

JOHN DOWLING – IRISH ULTRADISTANCE WALKER: 1929-2020

I was browsing facebook in late 2016 when I saw post <http://corkrunning.blogspot.com.au/2015/11/jack-dowlingthe-forgotten-irish.html>, briefly describing the career of Irish ultra walker Jack "Paddy" Dowling. It was all news to me so I got busy with my own research was able to put a more extensive biography out for everyone to read.

The riveting 40 minute radio documentary "My Uncle Jack", put together by Jack's niece Madge O'Callaghan in 2015, was a wonderful source of information.¹ In the podcast, Jack, long since retired from race walking, is a spritely octogenarian who talks without rancour about his treatment in the industrial school system in Ireland, his subsequent life and his dual loves of long distance walking and music.



Jack with his niece Madge in 2015

Born on 6th November 1929 in Tramore, Co. Waterford, Jack had a tough childhood, being forcibly removed from his newly widowed father and forced into an orphanage in 1935 at the age of 5, because it was deemed in Ireland at the time that fathers were not capable of looking after their children. At age 10, he was placed in St Joseph's Industrial School, Greenmount, Co Cork. He was one of many boys who suffered horrendous treatment at this infamous establishment which was eventually closed in 1959.

This and many similar cases of institutionalised abuse led to an Irish Government Commission which ran from 2000 till 2009. The final report noted Greenmount as one of many offending institutions, reporting that the mistreatment of boys who attended the facility was ignored by both the Presentation Brothers and the overseeing government department, and that residents were physically, emotionally and sexually abused by members of staff.²

When he was just 12, Jack tried to escape, only to be returned and beaten to within an inch of his life for his efforts. This tough start in life makes his later achievements truly outstanding.

He was finally able to legally leave at age 16, Returning home, he worked on a farm as a labourer for a couple of years but opportunities were few in Ireland at that time so, still a teenager, he made his way to the coal mines of the English midlands, settling in Sheffield.

It was dreadful work in the mines, especially for a young lad from a lush green Irish coastal town and he took the opportunity of joining the airforce when it was presented.

¹ See <http://www.rte.ie/radio1/doconone/2015/1106/740010-my-uncle-jack/>

² See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Church_sexual_abuse_scandal_in_Ireland and <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/floggings-and-sadistic-cruelty-1.766971>

While in the RAF, he took up athletics, quickly developing into an accomplished runner.

When he left the RAF in the early 1950s, he took on a job as an insurance agent in Sheffield. It was there that fate intervened and a chance conversation changed the course of his life, when he was invited by one of his clients to try out as a racewalker at the local club Sheffield United athletics club.

He soon determined that he was a much better walker than he was a runner and that his future lay in this new sport. He also married Dorothy around this time and they settled down in Sheffield, eventually raising a family of 4 children.

The gruelling world of racewalking became a passion for Jack.

In 1962, the annual English Centurion qualifier was held on the Leicester to Skegness course and Jack was one of 45 finishers and one of the 13 new centurions (C 331), with a one hundred miles time of 22:09:27. Interestingly, the event was won by fellow Irishman Frank O'Reilly, making it 4 wins in successive years.³

This was the first of 9 English centurion finishes for Jack, the last being in 1990 aged 60, and the fastest being an impressive 18:34:38 in 1974.

22:09:27	06-jul-1962	Leicester-Skegness
19:27:31	26-sep-1969	Bristol
19:29:03	28-jul-1972	Leicester-Skegness
18:34:38	02-aug-1974	Leicester-Skegness
18:35:10	14-oct-1977	Bristol
18:50:10	25-jul-1980	Leicester
20:23:00	26-jun-1987	Ewhurst
19:49:14	29-jul-1988	Leicester-Congerstone
21:22:46	28-jul-1990	Hungarton Leic

After his 1969 Centurion performance of 19:27:31, he was selected as part of the British team which contested the 1969 Roubaix 28 Hour walking classic. As this was one of the official qualifying opportunities for the 1970 Paris-Strasbourg classic and his Roubaix performance was over the requisite qualifying standard, he was duly invited to walk in the 1970 classic.

He was unprepared for such a multi-day event and had no support crew of any sort. He just turned up in Paris in early June of the next year with his kit bag, hoping for the best. The organizers allocated an attendant to look after him. It was a minimalist approach when compared to the campervans and teams of helpers attending the other walkers. It is not surprising that he was forced to retire after 205 km, whilst in 13th spot.

