11" at Lansdowne Road (now Aviva Stadium) in Dublin. He would eclipse the distance on ten separate occasions, including a lifetime best of 151' 6" while capturing the 1927 Leinster Championships in Carlow.

The mark stood until 1939 when fellow Garda Ned Tobin (see *Síocháin* Autumn 2020) surpassed his mentor with a throw 152' 6 1/2".

SPORTING SUCCESS DURING HOSTILITIES

His achievements were all the more impressive, considering the tumultuous era in which he competed. In 1914, while posted to the Green Street Barracks, which covered the city north of the Liffey, he became entangled in a prelude of hostilities to come.

DMP had been called in to disrupt a unit of Irish Volunteers unloading 1,500 Mauser rifles at Howth Harbour. Bermingham refused. And two years later, during the Easter Uprising, the Clare-born Constable arrested a British soldier for shooting indiscriminately into a crowd.

By the time the Irish Free State had finally gained independence and the guns of a bloody Civil War fell silent, the Emerald Isle began the arduous process of nation-building. Sport would play an integral role in this

development, demonstrating its new sovereignty and national identity.

OLYMPIC GAMES – PARIS 1924

As a result, top athletes such as Bermingham assumed the role of sporting ambassadors – an international stage that included the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris.

Although many Irish-born athletes had previously won Olympic gold medals under the flag of other nations, the 38-year-old Bermingham stood well-positioned to become the first athlete to win under the tricolour. However, a combination of bad luck and dubious officiating sealed his fate.

Several eyewitness accounts and newspaper reports confirmed that he launched the farthest throw in the competition only to have it ruled a foul by the judges. An explanation was



P.J. Bermingham during his early sporting days – and the Gold Medal, which he won at the Tailteann Games in 1924

never given.

Bermingham later recalled the incident as the only regret of his long, storied career: “My third throw that day was the winning throw but was disallowed for some reason which I never found out. There are several people who could verify this, who were present at the contest, including General Murphy the team manager. It was my one ambition to be the world champion and I succeeded and failed in the one day.”

Undeterred, he continued setting records and collecting trophies – and all the while steadily improving like a rare, fine wine. Along the way, he started a family with his wife, Catherine (the sister of John O’Toole), whom he had married on 2 November 1922 in Lissycasey, Co. Clare. Together they raised four children – Marjorie, Patrick, Tom and Kathleen. A handsome brood of grandchildren would follow.

DISCUS-THROWING PROWESS

When the DMP amalgamated with An Garda Síochána in 1925, Bermingham anchored the juggernaut blue and white teams that dominated the competition for years to come while guiding future standouts on the force. It is worth noting the grey-haired Hercules kept competing until the start of WWII, giving him the unique distinction of being a national champion and record holder before and after the foundation of An Garda Síochána.

In addition to his discus-throwing prowess, Bermingham added eight national titles in the 56lb throw – four for distance (1923, 1925-27) and four for height (1923, 1925-26, 1929). Other victories included the 1924 Tailteann Games and five crowns at the British Athletics Championships (best known as the ‘AAA’), culminating with his final victory there in 1934 at the ripe age of 48 years.

Since its inception, the AAA was open to all athletes from the UK as well as foreign athletes. In retrospect, however, the English governing body may have considered banning the Irish. Past winners such as P.J. Bermingham, Dennis Horgan, Tom Kiely and Dr. Pat O’Callaghan held a virtual stranglehold on throwing events for more than a half century.

FLYING TRICOLOUR FLAG

At the 1926 meet in London, an incident further cemented Bermingham’s legacy – not that he needed to. As per custom, officials placed the flag of the thrower’s country to mark the distance. However, when the Union Jack was used for Bermingham’s winning toss, he protested until the proper banner was rightfully unfurled. Erin go Bragh indeed.

Bermingham, having previously ascended to the rank of Inspector, retired from the force on 14 March 1943. He then continued his civic duty by serving on the Dublin City Council, representing No. 8 Borough Electoral Area (Ballsbridge). On 19 January 1959, he passed away and was interred at Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin.

About the Author: Christopher Warner is an Irish-American actor and freelance writer. He’s a frequent contributor to Síocháin and has written for several magazines and websites across multiple genres, including Military History Matters, WWII Quarterly, Aviation History, Ireland’s Own, and Irish America. He currently resides in Co. Kerry with his wife, Maureen and their brood of cats.



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P.J. Bermingham’s Headstone