

THE PEOPLE WHO INSPIRED:



GEORGE HOOK

Sport has sometimes succeeded in inverse ratio to economic and social upheavals. Nero promised the citizens of Rome bread and circus in an effort to take their minds off realities of living in Ancient Rome. As the country enters the most difficult period of its history, with the credibility of politicians at an all-time low, the heroics of sportsmen give us something to aspire to. Sport epitomises integrity, truth, loyalty and team spirit. For that reason I have looked at my sporting heroes.

JACK KYLE

Perhaps the best Irish rugby player of all time

THE greatest Irish fly-half of all time and perhaps even the best Irish player in any position. He was, in his time, the most capped rugby player in the world, with 46 caps over 12 seasons. It is indicative of his talent that he is still recognised in New Zealand and Australia as the finest number 10 to have toured there. On the Lions tour of 1950, he played in 20 of the 29 games, including six tests against Australia and New Zealand. Most of Kyle's career was played when offside was determined by ball, rather than the hindmost foot, and the flankers did not need to stay bound at the scrum. It reduced dramatically the space available to attack and yet he prospered. He qualified in medicine at Queen's University, Belfast and spent over 30 years working as a surgeon in Africa.



PADRAIG HARRINGTON

Run of major successes marks him as something special

HARRINGTON may be the finest sportsman ever produced by Ireland, by virtue of his success at the highest level of professional golf. In a two-year purple patch, he delivered under the most intense pressure. In 2007, he became the first Irishman to win the Open Championship in 60 years and the first ever from the Republic. A year later at Royal Birkdale, he defended his title with a four-under-par 32 on the back nine in the last round. He was the first European golfer since James Braid in 1906 to retain the Claret Jug. Just three weeks later, Harrington won the PGA Championship. Although five over par after two rounds, he shot eight under par for the weekend, carding successive scores of 66 in the third and fourth rounds. Harrington became the first European to win the PGA Championship in 78 years and the first winner from Ireland. Tiger Woods apart, he is the first golfer to win two majors in the same year since Mark O'Meara in 1998 and the first to win consecutive majors in the same year since Nick Price in 1994. Apart from Woods, he is the first golfer to win three of six consecutive majors in 25 years, since Tom Watson did so in 1983.



Tom Burke



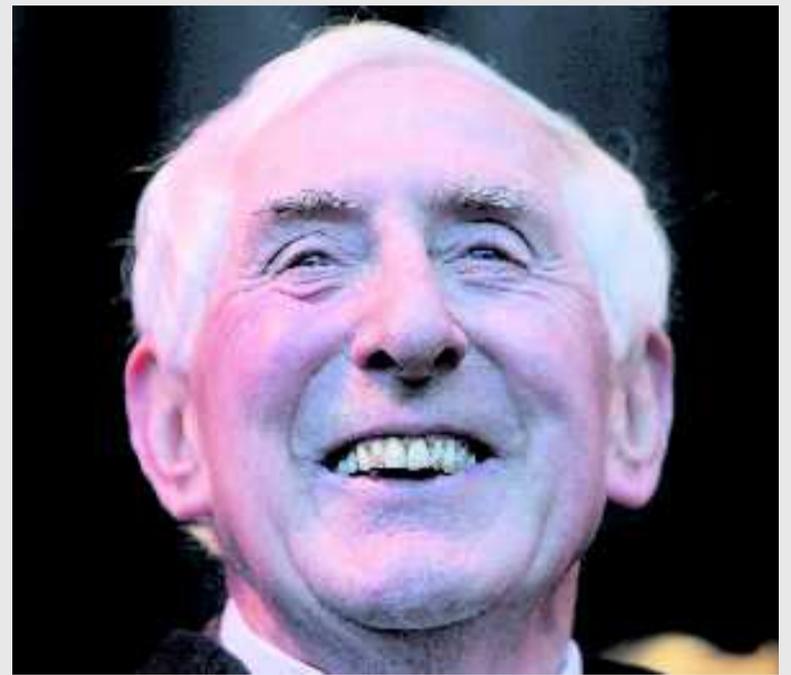
MAEVE KYLE

Trailblazer in women's sport at a time when it faced church criticism

SHE competed in three Olympic Games, gained 58 Irish caps at hockey and, in recognition of her work with athletes, was awarded the lifetime achievement award at the 2006 Coaching Awards in recognition of her work with athletes. She was one of the most important voices in the propagation of sport for women in Ireland. It must be remembered that in 1952, women's sport was criticised by the authoritarian Catholic Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, who railed against women competing in athletics in his Lenten pastoral. Maeve Kyle was one of the early pioneers and in the mid-'50s she persuaded talented women athletes to compete in Dublin in front of a surprised audience. I have no doubt that Kyle must have influenced and motivated huge numbers of young girls to take up sport when they saw an Irishwoman competing in the Olympic Games.

RONNIE DELANY

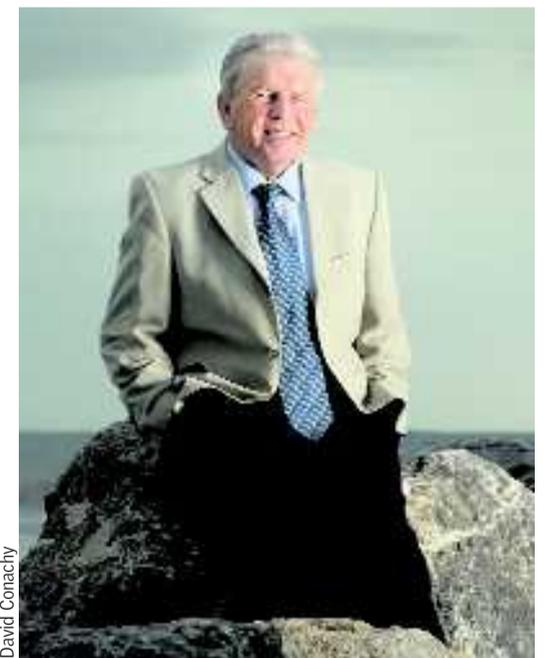
Olympic champion who was almost unbeatable indoors



IN 1956, despite being the seventh runner to run the mile in under four minutes, he struggled to make the Irish team for the Olympic Games in Melbourne later that year. Delany won the 1500m final in a new Olympic record, with a blistering last 200m. He became the first Irishman to win an Olympic title in athletics since Pat O'Callaghan and Bob Tisdall in 1932 at the Los Angeles games. He went on to win the bronze medal at the 1958 European Championships. He remained the last Irish Olympics champion for 36 years, until Michael Carruth won gold for boxing at the Barcelona games. Delany continued his running career in North America, where he was next to unbeatable on indoor tracks, in a 40-race winning streak. He broke the world indoor mile record on three occasions.

JOHN GILES

Soccer great who succeeded as player, manager and television pundit



David Conachy

GILES rates because he used sport to raise himself from the relative poverty of a working-class background in inner-city Dublin. Giles, like so many young people in that era, went from kicking a rubber ball in the street to being one of the finest footballers in England. The number of Irishmen who have reached the pinnacle of English professional football is very small. His achievements span three very different working disciplines - player, manager and pundit. Giles was the finest midfielder that Ireland has ever produced. He became a manager at club and international level, before becoming one of the finest television critics in Irish sport.