

Peter O' Connor's political protest at the 1906 Olympics

PETER O'CONNOR had seen enough. The long jump world record holder from Wicklow silently fumed during the awards ceremony at the 1906 Intercalated Olympic Games in Athens. Dubious officiating had already cost him the gold medal earlier that day, and making matters worse, O'Connor now had to stand under the Union Jack despite having entered the competition to represent Ireland – and only Ireland.

A tipping point had been reached, and it was time to even the score.

While his teammates and fellow countrymen, Con Leahy and John Daly, stood guard, O'Connor quickly scrambled up a 20-foot flagpole and unfurled a large green flag emblazoned with a golden harp and the inscription, "Erin Go Bragh."

A crowd of 55,000 spectators, including members of the British Royal Family, had just witnessed the first – and possibly the most dramatic – political protest in Olympic history. But this improbable tale that's as true as it is incredible doesn't end there. It gets even better. Not surprisingly, authorities weren't exactly pleased with O'Connor's spirited shenanigans but allowed him to remain in the competition.

The 34-year-old nationalist responded by winning the triple jump (then known as the 'hop, step, jump') a few two days later. Naturally, he celebrated by repeating his flag-waving dissent – but this time from the much safer confines of terra firma, nor having to fend off the Greek police. More importantly, his act of rebellion on a global stage had increased awareness for Irish Independence and foreshadowed the Easter Rising a decade later.

PETER O'CONNOR was born in Cumberland, England, on 24 October 1872 to Irish parents. His father, Edward O'Connor, a shipwright, and his wife Mary (née O'Brien) later moved back to their homeland, settling in Wicklow to raise 11 children (six of whom became nuns). Peter, the third

eldest, attended Wicklow national school, where his formal education ended at age 14.

During these formative years, he began cultivating his nationalist ideals, a frustration rooted in the British government's neglect of secondary education for catholic children in late Victorian Ireland.

In 1894, O'Connor found work as a clerk in Clifden, Co. Galway, in a solicitor's office. There, two paths converged that would profoundly affect the rest of his life: the sport of athletics and the field of law.

He quickly established himself as a top-flight competitor.



He scrambled up a 20-foot flagpole and unfurled a large green flag...writes Christopher Warner

He benefitted from a tall, sinewy physique, which allowed him to shine in the jumping events. His extraordinary prowess in the long jump, however, soon became the stuff of legend. As the most dominant jumper of his day, he made headlines worldwide with a leap of 24 ft 11³/₄ins (7.61m) in Dublin on 5 August, 1901. The feat also holds the distinction as the first IAAF ratified long jump world record – a mark that went unbeaten for 20 years.

Even more astounding, it remained an Irish record for 89 years until broken by decathlete Carlos O'Connell in 1990.

BY 1906, the modern Olympic Games were in a state of disrepair. The contests of 1900 and 1904 were poorly attended and paled compared to the prestige and commercial spectacle that

would later follow. In hopes of breathing new life into the limp affair, organisers decided to hold an interim staging in Greece, the ancestral home of the ancient Olympians.

O'Connor, who had turned down previous invitations to compete for Britain, saw the meeting as an opportunity to conclude a brilliant career while wearing proper home colours.

Two other Irish competitors, Leahy (high jump) and Daly (steeplechase), accompanied the world-beater to Athens. They were all given smart green blazers and caps adorned with a gold shamrock, and as representatives of the Emerald Isle, they took along a soon-to-be-infamous flag.

But upon arrival, the men were informed of a last-minute rules change, mandating that all participants must belong to a National Olympic Committee. Ireland didn't have one. As a result, the athletes were lumped in with the

British team.

THE DUPLICITY served as a harbinger of things to come. Founder Pierre de Coubertin's Olympic creed of promoting excellence, friendship, and respect through sport had become corrupted and

politicised. The skulduggery also found its way into the long jump pit, where the sole judge just happened to be the U.S. team's manager. In the end, American Myer Prinstein, whose world record O'Connor had smashed five years earlier, was declared the winner even though distances weren't announced until after the event concluded. And as they say, the rest is history.

Shortly after returning home to Waterford, the "King of Spring" (aka "Irish Antelope") retired from competitive athletics. He eventually became a successful solicitor, and with his wife, Margaret, raised nine children.

In later years, O'Connor remained active in the sport as a spectator, official, and ambassador. On 9 November 1957, he passed away at the age of 85.

Erin Go Bragh. ■