

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 20)—John J. Bresnihan of Castletown Conyers

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

JOHN J. BRESNIHAN came from a stock with whom manly pastimes and performances were always congenial. A vigorous strain of native physique came to him through both parents, the athletic tradition was in his being, and soon manifested itself in his frame and pursuits.

Manly vigour and native tradition seem indigenous to the district of his nativity, and the gift of physical vitality is inherent with its people. It is the misfortune in Ireland now that a boy may grow to youth and manhood with the qualities of a Davin, and never discover his gifts of limb and lung. The disappearance of old customs has brought about the discontinuance of those rural schools where the young learned their first lessons in emulation under the discerning eyes of their elders.

Fortunately for Bresnihan, he escaped the decline of rural sports, and came of a family that held athletes in olden esteem. His father was a notable weight-thrower in his time, and the art and gift found early vent and encouragement in his son. And another generation carried on the proud tradition in more recent times, when J. J.'s son, Dr. P. J. Bresnihan, distinguished himself as a hurler and jumper.

A SUPERLATIVE ALL-ROUND MAN.

We find the subject of our sketch admiring and storing away athletic knowledge at the age of eleven, and see him, seven years later, winning in open competition. Ere long there was not a test he did not essay, and no event in which he was deficient or mediocre. He was, indeed, a superlative all-round man, and it is one of the great pities of Irish athletic administration that no individual contest took place during the period of his versatile activity. In him we had, undoubtedly, a worthy successor to Tom Kiely, whose world triumphs stirred his emulant nature to the pitch.

From 1900 to 1926—more than quarter of a century—John J. Bresnihan flourished and proved by facts and figures, at scores of venues, that he ranked with the elite of track and field. In 1903, at Bandon, he covered 51 ft. 2 ins. in the hop, step and jump, and in 1925, at Limerick, he slung the 56 lbs. a distance of 26 ft. 2 ins. Yet these two events only represent the versatility of J. J. Bresnihan without even hinting at the variety and brilliance of the achievements which lie between.

SHONE AMID GREAT GALAXY OF STARS.

For the purposes of any useful review of an athlete's achievements we must know the epoch of his activity and the calibre of the men he met. There have been men of mediocre ability with an array of prizes no champion could display. In Bresnihan's time the southern arena literally sparked

with athletic stars, whose names illuminate the story of Irish athletics during the first decade of the new century. His prestige gains immensely from the prowess of those against whom he was constantly pitted. Proficiency under such circumstances is not to be measured by success or failure. The true criterion is his standard of achievement in relation to the accomplishments of those opposed to him.

The status of native athletics was never higher than during this period. Kiely, by his victories in 1904 and 1906, had confounded all who might speculate upon the athletic decline of the Celt at home. Sheridan had vindicated the vitality of our race abroad.

The summary of Bresnihan's performances shows that he had in him a third champion who could have maintained our pre-eminence against the rest of the world. A glance at that summary will demonstrate his versatility and merit.

NEAR RECORD IN SEVERAL EVENTS.

He approached record in several events; he could sprint with success in first class company, and all his jumps came naturally to him. In the running hop, step and jump he surpassed the Irish record distance more than once; but, through a malignant fate he was denied a record about which there can be no judicial doubt. We have never heard any acceptable reasons why Bresnihan's Bandon figure was not passed. It was more authoritatively vouched than some which adorn the official list. Like all our home keeping athletes, Bresnihan's "training" was practically nil. He was a natural athlete, and so remained by means of a natural healthy life. He stood just half an inch short of six feet and weighed 190 lbs. in competitive form during his later weight throwing years.

The decline of athletics in Munster limited his opportunities, and he had reason to lament the shrinkage of weight events in the South. He captured all the weight events at a Munster championship in Dungarvan, and was second to his fellow County man, O'Grady, in a kind of all-round competition confined to the "metal casting" business.

WOULD HAVE DONE WONDERS HAD HE SPECIALISED.

Writing on the championships of 1915, the late Frank Dinneen said of him: "I was glad to see Bresnihan back again in togs and in good form. He was a great all-

round man, and had he specialised he would have done wonders. It is a long time ago since I saw him competing at Jones's Road at a championship meeting and I thought then, and I still think, that he was the second best man in Ireland at any time for all round athletics." Further on he wrote: "If either of the two big men—O'Grady and McDonald—only knew as much about weight-throwing as John J. Bresnihan, they would smash all the records in the world between them." Some tribute as the Yankees would say, from such an authority.

