

THE GREATEST BALLPLAYER

J. J. BOWLES

There never will be another ballplayer quite like Johnny Bowles of Limerick. And that is not just my opinion but that of the best judges of the game whom I listened to as a boy in the Old Market Place ballcourt in Cork. There they valued above all the player who could last a long rubber, 'shift' a ball left or right and 'kill' it off either hand. And J.J. Bowles, who learned his ballplaying beside Clune's factory and in Quilty's Court, answered those tests.

To have reigned as Irish champion for the best part of twenty-five years, to have won Irish titles as a professional and later as a member of the GAA, to have contested the World Championship - that is no small achievement.

He was not yet twenty-one years of age when he won his first Irish title in 1900. In those days the title of champion was usually awarded to the winner of the Cork tournament where during the month of August all the great players gathered. Rubbers were long; the best of twenty-one games in home-and-home matches and the best of nine in one-day matches. He met and defeated such players as Billie Herlihy of Cork, Tim Twohill of Liscarroll, Paddy Coyne of Carlow, Jim Hunt of Sligo and Paddy Lyons of Dublin.

When I met him in 1942 he was still an active, athletic man, his sleek dark hair scarcely touched with grey. I called to his house at Thomondgate to be told that he was out for a walk and it was on the banks of the Shannon that I came up to him. He was a delightful talker, capable of recalling small details of his opponents' play and always generous in his estimate of their ability.

There are in the life of all great performers moments when their talents seem to lift them to great heights and, equally, moments when these same gifts seem to desert them. How else explain how with a lead of nine games to one, he came to lose to Coyne by eleven games to nine, even though he was to beat the same player 'out of sight' two years later? While Bowles never once complained of this in his account of the match, old players who were present questioned the legality of the ball used in the second half of the rubber played at Carlow. (It was customary for the winner of a game to have the right to select the ball for the following game). Bowles did, of course, have a judge to safeguard his interests because one of the two judges was always from the visiting club and William Ryan acted for Bowles.

Perhaps the most dramatic moment in his career came when he was matched with Morgan Pembroke of Ballymum for the Irish title of 1920. The first 'leg' of the two-day rubber was played in Limerick on a September day when armoured cars prowled the streets and spectators on their way to the Rutland Street ballcourt were stopped and searched at a checkpoint near Ellen Street. Morgan Pembroke was a player in his own mould, a beautiful striker with total command of all the great shots. However, Bowles was, even though then over 40, the master and led at the day's end by four games to three. But a fortnight later it was the Ballymum club which hailed its first All-Ireland champion when Pembroke won five games in a row.

Retirement followed but Bowles was persuaded to return to the game in 1926 when Stephen Gleeson of Fedamore needed a partner for the newly-organised All-Ireland championships under GAA rules. They teamed up very effectively, and, with Stephen playing on the right, they beat O'Mahony and O'Shaughnessy of Cork, Ormonde and Brady of Tipperary and, finally, Lucas and Dalton to win the title for Limerick.

Rutland Street ballcourt is long since closed, though I can

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A youthful J.J. Bowles.

modestly claim to have played there in 1934. I can recall a small hall under the wooden gallery where when the matches were over we were entertained by the Limerick club. Names are slow to return after the lapse of time but I do remember Tom Meany of Bruff, Jimmy Kirby and Paddy Hackett from Limerick and those wonderful players from nearby Nenagh, the Hassett brothers, taking part in the 'social' that followed the matches.

The right to be called 'the greatest' is one on which there will never be unanimity - only Mohammed Ali fails to accept that! However, a good judge and one who never hesitated to back his judgement with a fistful of sovereigns was Paddy Lyons. And he never had any doubt that J.J. Bowles of Limerick was the best handballer the game has known.