

Irish athletics – and race walking in particular – has been left reeling at news of the untimely death of athlete, coach, mentor and official **Ray Flynn**, at the age of 68.

The coach of (among many others) **Rob Heffernan, Olive Loughnane, Colin Griffin** and **Jamie Costin**, Ray Flynn was clearly loved as a man, apart from his various athletics roles. Pierce O'Callaghan has posted this illuminating tribute to a man who left an indelible mark for the better on so many:

### **Ray Flynn (Sligo) - Personal Obituary**

*by Pierce O'Callaghan (reprinted from 'Irish Athletics History' Facebook page)*

The news of the untimely overnight passing of Sligo athletics official **Ray Flynn** has come as a major shock to everyone who knew him from Sligo and further afield and marks the end of an era in Sligo Athletics.

He was only 68 and suffered a major heart attack on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022, fittingly while driving home from doing what he loved - officiating at the National Road Relays in Raheny.

A great family man, he lived for his wife Elizabeth and daughters Rachel, Zola, Edel and son Calvin whom he always talked about and was so proud of and to whom we express our deepest sympathies.

I last spoke to Ray on Saturday morning on my return from a family holiday when he rang me to tell me of the passing of one of his friends and fellow Sligo athletes Tony Leonard who was a two-time Irish Champion in the 1980s and tragically passed away last week. Ray was visibly very upset but wanted to honour his friend by writing his obituary for the local newspapers and phoned to check some of his achievements.



(Photo: [oceanfm.ie](http://oceanfm.ie))

Little did either of us think that I would be returning the favour to Ray within 48 hours...

Ray was an ever smiling, multifaceted man with a great sense of fun and mischief and certainly one of a kind who broke the mould and went against conventions in practically every way.

Athlete, Coach, Official, committee member, organiser, volunteer, journalist, judge mentor, friend - he wore every hat in the sport with great pride.

With work scarce in his native Sligo in the early 1970s, Ray emigrated to the UK and joined up with Plymouth and Dawlish Athletics Club where he gravitated towards a group of hardened athletes including 5 time Olympian Chris Maddocks who shared stories to the impressionable young Sligo buck about achieving the magical status of Centurion – a rare title awarded only to people who could race walk 100 miles in less than 24 hours.

With stars in his eyes, Ray embarked upon a vicious training schedule with the club for this mythical event – did I forget to mention he was just 17 years old?! – and in a few months found himself on the start line of his first 24 hour race with the soul intention of completing 100 miles in less than 24 hours.

He loved nothing better than, after a few pints enthusiastically regaling us of his heroic tale of reaching 50 miles, then 60, 70, 80, 90, 95 miles....

He ultimately reached 96 miles before collapsing and narrowly failing to attain his cherished status of Centurion.

Unperturbed and full of fire and determination, he returned to training when he was released from the medical treatment and entered the event the following year where he comfortably made the distance inside the time limit and was duly awarded with the title of Centurion Number 512 ... a title he was so proud of he regularly introduced himself as C512 to friends when he was on the phone.

For a time he was the youngest man ever to achieve this mythical status and on the fringes of the 2012 London Olympics all the Centurions were invited by then British Prime Minister David Cameron to the House of Commons in London where he was only half saddened to hear that a 17 year old had recently broken his record!

After marrying Elizabeth they returned to Ireland to raise a family and Ray joined the local Calry Athletics Club and came under the wings of Tommy Casey, Jackie McGowan, Tony Leonard and his brother Paul and others and achieved notable success on the track and roads.

The Irish Athletics Roll of Honour records that he won the National 10,000m, Walk title in 1982, the 20km walk title in 1979 and the 50km Walk titles in 1976, 1979, 1980 and the 35km in 1990 where he had great battles with some of the Greats of that time including my father Bernie, Jim Sheehan (Dungarvan), John Lennon (Kilkenny) and PJ Brennan (Carlow) before handing the mantle to Jimmy McDonald in 1982 who would go on to finish 6th in the 1992 Barcelona Olympics.

