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Historian lives on hallowed sports ground

By Peter McDermott

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When Ian McGowan moved into his apartment complex in Sunnyside, Queens, he had some idea of its connection to the Irish American Athletic Club.

His curiosity led him to an internet search in which he found an 1920s article from the Long Island Star that told the story of the leveling of the sports club's facilities and the plans to build an apartment complex on the site. It would retain the old name, Celtic Park.

An attached note from the current president of Greater Astoria Historical Association asked for information about the whereabouts of the many trophies that the club had won over the years. They'd been missing for decades.

Just a few weeks later, McGowan was at an event with his fiancée at the American Irish Historical Society in Manhattan. Afterward, he asked the then caretaker Bill Colbert to give them an informal tour of



Three of the Irish Whales, from left: John Jesus Flanagan, Martin Sheridan and John Mitchell.

the Fifth Avenue building. Colbert obliged and, minutes later, the trio stumbled upon the missing Irish American Athletic Club trophies, about 60 in all.

He contacted the Greater Astoria Historical Society. "They were ecstatic," he said.

McGowan's curiosity turned into an obsession. He changed the focus of his Masters thesis on the Irish diaspora from Latin

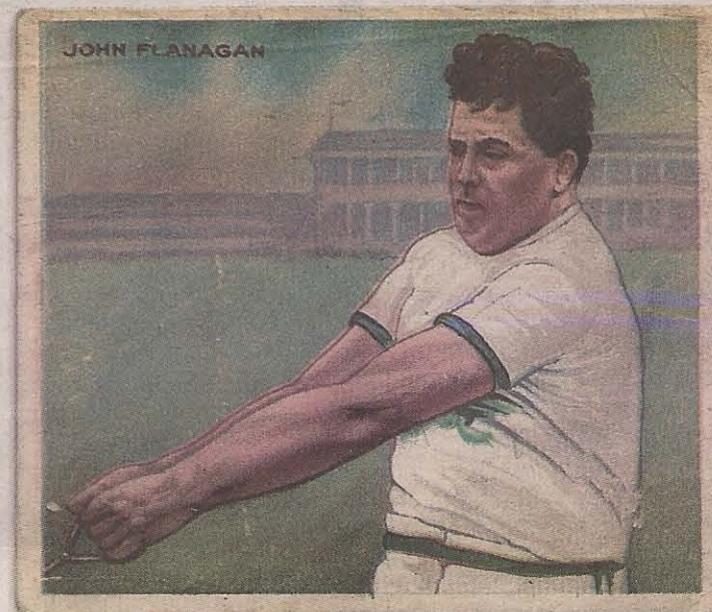
America to the Irish American Athletic Association, which, when at its zenith before World War I, was labeled the world's premier sports club.

He was invited back to the American Irish Historical Society where he gave an impromptu talk on the trophies to its president, Kevin Cahill, the Irish consul general and visiting dignitaries.

Again via the internet, historian McGowan bought up all the cigarette cards - which were popular for all sports in the first decades of the 20th century - he could find for the association's athletes. They included those for Irish-born legends like John Jesus Flanagan (winner of the gold in the hammer throw at the Olympic Games in 1900, 1904, 1908), Martin Sheridan (winner of three gold medals in the same period in the discus and the Greek discus) and Matt McGrath (winner of the hammer throw gold in 1912). Collectively, these and other athletes are known as the "Irish Whales."

Meanwhile, McGowan began the Winged Fist project with the Greater Astoria Historical Society, of which he is now a trustee, and founded his own web site, www.wingedfist.org.

"I was amazed to find how much coverage there was of them and how forgotten they are," he said. The web site has



articles that appeared in the New York Times and other papers on events at Celtic Park.

The club was founded in 1898 as an alternative to the New York Athletic Club, which it was felt discriminated against Irish sportsmen. Its emblem was winged fists adorned with American flags and shamrocks. Its motto in Irish was "Láim Láidir Abú" or "Strong Hands Forever."

The club was provided the cutting edge in America's efforts in the Olympic Games in London in 1908, accounting for 10 of the nation's 23 gold medals and in Stockholm in 1912, when club members won another five golds, four silvers and one bronze.

The London victors included runner John Baxter Taylor Jr., the first African American to win an Olympic gold medal (he contacted typhoid a few months later and died at age 26). Several prominent Jewish athletes also competed under the club's colors and in the Olympics.

"They were inclusive for their day," McGowan said of the club.

However, it went into a rapid decline. "It existed in name only after the [1914-18] war," the historian said.

Greyhound racing staged

there brought an "undesirable" element, as well as bootlegging, and undercover police squads to counter the illicit activity. After one shootout too many, local residents complain bitterly, and the complex was closed down and sold.

McGowan is campaigning to have a plaque mounted at Celtic Park commemorating the club.

The Winged Fist Project would also like to get the NYPD medal of honor in Martin Sheridan's name reinstated. It fell into disuse in the 1970s. The County Mayo-born cop died in St. Vincent's Hospital on March 27, 1918, the day before his 37th birthday. The obituary in the New York Times described him as "one of the greatest athletes this country has ever known."

An art exhibit, presentation and fundraising reception, will launch the Winged Fist Project of the Greater Astoria Historical Society in the historic Quinn Building, 35-20 Broadway in Long Island City, Queens, on March 23, at 7 p.m.

If you have information about the Irish American Athletic Club or would like more details about the event email wingedfist@gmail.com or go to www.wingedfist.org.

