

# IRISH PALS' OLYMPIC GAMES ODYSSEY 52 YEARS ON

# HEAVEN & HELL IN '72

## For six young farmers the trip to Munich was glimpse of a whole new world – then the Black September hostage horrors changed everything...

**GROUNDBREAKERS**, that's what they were. Long before Jackie's Army descended on West Germany for Euro 88, six young Irish farmers travelled to Munich for the 1972 Olympic Games.

The experience was life-changing. "Fifty-two years. There's a lot of water gone under the bridge since then," says Aidan Arnold, from Lusk in Co Dublin.

Arnold was joined on the trip by fellow vegetable growers Jim and Thomas Hagan, from Balbriggan, Joe Byrne, from Grace Dieu near Ballyboughal, Des Tallon, from Wicklow, and Mick Kenny, from Kildare.

*They were all around 22 when they signed up for a Macra na Feirme trip as part of a European agricultural youth programme sponsored by the German government.*

"Six of us, we were all around the same age. We were great mates and still are," says Arnold.

"One of us is sadly gone, Des Tallon. We called him

### EXCLUSIVE

David COUGHLAN

"The Desser". Probably the most disorganised man I ever met, but the loveliest man."

Munich 1972 was the Olympics of Mark Spitz and Mary Peters; where Charlie Nash fought for Ireland just months after losing his brother Willie in Bloody Sunday; of Olga Korbut and USSR beating USA at basketball; the Olympics when a bunch of Irish cyclists tried to gate-crash the men's road race.

*It was also the Olympics where 11 members of the Israeli team – six coaches and five athletes – were killed.*

"We were shocked. It went from being a fantastically enjoyable thing to something awful," recalls Arnold.

But just over a week earlier,

the six young Irish farmers arrived in a city buzzing for the biggest show in sport. It was a step into the unknown. "I think some of us had horse for the first time," says Mick Kenny, laughing.

"In our innocence we used to go to the same restaurant every night. 'Schweine cutlets' was the speciality. We'd all get the same, but maybe an odd night a fella would deviate and try something different. "And every one of them regretted it!"

### Canteen

They stayed in a college with hundreds of other young farmers from all over Europe, who congregated in the canteen each day for breakfast and lunch.

"You got main course, starter, dessert all in the one big plate in different slots," says Thomas Hagan.

"Some lads would be starting on dessert and some lads would be finishing on starters." Joe Byrne is flicking through some old pho-

**THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME:** (from left) Aidan Arnold, Joe Byrne, Jim Hagan, Thomas Hagan and Michael Kenny look over their memorabilia and (inset right) their time schedules in a programme



**GLORY DAYS:** (from left) Thomas Hagan, Michael Kenny (with his Olympic programme) and Aidan Arnold during their trip to Munich in 1972

tos from the trip.

"That's us in our former glory," he says, smiling.

Munich was a kaleidoscope of culture and sport for the first week of the Games. None of the six had any German. Not that they let that hold them back.

"We communicated all right. I think we participated more in the social side of it," Byrne says with a smile.

