



### Green Blades at the Olympics

The modern Olympics were first held in Athens in 1896. Rowing was one of the original sports, though the regatta did not take place due to bad weather. As Ireland was part of the United Kingdom at the time, any Irish athletes had to compete as Great Britain. While not in the rowing events, at each of the games between 1896 and 1920, not alone did Irish athletes compete, but they won medals at each. At the 1904 games in St Louis, the only three competitors representing Great Britain were Irish - and they won two medals.



Following the creation of the Irish Free State in 1921, Ireland was for the first time eligible to send a team to the Olympics in its own right. The Irish Olympic Council<sup>1</sup> which had been formed in 1920, sent teams to the Games in 1924, 1928 and 1932. There had been a suggestion that Ireland would send an eight to the 1928 games. By June with no crew selected, and no finance arranged, the proposal fizzled out.

In late 1935 there were approaches from DUBC and UCD with a view to entering a crew at the 1936 games in Berlin. Following recent decisions by both the IAAF<sup>2</sup> and IOC (the International Olympic Committee) that members should be delineated by political boundaries, the IOC advised that entries must now be in the name 'Irish Free State' instead of 'Ireland' as before. The Hon Sec apprised an Executive Meeting of this fact and it was decided *"In view of this situation, the consensus of opinion appeared to be that as the Irish Amateur Rowing Union was an all-Ireland body, it would not be fitting for them, or conducive to unity, to make any entry which was not in the name of Ireland, and further, the Executive Committee felt that even if it were permitted, no action on their part should be taken to destroy the united front organised under the aegis of the Irish Olympic Council."* At the AGM in February 1936 a notice of motion in the name of DUBC & UCD requested *"That the IARU should sanction the entry of a crew at the 1936 Olympics."* The Hon Secretary outlined the facts and informed the meeting of the decision which had been taken place at the Executive Meeting. Having being acquainted with the facts the proposers withdrew their motion.

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<sup>1</sup> Changed to The Olympic Council of Ireland in 1952 and the Olympic Federation of Ireland in 2018.

<sup>2</sup> The International Association of Athletic Federations



As no games took place during the Second World War, the first post-war games were scheduled for London 1948, with the rowing competition taking place at Henley. Following the passing of the 1937 Constitution, the IOC now referred to entries from the Irish Olympic Council as 'Eire' which of course only included the 26 counties. Against this backdrop the Executive debated the merits of sending a crew to participate in late 1947. The matter was referred to an EGM convened to discuss a potential Olympic participation on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1948. The Executive, which met prior to the meeting, agreed that the IARU should take the necessary measures to affiliate to FISA<sup>3</sup> and to submit an entry from the IARU as an all island body. The IOC could then accept or refuse the entry. These decisions were put to the clubs at the EGM and unanimously agreed. Further discussion took place on the method of selection. It was finally agreed that the winners of the 1948 Senior Eights Championship at Belfast Regatta would

represent Ireland. There was however an important rider added to the decision which allowed for a sub-committee to strengthen the crew. This had been a contentious point. Some speakers at the EGM had a preference for a club crew due to the vastly differing rowing styles around the country.

