

IKE O'BRIEN (1906 - 1945)

## **Isaac (Ike) O'Brien (1906 - 1945)**

Based upon conversations with his family.

*During (lie immediate post-war years of the 1914-18 Great War, the members of the Seaside Albion Football club noticed on their arduous training runs along the sands of Aberavon beach to Briton Ferry bend and back, that their constant companion was a slightly built, pale-faced schoolboy who trotted along happily behind them, never seeming to tire of the six miles run along the stamina- sapping sands.*

*This remarkable lad was Ike O'Brien who was destined to become a running legend in Welsh Athletics history.*

Isaac (Ike) was born at 35 Sandfields Road, Aberavon on 11th February 1906. He was the first of three children born to Michael O'Brien a docker and his wife Margaret (Peggy). He had a brother John and a sister Peggy. The latter named emigrated to Australia many years ago.

Ike O'Brien always ran - it was something he just had to do and the obsession stayed with him for his lifetime.

His running performances on the roads and tracks of South Wales were characterised by amazing displays of courage and endurance. He was a small man, no more than 5ft 2ins tall, with a slight frame, yet his strong sinewy legs pounded away for countless miles almost every day and year of his life - a running machine long before road joggers became the vogue.

Ike O'Brien was not born heavily endowed with worldly goods or good fortune, such luxuries never came his way. Employment was scarce and Ike, for many years, had less than his share. He and his family lived hand-in-hand with the spectre of poverty and it is something to be marvelled at how, with the absence of regular nutrition and energy- giving foods, Ike was able always to produce the strength sapping feats of endurance that are now synonymous with his name.

In 1923, at the age of seventeen years, Ike was invited to join the local Port Talbot YMCA Harriers, then a thriving athletics club, with a host of talented young athletes eager to compete and win at local events. The club had a high reputation in South Wales athletics circles and Ike was happy to become one of its keenest participants. He remained in active membership of the club for the rest of his days.

Soon, with the help and guidance of the YMCA officials and in particular, the encouragement of that doyen of Welsh athletics, Arthur Williams (later to

become Welsh AAA's President), Ike began to build up a huge reputation in long distance runs and prepared for such events with relentlessly thorough training schedules which would have severely punished lesser mortals. It was not unusual for Ike to be seen on daily training runs stretching from Port Talbot to Bridgend - and back, a distance exceeding 24 miles - and his feet not shod in the modern training shoes but in the cheapest "daps" available.

Such prodigious running feats were commonplace to Ike O'Brien, whose slight figure and close-cropped black hair glistening with perspiration, became a familiar sight on the streets of Port Talbot and neighbouring areas.

At about the time that he was building up his reputation for long distance running, a friend of Ike's, a well-known greyhound fancier named Dai Thomas of Thomas Street, Aberavon, asked Ike if he would take his most recent acquisition, a highly thought of and expensive greyhound, on one of his training runs. Several hours later, an apologetic Ike was seen carrying the exhausted animal on his shoulders back to the startled owner who was horrified to observe that the dog's footpads were worn away and bleeding profusely. The dog's owner and certainly the dog, had not appreciated quite how rigorous and lengthy were Ike's training runs. Understandably, Ike was never again asked to assist. In fact, after that incident, whenever the unfortunate animal caught sight of Ike O'Brien, he would very quickly slink away to some obscure hiding place until it became safe to emerge.

In 1928, Ike married local girl, seventeen years old Lilian May Saunders at Wesley Hall Methodist Church, Tydraw Street, Port Talbot and they lived for a while with Lilian's parents at 41 Oakwood Street, Port Talbot. It was at this address, in 1929, that their first child Albert was born.

A year later, in 1930, Ike was selected to represent the British YMCA Athletics team at the YMCA World Championships in Copenhagen, where he acquitted himself well enough in his event to merit the Western Mail' newspaper's acclaim as 'The best athlete in the British team'.

