

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 99-DAVY BROWNING of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE recent All-Ireland victory of the Limerick handball pair, P. Hackett and J. Moynihan, has focussed attention on this great game, which is, unfortunately, the cinderella of our national pastimes. Lacking the spotlight of publicity, it is only when something like an All-Ireland success comes along that we sit up and take notice—and then commence asking questions.

I have had several of the latter since the Croke Park handball success of a few weeks ago, and many have been asking when Limerick hit the All-Ireland headlines previously in this code. Looking back over the records, I find that we only won one All-Ireland title since regular championships were organised under G.A.A. control just thirty years ago. That was in 1926, when the great John Joe Bowles, partnered by another grand player and Gael, Stephen J. Gleeson, of Fedamore, won the senior handball doubles Championship of Ireland. They met J. Lucas and P. Dalton, of Kilkenny, in the final. The first half of the rubber was played at Limerick City Court on October 31st, 1926, when the home pair gained a four games to one lead on the scores: 21-19, 17-21, 21-14, 21-3, 11-21, 21-9. In the final portion, decided at Clough Court, Co. Kilkenny, a fortnight later, the Limerick men won 5-21, 9-21, 21-12, 17-21, 21-17, 21-12.

IN THE FINAL AGAIN.

Limerick were in the final again the following year but on this occasion our representatives, Tommy Forde and Danny Kelly, were beaten by the great Garda pair, Tom Soye and Terry O'Reilly. The first half of this rubber, played at Ballingarry on October 9th, 1927, resulted: 21-14, 10-21, 21-19, 20-21, 21-20, 21-3 in the Dublinmen's favour. At the Depot Alley, Phoenix Park, Dublin, on October 23rd, Limerick made a great bid for the laurels, Forde and Kelly winning the first three games 21-14, 21-17, 21-20. Forde met with an accident at this stage and when play was resumed after a short adjournment, the Dublin men ran out the three games necessary to take the honours, 21-2, 21-14, 21-12.

J. J. Bowles also contested the 1925 All-Ireland final in senior singles handball, but was beaten by W. Aldridge, of Athy. The first half of this rubber was played at Limerick City and the final portion at Clough—a splendid covered court that we hear very little about nowadays.

It is interesting to note in connection with all the discussion recently on the distinction Christy Ring secured in being the only man with eight senior All-Ireland medals in either hurling or football, that several handballers can beat that figure with ease, and J. J. Gilmartin, of Kilkenny, is a way ahead of all in this regard with thirteen senior medals for singles play alone and possibly even more than that number for the doubles.

THE GAME IS OF CELTIC ORIGIN.

The game of handball is undoubtedly of Celtic origin, and the proof of the assertion rests with the fact that wherever this nomadic race has set foot, only there will be found traces of the pastime. The earliest authentic mention of handball, according to the annals of Ireland, occur in the year 3370 A.M. or 1879 years prior to the Christian Era. This was in connection with the Tailteann Games, inaugurated by Erc, the last king of the Firbolgs, in honour of his daughter-in-law, Tailte.

As a healthful and exhilarating exercise there is no game extant more to be recommended for all-round physical development than handball. It calls into play every muscle in the body; it imparts quickness and precision to the eye, while the running and struggling after the little flying sphere is of the greatest good to the respiratory organs. In short, there is no class of athlete or even ordinary individual that would not be benefited by a little indulgence in this

invigorating pastime.

OF EXCEPTIONAL PROWESS.

About the middle of the last century the number of handball players in Ireland was something enormous. Of course, there were poor players and experts, but out of the long array the name of William Baggs stands exceptionally prominent. In fact, he might be called the father of the modern game. It was he who invented all the dodging tricks, curved balls, low drives and screw tosses known to the experts of to-day. Baggs was a native of Tipperary and was in his prime in the early 'fifties.' It was customary in those days that every village tavern, half way public house, and cross roads shebeen had a ball court attached, and it was at such places Baggs spent most of his time. He travelled all over the country, met and defeated all comers, and finally was regarded as invincible. His great delight was to meet a regimental officer who fancied himself as a player; then not only would Baggs administer the "dandy" a stinging defeat, but relieve him of all the available cash in his possession. On one occasion getting into a heated altercation with an officer, he offered to play the man of war without using his hands. The match came off then and there, and to the astonishment of the onlookers with his hands tied, Baggs put up every ball with the soles of his feet.

DAVY BROWNING OF LIMERICK.

After the passing of Baggs the next great player was Davy Browning of Limerick, probably one of the strangest characters Ireland ever produced. His adventures and escapades would fill a nice sized volume. Not only was he a champion handball player, but he was a first-class sprinter, jumper, weight-thrower, boxer, vaulter, fencer, swimmer, skater, billiardist and horseman. His adventures during his handball career—which lasted for fifteen years—were many and exciting. One is recorded as having a tragic ending. Being on a visit to Kilkee, which possessed two ball courts in those days, and was a favourite resort of his (in fact his brother, Thomas, lived there for many years afterwards) he received a challenge from a local player and in the course of the game which ensued, his opponent collapsed and suddenly expired.

Browning played John Lawlor in Dublin, in 1884, for the Irish championship, and the Limerick man won by five games to four. In the following year, however, Browning and Lawlor again met, and after a hard contest, which lasted four and a half hours, Lawlor was declared the winner by eleven games to seven. In the year 1886 a championship tournament was held in Cork, in which J. Dunne of Brooklyn, Davy Browning, and several prominent Irish players competed. Lawlor won this competition, and by doing so was declared the undisputed champion of Ireland.

