

# No. 158—JOHN JOE AIREY of Limerick City

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

WITH the passing a few years ago of John Joe Airey, we lost one of the rich old aristocrats of the heyday of Limerick handball—rich not in the material sense, but rather in the love and affection of the great ones—players and spectators, who frequented the old Rutland Street Ballcourt in the great days of its popularity and affluence.

Half a century ago the old alley behind the Town Hall was coming into its own as the centre of high class handball. For fully a score of years after it continued to hold the centre of the stage, and all the great players of a gala period in Irish handball were seen in action there.

That was the time when Limerick had the best ball players in Ireland, and the name of John Joe Bowles on the bill was sufficient to draw crowds to any part of Ireland. Winner of All-Ireland titles from 1902 to 1926, his first ball alley was the walls of Walker's Distillery by the banks of the Shannon, long since demolished. Another memory of the past is stirred by the mention of Frank Quilty's Alley in Thomondgate, where the peerless Johnny played some of his earliest championship games. That, too, is long since gone from its original purpose, although some of the original walls still remain as reminders of a glorious past.

## FINE NEW COURTS

Some old enthusiasts had hoped to see Quilty's Court rebuilt, but that is hardly feasible now, in view of the fine new courts built by the Corporation fairly close to the site of the old alley and now that the dream of the old time enthusiasts is about to be realised by the completion of the Killeely Ballcourt to make it fit for championship play in all weathers, I hope the powers that be will dedicate it as a worthy memorial to one of the greatest sons Limerick ever produced—the late John Joe Bowles.

For quarter of a century, Bowles ruled the roost in Irish handball. He was the great general of the ballcourts—supreme exponent of the native code, the old alley cracker that produced such sweet music for the true lovers of the game, who thronged the old Rutland Street gallery, and witnessed such exciting and great fare there.

## NOT ALONE IN HIS GLORY

Johnny Bowles, however, was not by any means alone in his glory. He was the great leader, the "noblest Roman of them all," but he had many able lieutenants—men who grew up around the champion, and were often able to give him a harder game than most of the challengers, who came from all parts of the country, and even from across the seas, seeking to deprive him of the title.

It was only natural in the circumstances that the club tournament should prove something of a miniature "All-Ireland," and few will begrudge the old timers their memories when they can muster such wonderful recollections.

Prominent in any recital of the glory deeds of the halcyon days must be the name of John Joe Airey, one of the best of those who kept step with the great champion for much of the way on the road to stardom. Looking back over the chronicles of the old Rutland Street Court, I find first mention of John Joe Airey as a fully-fledged championship player under date, September 6th, 1908, when he played a pair of hard rubbers in the senior club doubles championship.

## OPENING GAME

In the opening game that day, J. J. Airey, partnered by J. J. Fitzpatrick, beat T. Fitzpatrick and T. Cusack, 21-8, 21-14, 17-21, 16-21, 21-14. An hour later they were again in action, but lost this time to J. Kelly and J. Dickenson, 21-7, 21-9, 12-21, 14-21, 16-21. Other players who participated in that great club title fight included J. J. Bowles, C. Meen-

aghan, E. J. Bourke, A. Cole, J. Grant, S. Gleeson, Con Scannan, Jacky Ryan, M. McMahon, G. McSweeney, C. Trimby, J. Kelly, M. Lynch, R. Browne, M. McCarthy, and A. Lysaght.

For the best part of a score years Johnny Airey continued association with the Rutland Street Court, and besides figuring to real advantage there, he partnered J. J. Bowles in a number of outstanding matches against the best the other counties could produce.

He always insisted that Bowles was the greatest ballplayer of his time, and his one regret all down the years was that the world championship tie was so mismanaged as to load the dice heavily against Bowles, when the regulations for the game were being drawn up.

## "SUICIDAL CONDITIONS"

Actually, he was of the opinion that the Limerick fanciers of Bowles were so convinced of his superiority that they agreed to what proved suicidal conditions, so anxious were they to demonstrate his world beating qualities.

When I pressed J. J. Airey for his story of that much talked of contest, he recalled that when the match with the American champion, Jimmy Kelly, was being originally arranged, the Yankee led played a rubber in the old Market Place Ballcourt in Cork. Reports from there were to the effect that Bowles would beat him "with his eyes closed."

When the American and his backers visited Limerick and saw Bowles in action they were inclined to shirk the world rubber. They expressed dissatisfaction with the court and demanded that if the match was played that the door at the right hand end corner be built up.

This could have meant structural alterations to the Court, which the Limerick people were not prepared to carry out and it eventually looked as if the meeting, much publicised, was going to fall through.

In the end, in order to prevent this, Bowles agreed in signed articles of agreement governing the match that all service of his would be delivered to the left side of the court—a most unusual stipulation that should most certainly not have been introduced to a contest with a world title at stake, particularly when it is realised that Kelly was a left-handed player.

## THE GAME IN NEW YORK

Even as it was, Bowles could have built a commanding lead in Limerick, but he was anxious to make a game of it in New York and travelled there in arrears. In Brooklyn, he played in a covered court with a timber floor, without previous experience of such conditions, and a trick ball, introduced for the contest, left the Irishman on the wrong side at the end of the rubber. And the tragedy of it all was that the following day he could have beaten him to a frazzle—and the more sporting members of the American people were not slow to admit this fact.

After the great Bowles himself, John Joe Airey was one of the most popular of the players regularly appearing in the old Rutland Street Court, a popularity he re-

tained all through life, as can be judged from an obituary notice which appeared in this paper on the occasion of his much lamented death, which read:

"Few amongst us had won so affectionate a place in the hearts of his friends and acquaintances as John Joe Airey. The possessor of a truly fascinating disposition, incapable of a harsh thought of his fellowman, a lion-hearted sportsman and exemplary Catholic, it would be difficult to find his equal.

"He was a most pleasing companion, who could talk interestingly of outstanding events in the realms of amateur sport and time spent in his company as he reminisced on the feats of athletes during the past forty years passed all too quickly. The hard word was never uttered by him which, perhaps, could account for the general summing up of his character by his acquaintances: 'John Joe is a grand fellow.'"

## AN ARDENT REPUBLICAN

Since 1914 he was an ardent Republican, never wavering in his allegiance, but one of his grandest traits was his readiness at all times to give credit to those who held other views as being honest and conscientious in doing so. His one desire in recent years was, to quote his own words, "to see the old crowd once more united."

He was the survivor of a drowning tragedy at Plassy in 1931, when three other men were lost after a boat in which they were rowing was dashed against the bridge and overturned. Mr. Airey, although the only non-swimmer, was saved by clinging to the upturned boat.

In his young days he was a capable exponent of the game of handball, meeting and often defeating outstanding players from many parts of Ireland. The late John Joe Bowles, perhaps the best handballer the country ever saw, had a very high opinion of him, and on many occasions selected him as his partner for important national championship contests.

For a long time to come John Joe Airey's name will receive honourable and affectionate mention when the happenings of far off days are recalled, whether as a sincere and single minded patriot or an exponent of handball and much sought companion.

26<sup>th</sup> November 1955