Two years later, in 1932, Ike travelled to Vienna to compete for Great Britain in that year's "Workers Olympiad". The Union Jack emblem worn proudly on Ike's running vest during that event is still lovingly cherished by his family in an album storing Ike's memoirs.

Despite having to endure the ravages of constant unemployment and hearing the responsibilities of an ever-increasing family, in 1936, Ike was able to add to his considerable list of long-distance running achievements when he came first in the West Wales Marathon Championships and finished a commendable sixth in the British Marathon title race.

In 1937, his wife Lilian now with four children, joined in his pride at again coming first in the West Wales Marathon Championship and going on to

achieve his ambition of winning the Welsh National Marathon event for the first time. But more was to come in that eventful year when Ike performed a feat that was considered beyond all human endeavour. In the astonishing time of 6 hours 20 mins, he accomplished a measured run of fifty miles, starting at Llangadock and ending at Swansea, with the tortuous journey taking in the surrounding areas of Carmarthen and Kidwelly. All who witnessed this tremendous display of stamina and courage realised that they were seeing a phenomenon beyond belief in this little wiry Port Talbot runner.

Still and despite his well-earned fame, Ike was unable to obtain regular employment. He and his family knew only too well the true meaning of poverty. It was in 1938, at the age of 32 years that Ike, apart from occasional casual work at Port Talbot Docks, managed to obtain his first full-time employment when he became an electrician's mate at the Margam works of Guest Keen & Baldwins. He had won a local road race and at the finishing line, was awarded a food parcel. Ike's response to the gesture was as follows "I don't want charity, get me a job" and the official, struck by the intensity of Ike's request, went to great lengths to obtain employment for the runner.

By this time, Ike and Lilian, with five children had still only experienced housing accommodation of two rooms then at Mabel Street, Aberavon. Their fortitude had truly been tested.

Amazingly, and as if to celebrate regular employment, it was in 1938 that Ike won the Welsh Marathon Championship for the second successive year, finished fourth in the Scottish event and then, in August of that same year, set out on what was surely the most gruelling run of his career, that from Cathays Park, Cardiff to the Guildhall, Swansea.

The entire run was undertaken against a gail-force headwind and to add to the difficulties, no provision had been made on the route to provide Ike with vital liquid nourishment. In an attempt to rectify this lack of foresight, his attendants called in at a Pyle farm and purchased milk for the runner which inevitably became curdled before he got to Neath, causing great discomfort.

At Neath, the same attendants bought acid drops in an attempt to "settle" Ike's tortured stomach and thus it was predictable that some miles later, at Morryston Common, he collapsed. However, with his indomitable spirit and the encouragement of his attendants, the little man got to his feet and ran on to Swansea to complete the 47 miles run in a time of 7 hrs 40 mins, much longer than he anticipated but, in view of the series of mishaps, an epic achievement and completed by Ike vaulting over a five-bar gate as if to underline his fitness. In 1939, Ike and Lilian with their young children were allocated their first home at 28 Michna Street, Aberavon and life became a little brighter. He won the

Welsh Marathon Championship for the third successive year in a time of 2 hrs 45 mins, a record which remained unbeaten until 1950, when surpassed by the great Tom Richards of Olympic Silver Medal fame.

The memories of the years of near destitution and hunger always remained with Ike O'Brien and it was indicative of the character of this great little man that having fought his way through such tribulation, he continued to run and train every hit as hard as he ever had.

His eldest son Albert recalls his father during the struggles of the 1930's, taking part in a three-mile race at Ammanford but not having the fare to travel, ran to the event, ran at the event and then ran back to Port Talbot.

Albert also laughingly looks back at the time when he and other school friends, in similarly dire financial straits, used to "burrow" their way into the bottom of the furnace pits of the nearby Borough Tinplate Works and pick out used cokes which could be sold as fire fuel for three-pence per bag.