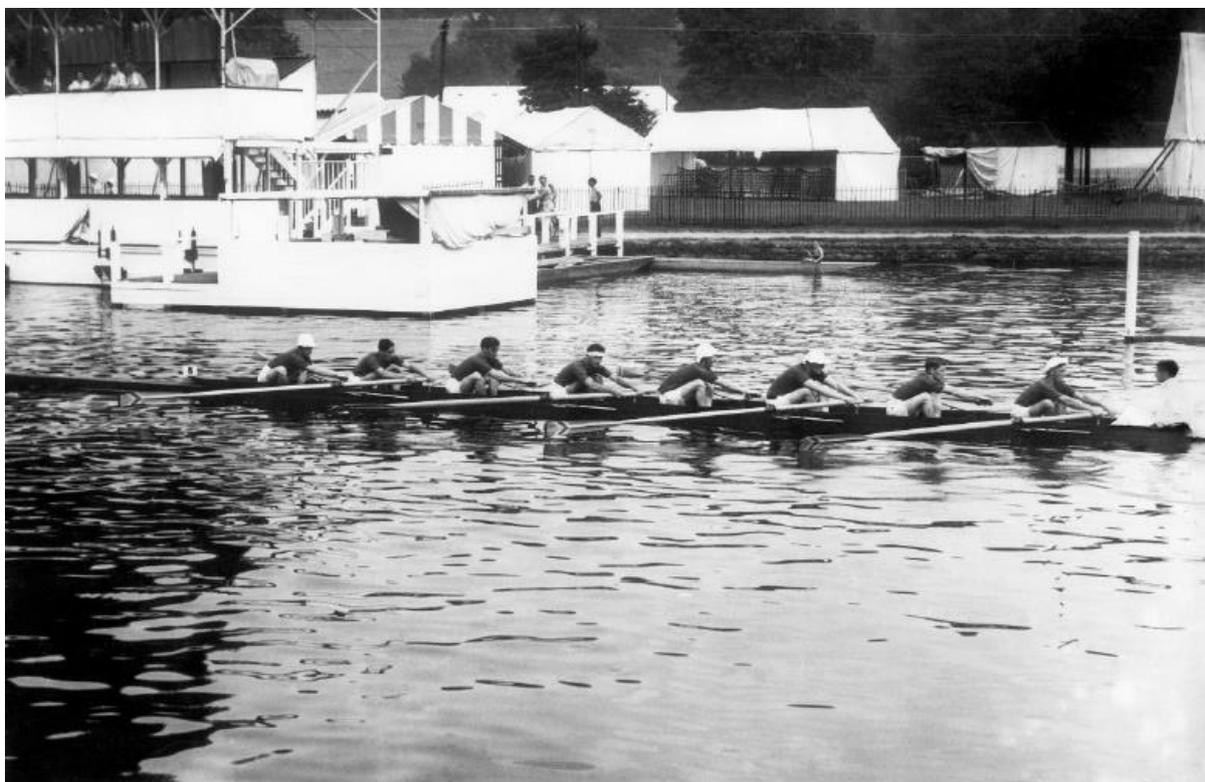
As Ireland was not at that time a member of FISA, there was a flurry of communication with them to ascertain what was required to facilitate affiliation. Having satisfied their requirements, the IARU were granted a provisional affiliation which permitted our Olympic entry to be made. Ireland received formal affiliation to FISA at the Congress the day before the commencement of the Olympic regatta.

At the Senior Championship, which was held at Belfast Regatta, UCD, the reigning champions won the final from Belfast Commercial Boat Club. Following deliberations by the sub-committee, it was decided to strengthen the UCD crew with oarsmen from Neptune, Queens and Trinity. The final crew selection consisted of six from UCD and one each from Neptune, Queens and Trinity. While it is now established practice for all costs in relation to an Olympic entry to be covered by the Olympic federation, this was an era before the mass commercialisation of the games with enormous revenues from sponsors and television rights. The Irish Olympic Council therefore had very limited funds to assist an entry. Accordingly, the IARU held an EGM in July to discuss the funding of their entry. Approval was given for expenditure of £600 which was almost all the assets of the Union.

The description of what happened in Henley is best told by Micheal Johnston in the Big Pot: *"There was warfare throughout these games between the Irish Olympic Council and the Organising Committee of the Games. Quite remarkably, rowing was the only sport in which the Irish won through: they rowed as Ireland, and Danny Taylor from Queen's University, Belfast was in the crew. They lost their two races, heat and repechage, but they held the Thin Green Line and they brought Ireland into the world of international rowing for the first time"*.

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<sup>3</sup> Fédération Internationale des Sociétés d'Aviron, now World Rowing.



*The Irish eight training at Henley*

Following the enactment of the 1949 Republic of Ireland Act, the IOC in 1951 commenced using 'Republic of Ireland' which further compounded the difficulties all-island sports were having.

While there was some discussion regarding the sending of a crew to the 1952 Olympic Games in Helsinki, it was felt that the cost at an estimated £2,000 was prohibitive. The other factor considered was that the entry would have to be as 'Republic of Ireland' and the Executive made it quite clear that they would not countenance any entry unless it was on an all-island basis.

