

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 8)—John Blackburne of Galbally

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THE historic village of Galbally, nestling at the foot of the Galtees, has taken no small part in keeping Limerick and Ireland's name to the forefront of the Athletic world. It has produced men whose feats will long be remembered and who could claim equality with the cream of the athletes of the different nations.

Sons of "Hoary Galteemore" whose names have become synonymous with athletic prowess, include the subject of my article this week—John Blackburne, one of the best all-round athletes of his day and champion pole jumper of Ireland; Jim Fahey, holder of the world's record for the "three jumps," and who was also a top notcher at the hop, step and jump, and the long jump, being consistent at 49 feet at the former; and Jim Ryan, another well known performer who specialised in the high jump, and was one of the best known stylists of his time.

John Blackburne saw light of day in that valley famed in song and story, the Glen of Aherlow, a region that has produced some amazing athletes, any of whose performances we cannot find recorded but were "handed" down by "word of mouth."

It is rather a remarkable thing that most of our best jumpers have come from the "Golden Vein" district. And this applies also to our foremost pole vaulters. But it is sad to relate that, with the decline of those fine old characteristic events here, they have practically disappeared from our native arenas.

### MASTERY IN THE POLE JUMP.

It was as a pole jumper that John Blackburne sought the competitive arena, and it was not long before his proficiency and mastery were recognised. The popularity of this event had begun to decline, even in Munster. Year by year, the programmes on which it appeared became fewer and fewer, and it was soon eliminated even from the championship schedule. What a real pity that this grand event was allowed fall into remorseless oblivion.

In this regard it is consoling to note a later revival and the continued connection through Bobbie Nolan, T. P. Murphy and P. A. O'Farrell, of Limerick, and P. Anglim, of Clonmel, with the trail blazed in the early years by men of the type of our present subject.

The last occasion I met John Blackburne was on the eve of the 1940 All-Ireland hurling final, in which Limerick triumphed over Kilkenny, the last Blue Riband to come to Shannonside.

Wearing a huge green and white rosette, John, who was then 74, spent some time with me, during which we discussed all the great athletes of his day, most of whom John knew intimately. I found it difficult to get him talking on his own deeds in the arena, but when I explained that I was trying to record the doings of all the prominent Limerick athletes, in the hope of interesting another gener-

ation in the grand cult of athletics, he readily agreed and promised every support to any effort to keep the lamp of Gaelic culture and athletics at an incandescent heat.

### HIS OWN STORY.

And here is John's story: "In my juvenile days I always had a tendency towards athletics, and I suppose environment had not a little to do with this, because in close proximity to my home in the Glen of Aherlow, there existed a little group of athletes that could vie with the best performers in any other area in Ireland at that period.

"My first appearance in public happened to be at a place called Cappunine, near Cahir. Not far distant, indeed, but still it necessitated the securing of a suitable conveyance to reach it. Means of transport were rather limited in those days; bicycles were even a novelty then. However, the good old horse, for which our country was always noted, fetched me there in good time.

"This was my first essay at the pole jump, and amongst my opponents I found Alec Noonan and Owen O'Neill, both of Glen fame, and noted performers, but, nevertheless, the raw youth prevailed and scaled the lath at 9 ft. 3 ins.

"As was the custom in those good old days, the budding athlete had always a treat in store for him, and I remember enjoying myself to my heart's content at a dance party, which was given by some friends near Bansha on that evening.

### SECOND OUTING.

"My second outing was at Golden Co. Tipperary, and were it not for the generosity of a local athletic enthusiast placing the services of his faithful mule at my disposal, the probability is that I would not have reached the sports field in time. I might remark here in connection with the mule, that the animal required the most gentle handling, as when offered the slightest insult he could use his hind legs with the very best of his kind.

"I took two events at this venue—the pole and long jumps. I won the former at 10 ft. 4 ins. and the latter at 21 feet.

"These achievements no doubt encouraged me to train more seriously—if I could call it training really in those days, for when I went to the U.S.A. in later years, I found our methods of developing top notch athletes was indeed, to say the most of it, rather primitive as far as the dear old isle was concerned.

"From this forward I appeared at nearly all the sports meetings of

the South, and scarcely ever returned empty handed.