It is much to the credit of Ike O'Brien and his family that they survived their early struggles and brought honour to their name and to the town.

Ike continued running through from the 1930's into the war-torn 1940's and tucked away in a corner of one of the family's scrap albums, the writer came across a yellowed cutting of the "Evening Post" of the early World War II years which describes an Amman Valley Hospital Carnival and Fete of that period.

The main attraction of the day, witnessed by a crowd of over 5000 spectators, was the Welsh Amateur Championship Marathon road race for the "Evening Post" Challenge Cup and the AAA Gold Medal.

The course of 26 miles and 385 yards was an exceptionally arduous one which started at Rhydyfro through to the Amman and Llwchwr Valleys as far as Pontardulais and back via Cross Hands, Penygroes and Llandybie, culminating in four laps of the Ammanford Central School field.

Only five runners completed the merciless uphill run and they were predictably led home by little Ike O'Brien with V.B.Sellars of Finchley Harriers seven minutes behind in second place.

With the dawning of 1945, Ike and Lilian had experienced proud parenthood on no fewer than ten occasions but sadly, had lost two of their babies who had died in infancy.

On a Saturday afternoon early in January 1945, Ike was designated to compete in a three mile event in a Triangular Athletics Meeting at Aberavon Athletic ground. At midday, in his capacity as an electrician's mate, he was engaged in working on an overhead gantry at the open-hearth furnace of Margam Steel Works when, in a horrific accident, he was crushed by a charger crane. He survived his appalling injuries for almost six weeks until his death at Neath

General Hospital, just days before his 40th birthday.

He left a 34 years old widow and eight children. Their eleventh child named David, born shortly after his father's death, died in 1947 at just two years of age.

With the passing of Ike O'Brien there ended a life of tragedy and triumph. The funeral service of this great Welsh athlete was conducted by the Rev. E. Whitford Roberts, Superintendent of the Neath and Port Talbot Circuit of the Methodist Church and appropriately, the funeral oration was delivered by Ike's great friend and mentor, Arthur E. Williams, representing the Welsh Amateur Athletics Association.

Shortly after his death, on Sunday 12th May 1945, a framed tribute listing his great achievements was unveiled at the Port Talbot YMCA by his eldest son Albert. On the bottom of the tribute are the words "Know ye not that they which run in a race, though all run, only one man gains the prize! So run that ye may win". - 1st Cor. 9.24.

Ike's widow Lilian May died in 1986 at the age of 75 years and lies buried with him at the Goytre Cemetery, Port Talbot.

*The athletics mantle worn so well by Ike O'Brien fit proudly upon his sons and they all took to running almost as if a birthright.*

*Albert, Jim and Aneurin progressed to representing their county and Arthur E. Williams once wrote of the four O'Brien brothers Albert, Jimmy, John and Aneurin that they ran seven miles of mountain roads as well as any in Wales. In July 1981, at the age of 43 years, Jimmy mirrored his father's incredible stamina-sapping achievements beating over 1000) competitors, including those from the USA and parts of Europe, to win the 10 miles Rhondda Runabout event in 53 minutes. After a shower, Jimmy then journeyed back to Port Talbot to take part in a 5 miles charity "Pram Race"*

*In a special profile in the "Running Review" of February 1984, Jim O'Brien, then 46 years old, listed his normal weeks training programme. This included over 140 miles of road and mountainous terrain.*

*The West Wales Marathon event ceased to be run after 1939 when last won by Ike O'Brien. Nearly fifty years late; in 1988, the event was revived and won by Ike's son Jimmy - in a time seven minutes faster than that achieved by his illustrious father.*

*The winner's prize was a flight to the USA to take part in the famous New York Marathon. Jim, at the age of fifty years, completed the gruelling run coming overall 105th out of over 26,000 competitors. He came second in the 'Masters' section, the American equivalent of our "Veterans" race.*

*The spirit of Ike O'Brien proudly lives on in his family.*



Mrs. Lilian O'Brien, Ikes widow, with six of her children, taken shortly after Ike's tragic death in 1945. The children are:- Jimmy, Johnny, Aneurin, Netta, Mary and Harry.

