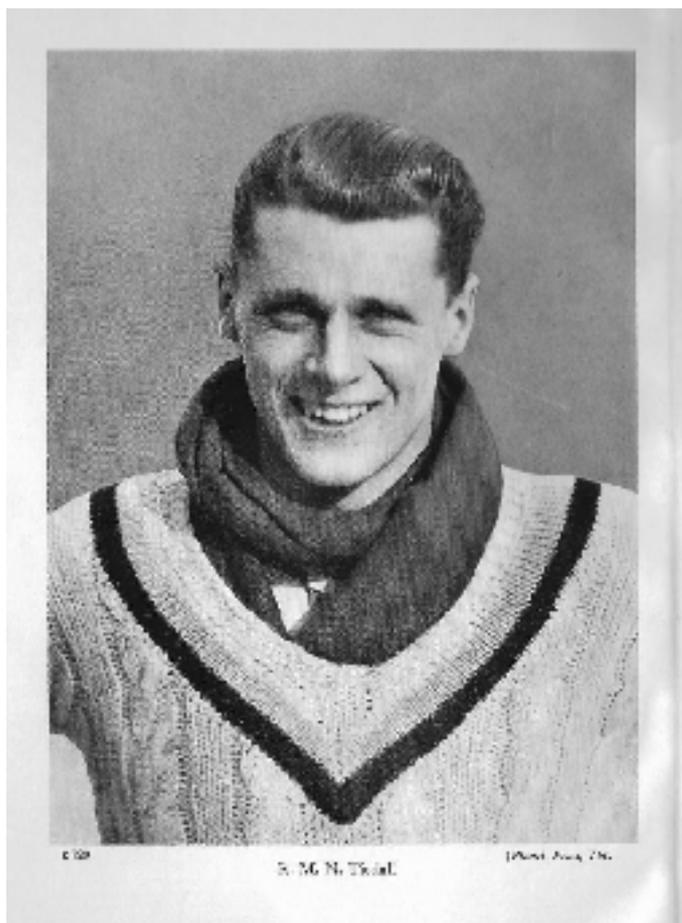


Bob Tisdall



An article remembering Bob Tisdall, from http://www.sparta-athletics.co.uk/bob_tisdall.htm

Bob Tisdall died on Wednesday at his home in Australia. Malcolm McCausland recalls recalls the amazing story of the man who won gold at the 1932 Olympics in Los Angeles almost exactly 72 years ago.

When Bob Tisdall crossed the finish line in the 400 metres hurdles at the Olympics in Los Angeles almost exactly 72 years ago (1 August 1932) he became only the second man to strike gold in the green of Ireland. It also capped an amazing chapter in the life of one of the country's greatest and most remarkable athletes.

Tisdall's victory came as a major surprise - he had only run the 400 metres hurdles three times before arriving in Los Angeles - and he was denied a world record of 51.7 seconds only because he knocked down the final hurdle. Later because of the incident the rules were changed and a few years ago the President of the International Olympic Committee Juan Samaranch presented him with a Waterford Crystal rose bowl with an image showing him knocking over a hurdle.

Robert Morton Newburgh Tisdall was born on the 16 May 1907 in Ceylon, now Sri Lanka. Although born to an Anglo-Irish family Bob, as he was always known, was 100% per cent Irish in his breeding. His father was an All-Ireland sprint champion while his mother was an Irish hockey international and by all accounts a formidable golfer.