The IOC agreed to change the name to 'Ireland' just before the 1956 Melbourne Olympics finally resolving an issue that had rumbled on for over three decades. Due to the cost of sending a crew such a long way, an entry for Melbourne was not considered realistic.

Having learnt from 1948 when the crew was selected a mere month before the regatta, preparations for a possible entry for Rome 1960 commenced in 1958. The feeling was that an eight should be sent and a sub-committee was established to investigate logistics and finance. One novel concept to promote the project was a debate in January 1959 "*Ireland should not send a crew to Rome*". The debate featured IARU officers and a number of prominent overseas rowing personalities. The outcome was a decisive vote in favour of sending a crew and an international fund was established with a levy on competitors at regattas. The trial was held at the first championship regatta held in Blessington in 1960. Despite the great enthusiasm for sending a crew it was deemed that the crews trialling were not of a sufficient standard and no crew was sent.

**NEPTUNE ROWING CLUB**

  
**IRELAND SHOULD NOT SEND  
A CREW TO ROME 1960**  
**A DEBATE**  
*on the above motion will take place in*  
*The Clubhouse, Islandbridge*  
*on Saturday, 24th January '59*  
*Commencing at 7.15 p.m.*

**SPEAKERS**

<b>FOR THE MOTION:</b> J. F. MEENAN, Esq., Vice-President, I.A.R.U./C.C.C. W. HEIMBACH, Esq., Germany, Train Ruler Ruder Club, Frankfurt/Rodriguez-Germania, Neptune R.C. H. V. CAHILL, Esq., Shannon R.C., International Umpire, I.R.A. D. G. GOURLEY, Esq., Vice-President, I.A.R.U., Team Manager Northern Ireland, Empire Games 1958, Belfast Commercial Rowing Club.	<b>AGAINST THE MOTION:</b> V. J. QUIN, Esq., President I.A.R.U., Shannon Rowing Club. W. A. D. WINDHAM, Esq., Great Britain, Leander, Cambridge, Christ College. Prof. J. JAMES, Coach Northern Ireland, Empire Games 1958, G.B.C. G. ANDREWS, Esq., Porton.
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Chairman: P. D. SHAFFREY, Esq., Neptune Rowing Club

Speakers from the floor will be limited to 3 minutes each. To ensure accommodation, will those intending to be present please request their Club Hon. Sec. to advise the undernamed not later than Jan. 21st of their numbers.

W. STEVENS, 89 Mocchi Rd., Glasnevin, Dublin.

Due to the considerable cost of travelling to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, an entry was not considered viable. The emphasis instead changed to the European Championships in Amsterdam at which a coxless four competed. For Mexico 1968 there again did not appear to be much interest in sending a crew such a long distance.

For the 1972 Olympics in Munich, the emphasis changed from sweep rowing to sculling and Sean Drea was entered in the single scull. Events conspired against him at the regatta but he still put in a commendable performance to finish seventh.

Ireland was by now a regular participant at the World Rowing Championships and the prospect of sending a crew to participate at the Olympics was no longer seen as a major challenge. The 1976 Olympic regatta in Montreal was significant in that it was the first time women's events were offered. Frank Moore had the honour of carrying the Irish flag in opening ceremony. Sean Drea again participated in the single scull but he was now joined by both a coxed and coxless four. In the semi-final Drea set a new world record but in the final he could only manage fourth place just tantalisingly off a medal. This was far from the ruthlessly ambitious target he had set for himself but an incredible performance for Ireland.



*Frank Moore carries the flag at the 1976 Opening Ceremony*

Irishman Lord Killanin was President of the IOC when the 1980 Moscow Olympics came around. They were to be seriously impacted because of political action. Sixty-five countries boycotted the games in opposition to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The boycotting nations included USA, West Germany and Japan who had finished third, fourth and fifth in the medal count at the previous games. Ireland had been under pressure to consider a boycott but chose instead to compete but under the Olympic rather than the Irish flag. The rowing team was the largest yet with four crews – men's coxed pair, men's coxless pair, a men's coxed four – and, significantly our first women's entry with Frances Cryan in the women's single sculls. At the time the race distance for women at the World Championships and Olympics was 1000m<sup>4</sup>. The best performances came from the men's coxless pair and the women's



<sup>4</sup> Changed to 2000m at the 1988 Olympics.

single with both winning the B final to take seventh place. The team of eleven athletes and four crews remains the largest Irish entry, at the time of writing.

