

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 64)—J. J. BOWLES of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

FOR carefree health and enjoyment it is hard to beat an Irish ball alley with a few kindred souls for company, a ball or two and the sun shining. I have cherished memories of some great days in Irish handball, and associated with them must ever be sweet recollections of a dear departed friend—one of the grandest of Ireland's champion ball players—the late J. J. Bowles.

'Tis a long call from John Lawlor, the Dublin jarvey and witty raconteur, world's champion handballer of 1885, just following the birth of the G.A.A. to our present day stalwarts, and there is a long gallery of great Irish players between, from the ambidextrous men of the eighties who tossed the old solid sheep-skin ball from a walling on the earthen floor to the bouncing rubber ball and roofed-in four-walled palaces of today, from Talbot's Inch to San Francisco.

Like most other ball games, handball oldest of all, has changed exceedingly. Matches for heavy wagers were common in Ireland in the early days, and there are traditions of exciting rubbers in a score of counties. Irish emigrants took the game with them to America and international interest was roused when Phil Casey built his luxurious covered court in Brooklyn with its back wall of plate glass, its wooden floor and spacious galleries. Phil Casey was a cheerful six-foot Midlander, friend of Adamman Jim Duane, boxer ball player, ward politician, fearless all round sportsman, backer of his flock from pitch and toss to a main of docks.

WHILE JOHN L. SULLIVAN TRAINED.

Between Alderman Dunne and Phil Casey the famous Casey Court at Brooklyn attracted all the high-brows of American sport sixty or more years ago. 'Twas there the great John L. Sullivan himself trained and so effective a medium did handball become that Gentleman Jim Corbett, the highbrow Californian banker, son of the Galvian; Hat Corbett, conqueror of the great "J.L." had to build a court of his own in the days of his adolescence and fashion.

I had the great pleasure of meeting the famous Irish-American handballer, John Lawlor, on two memorable occasions in Dublin. President of the Dublin Cab Owners' Association, member of the Dublin Corporation, Vice-President of the Trades Council, the great John Lawlor was a well-known name.

A five-foot eight man with heavy drooping moustache and bowler hat, he was still alert enough at fifty to jog out for a two-handed game at Ballyman. Sturdy limbs, his trim body told of his abstemious life, and he could dodge and place a ball in the most masterful way. He could continue all day, keeping gallop and court laughing meanwhile with playful jest.

A GREAT HANDBALLER.

John Lawlor was a great handballer. Born in America of Wicklow parents, he was back in Dublin before he could walk and was playing ball in the eighteenth century alley at St. Patrick's before he was fourteen. Dublin held a wealth of handballers then. Lawlor beat them all, went further afield, claimed O'Grady and O'Keefe of Carlow as rivals, had a great pair of rubbers with Davy Browning of Limerick before winning out the Championship of Ireland at Cork in 1887, when Alderman Dunne of Brooklyn was amongst the competitors.

'Twas Dunne arranged the historic match between Lawlor and Casey—Cork and Brooklyn, a real marathon test of twenty-one games for 400 and the Championship of the World. Lawlor won seven of the ten games in Cork. Brooklyn was aflame and galleries packed to suffocation for the final stage. Lawlor had never played on a wooden floor before, and Casey won eight games of the reel with his faster ball. The return challenge by the Dubliner was not responded to by Casey, and Lawlor claimed the World's Championship. He was forty years old when beaten by another grand handballer, James Fitzgerald of Tralee.

A BRIGHT STAR.

Around the period of the G.A.A. revival of the eighties, a bright handball star appeared in the person of a sixteen year old clerical student—Thomas Jones of Tralee—who had a brilliant pair of hands and untarnish accuracy. Tom Jones was considered by those competent to judge as the greatest ball player of all time. His speed and stamina were phenomenal. He took the Irish Championship from Delaney of Carlow whilst still a boy. He beat O'Shea of Carrick-on-Suir, Casik played Fitzgerald, Twohill, O'Leary, Tobin and Browning and was never beaten. A symmetrically built athletic youth of 5ft. 7ins., he could reach impossible heights and was a law unto himself as far as handball was concerned. I had the great honour of meeting Tom on a number of occasions and I treasure some beautiful letters which he wrote me.