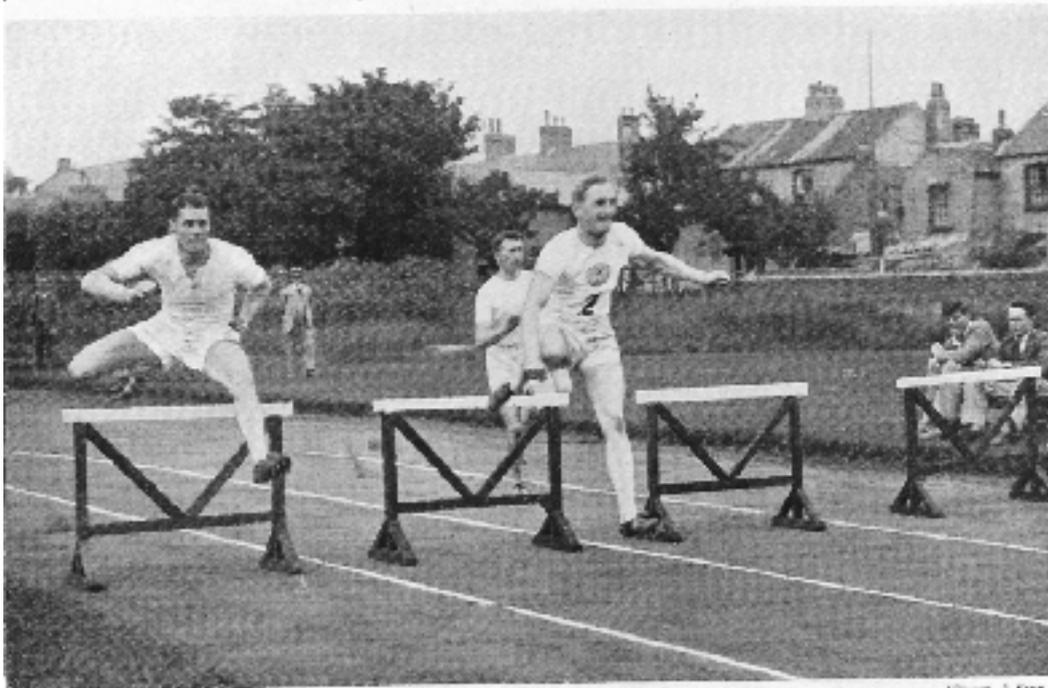


Inspired by the acrobats on a visit to circus as a young boy, he developed an interest in physical culture that was to last all his life. For weeks afterwards he spent all his free time doing cartwheels, walking on his hands and using the branches of a tree as a trapeze.

It was in prep school at Mourne Grange, standing in the shadow of Slieve Donard, that he first found a gym which enabled him to develop the skill, balance and poise that was eventually to take him to the winner's podium in Los Angeles.

After Mourne Grange he went to public school at Shrewsbury where at the age of 14 the fascination for hurdling had already gripped him. After leaving school he went to work in an office in London but after only ten months of city life an x-ray showed he had deposits of soot in his lungs. He was advised to live in the country and it was only then that a university career was considered. But he had no formal qualifications from Shrewsbury which would have gained him entrance and was refused a sports scholarship at Oxford. He worked hard for and passed the entrance exam to Cambridge in 1928.

A very successful athletics career followed and in his final year, 1931, Tisdall was elected CUAC president charged with the responsibility of selecting the team for the annual match against Oxford. He played a captain's part winning four of the eight individual events - a feat only equalled 60 years later. He could have won a fifth, his strongest event the 220 yards hurdles, but showing his measure as a man he stood down so that a friend would have the opportunity of winning a full-blue.



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An exciting duel between Tisdall and Lord Burghley over the Low Hurdles

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Early in 1932 he wrote an impassioned letter to the President of the Irish Olympic Council, General Eoin O'Duffy, asking him to be considered to represent Ireland at the Olympics later that year. O'Duffy was so taken by the tone of the letter, he immediately invited the Nenagh man over to run in Ireland's Olympic Trials at Croke Park. To pursue his Olympic dream, Bob promptly left his job and moved with his wife to Sussex where he lived in a disused railway carriage in an orchard and trained by running around the rows of trees.

Tisdall failed to make qualifying time at the trial but was given another chance by O'Duffy at the Irish Championships, also at Croke Park. This time, he made no mistake winning in a national record of 54.2

seconds, well inside the 55.0 seconds standard. After two weeks at the Irish Olympic training camp at Ballybunion, Co. Kerry, he faced the tortuous 14 day journey to California.

According to contemporary accounts the temperatures crossing the deserts of Nebraska and Colorado had registered in excess of 118°F (53°C). Tisdall whose normal racing weight was 11st 11lb (75kg) lost seven pounds (3.5kg). He had also slept badly during the 14 day journey and was anxious on account of having only raced over the 400 metres hurdles three times previously in his lifetime. In Los Angeles he lost another three pounds and amazed everyone by spending 15 out of every 24 hours in bed. Even more surprisingly, he never put on a running shoe or ran a yard!



Three days before the heats he tried a jog but discovered that the foot injury sustained twelve months previously had recurred on him. Had the Games been held today he would probably have withdrawn but in a less sophisticated era he merely attributed his symptoms to nerves.

Nevertheless, Tisdall opened his account in Los Angeles by winning his preliminary round heat in 54.8 seconds before leading home the competitors in the second semi-final in 52.8 seconds, 1.4 seconds faster than his personal best.

Drawn in lane three, Tisdall seemed to enjoy a narrow advantage over his five rivals in the early part of the final and was well ahead when the field entered the home straight. He was still comfortably clear coming down the home straight but in the dash to the line he brought down the final hurdle making him stumble for five or six strides and allowed the American Hardin to get within a yard of him at the tape.

Tisdall's time of 51.7 seconds would have been a world record but under the rules at the time was disallowed because of Tisdall bringing down the final hurdle. The Tipperary man did not any waste time celebrating but immediately made for the throwing area. There he encouraged his friend and team mate Dr Pat O'Callaghan who had trailed Finn Ville Porhola for five rounds in the hammer to win a second Irish gold with his last throw of the competition. It completed Ireland's greatest ever hour in the Olympic Arena winning two gold medals in only the country's second Olympiad.

Later Bob lived in South Africa, where he ran a gymnasium which he converted to a nightclub in the evening. He moved to Tanzania and grew coffee before raising cattle in Australia. He claimed to have run his last race at the age of 80 and took part in the Sydney Olympics torch relay. He was present in Nenagh in 2002 when a statue was unveiled in memory of him and the town's two other Olympic champions, John Hayes and Matty McGrath. Last year, he was involved in a serious accident in which he ruptured his spleen as well as breaking his shoulder blade and several ribs after he falling down a steep set of rock stairs. But within a short time he was back on his feet - only minor setback for a man who conquered the world all those years ago.