Following the drama of the boycott of the Moscow Olympics, fourteen Soviet bloc countries indicated they would boycott the Los Angeles 1984 games. Various reasons were cited including security concerns for the lives of their athletes and the opposition to the commercialisation of the games. Many however suspected that the real reason was revenge for the US-led boycott of the Moscow games four years previously. The Olympic Council of Ireland had laid down challenging qualifying criteria which the IARU accepted. Three crews were looking for qualification – a men's coxed four, men's coxless pair and Frances Cryan in the women's single. The crew had mixed luck at the earlier qualifying regattas sometimes making the final but well off the pace. At Lucerne, the final qualifying regatta, injury forced the withdrawal of the coxed four and the other two crews performed poorly. After this regatta the decision was reluctantly taken to recommend no crews for the Olympic regatta. It was suggested that because of the eastern-bloc boycott the criteria for selection might be lowered, but based on the results achieved it was decided not to do that. This decision was appealed to an EGM of the IARU which endorsed the Executive's decision.

At the Seoul 1988 Olympics, Ireland sent a more modest team consisting of a coxed pair which finished second in their repechage narrowly missing out on a place in the semi-final.

While a squad had been training for the 1992 Olympics in Barcelona, it was felt that they were not of the required standard to be sent. Niall O'Toole, who had won the men's lightweight single at the World Championships in 1991 was selected on the back of that performance. His preparations were seriously impacted due to his contracting jaundice during the season. At the regatta it was obvious he was still not well and he finished in 21<sup>st</sup> position.

The 1996 Atlanta games were notable for a number of changes in relation to the programme. Following lobbying for a number of years, a men's lightweight four and lightweight double sculls events were added. Due to the growth in the number athletes looking to compete at each successive games, the IOC imposed a cap of 10,000 athletes. To implement this each event within each sport was set a quota by the IOC. FISA as the governing body for rowing was then entrusted with the responsibility of establishing a qualification system to fill the quota. The current practice is that the majority of the places are allocated at the World Championships in the year preceding the Olympics. To ensure that there is global representation in the rowing events, a small number of places are offered at continental qualification regattas. Finally a number of places are offered at the final Olympic Qualifying Regatta in Olympic year<sup>5</sup>. Ireland quickly adapted to the new lightweight events and qualified a lightweight double at the 1995 World Championships and they added a lightweight four at the final qualifying event. At the Olympics, the four had the best performance strongly contending the final and being unfortunate to finish in fourth place just outside the medals. The first Olympic crew five decades previously were happy to simply participate and fly the flag, but Irish rowing had matured and there was a growing feeling that it was now surely just a matter of time before we were in the medals.



For the Sydney 2000 games Ireland for the first time failed to qualify a crew at the World Championships the previous year. A lightweight four, however won the final Qualifying Regatta at Lucerne. Based on early-season form there were bright hopes for the four but they failed to bear fruit and the crew finished in eleventh place.

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<sup>5</sup> Whereas a country qualifies a boat in the year before the Olympics, it is the crew that qualifies at the Final Olympic Qualifying Regatta.

Ireland qualified a lightweight double scull and lightweight four for Athens 2004 at the 2003 World Championships. On this occasion the more experienced double, which medalled at the World Championships the previous year, were the favourites to contend for a medal. Unfortunately there was drama in relation to the weigh-in for their semi-final which upset the crew's preparations. They were beaten for a place in the final and had to settle for fourth in the B final. The lightweight four had a good regatta finishing sixth.

For Beijing 2008 separate men's lightweight and heavyweight squads had been formed. Both managed to qualify coxless fours for the Olympics. This was the first time in twenty years that Ireland qualified an open weight sweep crew for the games. Both crews finished tenth.