He was a prolific racer, walking 8 or 9 hundreds each year and amassing over 70 hundreds (all bettering the 24 hour standing) during his career.

One of his favourite events was the Roubaix 28 Hour Classic. He competed in it 21 times, finishing on all but one occasion. He was the first walker to achieve 10 finishes, then the first to achieve 15 finishes and finally the first to achieve 20 finishes. He also completed the Rouen 24 Hour Walk Classic on 5 occasions, with a best distance of 205 kilometres.

Interestingly, the one event that he never conquered was the Paris-Strasbourg. While he tried on 7 occasions between 1970 and 1984, he never managed a finish.

1970	13 th	205 km
1972	19 th	174 km
1974	15 th	181 km
1979	16 th	305 km
1980	10 th	439 km
1983	15 th	413 km
1984	25 th	251 km

3 And if that wasn't remarkable enough, O'Reilly completed the course in 16:58:16, the second sub 17 hour time in his outstanding career, and he is still the only man to have beaten this time barrier.

In 1982, Jack walked the length of Ireland, starting from Malin Head (Ireland's most northerly point in County Donegal) and finishing at Mizen Head in County Cork. As the crow flies, the two points are 466 km (290 mi) apart.⁴ His time of 5 days, 22 hours and 30 minutes was officially recognized as a record by the Guinness Book of Records. Con Hearty described the feat in a 2001 letter to the Irish Times⁵

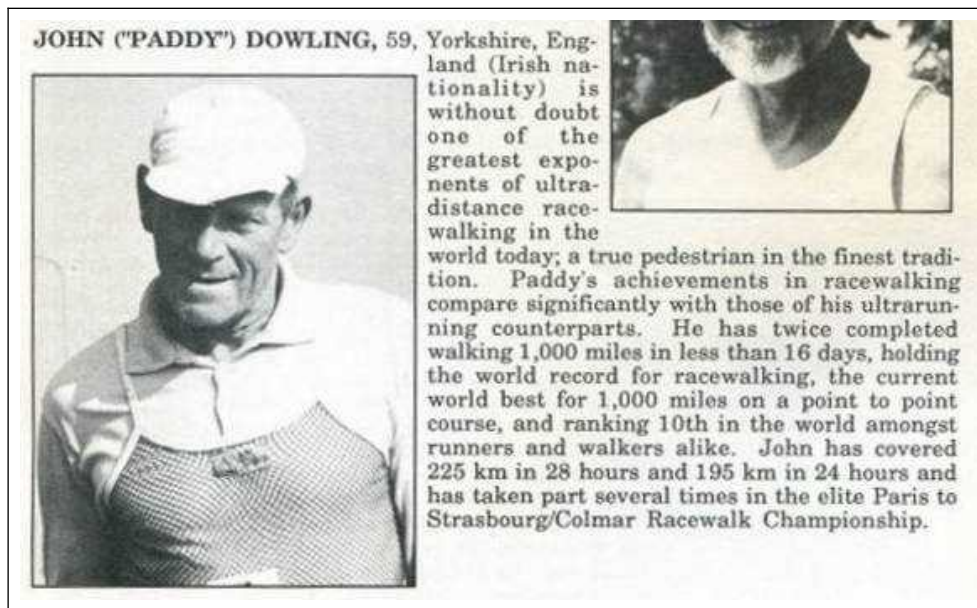
I am open to correction but I believe the Irish end-to-end record still stands to my Irish international race-walking colleague John Dowling (born 1929), who race walked under supervision the 644km (400.2 miles) in five days, 22 hours and 30 minutes between the 18th and 24th March 1982.

It is noteworthy that Dowling, one of the finest endurance athletes Ireland ever produced, was 53 when he achieved the record. It was recognised as such by the Guinness Book of Records, which in most cases seek written corroboration in the form of press coverage and signed authentication by independent adult witnesses of standing in the community. Signed log books should show that there has been unrelenting surveillance where appropriate.

It was Jack's usual signature performance, done in freezing and rainy conditions and with a minimum of support.

He also completed the feat in the reverse direction (Mizen to Malin) and also completed the British equivalent, walking from John 'o' Groats to Lands End.⁶ To my knowledge, he is the only person to have walked end to end on both islands.