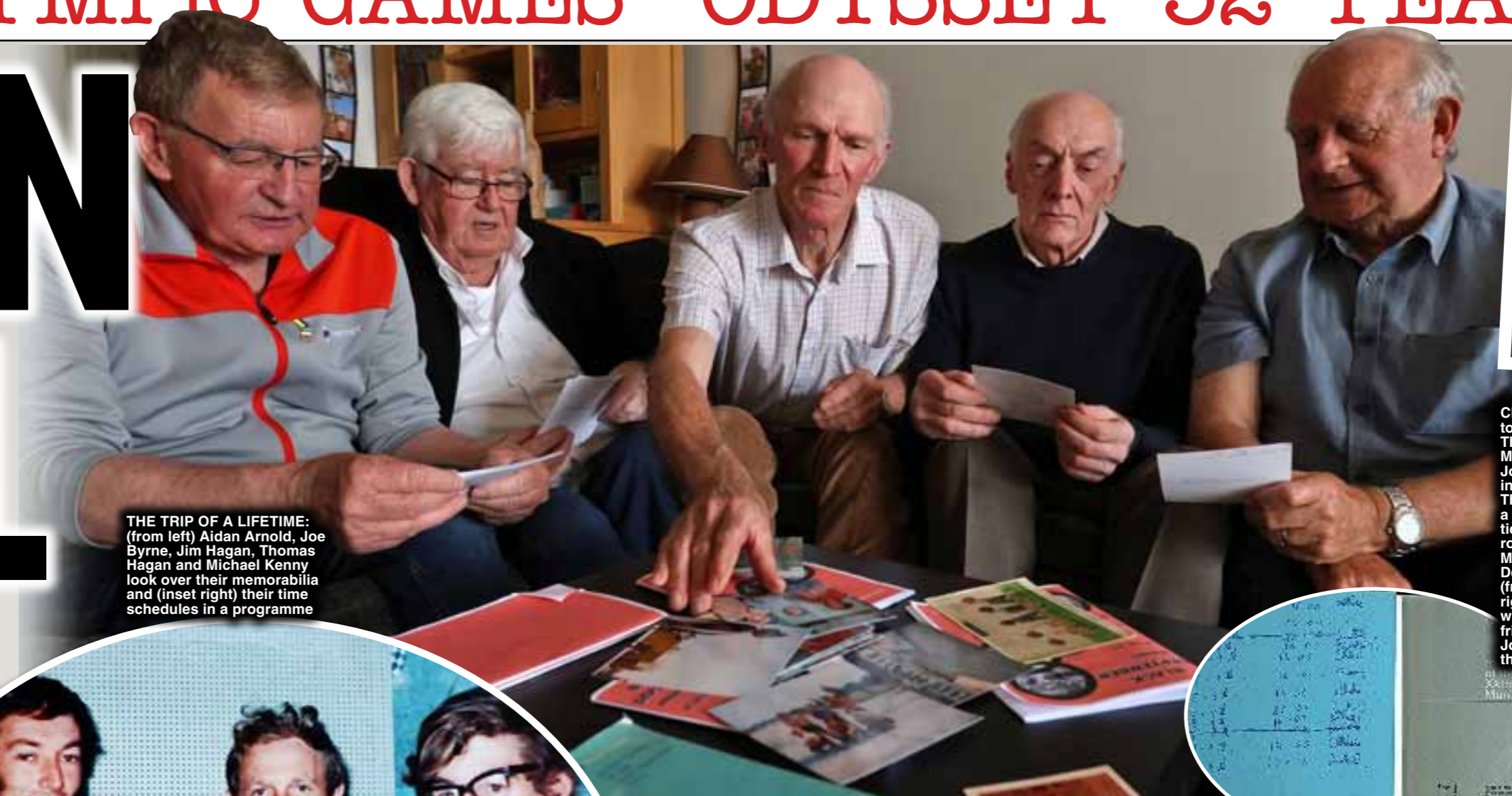
*They made it to the opening ceremony and enjoyed music and open-air theatre and spent hours in Marienplatz square haggling for Olympic tickets on the black market.*

"You had everything from evangelical Christians to women burning their bras to protests against the Vietnam War," says Byrne.

"There was a sense of being part of something very big."

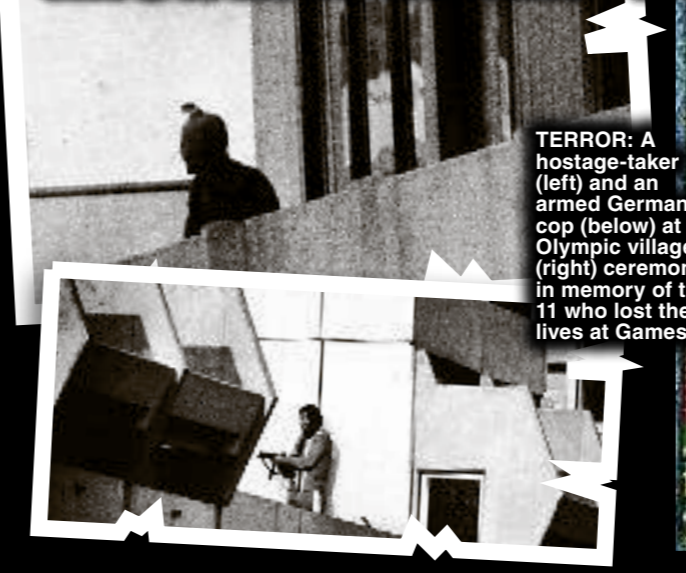
Thomas Hagan recalls the daily scrum to get tickets.