Now for some of his principal achievements. The Irish championships he secured were:—Running long jump (under G.A.A. rules), 1906, 23 ft. 7½ ins.; running hop, step and jump (under G.A.A. rules), 1904, 49 ft. 8½ ins.; 1905, 48 ft. 11 ins., 1906, 48 ft. 3 ins. Three jumps (under G.A.A. rules), 1903, 32 ft. 11 ins.

OTHER PERFORMANCES.

Other typical performances were: 1900 (at the age of eighteen), high jump, 5 ft. 5 ins.; hop, step and jump (at Kilmallock), 42 ft. 9 ins., 1903 (whilst teaching at Bray), Leinster championships, long jump, 21 ft. 6½ ins.; hop, step and jump, 46 ft. 10½ ins.; three standing jumps, 32 ft. 11 ins., 1904; Long jump (at Listowel), 22 ft. 7½ ins.; hop, step and jump championship (at Jones's Road), 49 ft. 8½ ins., 1905; hop, step and jump championship, 48 ft. 11 ins.; long jump, 22 ft. 3 ins., second to D. M. Horgan in 28 lbs.; high jump, 5ft. 10ins.; slinging 56 lbs. without follow, 23ft. 5ins.; shot, 40ft. 2ins. (at Cork); high jump, 5ft. 11ins.; putting 28 lbs. 32ft. 9ins.; hop, step and jump, 48ft. 11 ins. (at Limerick). In this year he won sixty-one prizes, including thirty-three firsts, both on track and field, against the best competitors in a banner season of Irish athletics.

RECORD THAT WAS NOT SANCTIONED.

On August 26th, 1906, J. J. Bresnihan covered 51 ft. 2ins. at Bandon in the hop, step and jump, beating the existing record by four inches. The ground was certified by the local clerk of works, and examined by Mr. Beckett, of Cork, but a record was never sanctioned. He also covered 50 ft. 1 in. at Blarney and Kilmallock. At Cork, he won the hop, step and jump championship at 48 ft. 3 ins., and the long jump championship at 23 ft. 7½ ins. At Coachford, he won the high and broad jumps, the 100 yards flat and the 120 yards hurdles. A few of his 1908 achieve-

ments were: slinging 56 lbs. without follow (at Kilmallock) 25 ft. 9 ins.; slinging 56 lbs. with follow (at Limerick), 28 ft. 3 ins.

Bresnihan was hungering for a test of his all-round ability, and had his profession permitted he would have entered for the great annual contest in America. Circumstances were adverse, and the hope of a trial at home partly restrained him. It did not come, and then a strain due to overwork practically debarred him from the more active events. However, his athletic zest was unappeased, and he thenceforward devoted himself to the weights.

SOME MORE TYPICAL PERFORMANCES.

Before turning away from his achievements we pick some more typical performances:—1915, at championships, 56 lbs. (no follow), 25 ft. 10½ ins.; shot, 38 ft. 11½ ins.; 28 lbs., 32 ft. 3½ ins.; at Tralee, slinging 56 lbs. over bar, 12 ft. 6 ins.; at Athea, 16 lb. shot, 42 ft.; at Listowel, putting 28 lbs., 34 ft. 3 ins.; at Newcastle West, putting 56 lbs. 23 ft.; at Dungarvan, hammer, 119 ft.; 56 lbs., with follow, 27 ft. 6½ ins.; At Adare, striking hurling ball 90 yards; at Foynes, football place kick, 80 yards; standing hop, step and jump, 30 ft. 9 ins.

1919—In Munster Championships, won all weight events, putting 28 lbs., slinging 56 lbs. and hammer.

1924—Won Munster Championship in slinging 56 lbs.

1925 — At Limerick, slinging 56 lbs., 26 ft. 2 ins.

1926 — Won slinging 56 lbs. at Limerick, in Inter-County Contest v. Tipperary.

EXEMPLARY TYPE OF SPORTSMAN.

Although Bresnihan's feats scintillate in the chronicles of Irish athletics all through the first quarter of the century, his performances and capabilities are too little known. In his student days he was playing Gaelic football and hurling with St. Patrick's Training College teams, and later in Bray with the local Emmets. He was an exemplary type of sportsman, and always paid the tribute of zealous and intelligent devotion to the spirit that filled the Temple of Jupiter at Olympus with the statues, pedestals, and trophies of untarnished effort.

The summary, brief as it is, of his exploits, vindicates any estimate of his powers, especially when put side by side with those of other men. He rarely travelled far, and the big majority of his successes were gained in his native Munster. Castletownconyers, his native place, incorporates a district that will ever be associated with the deeds of grand athletes like the Leahy brothers, and also, when all men get their due, none less significantly with the name of John J. Bresnihan.

PRINTING — When about to order Printing of any kind ask at the "Limerick Leader" Office for Quotations "I will pay you to do so."