



The Legendary

CASEY BROTHERS



JIM HUDSON WITH JIM CASEY



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JIM HUDSON was an aerospace engineer with the Rockwell Space Operations Company at NASA's Johnson Space Centre in Houston, Texas, and like Jim and Myrtle Casey, was a resident of Dickinson, Texas, near Galveston Bay.

Though he had five children and six grandchildren, Jim still found time to devote to freelance writing assignments. In 1979, Jim wrote a book detailing the history of Dickinson and its surrounding area (*Dickinson – Taller Than the Pines*) and also wrote for trade magazines.

When Jim and Myrtle Casey approached him with the idea of chronicling the exploits of the seven Casey brothers in a book, Jim agreed. The outcome was a happy one for the author and his wife Lillian who gained two charming friends for life. That alone, said Jim, was ample reward for the hours spent in writing this book.

To the memory of their remarkable parents 'Big Mick' Casey and, in particular, Bridge Sullivan Casey who devoted her life to their well-being, their children lovingly dedicate this book.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Weeshie Fogarty

Introduction

1. Beginnings
2. The Formative Years
3. Signs of Greatness
4. Winning ... Winning ... Winning
5. Killarney
6. All Seven Now
7. Branching Out
8. 'Scuffling' Pays Off
9. What Might Have Been
10. On their Way to Glory
11. Triumph
12. 'Crusher Casey'
13. Brothers in Boston
14. New Worlds to Conquer
15. The Governor's Cup
16. 'Mighty' Jim Casey
17. The Further Adventures of Jim Casey
18. Life After Wrestling
19. The Caseys and the Kids
20. Steve
21. Tom, Mick and Jack
22. Dan and Paddy
23. Finally – The Astronauts
24. Back to Sneem

Postscript

A Tribute from the Casey Brothers

Index

FOREWORD

by **WEESHIE FOGARTY**



I had heard the phrase ‘The Caseys of Sneem’ since I was a young lad growing up on the side of Lower New Street in my hometown of Killarney. The name has reverberated down through the decades. Expressions such as ‘the greatest’, ‘the strongest’, ‘the best in the world’, ‘sporting giants’, ‘the toughest’ and much more capture the imaginations of generations of Kerry people whenever the name comes up for discussion. As a youngster in the 1940s and 1950s in Kerry the Caseys of Sneem influenced my thinking and that of any youthful sports person with ambitions of greatness in their own right and yet, despite all the praise and adulation showered on the name, not alone in Kerry but in England and America, the story of this remarkable family has never been told – until now.

The list of Casey sporting achievements are far too many to list here: Paddy was undefeated light and heavyweight wrestling champion of Ireland and his son, Patrick, was a member of the Vesta Rowing Club in London and won a medal in 1981 in the Henley Regatta; Paddy also won many long-distance cycling races in Ireland; Dan was a contractor, champion oarsman, and tug-of-war champion; Jack Casey had remained in Ireland, married and had taken up farming and fishing. He built the finest seine boats ever seen in the area. A superb oarsman in his own right, he helped win the Salter Cup with his brothers and has ensured a family legacy of greatness – his son, Noel, grandchildren, Bernie and Caroline, and great-grandchildren, Jack and Victoria, are deeply involved in sports including, of course, rowing! Tom became British amateur boxing champion in 1937 after only nine days’ training; Jim won the Canadian and South American wrestling titles; Mick, in a career that lasted over twenty years, had 200 wrestling bouts; and, of course, probably the greatest of them all, Steve retired undefeated as world wrestling champion. Most astounding of all was their non-participation in the Berlin Olympics of 1936 when they were barred from rowing there following their victory in the English rowing championships. The brothers were also unbeatable in tug-of-war, winning many titles. This amazing story of the

Casey brothers is surely one of the most remarkable and inspiring of all. They left their native place, went forth and matched their prowess against the greatest sportsmen throughout the world. They earned undying fame and it can be said, without fear of contradiction, that this family of seven boys was 'the greatest of all'.

Christy Riordan lives in the town of Caherciveen deep in the heart of the Iveragh peninsula in County Kerry. He runs his own highly successful C/R video company together with his son Anthony and has been obsessed with the story of the Caseys all his life. He has been amassing the history of the family for decades but one aspect of this astonishing story had always eluded him. That was the narrative of the boys when emigration took them to America. Christy knew that the real source of information needed to complete his account of the Caseys family lay in Houston, Texas, where Jim Casey lived and died. Luck was on his side. When Jim's American-born wife, Myrtle, came to Sneem on holidays, she was put in touch with Christy and, at her invitation Christy and I jetted out to Houston in February 2008 where we spent a wonderful week at Myrtle's home.