# THIS MEMORIAL

IS HUNG HERE AS

A TRIBUTE TO

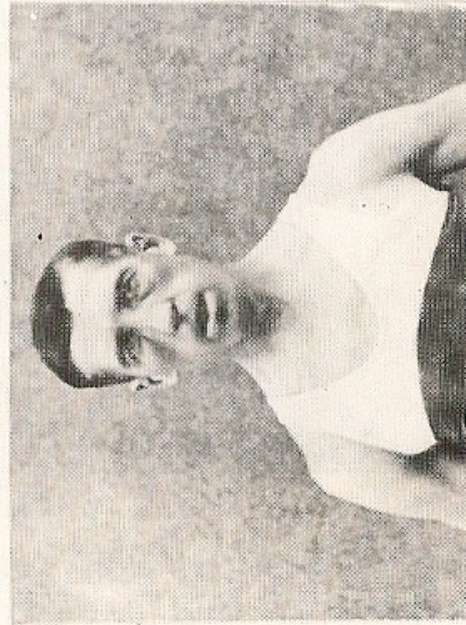
# Isaac O'Brien

Port Talbot Y.M.C.A. Harriers  
1923-1945

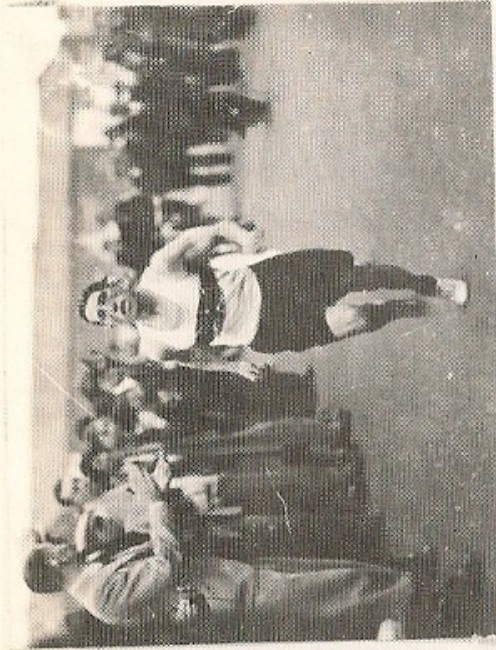
Who died February 11th, 1945.

He was a really great-hearted Athlete, famous in International Athletics, who brought fame to himself and great credit to his club, town and country.

His record here is some evidence of his prowess.



*This picture is of the framed special tribute to Ike O'Brien which hung for many years at the Y.M.C.A building, Port Talbot.*



1st Welsh Marathon Championship, 1937-38-39.

1st West Wales Marathon Championship, 1936-37-38-39.

6th British Marathon Championship, 1936.

4th Scottish Marathon Championship, 1938.

1st Guardian Cup Race, 1925-26-27-28-29-30.

Welsh "Noteworthy Performance" 50 Miles Run  
(Llangadock-Carmarthen-Kidwelly-Swansea), 1937  
6 hours 20 minutes.

Cardiff-Swansea Run, 1938. 7 hours 40 mins.

Member of British Y.M.C.A. Athletic Team  
International Y.M.C.A. Championships, 1930, at Copenhagen.

