A sculpted athlete, yet again

A local Olympian is forged in bronze

By Will Kilburn, Globe Correspondent | January 15, 2006

Growing up in Brighton in the 1940s, Harold Connolly didn't have Olympic dreams. Being able to scoop up a grounder in sandlot baseball games at Ringer Park would have been victory enough, but due to nerve damage during his birth, Connolly's left arm was considerably shorter and had less mobility than his right, preventing the strong batter from effectively using a glove in the field.

One day on his way home after a disappointing afternoon at the park, Connolly came across a discarded muscle magazine, and in its images of sculpted heroes, he found a new dream that led him to a gold medal in the hammer throw at the 1956 Olympics, an achievement that last month was recognized at the dedication of a statue on the grounds of the William Howard Taft School.

''It's definitely a story that is not nearly as well known as it should be," says state Representative Kevin Honan, who learned about the Connolly legend when he played at Ringer Park as a youth years later. ''To win an Olympic gold and overcome that physical challenge is such an extraordinary feat, and people need to know about it."

A few years ago, Honan formed a committee to erect a statue in Connolly's honor, and phoned Connolly at his home in Virginia to tell him about it. ''I couldn't believe it, because I, like most people, believe that such things only occur to people who are dead," Connolly laughs. ''I get kidded a little by people I know that they don't know anybody else that has a statue and he's still alive."

For Connolly, 74, the road to immortality was far from direct. Money was tight in the Connolly household, so young Harold, then 15, took a paper route so that he could buy a barbell set; a grueling training regimen led to several broken bones. After recovering, Connolly made Brighton High's football team in his senior year, starting at tackle before going on to Boston College. There, he initially competed as a shot-putter and discus thrower, finding his true calling almost by accident.

''He thought it would be good exercise to throw the hammers back to the hammer throwers -- after they had made their throws in practice, he would toss it back," said Reed Oslin, the former director of BC's sports information office, who now works in the school's public affairs office. ''And all of a sudden, they realized he was throwing it farther back than the guys were throwing it out."

A successful indoor track season followed, during which Connolly met and started training with Olympian and then-world record holder Bob Backus. After graduation, Connolly worked as a substitute teacher for Boston's public schools while continuing to train in both conventional and unorthodox ways. Among the latter: Ballet lessons.

One of his aunts was a ballet teacher, which Connolly says has many parallels to hammer throwing in its jumps, spins, and emphasis on balance. Those lessons also led to an improvement in his hammer-throwing gear. Needing shoes that were soft but would also not wear out on the concrete of the hammer-throwing circle, Connolly had a shoemaker on Commonwealth Avenue attach rubber soles to ballet slippers.

Connolly made the 1956 US Olympic team. That November in Melbourne, Australia, he beat a heavily-favored Soviet thrower to win Olympic gold, the peak of a career in which he set the world record seven times and made three more Olympic teams.

During and after his competitive career, Connolly taught and coached all over the world, including a stint in the 1970s as an adviser to the World's Strongest Man Competition (''Arnold [Schwarzenegger] never quite forgave me that I didn't invite him"), and from 1988 through 1999, deputy director and then director of US programs for the Special Olympics. Father of six, Connolly lives with his second wife in semiretirement in Virginia, where he coaches part time at a local college and occasionally flies around the country to encourage kids to get into weight-throwing events.

Connolly finds it hard to describe his feelings at the sight of the statue of himself in his old schoolyard. Medals, plaques, and awards are one thing, he says; this is different. ''I've had those, but suddenly, in the advanced years of your life, to be so honored by your boyhood community, it's just unbelievable."

Honan found archival film of Connolly throwing the hammer in 1956, and gave it to Gloucester-based sculptor Pablo Eduardo, who rendered it in bronze. Frozen in midspin, the thrower seems poised to send the hammer over a nearby hill and to the world beyond sandlot disappointments.

''They thought when I was born, I would be a boxer, but that wasn't to be," says Connolly. ''I managed somehow to do well, but it took a while."