Christy Riordan pictured in Jim Casey's home in Dickinson, Texas, in April 2008 as he collected Casey family memorabilia for the book and DVD, (l-r): Jim Hudson, his wife Mary and Myrtle Casey, Jim's wife Christy. The cup is the Governor's Cup, won by Tom Casey on the Charles River, Boston, in 1940 and presented by the Governor of Massachusetts, Leverett Saltonstall.

It was unforgettable seven days and we were given full access to the vast amount of memorabilia about the family that Myrtle has collected through the years – huge scrapbooks packed with priceless stories and information, stunning black-and-white photographs, audio interviews and even film footage of the boys competing in rowing and wrestling. We were introduced to Jim Hudson, the author of this book written in cooperation with Jim. Myrtle and Jim had sought out Hudson, mainly due to the fact that he had previously written *Dickinson – Taller than the Pines*, a superb history about their home place of Dickinson, Texas, published in 1979.

Dickinson, home to the Caseys, is on State Highway 3 at the edge of the Galveston metropolitan area in the northwest corner of Galveston County. Hudson explained how he was stunned as he listened to Jim recalling the family history and he was dumbfounded that their story had not received international recognition. A further fascinating insight into Jim Casey's fame as a sports personality and high standing in his community in Texas was vividly brought to us when we were introduced to and interviewed George Abbey, Director of Johnson Space Center (1996–2001).

He had served as an integral part of the NASA Shuttle-Mir Program, providing crucial oversight, management and guidance for the first phase of the International Space Station. He explained to us how Jim Casey had been approached by NASA to train many of the astronauts as they prepared for their flights into space. Further interviews were conducted by us with Myrtle and her daughter and the story, seemingly forgotten forever, was finally been pieced together. On our last night in Dickinson, Myrtle presented us with a copy of the original book written by Jim Hudson with Jim Casey and her written permission to have the book published in Ireland. She was adamant that the story of the family would finally be told to the world.

3038 Hughes Rd.
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U.S.A.
April 30, 2008

To whom it may concern:

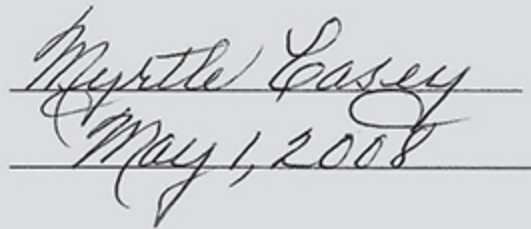
I have extended my permission for any and all photos, videos, news articles, C D's and DVD to be used in preserving the story of the Casey family to Christy Riordan and Weeshie Fogarty.

If they see fit to update the book written for Jim and Myrtle Casey, by Jim Hudson, "The Toughest Family on Earth" , I give my permission to do so.

On a recent trip to Texas they suggested that the book be republished in Ireland and the photos, etc. that they copied be added to complete the story of the Casey family. A suggestion was made to rename the book and I agreed to that.

The people of Ireland want to read about this famous family and I agree to that. I feel confident that these two men are sincere in their desire to see that the Casey name will never die.

Myrtle Casey

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Myrtle Casey" followed by the date "May 1, 2008". The signature is written on two horizontal lines.

We flew home to Kerry determined to have this book made available to sports lovers everywhere and now, thanks to The Collins Press of Cork, Myrtle Casey's dream has come true. Christy Riordan, however, has gone one step further and a marvelous DVD chronicling the life and times of this extraordinarily family from Sneem in County Kerry will also be available – now people can listen to interviews with the family, view footage of their greatest victories and look at that collection of priceless memorabilia obtained on that unforgettable trip to Texas. However, for both Christy and myself, just one more journey needed to be made to complete the real story of the family.

The Casey family was born and raised in a tiny hamlet that sits upon the shore of the *Sneem River*. In May 2013, Christy and I, accompanied by our sons

Anthony and Kieran, were rowed by local boatman Noel Donnelly to the old home, which now lies in ruins. It was a poignant and uplifting experience, more of a pilgrimage than a journey as we stood in silence at the very spot where this exemplary family had lived. Our journey, which had brought us to Houston, Texas, and all over Ireland, was complete and in that place it felt as if the spirits of the seven Casey brothers were reaching out. The story of the legendary Casey brothers is, without argument, one of the world's greatest sports stories. This book and DVD will fortify their place in history's pages.

