

# Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 37) — Richard J. Casey  
of Martinstown

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

IT is not generally known that the men who re-organised the famous North Tipperary Hurling Club, which later was known through the length and breadth of Ireland as the "Toomevara Greyhounds," was a Limerickman, and the subject of our sketch this week.

Born at Clareen, Kilmallock, in 1832, Richard J. Casey had a colourful career and a life full of national incidents, far too numerous to permit of being recounted in detail in one short article of this nature. All Gaels, however, who would have Ireland Irish will willingly concede generous praise to Dick, as he was familiarly known by his old friends and comrades, on the part he played in keeping the Gaelic spirit what it is — unconquered and unconquerable.

## PLAYED WITH FAMOUS "STAKERS."

At a very early age Dick showed sign of athletic abilities, and as a youth of sixteen he was starring with the renowned "Staker Wallace" Hurling Club, and played a notable part in securing many victories for that great team.

His membership of the "Stakers" helped to sow other seed also, for that Club was founded to perpetuate the national ideals in an unmistakable way, and followed an old tradition best recalled in the words of the late P. J. Rea, who explains it thus:

The young man who at Emlygrennan churchyard took the symbol of Vinegar Hill from the leader of the Eastern division of the county, Padraig Norah, was Patrick Edmond Wallace, who in the course of subsequent events became the "Loyal Staker." The oath of the little community was in a sense whispered, for the walls have ears in troublous times, and the simple but far reaching words "death before dishonour" were passed from man to man, each kissing the haft of a pike as he uttered the significant words. After which the fatal password was given in a whisper, "Malua."

Fancy the grandeur of the men of this great secret society, the Whiteboy Brotherhood, who before they left the burial precincts knelt in devout prayers for the dead. This sacred function being finished with a degree of piety and sorrow worthy of the sleeping tenantry "beneath those rugged elms," the sworn-in members scattered here, there and elsewhere, all by different routes, until the word went round for the next meeting, which event took place at midnight in a sequestered spot near Moorstown, high up the hills.

## PATTERN DAY.

And this little epitome brings us on to August 15th, the pattern day of Ballylanders, where the inhabitants of the entire adjoining parishes gathered in numbers to support the devotion due to the blessed well. After Mass in that ideal old church, made all the more historic by the spirit and patriotism of the congregation, leaders of the Society met in globo at the old building adjacent to Hennessy's farm house, and there the members of the famous Brotherhood renewed their vows, "death before dishonour," this time on an old "blunderbuss," kept purposely furnished for the sacred ceremony.

When the political aspect coupled with the religious sentiments of the people were honestly complied with, the young men of the respective localities—and they were legion—met in friendly rivalry in an old field below the village and near the blessed well for jumping, wrestling, weight-throwing, and generally winding up with a steeplechase—better known by the people in those happy days of the more simple expression, a foot race. Great men peeled off the Sunday garb and got into the cut pants and boneens, and the herculean efforts of such giants are to-day the subject of fireside gossip, the folk lore of the grand old men "who have gone before."

## FELONY TO BE SEEN NEAR BLESSED WELL!

The true spirit of athletic superiority was made all the more manifest by the parishes that produced the ablest and the most popular men. When the "Whiteboys" were eventually annihilated it was felony to be seen near a blessed well, for these wells were looked upon by the Castle authorities as landmarks for organisations against the British occupation. To avert this the wiseheads of the parishes where a holy well was in evidence always managed to have a gathering of the clans for athletic rivalry, and it was then that the family tradition of athletic superiority was fanned into flame, and it was soon recognised that the young men who could do a long jump or a high jump of any decent merit could also wield a hurley, a shillelagh or a flail, and handle a rifle. They were all marked men by the alert eye of the vigilants, and they jumped into speedy notoriety as being the men to be entrusted with the administration of the "oath" in the absence of the poor leaders whose bodies were being consumed by quicklime in the public market squares of Kilfinane and Crossagalla. How faithfully the united henchmen kept their sacred word, the bond of the brotherhood, is now a matter of history—and the tradition that nurtured the Staker Wallace hurlers in those memorable early days.

After half a dozen years useful service with the "Stakers," Dick transferred to another great Club of that time, the renowned Kilfinane Emmets, for whom he also did yeoman work. The Emmets were then at the zenith of their power, and the Kilfinane district then abounded in the athletic talent that I have so often mentioned during the course of these articles.

Business transferred Dick Casey to Tipperary, but that did not curb his Gaelic energy. In 1909 he re-started and organised the famous "Toomevara Greyhounds" Hurling Club, for which he figured as centre or full forward in all their matches for four years, materially helping to secure many prizes won by this great team, the pride of Gaelic Ireland in those days of powerful and glamorous club combinations.