He was capped 6 times for Ireland at senior level including the 1973 World Race Walking Team Championships along with Con Hearty, Fintan Walsh, John Dowling, John O'Leary, Pat Rice, John Mackey and Tommy Casey and although regularly confused with the miler of the same name and era they both represented Ireland during the same period of the late 70s and early 80s. Along with his brother Paul he appears on the unique list of brothers capped for Ireland and brothers who won Irish senior titles.

Arguably it was after he finished competing that he made his biggest contribution to the sport as a coach, mentor, driving force in Sligo, official and Board member for BLE and Athletics Ireland.

Under his tutelage and driving force, the past 30 years has seen a major resurgence in Sligo Athletics with numerous National senior team titles won in in Road Relays (2013 & 2014) and National T&F League (2021) as well his work closely alongside coaches Dermot McDermott, Emmet Dunleavy, Roddy Gaynor and others to numerous National titles in a range of distances. His hand was all over the rise of Irish Race Walking on the global scale over the past 25 years which saw World titles for Robert Heffernan (2013), Olive Loughnane (2009) and Kate Veale (2011) at Youth level, a World silver for Gillian O'Sullivan (2003).

He enthusiastically filled many roles including team manager, coach, mentor and International Judge, but it is perhaps the friendship and support for his friend - World Champion and Olympic medallist Robert Heffernan - for which he will be longest remembered and gave him the most satisfaction in the sport. Their paths first crossed when a 20-year-old Heffernan made his International debut at the 1999 World Cup in France along with myself and Jamie Costin, with Ray as team manager along with my Dad as team coach and from there, their relationship blossomed so close that Ray was a groomsman at Robs wedding to Marian in 2009.

A cursory look at Rob's autobiography, 'Walking Tall', last night showed the extent and depth of Ray's unwavering support for him, best summarised by the true story in the mid noughties when Rob was injured, going through a very bad patch and needed surgery and was told he was on a waiting list for 6-12 months. Upon hearing this, Ray decided to take matters into his own hands, phoned the surgeon himself, and shouted down the phone the immortal words "Doctor, you don't understand, this man is in pain and urgently needs surgery?"

His intervention brought immediate results and following successful surgery within the week, Rob returned to fitness and 12 months later had a top 8 finish in the 2007 World Championships, a year later top 8 at the Beijing Olympics and 4 years later won the Olympic Bronze medal. Had Ray not made that call, Rob might be like the rest of us and be wondering what if ...

His weekly columns in the Sligo newspapers were always entertaining and informative where he loved challenging the status quo about the profile of the GAA, the lack of press coverage for athletics etc but despite not being blessed with what one might call diplomacy, he remained totally true to his core values – a loyal and committed enthusiastic foot soldier for athletics.

He was elected Chair of the High Performance Committee in 2009 following in the footsteps of his friend Patsy McGonagle, qualified as a European Athletics Race Walking Judge in 2013 and was part of the coaching teams for the Rio and Tokyo Olympics. He was a board member of Athletics Ireland since the late 1990s until very recently and ran for President of Athletics Ireland in 2016.

Sadly, however, there is a strong feeling among his close friends that his race wasn't yet run, that he was called ashore before the end of the race. But his memory will live long with those fortunate enough to call him a friend. When the numbness passes, his family will need to be looked after and in time we will be able to smile when we regale the next generation of athletes of the craic, mischief and sense of fun of Ray Flynn.

His passing leaves a major void in Sligo, Connacht and Irish Athletics, and for that we all have to step up to the plate.

Rest in peace Ray, you were a great friend to all who knew you and who made us laugh more times than most of the people in our lives..



*1999 Walking World Cup, Mezidon (FRA): Ray Flynn (Team manager), Rob Heffernan, Jamie Costin, Pierce O'Callaghan, Bernie O'Callaghan (Team coach)*