INTRODUCTION

This is the story of an incredible Irish family. In particular, it details the amazing athletic feats of the seven brothers in that family, the Casey brothers of County Kerry. Nowhere in the annals of sport will you find an entire family so gifted: seven brothers uniquely equipped to star as Olympic-class oarsmen, tug-of-war champions, professional wrestlers and boxers. When you have read their story, you will undoubtedly agree that, if they weren't the 'toughest family on earth', they surely never found one that could beat them – at anything.

Let me be quick to point out that every word of this story is true. It is founded on fact, facts that have been documented in many places: in Ireland, England and the United States.

In their time, the athletic achievements of the Casey brothers won them a measure of fame throughout the sporting world. Today, they are still recognised as national heroes in their native Ireland, although some of their accomplishments took place over half a century ago. If they had had available to them then the worldwide sports coverage that is provided by the media today, they would surely be famous the word over. And if they had won four or five of the 1936 Olympic rowing events (as they should have), their names would be household words today.

Though late in the telling, this book attempts to win for the fabulous Casey brothers some measure of fame or, at least, some acknowledgment. Read on, then and see if you don't agree that the Casey brothers were, and perhaps still are, legendary.

JIM HUDSON

ONE



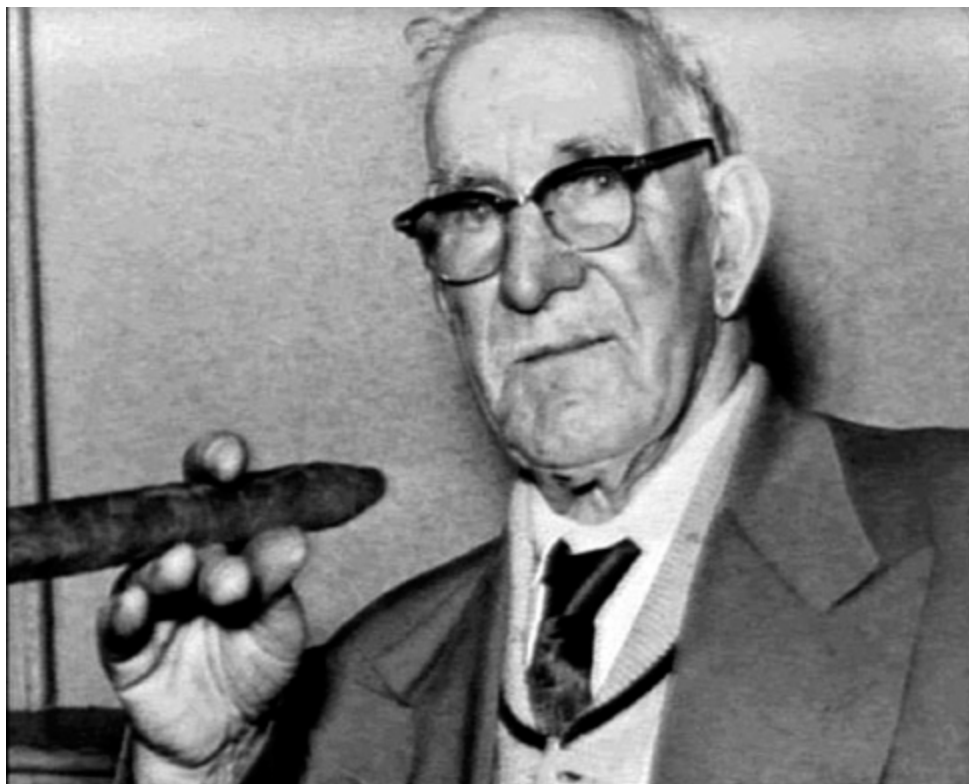
BEGINNINGS

In County Kerry, a tiny hamlet consisting of five houses sits upon the shore of the River Sneem. Named Ballaugh, it is situated near the coastal flatlands, which gradually rise into upland slopes and gentle hills that approach 2,000 feet in height. The nearest habitation of any consequence is the town of Sneem. No roads connect Ballaugh and Sneem; to go from one to the other, one must either trek overland through the hills for 4 miles or row a boat up the River Sneem for some 2 miles.

The inhabitants made, and still make, their living by fishing and farming. Fish can be sold in the local markets and restaurants in Sneem with any excess amounts exported from there. Farming is done mostly for home consumption; families in this area were and are more or less self-sustaining.

