

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many intellectuals believed that the American Republic was in danger. Their fear lay not in outside enemies, but in the internal disorder and moral degeneracy which arose from the Industrial Revolution.¹ Political thinkers believed that American moral and material success depended upon a vigorous citizenship. They believed a vigorous citizenship had been developed and sustained by the agrarian labor force that was disappearing in the age of the machine. It was believed that the repetitive style and long hours of factory work sapped the vigor of the populace. This, coupled with a rise in immigration that accompanied industrialization, created a fear that the bonds linking communities would be irrevocably severed. With the loss of an agrarian centered society, a new method of developing and sustaining the nation's vigor was needed.²

A group of progressive thinkers decided that athletics could offer the answer to America's problems. It was thought that athletics could be a means of reinforcing republican values. Sports would instill in participants the puritan work ethic and sense of community that were evaporating.³ It was felt that athletics offered a way to transform foreign-born industrial workers into their American antecedents. The goal of this policy was tantamount to stripping the Irish, and East and South European immigrants of their ethnicity and traditions, making them conform to an idealized past.

This desire of intellectuals for immigrants to assimilate into mainstream America was not shared by most Irish Catholic emigrants. They were unwilling to abandon their religion and culture in order to fit into pre-existing "American" mold. Unwilling to shed their identity, they sought to alter the definition of what made a person American. In order to accomplish this feat, they needed to link traditionally Irish goals with American ones such as athletics. Instead of

using it to change its participants, they would use athletics to alter the views of its spectators. In 1908, a perfect opportunity to use this strategy would emerge.

In 1908, the fifth Olympic Games were held in London. For the first time, these Games were expected to bring together the best athletes of Europe and America. It was felt that no better place than England could stage the premier sporting event of the day.⁴ England was viewed as the originator of modern sports and the protector of fair play. Despite their great hopes, the majority of those observing the 1908 Olympics would be dismayed at the feuds that broke out. Such ill will between English and American Olympic officials existed during the Games that "[n]one of the American athletes and only one member of the committee attended banquets or receptions, one-tenth of the outlay for which was subscribed by Americans."⁵ Unlike many other spectators, Irish Americans were thrilled as the English were portrayed throughout the games as cheaters and poor losers. Newspaper coverage saturated New York with the exploits of Irish American victors and the despicable deeds of the English. The newspapers transformed Irish American athletes into American heroes, the defenders of the American republic, while villainizing the British.

From the opening ceremony to the distribution of prizes, every New York newspaper carried daily accounts of the Games. The *Evening Post* had front page coverage approximately 80 percent of the time. The *New York Times* had front page coverage once, choosing to cover the Games with other sporting events in the middle of the paper. On two days, the *New York Daily Herald* printed articles on its third page (the first two pages of the newspaper were advertisements), at other times it covered the Games with other sports in the back half of the newspaper. The *Sun* contained front page coverage three days, but covered the games on its last

page about 60% of the time. The *New York Daily Tribune* contained front page coverage 50% of the time. It can be inferred from these statistics that the typical New Yorker was apprised of the happenings of the Games, and that the Olympics were viewed with more interest than a simple sports story.

The coverage in the newspapers consisted of a chart of scores by nation published daily, and articles covering the Games. By comparing the scores of the nations, the papers added to the sense of international rivalry created by the Games. The articles contained a list of the winners of each event held the previous day. The nationality of the winners and the athletic club or college that they belonged to was also identified. On every day of the games, athletes from the Irish American Athletic Club (IAAC) appeared in the newspapers.

The Irish American club received its charter from the city of New York in 1897, and opened in 1898 ten years before the 1908 Olympics. P. J. Conway is credited with the creation of the club and served as President all but one term up until the 1908 Olympics. An emigrant from Limerick, Conway came to America at the age of twenty and began work as a journeyman until he had saved enough money to open a stable for shoeing horses.⁶ Conway symbolized the increasing prosperity and respectability of turn-of-the-century Irish immigrants.

The dominance of Irish Americans on the Olympic team was readily apparent. Martin Sheridan, a member of the IAAC, commented on the ethnicity of the United States team saying, "Indeed if one were to go right through the team the difficulty would be to pick out those who haven't at least some strain of Irish blood in them."⁷ The Irish flavor of the team went all the way to its coaches. James E. Sullivan, the son of Irish immigrants, had been appointed to lead the American Olympic team by President Roosevelt.⁸ The trainer of the team, "Mike" Murphy,

was also of Irish descent. While in London these men served as official envoys from America. As such, their statements and actions in London reflected upon America. These statements, printed by American news agencies and often reprinted by London newspapers, were uniformly inflammatory. Typical of the sentiment contained in Sullivan's comments was a quote in the *Gaelic American* given after the Olympics: "English sportsmanship! I don't want to hear that expression again as long as I live. There is no such thing as English fair play to-day." In the same article, referring to English spectators, Sullivan said, "Do you call booing and baying our competitors whenever they showed on the field sportsmanlike?"⁹ Sullivan's observations about the British seem salutary in comparison to those of Murphy.

