

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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America's First Super-Star Athlete Was an Oarsman

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Edward Kosner, in his review of Christopher Klein's "Strong Boy" (*Books*, Dec. 21), a biography of America's professional boxing legend, the great John L. Sullivan, makes the claim that Sullivan was America's "first superstar athlete" and that he was also America's "first athletic god."

History and the magazines and newspapers of the time will show that America's "first superstar athlete" and "first athletic god" was not Sullivan, and moreover, was not even an American!

Edward "Ned" Hanlan, the "Boy in Blue," the first international sports superstar, was a Canadian from Toronto, who after winning the World Professional Rowing Championship in 1880, was hailed and claimed as an American by the U.S. press of the time, including *The Police Gazette* in its 1880 publication "Edward Hanlan, America's Champion Oarsman." New Yorkers learned that "Hanlan was looked upon simply as an American." The *Boston Transcript* reported that "America has the Championship of the World." The *Elmira Free Press* boasted that "the honor of the American flag has been upheld at last." The *Buffalo Courier* insisted that "Hanlan is an American—a North American Oarsman."

In the last quarter of the 19th century, professional rowing was a major spectator sport, attracting huge crowds to regattas and individual contests. In 1879, the Hanlan-Courtney race on the Potomac in Washington drew over 100,000 spectators. Congress adjourned and much of Washington closed down for the event. Railroads provided observation cars following the five-mile course, a standard practice for major races in both the U.S. and Canada. U.S. President Rutherford B. Hayes followed Hanlan and Courtney on the course in one of the many steam-yachts full of spectators. Every major newspaper in North America was on hand to report on the "Great Boat Race."

Hanlan, an unknown when he won the professional singles race at the 1876 Centennial Regatta in Philadelphia, soon became the first international athletic superstar after claiming the Canadian, American, English and, finally, the world championship in 1880. Huge crowds watched his races.

Hanlan also had the perquisites of a sports celebrity: he intimidated his opponents by stopping during a race and then going on to win. He participated in over 300 races, losing, it is reported, only six. He was backed and managed by the Hanlan Club, a group of well-known and wealthy sponsors, including the American consul. Three separate pieces of music proclaimed his fame with sheet music of the time. He was truly the first major sports superstar of his era, almost two years before Sullivan became the heavyweight boxing champion. Eighteen years after his death, an heroic bronze statue was unveiled before a huge crowd in Toronto.

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