With the 2012 Olympics in London it had been hoped there would be a strong team participating. Unfortunately for the first time since qualifying had been introduced, Ireland failed to qualify any boat at the World Championship or the final Qualifying regatta. As part of the qualification system utilised by FISA, a place is reserved for the host nation in both the men's and women's single sculls. This is to guarantee a participation by the host nation should it not qualify any crews. As Great Britain had qualified a large rowing team, the women's reserved place was released to the next qualifying sculler at the final Qualifying Regatta. Sanita Puspure was the beneficiary of this, ensuring an Irish participation at the regatta where she finished in thirteenth place.

At the 2015 World Championships, Ireland qualified both a men's and women's lightweight double scull for Rio 2016. At the final Qualifying Regatta, Sanita Puspure took the last qualifying place to send her to her second Olympics. During the 2016 regatta season the men's lightweight double signalled their intent by winning the European Championships and taking a second and two fourth places at the three World Cup Regattas. At the Olympic regatta, the wind played havoc with the fixture forcing a postponement of some racing and with other racing run in conditions where crews were happy just to survive the experience. There is no doubt that Sanita suffered from the difficult conditions and finished in thirteenth as she had in 2012. The women's double had a good regatta and broke a new barrier by being the first Irish women's crew to make an Olympic A final - they finished sixth. The men's lightweight double made history, becoming the first Ireland crew to take an Olympic rowing medal. In the final, French had a strong lead coming into the final 500m. They had not however counted on the sprint from the Irish crew of Gary & Paul O'Donovan. They came close to catching the leaders taking silver and reaching a new milestone for a crew from Ireland.



*Silver medallists Rio de Janeiro 2016*

Under pressure from the IOC, a decision was taken at the 2017 FISA Extraordinary Congress to eliminate the men's lightweight coxless four and replace it with a women's coxless four. Ireland seized on this opportunity and were unfortunate not to qualify a women's four at the 2019 World Championships. Four boats did qualify at this stage for Tokyo 2020<sup>6</sup>: the men's double scull, men's lightweight double scull, the women's pair and the women's single scull. It is hoped that additional crews may be qualified at the deferred final Olympic Qualifier in 2021; possibly a women's four or women's lightweight double scull.

Ireland has come a long way since it first dipped its toe in Olympic rowing back in 1948. That entry was as much about breaking old norms and proving that, despite having a lot to learn, we had started on our Olympic journey. Throughout that time we have held steadfastly to the principal that we are an all-island sport, never even contemplating an entry unless athletes from the northern clubs were eligible for selection. Of course we fully respect the right of northern athletes to choose to compete for Great Britain and many have done so with great success.

We look forward to the Tokyo Olympics with a great sense of optimism. Never before have we approached an Olympic regatta having two reigning gold medallists (the women's single and men's lightweight double scull) and a silver medallist (men's double scull) in Olympic-class events. The Covid-19 pandemic and the resultant delay will undoubtedly have disrupted the carefully choreographed training plans of our athletes but the same applies to athletes of all nations.

And what of the future? The Olympics have evolved and changed over the years. Ireland was quick to adapt to the possibilities from the introduction of lightweight rowing and the women's four. At the 2020 Extraordinary Congress World Rowing decided to remove the men's and women's lightweight doubles and replace them with coastal<sup>7</sup> solos for men and women along with a mixed double. While it was intended that this change would happen at the 2024 Paris games, overruns caused by Covid now make it more likely these events will be introduced in Los Angeles in 2028. Ireland is fortunate to have a strong coastal club structure affiliated to Rowing Ireland so are in a good position to seize this opportunity. In contrast, many of our European neighbours either don't have coastal clubs or the clubs they have are not affiliated to the NGB. There will undoubtedly be other changes to the Olympic programme in the future but Ireland has proven that it is well positioned to react to such challenges.

**Kieran Kerr – February 2021**

For details of the individual crews representing Ireland please see [Irish Olympians](#).



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<sup>6</sup> Postponed to 2021

<sup>7</sup> Referred to as Offshore rowing in Ireland to differentiate it from the traditional fixed seat coastal rowing.