Murphy's comments about the 400 meter race were especially vitriolic. This was one of the incidents during the Games that created great ill feelings all around. The race contained three Americans – Carpenter, Robbins, and Taylor – and one English athlete, William Halswelle. Most accounts of the race agree that J.C. Carpenter took the lead from the beginning, followed by W.C. Robbins and then Halswelle. Taylor got off to a poor start and would never be a factor in the race. All accounts also agree that Carpenter drifted wide coming out of the final turn. English newspapers claimed that he elbowed and blocked out Halswelle, while American newspapers claimed that Carpenter had pulled away from Halswelle before the turn and did not impede him. Before the race had finished multiple English officials ran onto the course. The tape marking the end of the race was torn down before Carpenter could cross it. Carpenter and Robbins finished first and third, with Halswelle coming in second.¹⁰ The Olympic officials immediately declared the race null and moved around the crowd informing the spectators of the ruling. Upon an American protest, a committee meeting of the Amateur Athletic Association of

Great Britain was called. Furthering the ire of the Americans, only Halswelle and the judges who had rendered the decision to decertify the race were called to testify. The committee decided that Carpenter should be disqualified and that Halswelle, Taylor, and Robbins should rerun the race.¹¹ Sullivan and Murphy ordered Taylor and Robbins to boycott. Thus, two days after the original race, Halswelle won the 400 meter race uncontested even though the incident was to be contested in the newspapers of America and London for months thereafter.

Most of the New York newspapers exacerbated the hostilities by printing the lengthy diatribes of Murphy about this race. In the *Daily Tribune* Murphy said, "'Highway robbery' is pretty strong language, but there are no other words for it. I have been up against the English officials for years, and it has always been the same story – they would have robbed us of everything they could."¹² Murphy told the *Evening Post*

It shows what the boasted 'fairest sportsmen' in the world will do to win. I would rather have seen this happen than win fifty races. It proves, what I have always said, that these English officials will do anything to prevent an American or anybody besides their own people from winning a race. You bet (our athletes) won't run it over, and, if I had my way, every American athlete at the Stadium would leave here right away, and never return, either to this arena or to England.¹³

These remarks and others of a similar tone by Murphy were picked up by London newspapers and served to widen the rift between those passionate about sports in the two nations.

Not all papers tried to rile up its readers. Conspicuous among the New York papers, the *Sun* chose not to engage in such sensationalistic reports. In its coverage of the 400 meter race, the *Sun* wrote that "Trainer Murphy declares that Carpenter had the right of way. In his opinion the Englishmen are all things quite unprintable."¹⁴ This demonstrates how little concern the other newspapers held for protecting the existing goodwill between the United States and

England. This is evident when one considers that there was little difference between the coverage in the Irish American weeklies and the established New York dailies. The only difference was that the Irish papers continued the sentiment conveyed in the coverage to its logical end and called for a break in diplomatic relations with England.

The apparent goal of the New York papers to color the opinions of its readers also took on a passive quality. From the beginning of the Games, quotes from Sullivan and the Olympic team criticizing the English manner of drawing heats were abundant. Under the English system, only the winner of each heat advanced to the next round. The spaces for the heats were supposedly determined by randomly drawn lots, but the American team complained that its best athletes were often drawn for the same heat. Athletic events in America, including the 1904 Olympic Games, had historically allowed the first and second place runners in preliminary heats to advance. Commenting on this situation Sullivan said, "It is either extraordinary bad luck or the manner in which the drawings have been made that has resulted in such unfavorable conditions for the Americans."¹⁵

Two heats in particular were felt to be unfair. In one of the preliminary heats for the 1,500 meter race, Mel Sheppard of the IAAC faced Halstead, the preliminary favorite of the American team. Sheppard won the race just ahead of Halstead, whose time would have won the other heats. When Sheppard and Halstead were drawn together in a preliminary heat for the 800 meter race, the New York newspapers reported the story as proof of British foul play. While all the newspapers mentioned that the team had lodged yet another protest against this situation, the *Sun* was the only newspaper to publish the result of the protest. It reported that the committee

would allow Sheppard and Halstead to enter separate heats.¹⁶ Apparently the other four newspapers did not consider this to be newsworthy.

