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Celtic Park: A Training Ground for Olympic Champions

In 1898, before there was a No. 7 train, a Queens Boulevard or a Queensboro Bridge to get across the East River, a group of Irish immigrants purchased a nine-acre plot of farmland on what is now the Sunnyside-Woodside border and built what would become a world-renowned stadium and a training ground for Olympic champions.

They named their stadium "Celtic Park," after a stadium built by Irish immigrants in Glasgow, Scotland in 1888, (today the home of the Celtic Football Club). The Celtic Park stadium in Queens quickly became a meeting place for New York's Irish immigrant community, and the home of the Irish-American Athletic Club. From 1900 to 1924, members of the club won 55 Olympic medals for the United States at seven Olympic games. In the 1908 Olympic games in London, the Irish-American Athletic Club members were one-sixth of the U.S. Olympic team, but they won half of the 24 gold medals awarded to the Americans that year.

Celtic Park was originally intended as a venue for the ancient Irish games of Gaelic football and hurling, but it also served as a track and field for competitions under the auspices of the Amateur Athletic Union, the governing body of amateur sports in the U.S. National and world records frequently were set or broken at Celtic Park, sometimes only to be broken again within days or weeks. From 1902 to 1912, Celtic Park hosted six A.A.U. All-Around Championships, the predecessor of the modern-day decathlon. It was at Celtic Park that Native American Jim Thorpe, one of the greatest American athletes of the 20th Century, qualified for the 1912 Olympic games and won his All-Around Championship that same year.

The Irish-American Athletic Club was formed in part as a response to the more established New York Athletic Club's reluctance to accept recent immigrants as members. But while founded by Irish immigrants, the Irish-American Athletic Club quickly became a multi-cultural and multi-ethnic organization, in an era of segregation and discrimination. It became known as New York's workingman's athletic club. Their membership included not only the first Irish-born athlete to win an Olympic gold medal for the United States (John J. Flanagan), but the first African American Olympic gold medalist (Dr. John Baxter Taylor), and the first Jewish and Polish athlete



to win Olympic gold for the U.S.A. (Myer Prinstein).

The symbol these men proudly wore in competition was a "Winged Fist," adorned with American flags and shamrocks, in contrast with the rival New York Athletic Club's "Winged Foot" of Mercury emblem. Sportswriters of the day frequently recounted the epic athletic battles that took place at Celtic Park between the "Winged Fists" of the I-AAC and the "Winged Foot" team of the NYAC. And frequently the Winged Fists came out on top. Between 1904 and 1916, the I-AAC won ten National Outdoor Track and Field team championship titles and seven National Indoor titles, while individual athletes of the Winged Fist club won 81 National Outdoor championships and 36 National Indoor titles.

In addition to serving as a prime leisure destination for the Irish Diaspora in New York, Celtic Park also served as a venue for fundraising. It was here that the clandestine Clan-na-Gael, a group dedicated to the overthrow of British rule in Ireland, raised tens of thousands of dollars to fund the 1916 Easter Rebellion, which eventually led to the creation of the Republic of Ireland. And in the bloody wake of the rebellion, it was at Celtic Park that the Irish community came together to grieve, and raise funds to send home for Irish relief.

While the Irish-American Athletic Club excelled in track and field competitions in general, they particularly dominated in weight throwing events - the discus, the shot-put, the hammer and the 56-pound weight throw. There was a group of them, all Irish immigrants and almost all New York City police officers, who became known collectively as the "Irish Whales." For more than 20 years, these huge sons of Erin garnered Olympic weight-throwing titles. They were Martin Sheridan from County

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Mayo (nine Olympic medals, five gold); John J. Flanagan from Limerick (four Olympic medals, three gold); Clare native Patrick "Babe" McDonald (three Olympic medals, two gold); and Matt McGrath from Tipperary

(three Olympic medals, one gold). To this day, Martin Sheridan, who is buried in Woodside's Calvary Cemetery, is the Irishman and New York City police officer to have won the most Olympic medals.

The Irish-American Athletic Club suspended activities in 1917, with U.S. entry into the First World War,

and many athletes enlisted in the war effort. Former team captains Lawson Robertson and Mel Sheppard served as athletic trainers for the U.S. Army. At least one former member of the team, Jack Monument, was killed in battle, and another, Patrick J. Flynn, received the Purple Heart. After the war, the club failed to

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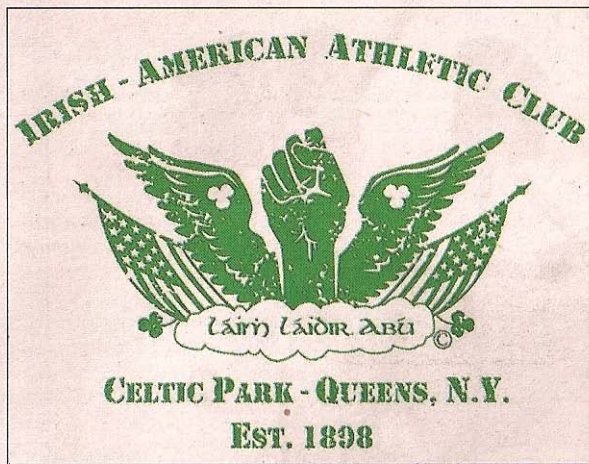


1909 Team photo of the Irish-American Athletic Club, the "Winged Fists" of Celtic Park, standing in front of the street that is today "Winged Fist Way." Beyond the sheep dotting the fields in the background, Calvary Cemetery can be seen on the horizon. Photo courtesy of the American Irish Historical Society.

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York City's tallest building. And as an



appropriate tribute to the location's historic roots, the complex is called the Celtic Park apartments, known to locals affectionately as "The Celtics."

To honor the proud history of Celtic Park, councilman Jimmy Van Bramer sponsored a bill last year to co-name the street that runs through the two-block apartment complex, and in March of 2012, 43rd Street, between 48th and 50th Avenues, was co-named

reconstitute, and in the 1920s the organization existed in name only.

In 1930, the Irish-American Athletic Club sold their Celtic Park stadium, track and field to the City and Suburban Homes Company for the construction of apartments for working-class families. Because the land was sold as one intact plot, it allowed for the construction of one of the first garden style apartment complexes, taking up two square blocks and eventually 25 buildings in all. The apartment complex was designed by renowned architect Ernest Flagg, who designed the Singer Building, once New

"Winged Fist Way," in honor of the Olympic champions who once called Celtic Park their home.

About the author: Ian McGowan has a Master's Degree in history from the City College of the City University of New York, and is the founder and executive director of the Winged Fist Organization, a Queens-based historical society, dedicated to preserving the legacy of the Irish-American Athletic Club. For further information, visit the group's website, www.WingedFist.org.

—Ian McGowan, M.A.