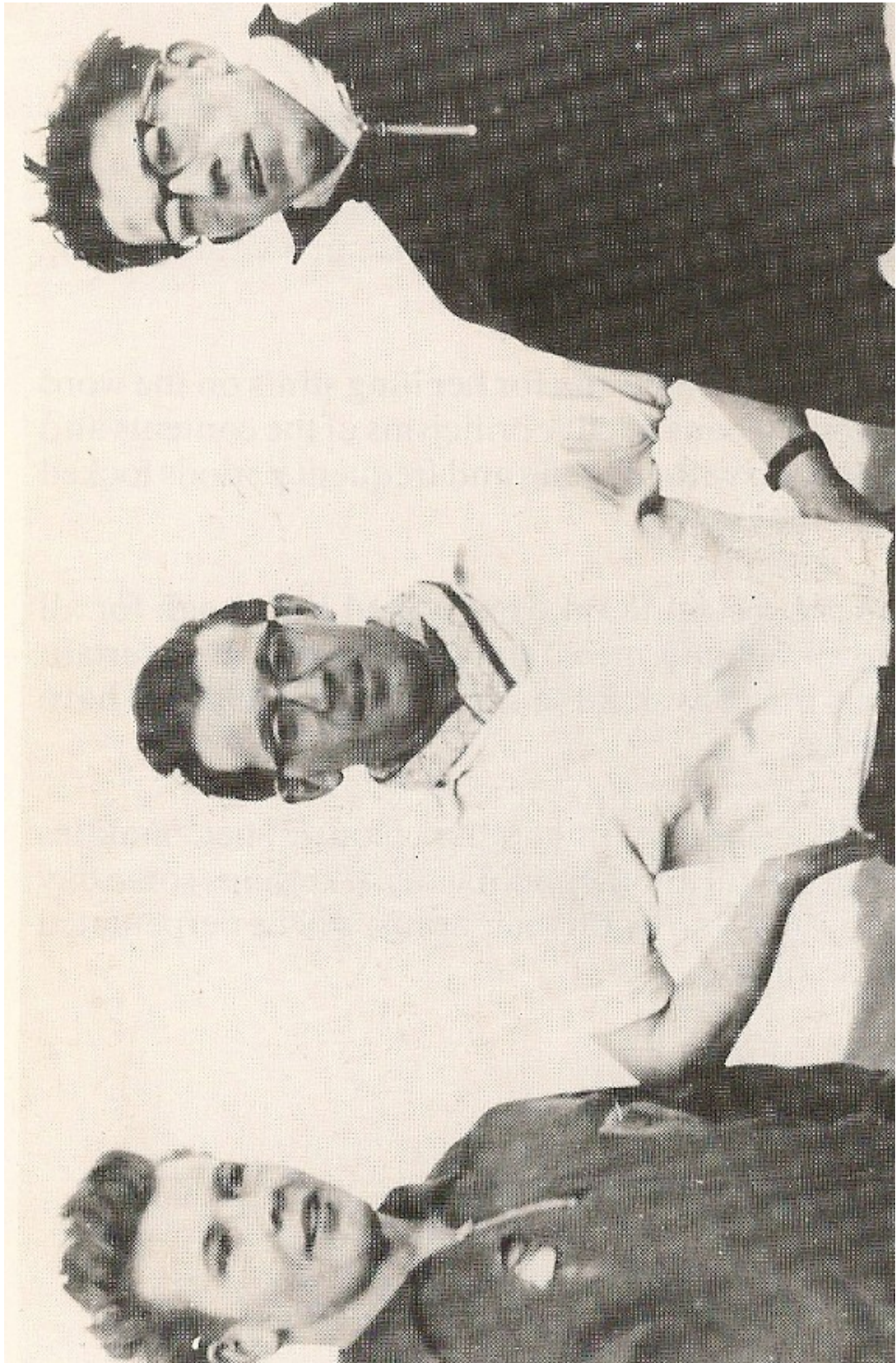
Member of British Workers' Athletic Team  
International Workers' Olympiad, 1932, at Vienna.

"Know ye not that they which run in a race, though all run,  
only one man gains the prize? So run that ye may win."

—1st Cor. 9, 24 (Revised)

Plate 53





Aneurin, Albert and Jim O'Brien three of the Sons of Ike O'Brien who all represented Wales in long distance running events.