

Martin Sheridan: “That flag dips before no earthly king”

An often overlooked fact of Olympic history was the early domination of the strength events by men who shared two common characteristics: they were Irish-Americans and New York City Policemen. Foremost among them was Martin Sheridan.



Martin Sheridan 1908 Olympics

Sheridan was born in County Mayo in 1881 in the town of Bohola. He immigrated to the United States at the age of sixteen, shortly thereafter becoming a New York City Police Officer. He won his first gold medal at the St. Louis Olympics in 1904 in the discus, an event he was to dominate during his career. In the 1906 Olympics he would again easily win the discus gold, but also a gold medal in shot putt, and silver in the standing long jump, the standing high jump and stone-throwing. He was the odds on favorite to win the pentathlon before having to withdraw due to a leg injury.

However, it is the 1908 Olympics that Sheridan is best remembered for and his actions prior to the start of competition. The 1908 games held in London were mired in controversy from the start. It was the first games to have an “Opening Ceremony”

and the now traditional parade of nations marching into the stadiums. Prior to the opening ceremony it was noticed by the American team that while the stadium was surrounded with the flags of various nations (including two that were not competing), the British hosts had omitted the flag of the United States, claiming “they couldn’t find an American Flag”. Additionally, many Irish athletes had withdrawn when learning they would be required to march behind the Union Jack. The protocol for the open ceremony established by the UK organizers had each team parade before King Edward VII, where they were to dip their national flag in salute. When the US team marched in front of the English King, the standard bearer Ralph Rose did not dip the flag. Legend has it that fellow Irish American Policeman and hammer thrower Mathew McGrath had told Rose along the parade route “Dip that flag and you will be in a hospital tonight”. When American team captain Martin Sheridan was questioned on the incident he famously replied while pointing to the American flag “That flag dips before no earthly king”, establishing a tradition that continues to this day, the American flag being the only flag not to be dipped before the head of state of the host country at the Olympics.

The 1908 London Olympics would go down as one of the most controversial in history, with obvious host country bias forcing a change in how judges are selected. Martin Sheridan would go on to win two more gold medals in the discus and a bronze in the longjump. He won a total of 9 Olympic medals and is considered one of the greatest athletes of all time. He would continue to serve on the NYPD, becoming a first grade detective, till his death from pneumonia shortly before his 37th birthday.

Did you know that....

- 47 years earlier, Michael Corcoran refused to parade the 69th NY Militia before the future Edward VII as Prince of Wales in protest of English actions in Ireland
- The first medal awarded in the modern Olympics was to Irish American James Brendan Connolly
- The Shea’s are America’s first 3 generation Olympic Family: Jim Shea gold in speed skating 1932, Jim Shea competed in Nordic Skiing in 1964, Jim Shea Jr. won gold in sledding in 2002.
- The oldest world record breaker in the history of athletics is Irish American Olympic hammer thrower John Jesus Flanagan