

TIPPERARY ATHLETES



John Hughes

by Michael O'Dwyer

John Hughes was born on 21 June 1850 in Roscrea, County Tipperary. Here he laid the foundation of his powers of endurance by following the hounds on foot. It is known he worked for a while on the farm of Mr T. Maher, Cloneen, before emigrating to America in 1868. His father was a fleet-footed man and was said to have run at the age of sixty years, ten miles in sixty-one minutes and forty seconds. In 1870, John 'Lepper' Hughes, so called from his peculiar jumping gait, began his career of walking and running in America. The Lepper was one of the great pedestrians in the second half of the nineteenth century. Pedestrianism (race walking) was all the rage in the United States and Britain from the 1850s, and its popularity quickly led to the organisation of events based on popular formats such as six-day races. Many thousands attended such events to drink, bet and watch the professional athletes, or 'peds' as they were known, as they walked or ran around the track. As public amusements were prohibited on Sundays, the six-day events started after midnight on Monday morning and finished at midnight the following Saturday. John 'Lepper' Hughes competed in many of his races with the logo of his sponsor, the *Police Gazette*, a popular newspaper, on his shirt. He won a six-day race at Madison Square Garden in January 1881 with 568 miles. Ahead of another six-day race, his pen-picture in the New York newspaper, the *Democrat and Chronicle* of 25 October 1882 reads, 'John Hughes was born in Tipperary, Ireland, June 21st, 1850. He is five feet seven inches high, and tips the scales at 150 pounds. His strength and endurance while working in Central park a few years ago made him a candidate for pedestrian honors. He made his first appearance as a six-day man four years ago. Since then he has engaged in six long-distance races. He is thoroughly game, sometimes plodding on for days while distorted with rheumatism. In January, 1881, Hughes became the champion of the world for the time by winning the O'Leary International belt in the first contest for the trophy, earning a score of 568 miles.' He earned a total of \$8,219.52¹ for his win and for breaking the world record. John 'Lepper' Hughes died on 13 March 1921 at Leonia, New Jersey, aged seventy.

¹Thanks to Paul S. Marshall, author of *King of the Peds*, for this information.

	Gate Money	Special Prize	Sweepstake	TOTAL
1 Hughes	\$4,219.52	\$1,000	\$3,000	\$8,219.52