STUDIED FOR MEDICINE.

Born in Limerick city, in the year 1859, Davy Browning received his early education at the Model Schools, later passing to Dublin University, where he studied for medicine. At an early age he came into prominence as an all-round athlete of very fine physique, and, although sports meetings were few and far between in the years prior to the founding of the G.A.A., he succeeded in collecting a big number of prizes, in jumping, walking, at sprinting, and over long distances up to the mile flat. In later years he had many successes with the weights, but much of his doings went unrecorded, and any reports that did appear are not now available, as existing material rarely goes back further than the mid-'eighties, when the influence of the Gaelic revival put athletics on a new plane, aroused great enthusiasm, and gained the spotlight of publicity previously absent.

Davy was a member of the old Irish Championship Athletic Club almost from its inception. This club organised meetings every year from 1873 to 1884 that were

the initial efforts at Irish championships but far short of the popular conception, as competition was largely confined to the colleges, universities and the "upper ten"—a fashionable vogue. No attempt was made to tap the wide rural areas, where the cream of Irish athletic talent lay dormant. A man who had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow was not welcome. Many of them were refused entry to the championships held under the auspices of the exclusive I.C.A. Club. Nevertheless, some great men competed in these championships, including Pat Davin, R. C. Millar, J. D. O'Gilvey; the astonishing Clareman, Thomas M. Malone; Michael Cusack, who later was instrumental in founding the G.A.A.; John Purcell, Owen Harte, Dave Commins, and John E. Tobin. In such company we find Davy Browning winning the running high jump (5' 11") and the throwing 16 lb. hammer (84 ft. 8 ins) in the year 1881—a double achievement that tells of his prowess more eloquently than anything else.

HIS OTHER INTERESTS.

Browning also did a bit of boxing, at which he was very successful and he was also very good at football, being a member of the all-Irish team that defeated the English in an international match.

A great swimmer and diver, his high jumps off the cliffs in Kilkee were remarkable, and aroused great interest at a time when a great number indulged in such exercises, with Davy almost the foremost of the bunch in deeds of daring. He also jumped off the high rocks at the Pollock Hole, and specialised in a leap off one particular rock, from which only a select few ever attempted the feat, and locals say that nobody has tried it within the past thirty years or more. Davy used to walk from Limerick to Kilkee always, and did the sixty miles journey in the one day.

The Brownings were an old Limerick family, and Davy often boasted that his great, great grandfather was, in his infancy, looked after by one of the soldiers of Sarsfield who defended the Walls of Limerick against King William.

I have already mentioned that Davy Browning was one of the earliest men to gain general recognition as champion handballer of Ireland. Here also very few records are to be found telling of his prowess in the ancient game, and I am indebted to the late Mr. John Lawlor, one of the greatest ballplayers Ireland ever produced, for the little details I have. I only met John Lawlor once, at one of the early meetings at which the present Irish Amateur Handball Association was launched, and, on that occasion, after paying tribute to John Joe Bowles as being "as good a handballer as Ireland ever produced," the veteran champion told me that he played Browning for the Championship of Ireland at Kingstown, in 1884, a few months before the G.A.A. was established. Browning won the day by five games to four, in a rubber of nine games.

MET FOLLOWING YEAR FOR IRISH TITLE.

The pair met again the following year in a match for the Irish title, with Carlow the venue on this occasion. The rubber was a marathon one—21 games of 15 aces each and Lawlor reversed the verdict of the previous year by 11 games to 7. It was a terrific struggle fought at a gruelling pace. Some idea of its strenuous nature will be got from the fact that it took 4 hours and 35 minutes to decide. In 1886 Lawlor and Browning met again, this time in the old Market Place Ballcourt in Cork, the President of which, Alderman D. Horgan, offered a gold medal and £10 for what was really the first open entry competition for an Irish Handball title. In addition to Lawlor and Browning the other competitors included James Dunne of Brooklyn, U.S.A.; John O'Leary, Middleton; J. Herlihy, Cork; Joseph O'Leary, Fermoy, and Redmond Tobin, Fermoy. Lawlor and Browning met in the opening round but the latter withdrew in the fifth game and the match was awarded to his opponent.

One other great game in which Davy Browning figured was at Limerick in 1886, against the

famous Tom Jones, of Tralee, who captured the Irish title in 1888 and held it until 1895. This match was unfinished owing to rain and there is no record of a re-fixture. Tom Jones's admirers—and they are legion—claim that if his ecclesiastical studies had not interfered with his playing and had he continued with the game, he would have been the greatest handball player that ever entered a court.

TREASURED POSSESSION.

I had the great pleasure of many years close friendship with Father Tom Jones and treasure as one of my dearest possessions his last letter written shortly before he died. In the course of this he referred to the great pleasure he got from one of the last occasions we met, when he was presented with an artistic shield by the G.A.A. Handball Association in memory of his great service to handball all down the years. "Of course I have not deserved this," he wrote, "but it is cheering, now that the sere, the yellow leaf has overpowered me." He concluded: "I wish you and yours the best blessings that life can give and now that I am on the verge of my departure from this wayward world, I beg your prayers. And my last hope is that your Limerick handballers will soon regain the proud place the County, once held at the grand old game."

On this note we leave the great handballers that laid the foundations for later years of glory. Almost all of those who were prominent in the days before and immediately following the establishment of the G.A.A. have passed out of this valley of tears to meet again, I hope, where parting is no more. May God be with them all.