In 1988, he was invited to compete in what was billed "the Race of the Century", a 1,000 mile event organized by the Sri Chinmoy organization and held in New York.⁷ His profile in the race booklet read as follows



The booklet also noted that he ranked 10th overall in the 1000 Miles all-time world rankings, all those ahead of him being runners. His 10th ranking time of 14 days 23 hrs, 41 mins and 20 secs had been done in Hull in the UK two years previously when aged 57. It was noted as the World Over 55 record and the overall world racewalking record. The following ranking performances were also noted

1500km	John Dowling	IRLD (racewalking)	13d + 23:33:53
1000km	John Dowling	IRLD (racewalking)	9d + 06:51:21
700 miles	John Dowling	IRLD (racewalking)	10d + 12:44:31
6 Days	John Dowling	IRLD (racewalking)	462.41 miles
5 Days	John Dowling	IRLD (racewalking)	378.41 miles

4 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malin_to_Mizen

5 See <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/letters/malin-to-mizen-head-record-1.324050>

6 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land%27s_End_to_John_o%27_Groats

7 See <http://us.srichinmoyraces.org/sri-chinmoy-700-1000-and-1300-mile-races/previous-results/1988>

Seven of the starters managed over 100 miles on that first day (6 runners and Jack as a walker), with Yiannos Kouros leading with 144 miles and Jack amongst a group clustered around 103 miles. From then on, it was everyone for themselves as the days rolled on. Overall, only 4 runners finished the entire 1000 miles, with Jack the next furthest with 776 miles, securing 5th place overall. Not to shabby for someone who was 59 years of age.



The 1000 Miles entrants (left to right): Gerard Jacquaniello, Yiannis Kouros, Michel Careau, Sandy Barwick, Malcolm Campbell, Tom McGrath, Marvin Skagerberg, John Dowling, Emile Laharaque, Richard Brown and Dan Coffey

His final English Centurion finish in 1990, aged 60, was by no means his last long walk. Ten years later, he donned the walking shoes once again, to raise money for the Sheffield Eagles Rugby League Club. On that occasion, at the Don Valley Athletics Stadium, he completed yet another hundred, at 70 years of age, his time an impressive World Best of 21:37.

Magnificent seventies!

Pensioner breaks 100-mile walk record

By James Collins

SEVENTY-one-year-old John Dowling won a battle with fatigue in the lonely hours before dawn to break a world record – and help the bank balance of his favourite sports team.

He walked 100 miles in 21 hours 37 minutes – 401 laps of the Don Valley Stadium track – to raise cash for the Sheffield Eagles rugby league side.

For part of the walk he was joined by Eagles fans and the club hopes the cum-

bined sponsorship will raise a five-figure sum.

"John was fantastic. I don't know how he does it," said Eagles player-coach Mark Aston.

"It was really tough at times but he came through it."

"At the start he was doing two-and-a-half minute laps but in the early hours he was down to more than four minutes. But he just kept going."

"I'm planning to get him in to talk to my players about the way he motivates himself

and bottled through the pain barrier."

The Eagles are having the walk recognised as a record to add to the more than 30 distance marks John holds.

And a new honour is on the way for the Gleadless pensioner. The Eagles plan to make John their first honorary member.

"He deserves it," said Aston.

"We can't thank John enough. He's amazing."

"And we shouldn't forget his support team and the other fans who joined in the walk."



Lapping it up: John Dowling, aged 71, walked 100 miles in record-breaking time at Don Valley Stadium

In 2015, Jack was awarded a special Lifetime Achievement Award at the Irish National Sports Awards⁸, a fitting acknowledgement for an athletic life lived to the full.

He was also deeply involved in Irish Music up until his death. He was well known as a singer, musician and music teacher in the Irish tradition. For decades he played in Monday night sessions at the Sheffield Irish Centre in Pitsmoor, the Dog and Partridge and most recently at The Grapes, both on Trippet Lane.

He was predeceased by his wife Dorothy, son Robert and daughter Theresa and is survived by his daughters Patricia and Jacqueline and lots of relatives including the Powers of Newtown, Tramore.

Quietly passed away on Sunday 6th February 2022, aged 94years.

In her radio documentary, Madge wonders whether, if circumstances were different for her uncle, he may well have represented Ireland at the highest level in athletics and could have presaged the success of Ireland's Olympic medal winning race walkers of recent decades. We can only agree.

Tim Erickson

Last update: Thursday 24th March 2022

⁸ See http://sportsnewsireland.com/other_sports/hockey-green-machine-nominated-for-national-award/