Each of the papers found plenty of room to cover the tug of war scandal. The American tug of war team faced a British team composed of Liverpool policemen. These men wore heavy boots with metal rims, in contrast to the Americans who understood that athletic shoes were the legal footwear. After the first pull, the American tug of war team walked off the field. The newspapers contained accounts of the British team wearing spikes and even boots which they could barely lift off the ground. Once again the *Sun* was the only paper that did not report the story in an Anglophobic manner. It wrote that the American protest "must have been due to ignorance of this form of sport, in which it is a great specialty of the British police and army to wear heavy boots. To wear athletic shoes in a tug of war would be regarded as the same error as to wear heavy boots in a sprint."¹⁷

While the *Sun* limited inflammatory rhetoric in its columns and tended to keep its coverage of the Games on the last page, it offered the best documentation of the most compelling story of the Olympics. One of the final events was the marathon. Coming into the 1908 Olympics, it was an accepted notion in the sporting world that the English dominated the middle and long distance events, while Americans specialized in field exercises and short distance track events. Before the Games, even James E. Sullivan predicted that "England should win the Olympic Marathon, and if [it] does not finish one, two, three [it] should be well up."¹⁸ The United States was considered a long shot to place a runner in the top five.

From the start of the race, Dorando Pietri from Italy and Charles Hefferon, an Irishman from South Africa, were the leaders. After reaching the half way point John Hayes, a nineteen

year old member of the IAAC, started to move up through the field. After passing Hefferon, Hayes was able to see Pietri enter the stadium. Pietri collapsed before he could reach the finish line. English officials helped him to his feet and watched as he collapsed again. Then an official supported him as they walked together across the finish line. Shortly after this scene, Hayes entered the stadium relatively fresh and crossed the finish line second to Pietri. Instead of disqualifying Pietri right away, English officials raised the Italian flag. Not until after an American protest was upheld would Hayes be declared the winner. Many Englishmen took the news of the Irish American's victory bitterly. The *New York Herald* reported that "just before the prizes were awarded, a report was spread among the crowd in the Stadium that certain British officials had obtained a photograph of Hayes being carried along the Marathon course in a blanket."¹⁹ This laughable rumor demonstrates how rankled the English were by the success of the Americans at the marathon.

Increasing English consternation, Hayes was not the only American marathoner to finish well at the Olympics. American Joseph Foreshaw followed Hefferon across the line and finished third. Disproving Sullivan's prediction for the event, four Americans placed in the top ten, while the first Englishman finished twelfth.²⁰ The marathon more than any other event seemed to prove the dominance of the American athlete over the British. Hayes' victory and the other Americans' success symbolized the emergence of America as the premier sporting nation in the world, while the incredible success of the IAAC testified to the Irish American athlete's leading role in the process. Americans won thirteen of twenty-three track and field events; of those thirteen victories, members of the IAAC accounted for eight.²¹

Of these eight athletes, Hayes became the most celebrated. New York newspapers offered biographies of him which seemed to precede a candidacy for sainthood. The newspapers contained pictures of Hayes donning his IAAC uniform, with the club's symbol, the winged fist, prominently displayed. The Irish American community found him to be a perfect symbol for their cause. The *Sun* wrote that "Jack Hayes is as Irish as you find them, with black hair, blue eyes, a good humored and freckled face and a ton of confidence in himself." Hayes was universally characterized as "a modest chap who doesn't care to gabble about his own achievements."²² Each of the newspapers printed stories informing readers that Hayes had worked at Bloomingdales six days a week since he was seventeen, and that he was going to be offered the well paying position of head of its sporting department. Readers learned that Hayes had trained at night without a coach due to his job.²³ He was even a member of the Ninth Regiment, N.G.N.Y.²⁴

Hayes's youth and victory over England offered Irish Americans hope for the future. Embraced by all of American society, Hayes was proof that Irish Americans could gain a place within the American mainstream without sacrificing their ethnic identity. He showed that Irish Americans could gain acceptance by achieving success for America.

In order for this success on the athletic field to translate into goodwill from the American establishment, it needed to be clear that the Irish American athletes were competing for the sake of American not for Irish glory. Those who wished to deny Irish Americans a place within the middle class of America attempted to portray the IAAC athletes as sojourners in America more concerned about Ireland than their adopted country. An article in the *Sun* comparing western and eastern athletes, suggested the western athletes were more patriotic: "among the New York A.C.

and the Irish A.A.C. there [was] a bitter rivalry, the latter, except for John Flanagan, being out for the Irish club only."²⁵ There was at least a small grain of truth in this statement. Martin Sheridan of the IAAC was quoted in the *Irish American Advocate* as saying, "I must have a good try, if only for the sake of the old country."²⁶

Irish American opinion makers answered attacks of divided loyalty, by portraying the athletes' love for Ireland as a complementary force to their intense American patriotism. Conway was quoted as saying, "While our men are showing up in fine style it's all for the good of the Stars and Stripes." Articles on the club members in the Irish American weeklies characterize both the athletes and their supporters as American and Irish patriots. An article for the *Gaelic American's* coverage of the parade in New York for the returning athletes, said:

The buildings along the route of the parade were decorated with American flags, and American flags were carried by many of the paraders and spectators. The Irish flag was also in evidence, and the bands played "The Star-Spangled Banner," "Hail, Columbia," and the "The Wearing of the Green."