### MET BEST MEN OF HIS DAY.

"I met and competed against the best men of my day, and I do not wish to boast, but I could always hold my own and the honour of the Glen against all comers at most events in an ordinary sports meeting.

"Possibly my stature militated against my making of records, as my height was never greater than 5 ft. 5½ ins., and I was at one time persuaded by my admirers to offer a challenge to any opponent of the same height and weight, to an all-round contest in any part of the world.

"As time rolled on, and great men had come and gone, the call of contest and conquest always appealed to me in the realms of decent, honest sport, and I longed to be in the fray, but I must admit there was one occasion in my career when I felt happier than ever before, and that was when I was placed second to the great J. M. Ryan on the day he made the world's record breaking high jump, at Tipperary in 1896. On that day also I won the pole jump at 11 feet.

### WENT TO AMERICA.

"Subsequently I went to America and although engaged on strenuous work at the docks, mainly on grain boats, I never relinquished my interest in athletics, and I appeared on many occasions at the old fabled New York Celtic Park and Buffalo, where I won many prizes.

"My final ambition was to return to my native country, settle down and spend my retirement in the rural surroundings which I always so dearly longed for.

"In this God was kind to me. I worked for half a dozen years in America. I brought a bit of money there and added to it, and shortly after my return I was wedded to Elizabeth Fahey, sister of James J. Fahey, of Chicago, world's record holder for the three standing broad jumps. We were blessed with one son and many daughters, two of whom are nuns, and a few nursing.

"I am now 74 years, and as Providence bestowed on me good health, I was not afraid of hard work, and I may venture to say if the present day youth were not so 'pandy' fed and coddled as they are now, Ireland would be nearer to regain its fair name in the athletic arenas of the world."

That is all John Blackburne told me. In his modesty there is much that he omitted, so let us have a quick run through his career, with mention only of those performances not already noted.

### OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENTS.

His outstanding achievement was the securing of three All-Ireland championship titles, all in pole vault, 1892, tying with J. Cahill, Muckalee A.C., Kilkenny, 10 ft. 5 ins., winning in 1893 at 7 ins., and again tying in 1897, at time with M. Ryan at 10ft. 2ins.

Some of his outstanding achievements include a jump of over feet in the pole event at Fern in 1894. At Cobh on August 15 1893, he won his favourite event, 10 ft. 8 ins., beat Denis Carey, Kilfinane in the running hop, step and jump at 46 ft. 1 in., and tied with Barry O'Connor in the high jump at 5 ft. 9 ins. The following day, at Mallow, he won the pole jump at 10 ft. 5 ins., tied for the high jump, from scratch, with T. E. Woods of Enniskeen, who won the All-Round Championship Ireland in 1895 at 5 ft. 10 ins., and was second to Dan Shanahan in the running hop, step and jump, 45 feet, the Kilfinane man covering 47 feet that day.

### "INVASION" OF LONDON.

John Blackburne was a member of the "Invasion" Team to London in May, 1896, and won the pole jump there at 10 ft. 7 ins., tied in the high and long jumps (off trig board) with Tom Woods, the former at 5 ft. 10 ins., and the latter at 21 ft. 1 in. Blackburne's best performance in the long jump (off trig board) was 22 ft. 1½ in. at Bansha in August, 1896. On the occasion Michael Ryan of Rockwell, famous in international football; J. J. Flanagan of Kilbreed Kilmallock, prominent as a sprinter, long jumper, and all-round before specialising in the 16 lb hammer, where he made his worldwide fame, and another great jumper in J. J. Chandler, were among the competitors.

In 1898 the Galbally man, competing at Celtic Park, New York in a special competition between the Pastimes Club, New York, which he was a member, and the Star Athletic Club, Brooklyn, won the pole jump at 10 ft. 5 ins.

On his return to Ireland in 1900 John was seen in action at the Mardyke, Cork, where he tied a 10 feet with J. Murphy, of Mallow and D. Barry, of Cork, for the Pole Jump Championship of Munster.

At the end of his active athletic career, John Blackburne retired to spend many memory-packed years in the happy, healthy rural life of his native district, behind an around the storied hills and valley still redolent of great men and deeds in Ireland's athletic history.

No. 9—Bob Coll of Dromin.