

SPORTS

Masters meets reuniting Conley with sport of his youth — javelin

By RUSS WATERMAN
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How appropriate it was for Patrick Conley to be chairman of the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission in 1976 when it played a role in gilding the Independent Man when it was taken down from its perch atop the State House. For Conley "feels an affinity" for the statue, not just because he is an independent man himself, but because he, like the statue, also carries a spear of his own.

Conley's ties to the city run deeper than being a noted historian, teacher, author, lawyer, and real estate developer. The blood within him runs just as deeply in athletics, especially the javelin.

"I try to hold on to something I do reasonably well," said Conley, 51. And throwing the javelin, he says, is "my only link now with my athletic past."

Keen rivalries

And a rich athletic past it was. He speaks of how ethnic groups — Italians, Portuguese, and Irish — once engaged in friendly, though fierce rivalries against each other in athletic events. Youngsters, when asked where they came from, responded not by the part of the city they lived in, but by the Catholic parish they attended.

For example, Conley went to St. Michael's School and was a co-captain of the Rhode Island CYO championship baseball team — St. Michael's Parish — in 1957.

But that's just the beginning of his many accomplishments.

"I did the long jump, high jump, and low hurdles," he says, in addition to his favorite, the javelin, and was a medalist in all four events in

the Rhode Island Interscholastic Indoor Meet in 1955.

He lettered on the indoor and outdoor track team and in baseball at La Salle before attending Providence College.

Midway through his senior year at La Salle, he sustained a calf injury which was to seriously affect his jumping abilities, but he continued to play baseball and, of course, throw the javelin.

At Providence College he began to specialize more in the javelin and was the New England Intercollegiate Track champion in 1959 with a throw of 208 feet, 6 inches.

"PC didn't really have a track team," he says. "I competed pretty much on my own at regional meets."

The best he threw in a meet was 213 feet, 6 inches, while competing in AAU meets after graduation from PC. His top efforts would still be competitive at many meets even today.

A broad-chested man at 5-foot-8½ and 185 pounds, he can only speculate how far he could have thrown with better instruction and equipment.

"I bet I could have thrown the javelin at least 40 feet further," he surmises, talking about the light and aerodynamically-designed aluminum poles of today versus the clumsy wooden poles of the past.

He also did some boxing, and about the time he was graduating from PC, he became New England Golden Gloves Champion in the middleweight Division in 1959.

Conley — "achievement-oriented, but mindful of my limitations" — graduated from PC with a degree in history and eventually earned his master's and doctorate

degrees at Notre Dame, also in history, and with high honors in all cases. He later became a lawyer by attending Suffolk University Law School.

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PAT CONLEY

"From (ages) 23 to 41 I didn't compete at all (in the javelin)," he said, pointing to his business ventures, teaching (he was a full professor of history at PC for 25 years), and other commitments to his family, community, and business.

Won many awards

He received numerous awards and honors for his involvement in government, civic, fraternal, religious and educational circles while being intensely involved in publishing or in writing several books on Rhode Island and Providence.

However, the love of sports remained. As player-manager of ri76 softball team, he was a part of the first state championship team in 35-and-over softball, and the team barnstormed all over the state, raising money for various charities.

Then he began to read about master's track competition. Beginning in 1979, he began to once again assert himself, this time in the Rhode Island Senior Olympics.

"That gave me impetus to get back into athletics," he said, although noting the physical limitations he faced.

"I had torn cartilage in my knee playing softball and then I had rota-

tor cuff problems (ligament damage) in my shoulder," he said.

These injuries have forced him to compensate while throwing the javelin.

"I have to throw with my upper body now. I throw the javelin from the waist up," he said, demonstrating his technique. "It's a three-quarters sidearm method . . . I can't get my weight completely behind it."

He remains competitive "as long as I remain in the eastern part of the United States," he says. He now throws anywhere from 130-140 feet, still placing him near the top for his age group — 50-54 — but he won't go anywhere near the West coast, where several competitors can throw 40 feet farther than he.

Still, he competes all over the Northeast and as far north as Canada and as far south as Virginia.

"It's really part of an excuse to travel," he says, and he's always made even the longest of trips by car — acrophobia keeps him from flying — says he designs "mini-vacations" around the meets.

Among the meets he's won throwing the javelin are the (1980) Eastern United States Regional Championships with a throw of 153 feet, the Ontario Provincial championships four times in 1980s, and the Canadian National Masters title in 1981 with a throw of 151 feet.

Recently he was the Division 2A champion in the Rhode Island Masters Track and Field Championships and won in other divisions from 1980-82, and in 1985.

"It's done a lot for me," he says of the javelin. "It keeps you tough mentally and encourages you to keep in shape in physically."

And there is "a lot of nostalgia" attached to this event, not only be-



—Journal-Bulletin Photo by RUSS WATERMAN

CONLEY: "Competition is an incentive to stay in shape . . ."

cause of his success throughout the years, but because his sons seem to be following in his footsteps.

One son, Patrick, Jr., also now a Providence lawyer, broke his father's record representing PC in 1983. In winning the New England Intercollegiate Javelin Championships, his throw of 219 feet eclipsed his father's former mark by six feet.

And his 12-year-old son, Thomas,

has already thrown the javelin over 108 feet and could one day eclipse his brother and father.

The elder Conley is proud of his sons' achievements, but he's not ready to give up his own competition just yet.

"It's an exhilarating feeling and I still have some of the prowess," he says. "Competition is an incentive to stay in shape and I'm looking forward to the time I'm back in shape."