Cork City and County produced a brilliant handball group about the latter part of the century—Tim Twohill, a muscular all-rounder from Kan-

tick athlete, footballer, glorious handballer who won the Championship after Fitzgerald had gone; Oliver Drew of Cork City, a speed merchant with a boyish face; Billie O'Herlihy, a delightful ball player to watch, and Joseph O'Leary, the cast-iron man of Fermoy.

JOHN JOSEPH BOWLES.

The present century was still young when a new Irish handball star rose above the horizon. By the Shannon he appeared—John Joseph Bowles, a tall, slender boy with fingers like a violinist and limbs like a ballet-dancer. He won his first tournament. His right and left arms seemed to cover every corner of the

court. Ease and grace he was personified. He beat Tim Twohill in the Cork tournament and swamped O'Brien in the final. He met all and stindry for large and small trophies, becoming undisputed champion of Ireland when he ran out a pointless rubber against Billie O'Herlihy of Cork.

First mention of J. J. Bowles as a ball player of merit is found in 1897 when, partnered by Mick Heffernan, he lost to James Fitzgerald and E. Sheehy of Tralee in a double-handed contest for the Irish Championship. "J.J." was but a youth then, and for the ensuing thirty years, to 1926, when, partnered by Stephen Gleeson of Fedamore, he won his last All-Ireland title after a great struggle with Jim Lucas and Andy Dalton of Kilkenny, the name of Bowles was enough to draw to any court in which he played every true lover of the game.

WHAT "CARBERY" WROTE.

Perhaps the naggiest description that appeared of him was from the pen of "Carbery" written somewhere about 1916. It read: "He stands somewhere around five feet ten inches in his clothes and does not look the 12st. 10lbs. he weighs when fit and well. His shoulders are square, wide and loosely set. His waist is small like the waist of all athletes, but his hips are powerful and his lower limbs are firm, small, clean and useful looking. I took pains to examine his hands, the hands which have made him, perhaps, the finest exponent of the game of handball in the world at the moment. These hands are surprisingly refined, nothing like what I expected to see. The fingers are long, straight and rather effeminate looking, the fingers of a violinist a student of such matters would pro-



THE LATE J. J. BOWLES.

nounce them. His face is bronzed and carries an expression of quiet confidence which one finds in the face of all successful men. His sleek hair, parted in the centre, lies smoothly back and gives the athlete a well-groomed appearance.

Returning to his prowess with the alley cracker, space only permits reference to his many big matches that go down in handball history as milestones in the progress of the game. Some day I hope to return to the subject and deal more fully with the incidents that for ever keep green in memory some of the ties mentioned hereunder, besides rendering due tribute to the many splendid and lovable figures who graced the old Rutland Street court in days that cannot come again—and more—the pity!

MATCH AT FEDAMORE.

One of his first away from home matches was at Fedamore, where he played the late T. O'Brien, solicitor. To get to the venue, "J.J." travelled "on an ass and cart," and he often related how they had "a break down" and were forced to complete the journey on foot. I don't know if he won the game—Johnny never spoke of such things—but it matters little now, anyway.

However, the next important contest recorded following the early defeat of 1897, tells of an occasion

when, partnered by J. McCarthy, he beat E. Quilly and P. Sheehy in Quilly's Ballcourt, Thomondgate, on a late November day of 1900.

With Mick Heffernan again as partner, he participated in the All-Ireland Double-Handed Championship the following year, and reached the final, where he was opposed by Tim Twohill (Kanturk) and Andy Roche of Fermoy, at Cahinane date, September 22nd. With the scores level, the game was abandoned because of rain, and was never concluded.

ALL-IRELAND SINGLES FINAL.

In 1902, in the All-Ireland Singles Championship final, Bowles beat Willie O'Herlihy of Cork by six games to two, at Cork, having previously disposed of T. Neary (Waterford), Michael Dinneen (Ballingarry) and D. Roche (Fermoy).

In 1903 O'Herlihy reversed the verdict in a close rubber by the narrow amount of four aces. The Limerickman made a remarkable recovery when O'Herlihy had all but won, and was unlucky to then over-reach his arm, a misfortune which probably cost him the title.

In 1905 Bowles beat E. Drew of Cork, 4 games to 2, and J. O'Brien of Fermoy, 4 games to nil, to win out in the National Monument Tournament.