The article goes on to say that in front of the float containing John J. Hayes, P.J. Conway, and James E. Sullivan, was a float decorated with American and Irish flags.²⁷ The mixing of flags illustrated how Irishness and Americanism could intermingle and reinforce each other.

The conscious effort expelled by Irish Americans to characterize the Irish American athletes as American can be seen in the E.P. McKenna's poem "How the Yankees Beat the World" published in the *Gaelic American* on 25 July 1908. The title of the poem demonstrates an Irish American attempt to alter the definition of what makes a person American, for the poem could have easily been "The Irish Beat the World." Instead of making a plea to be accepted as American on the terms offered by others, Irish Americans had the agency to declare themselves

Yankees. The poem offers their Irish heritage as a source of pride and a cause for the success of the athletes.

McKenna's poem shows how perfectly the 1908 Olympics lent themselves to Irish American cultural aspirations. By competing under the American flag, Irish Americans were able to demonstrate their loyalty. The circumstances surrounding the Games allowed the American media to portray the English as poor losers and cheaters who hated America. Turning middle class Americans against the English naturally increased the visibility and respectability of the Irish on the United States Olympic team. The victories of Irish Americans at the Games gave the Irish ethnicity an enhanced value in America. By claiming the victories of the Irish Americans as their own, those previously considered "native" Americans were implicitly inviting the Irish to join their ranks – at least in the sporting world. This process occurred not by instilling any change in the Irish Americans, but by embracing the very qualities that had previously been despised in Irish Americans. The pride America took in its Irish American Olympians' physical vigor and competitive spirit transformed them into a valued part of American society.

NOTES

¹ Mark Dyreson, *Making the American Team* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 8

² *Ibid.*, p. 14

³ *Ibid.*, p. 9

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136

⁵ "America's Best Are Again Drawn for the Same Heat," *New York Herald*, 20 July 1908, p. 10

⁶ "Conway of the IAAC," *Gaelic American*, 25 July 1908, p. 8

⁷ "Irishmen at Olympic Games," *Irish-American Advocate*, 18 July 1908, p. 4

⁸ Dyreson, *op.cit.*, p. 60

⁹ "English Hate Americans," *Gaelic American*, 15 August 1908, p. 5

¹⁰ Roger D. McGrath, "Running Rings 'Round the Empire," *Irish America Magazine* (Vol. IV, September 1988), p. 40

¹¹ "New Olympic Disputes," *New York Daily Tribune*, 24 July 1908, p. 1

¹² "New Olympic Disputes," *op.cit.*, p. 5

¹³ "400 Meter Race Controversy," *New York Evening Post*, 23 July 1908, p. 1

¹⁴ "Yankee Runner Disqualified," *New York Sun*, 24 July 1908, p. 1

¹⁵ "America's Turn Next," *New York Daily Tribune*, 20 July 1908, p. 1

¹⁶ "America's Day in Stadium," *New York Sun*, 21 July 1908, p. 10

¹⁷ "Off Day for Our Athletes," *New York Sun*, 18 July 1908, p. 10

¹⁸ "Sullivan's Olympic Views," *New York Sun*, 13 July 1908, p. 6

¹⁹ "Britishers Still Trying to Discredit Hayes' Victory," *New York Herald*, 27 July 1908, p. 11

²⁰ "Hayes, American, Marathon Winner," *New York Times*, 25 July 1908, p. 1

²¹ "Fine Example of Self-Development," *New York Herald*, 25 July 1908, p. 13

²² "Hayes a Real New York Boy," *New York Sun*, 25 July 1908, p. 3

²³ "Running Rings 'Round the Empire," *op.cit.*, p. 42

²⁴ "Hayes a Real New York Boy," *op.cit.*

²⁵ "Olympic Team Sidelights," *New York Sun*, 19 July 1908, p. 10

²⁶ "Irishmen at Olympic Games," *Irish-American Advocate*, 18 July 1908, p. 3

²⁷ "New York Welcome to Olympic Victors," *Gaelic American*, 5 September 1908, p. 1