"Mark Spitz won seven medals in the pool and it was hard to get tickets for the swimming, same with the gymnastics, nearly im-



**CRAIC:** from top) Jim, Thomas, Michael, Joe and Aidan in Munich; Thomas buying a black market ticket; (back row) Jim Hagan, Michael Kenny, Des Tallon and (front row, far right) Joe Byrne with some US friends; and Joe heads to the stadium

## HORROR-IN-THE VILLAGE



**TERROR:** A hostage-taker (left) and an armed German cop (below) at the Olympic village; (right) ceremony in memory of the 11 who lost their lives at Games



possible. But we made the best of it," he says.

The innocence was shattered on September 5, when Black September militants entered the Olympic village and stormed the rooms of the Israeli team.

A day-long hostage siege ensued, before a botched rescue attempt at a nearby airfield ended in tragedy. In total 11 Israelis were killed, along with one West German police officer and five Black September terrorists.

With the language barrier and no access to TV, the six Irish farmers were in the dark for much of the time.

"We knew there was something wrong, but we didn't know what was wrong," says Jim. "A cloud descended."

They saw the helicopters leave the Olympic village with the hostages and the captors, but didn't know the full

story until they got back to Dublin.

"I think people at home watching the television knew more about what was going on than us," says Byrne.

"Even when the Israelis were murdered we were the last to know."

*The Games were halted for a day, before astonishingly continuing, and Byrne likened the atmosphere during that period to what they encountered when they visited Dachau concentration camp on the outskirts of Munich.*

"That seriousness. That feeling. It's like when we went to Dachau. If you've ever been in one of those camps, you go in and there's this silence. That visit had the most profound effect on us," he said.

The tragic events at Munich have never left the group of Irish farmers, but there are many happy memories too.

Mick Kenny takes out an official programme from the Munich Games and points out some of the events they saw during those two weeks in 1972.

Aidan Arnold was in the Olympic stadium to see Lasse Viren and Kip Keino take memorable golds on the track and between them they made it to some football, canoeing and boxing events.

The late Des Tallon even got a ticket for the famed basketball final between USA and USSR.

That match – played at the height of the Cold War – has long since gone

**'We knew something was wrong, a cloud descended'**

down in folklore after the Soviet Union won gold with a disputed final throw of the game.

Not that The Desser saw it. "Des had a habit of getting lost," says Kenny. "He'd had one bad experience already of getting lost after an event, so he left just before it finished so he wouldn't get lost again."

"It turned out to be the match of the century. He didn't even know who won!"

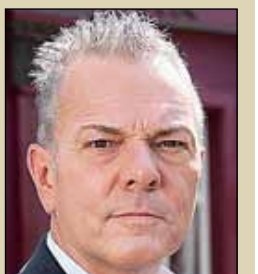
### Anecdotes

Fifty two years later, the remaining five farmers are still enjoying the same in-jokes and anecdotes and moments of dilvillment from all those years ago.

*They will watch this summer's Paris Games on TV and over five decades on, the memories of Munich are still fresh.*

"It's great that we can still meet up and talk about it," says Arnold.

"We were 22-year-old farmers from Ireland. It was an education, we hadn't got a clue."



RETURN: French

### Something for the Wick End

IT'S been a decade since we last saw him in Albert Square but Michael French will return as David Wicks later this year.

EastEnders fans last saw the smooth-talking ladies' man in Walford back in 2014. He left after his relationship with old flame Carol Jackson broke down.

### Soap

Now French (61) will help the soap celebrate its 40th anniversary with a "short stint".

He said: "I feel honoured to be asked to reprise the role of David Wicks once again. It may only be a brief visit, but we know from his past that David never fails to create a lot of drama in a very short time."



DOTING: The couple

### Depp dates model but 'informally'

JOHNNY Depp is "casually dating" Yulia Vlasova.

The Pirates of the Caribbean actor has recently been romantically linked with the 29-year-old model but insiders have stressed the pair are not formally in a relationship.

A source told Entertainment Tonight: "[Johnny is] casually seeing Yulia Vlasova.

### Label

"They've known each other for a few years and see each other when they can."

Another insider told People magazine the pair don't use "boyfriend-girlfriend" labels.

It is believed the pair first met at the 55th Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2021 in the Czech Republic.



GOLDEN GIRL: Mary Peters