## ALL-ROUND ATHLETIC ABILITY.

Dick, however, did not confine his activities to the clash of the ash. At the age of fourteen he carried off all the jumping events at the local school, a preview of what was to come later, when he held his own with great figures like the Leahys, Creed and J. J. Bresnahan in jumping and against Paddy Ryan in the weights.

Continuing yearly as a popular and well known figure at all the leading athletic meets of the South until he was over thirty-two years of age, Dick Casey won an average of twenty-five to thirty prizes each year, in firsts and seconds, a very respectable total over the long years he flourished.

It would be impossible, and anyway tiresome for the reader, to give the details of his legion successes, and it should suffice to add that his best efforts included 5 ft. 11½ ins. in the high jump, accomplished at Kilmallock Sports; 21 ft. in the long jump; 9 ft. 9 ins. in the pole vault; and twenty-three to twenty-four feet for the 56 lbs. He was regarded as a very stylish performer at pushing the 28 lbs., and could always with ease reach 32 ft., and on occasions exceeded 33 ft.

Twenty-four years all told Dick Casey was connected with hurling and athletics. This long association naturally means valuable memories,

and I am glad to reproduce some of them here, as a fitting conclusion to the story of another great son of Limerick. Here is Dick Casey's story as told by P. J. Rea: **DISTRICT THAT PRODUCED GREAT ATHLETES.**

Away back in the early nineties, that part of Co. Limerick stretching from Ballylanders to Kilmallock, produced more famous athletes than any other part or County in Ireland.

I will just mention a few of the most notable of many who were born within a few miles radius of my native home, and with whom I was associated and contemporary with in their early history.

First to come to my mind's eye was that genial, light-limbed, athletic six-footer, Dan Shanahan, of Ballinanima, Kilfinane, whose hop, step and jump record of 50 ft. 0½ ins. stood the test of time for over a quarter of a century. Dan led the ordinary life of a farmer's son, daily working with spade and shovel in his father's farm. He went in for no specific diet, nor carried out no orthodox system of training preparatory to making his record jump—nor did he travel that Sunday morning the long journey from Ballinanima to Rathkeale by motor or bike? With the assistance of John Flanagan they procured a horse and cart, and with laugh and song they jogged along those rough cobbled roads, conscious and intent only of giving their best in their respective events. But Dan had all the natural attributes of the perfect athlete; and I venture to suggest that if he were subjected to the scientific methods of training we now know, it is more than probable he would add a few more feet to his record jumps. Never of a robust constitution, he died in his early 'forties, but his name will always be remembered in the annals of famous athletes.

## "SEAN OG."

Jim Hanley, "Sean Og," I hold, was the greatest of all hurlers. Seldom or ever he would train like the rest of the team. He was a natural hurler, and his drop pucks were a treat. He never seemed to be in difficulties no matter who was marking him—always the same cool Jim. The last time I saw him was when he was hurling with the London-Irish in Kilmallock. Another Kilfinane hurler, Denis Grimes, was hurling with him the same day. I was told that Jim died in London some years after, and was buried in an unknown grave—a sad ending to a grand hurler, leaving a wife and two children to mourn his loss.

Kilbreehy lies about two miles to the west of Ballinanima and three miles to the east of Kilmallock. Here that famous hammer thrower—John Flanagan—first saw the light of day, and here, too, in the adjacent churchyard, in his own farm, lie his mortal remains. John was a most amiable, kindly disposed man, simple in manner, unostentatious in general, and charitable in word and action. Many a Sunday afternoon I watched him practising at the hammer, in that field by his house, specially devoted to athletics. Here he kindly showed us the technique of weight pushing and jumping, and here also, that "pocket Hercules"—M. J. Creed, of Elton—learned his early tuition. "Mick" was a most charming and interesting personality, bristling with wit and humour, always entertaining, never sarcastic, but dynamic in action.

## REMARKABLE PERFORMANCES.

Standing only 5 ft. 4 ins. he cleared the bar at 6ft. 4 ins. in Celtic Park, New York. This performance, for a man of his stature, has yet to be equalled. He was an all-round un-

tiring sport — jumping, running, hurling, bowling and fishing claimed his attention, and he was proficient to a high degree in each and all. "Mick" and myself were pals from early youth and in our "teens" daily practised our running and jumping in "Casey's Athletic Field" or "Flanagan's" and often like the "dancing pair that simply sought renown by holding out to tire each other down," we continued from one event to another, until our energy was exhausted. Youthful simplicity? "Mick" left us for the great Beyond, all too unexpectedly, all too untimely, and all who knew him mourn his loss, and will fervently pray that the sod may rest lightly on such a noble soul.

No. 38—P. J. Kenna, of Limerick City.