



IRISH LANGUAGE: Linda Ervine outside Braniel Primary School, which had been due to host Naíscoil Na Seolta

PICTURE: Mal McCann

My medals go to Linda Ervine and Diane Dawson

GIVEN the Covid-related ban on spectators, the Tokyo Olympics didn't seem a very inspiring prospect. But that was before the lads from Skibbereen, Fintan McCarthy and Paul O'Donovan, came in ahead of Germany to win their country's first-ever gold medal in rowing.

Already Ireland had got its first Olympic medal for women's rowing when Aifric Keogh, Eimear Lambe, Fiona Murtagh and Emily Hegarty secured the bronze last Wednesday morning, in a race delayed for 24 hours because of a typhoon warning.

Congratulations also to Aidan Walsh from west Belfast for the bronze medal he won at welterweight boxing, before sadly having to withdraw because of an ankle injury, while lightweight Kellie Harrington has also guaranteed herself a podium place.

Sunday didn't go well for Ireland but, at time of writing, who knows what else might happen?

The fact that the spectators are only there virtually hasn't detracted from the pleasure and enjoyment after all.

As in the current case of the Belarusian athlete refusing to go home, there is often a political dimension to the Olympics.

The most notable occasion was of course 1936 in Berlin, when the Games were held under the auspices of the vile Nazi regime.

The African-American legend Jesse Owens won four gold medals – three for sprinting and one for the long jump. It was one – or maybe we should say four – in the eye for Adolf Hitler, who had been portraying Germans as members of “the master race”.

Owens was initially reluctant to go to Berlin, because of concern that the Nazis would use the Games to promote their racist ideology. Albert Speer wrote afterwards that Hitler was “highly annoyed” at the successes of the black athlete and grandson of a slave from Alabama, although there are eye-witness accounts of the dictator saluting and even shaking hands with Owens.

However, President Franklin Delano

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Roosevelt failed to invite the four-times gold-medallist to the White House and the athlete said later: “Hitler didn't snub me – it was our president who snubbed me. The president didn't even send me a telegram.”

The next time the Games had a strong political dimension was 1968 in Mexico City when African-American gold-medallist Tommie Smith and bronze-medal winner John Carlos gave the black power salute as *The Star-Spangled Banner* was played at the Olympic Stadium.

Jesse Owens initially dismissed their gesture as “meaningless” but later praised it as “militancy in the best sense of the word”.

There's always something special about medals, be they gold, silver or bronze.

They are mostly awarded for sporting or academic achievements but, if I had a set of

medals, there are two people in particular I'd like to present with them.

Linda Ervine deserves credit for her work in taking the Irish language across the community divide and promoting its use among the Protestant/unionist/loyalist community, especially through the unprecedented establishment in east Belfast of an Irish-language pre-school, Naíscoil na Seolta, on the site of Braniel Primary School. But due to “an ongoing social media hate campaign” the pre-school is moving to a different location, which is undisclosed as I write.

Ms Ervine would get my gold medal and the silver would go to the principal of Braniel PS, Diane Dawson, who supports the pre-school project while at the same time declaring on the BBC: “I am a unionist, I will be first, foremost, and last a unionist and not one word of the Irish language spoken undermines or weakens my unionism. And certainly not two-year-olds learning how to say colours in Irish on the Braniel school site.”

That is one of the most significant public statements made on this island in recent times.

It is vitally important to emphasise that learning Gaelige does not turn you into an Irish nationalist any more than speaking French makes you a Parisian.

The same applies to hurling and Gaelic football. Indeed, on the other side of the divide, the Gaelic Athletic Association imposed a ban from 1905 to 1971 on members playing or even watching “foreign games” such as rugby, football or hockey.

After the ban was lifted, Ireland's sporting successes in Italia '90 and on the rugby pitch actually enhanced national morale in a very healthy and benign manner.

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ON THIS DAY

AUGUST 4 1921

Tribute to Craig

IN A Committee Room of the House of Commons at Westminster, presentations were made to Sir James and Lady Craig.

To Sir James, the presentation took the form of a plain solid silver tray upon which was engraved: ‘To Colonel Sir James Craig, lately Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty, now first Prime Minister of Ulster, a loyal colleague, a wise counsellor, a faithful friend.’

The presentation was made by Mr Austin Chamberlain [Chancellor of the Exchequer] and the Lord Chancellor [Birkenhead] and the gathering included Sir Hamar Greenwood [Chief Secretary for Ireland].

Mr Chamberlain, who conveyed apologies from Lord Carson and Mr Walter Long [former Unionist leader], said most people left the House of Commons to secure greater freedom and less responsibility but that did not apply to Sir James.

He had accepted on one of the heaviest tasks which could fall to the lot of any public man – to establish on a firm footing the new government with which his people had been endowed by the Imperial Parliament.

Lord Birkenhead described Sir James as a very remarkable man. He reviewed the history of the North of Ireland and went on to say that the people of Ulster had never failed in their attachment to the people of [Great Britain].

‘Ulster owed the positions she occupied at the present time to two remarkable men – Lord Carson and Sir James Craig. We hope that through the exertions of Sir James Craig, for which he had sacrificed so much, Ireland will be brought safe into the harbour of his aspirations and happiness’.

In acknowledging the gifts, Sir James said that Ulster could still rely upon the assistance and helpfulness of the British people.

‘Whatever side people take, I refuse ever to take any side except that of Great Britain and the Empire.’

WHILE James Craig always claimed that Ulster Unionism had made ‘a supreme sacrifice’ in accepting a devolved administration and the loss of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal as ‘the price of peace’, he protested too much. As a junior minister in the British coalition government he had rejected the nine counties as containing too many Catholics and quickly grasped that a Unionist parliament would provide a barrier against any attempt by Westminster to force the north into a united Ireland. His wife's diary shows that Craig was reluctant to leave the cosy world of British politics and viewed his new role with resignation rather than enthusiasm. Despite his praise for Carson and Craig, Birkenhead knew that without Conservative support for Unionism, Northern Ireland would never have been created in 1920.

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