In the All-Ireland Championship semi-final at Cork on September 2nd, Bowles beat Tim Twohill of

Kanturk, 4 games to 1, afterwards defeating J. O'Brien (Fermoy) by the same score in the final.

On June 3rd, 1906, Bowles beat O'Herlihy 4 games to nil, and on July 29th he beat Twohill 4 games to 2 in the Kanturk Tournament. In the All-Ireland Championship he was likewise successful, defeating Twohill in the semi-final and P. Carroll for the title.

CHALLENGE GAME FOR SIDE BETS.

The same year the Limerick man beat O'Herlihy of Cork five games to nil. This was a challenge game for side bets, Bowles staking £20 to O'Herlihy's £10.

Owing to the Cork Tournament being abandoned, there was little handball played until 1908, when a visit from Ald. J. Dunne of Brooklyn revived the pastime. He travelled to Limerick for the special purpose of arranging a match between Bowles and his son, James Dunne, for the World's Championship and £2000 purse. The match was made, but Dunne was unable to make the journey, and the Americans sent Jimmy Kelly instead. The first part of the rubber was played in the Rutland Street Ballcourt on July 11th, 1909, and in which Kelly secured five of the games played to Bowles's two.

TRIP TO AMERICA.

Bowles left for America in August, where he had to play in a strange court, which was a covered one—a trying ordeal on a man used to playing in the open. According to the American Press, the Irishman put up a desperate defence in the first game, one time leading by seven aces to three and later by eighteen to fifteen. Kelly then got going like a racehorse, and ran off the six aces to win. The American's exhibition in the second and third games was the prettiest ever witnessed. His tossing was so vicious and accurate that Bowles never had a chance.

In natural physique Kelly was the larger and better man. His hitting, too, was harder than Bowles, his left hand doing terrible execution in low play. Bowles was the better all-round handballer, and took balls in places where Kelly failed miserably.

CLAUSE THAT HAMPERED BOWLES.

It is difficult to say how the match would have gone but for the presence of a clause in the agreement between the players, stipulating that all serving was to be in the left-hand court exclusively. This, naturally, gave Kelly, who was a left-hand player, a great advantage over Bowles. With a world title at stake, it is difficult to find justification for such a clause, but Bowles was a sportsman to his finger tips and was never known to exploit an advantage over an opponent.

In October, 1910, Bowles was defeated in surprising fashion by P. Coyne of Carlow (11 games to 10) for the Irish title, which he, however, regained on August 18th, 1912, defeating Coyne 11 games to 1. In 1911, "J.J." beat M. Franklin of Cahir 9 games to nil, and his old rival, Billie O'Herlihy, 5 games to nil.

On November 30th, 1912, the Limerick star beat P. Lyons (Dublin) in a home and away rubber, 10 games to 3, repeating the success four years afterwards by eight games to two. The latter rubber was for £50 aside.

PERIOD OF BIG STAKE MONEY.

This was the period of big stake money, and in 1918 Bowles beat Jim Hunt of Sligo by eight games to one in a home and away rubber at Cork and Limerick for £50 aside.

Two years later, "J.J." surrendered his crown to Morgan Pembroke of Dublin by eight games to

four, with a side stake of £100 each. The first half of that rubber was played in Rutland Street Court under extraordinary conditions. It was a period of great political tension in Limerick, and the packed gallery had to keep a stony silence. At every ace they were threatened with Black and Tan raids, but the scouts did their work well, and everything passed off without incident. The rubber was finished in Dublin, and Pembroke outclassed his ageing rival at Ballymun's then famous court.

Following this, Bowles retired from active competition, but on the formation of the G.A.A. Handball Organisation in 1924, the great ball-player threw in his lot with the new Association, and returned to active participation in an effort to revive enthusiasm.

REMARKABLE INTEREST IN HIS RE-APPEARANCE.

His re-appearance in the courts aroused remarkable interest, and crowds flocked everywhere to see him play. He took part in contests all over Munster, and I can say, without fear of contradiction that the part he played in the revival movement will never be properly estimated.

To his great credit be it said that he accepted invitations to appear at venues everywhere he was asked, and I know that he played in places where players of far less repute refused.