In the late 1800s the forebears of the Casey brothers lived in Ballaugh. Strangely enough, however, the two who were to bring the Casey brothers into the world never met until each had returned to Ireland from a stay in the United States.

Michael ('Big Mick') Casey was born in May 1877. Though not gigantic in size, he was enormously strong and a natural athlete. Both in Ireland and in America he was known as a 'brawler', a naturally tough and durable man who delighted in taking on all comers in fisticuffs or in wrestling. This tag of 'brawler' was not nearly as disreputable then as it may sound today. As a matter of fact, it was then often used in a flattering way and the man so named was proud. In those days, organised and supervised athletic pursuits such as are commonly available today were lacking and men were oftentimes disposed to work off excess energy and fill their idle hours by engaging in impromptu fist fights or wrestling matches.



Michael 'Big Mick' Casey was a naturally tough man who passed on his strength – of body and character – to his children.

It is not known exactly when Mick Casey left for the United States but it must have been just before or at the turn of the century, when he was about twenty-three years old. He worked in the coal mines in Montana for a time before heading east and settling for a time in Boston, where he worked as stevedore loading and unloading freight for the Fall River Shipping Company. This line of work no doubt contributed even more to his strength and conditioning.

Still a 'brawler', he came to the notice of the great John L. Sullivan, who had been the world heavyweight bare-knuckle boxing champion. John L. took Big Mick into his camp for a time as his sparring partner. This fact alone is sufficient testimony to Big Mick's strength and skill. And what better triumph for a man who fancied himself a 'brawler' than to be asked to spar with the great John L. Sullivan.

In the same period, Big Mick was given the opportunity to wrestle with the heavyweight-wrestling champion 'Farmer' Burns who was reputed to have been one of the greatest wrestlers of all time. Years later, when his sons would press him

for details about his bouts with John L. Sullivan or his match with 'Farmer' Burns, Big Mick would say only that each man, in his own way, had been 'a holy terror'. He never elaborated on how he had fared with them. He was probably a bit of a 'holy terror' himself, for both Sullivan and Burns.

During this same period, a young lady named Bridget Sullivan was living and working in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was from County Kerry too but had gone off to America at about the same time as Mick Casey. Back in County Kerry, her family was held in high esteem because of their great strength and athletic skill. Bridget's two brothers, Dan 'Graffa Mountain' Sullivan and Patsy Sullivan, were fabled for their physical prowess and, it would seem, with ample justification.

There is the story still gleefully told about Dan Sullivan in County Kerry, although it undoubtedly dates from the 1800s. This was the time when Dan 'Graffa Mountain' Sullivan took on the British Navy – and won. It seems that part of the British fleet was anchored off the coast of Sneem and one evening they put ashore two boatloads of sailors in search of fresh food – in particular, fowl to supplement the meagre rations in their mess. Once ashore, they began rounding up and capturing chickens, geese and turkeys, causing a great commotion. The sailors intended to pay for the fowl they collected but Dan Sullivan, angrily observing the audacity of the sailors, either didn't know that or didn't believe it. With a bellow of rage, he flew out of his father's house and began to flatten sailors left and right. After he had knocked five or six of the sailors unconscious, his father ran out to stop him. The ten or twelve remaining sailors (most of whom, in those days, were Irish) were vastly relieved by Johnny 'Mountain' Sullivan's interference. If he hadn't stopped him, they swore Dan Sullivan would have flattened them all.

The next day, the British fleet commander, accompanied by three staff officers and three of the crewmen who had been involved in the ruckus, came ashore to apologise. Looking with a bemused grin at his three battered and bloodied crewmen and then at the 6-foot-225-pound Dan Sullivan, the admiral said that he had come not only to apologise but to get a good look at this rugged Irishman who had 'whipped the British Navy'.

The admiral would have marvelled to know that, for all of Dan 'Graffa Mountain' Sullivan's toughness, his father, Johnny 'Mountain' Sullivan, was

generally acknowledged to be even tougher. Later on, when Bridget Sullivan wed Big Mick Casey, there was considerable rivalry between Mick and his fabled father-in-law.



'Big Mick' Casey, the scion of the Casey clan, shown in his later years.

Patsy Sullivan came to America with his sister Bridget, while Dan remained in Ireland where he did quite well for himself at farming and even better at rowing. He was generally acknowledged to be one of Ireland's finest oarsmen of that time. Bridget worked as a maid for a family in Cambridge, while her brother Patsy