As then Secretary of the Munster Handball Council, I was very closely associated with him during that period, and I can sincerely say that no player in the province responded so readily or so enthusiastically to any call on their services as the great "J.J." did. He was playing almost every Sunday, right through the 1925 and 1926 seasons, and found time even to fit in a few evening matches at mid-week, in order to help out clubs that were unable to secure Sunday fixtures.

J. J. Bowles won the first great Senior Singles Championship played in Limerick under G.A.A. laws, beating some great players, including Jackie Ryan, Jimmy Kirby and Tommie Ford on the road to the final, in which he triumphed over Stephen Gleeson of Fedamore after a thrill-packed game, played at Ballingarry.

In the Munster tests, "J.J." worked his way to the decider, and the gallery of the old Market Place Court in Cork was packed to suffocation when the popular hero of so many great games of the past lined out against Gus Moriarty of Mallow for the Southern Crown. Bowles won the first two games, but youth then asserted itself, and Moriarty captured the remaining ones to lead four to two on the day's play.

SECOND PORTION OF RUBBER.

The second portion of the rubber was played at Kiltinane the following Sunday, where the greatest crowd ever to see a handball game in the South were thrilled by one of the most exciting deciders ever witnessed in any ballcourt.

Bowles needed five games to win, whilst Moriarty was only short three for the rubber. The Limerick man, playing in magnificent form, soon removed any doubts as to his fitness and cut the leeway by winning the first game 21-4. The second went also to the ex-Champion, who won a real thriller 21-20. Now the games were level—four all.

Bowles took the lead when he won the next game 21-11. Following a twenty minutes break, Moriarty re-appeared very much refreshed, and a terrific tussle was witnessed, the players being level at 5, 6, 8, 12 and 14, before the Cork man went away to win 21-15, leaving them level again at five

games all.

The fifth game was a fiercely fought one, and was neck and neck until six was reached, when Limerick pulled out to win in typical fashion.

EXCITEMENT AT FEVER PITCH.

Excitement was at fever pitch as Bowles required a game to win, and the crowd wondered could he stay the pace or would youthful stamina beat him. It was a wonderful last game, ace for ace most of the way, and although Bowles won, it took thirteen innings before he struck the historic last ace that set the heather ablaze and the great crowd wild with delight, for even the big Cork contingent present could not fail to be thrilled by the wonderful display of the old veteran, who recaptured all the glory of twenty-five years in that moment of greatest triumph.

The close nature of the contest can be judged from the fact that out of 386 aces only six separated them at the end: Bowles, 196; Moriarty, 190. Both players were carried shoulder high from the alley, and not since the palmy days of its great All-Ireland Hurling triumph did the town of Kiltinane witness anything like the excitement and enthusiasm of that memorable evening, and Bowles said later than Moriarty was the best loser he had met in his thirty years handball experience.

FIGHT FOR ALL-IRELAND CROWN.

Bowles was later beaten by W. Aldridge, after a splendid fight for the All-Ireland crown, and so well did the Limerick man perform that the Central Handball Council had a special gold medal struck in appreciation.

It was my privilege later to present this to him, along with his Munster Championship medal, at a great handball social held in his own home, where the hospitality was in accordance with the other fine qualities of the great ball-player.

The following year J. J. Bowles, partnered by S. J. Gleeson of Fedamore, beat the Cork and Tipperary champions to secure Munster honours, and in a great final took the first All-Ireland Doubles title promoted by the G.A.A.

Limerick led Kilkenny four games to two at the Rutland Street Court but Kilkenny responded magnificently when the pair met in the second portion of the rubber at Clough covered court in Co. Kilkenny.

The home lads brought the score to four all. Early in the ninth game Limerick form manifested itself and they won 21-12. Kilkenny made it five all by winning number ten, but Bowles and Gleeson were hitting brilliant form and left no doubts in the minds of those present as to their ability. The Shannonsiders won the eleventh and twelfth games in thrilling fashion, and the big Limerick crowd present responded in enthusiastic manner, the veteran pair being carried from the court in triumph to receive congratulations from all sides on their wonderful achievement.

CAREER PACKED FULL OF GLORY.

Thus ended in glory that late October day a handball career that spanned a full thirty years packed full of glory. I have already trespassing too much on the kindness of a generous editor without doing anything like full justice to the remarkable performances of a great sportsman, one of nature's gentlemen, and a friend whose memory will ever be cherished by those lucky enough to have known him.

No. 65—John O'Connell of South Liberties.