

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 9)—BOB COLL of Dromin

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

"DOWN at Bruree," wrote that great judge of an athlete, the late Frank B. Dinneen:—"You are reminded of one of the best all round men—Bob Coll, of Dromin—the world ever produced. Bob Coll was my ideal as an athlete. I remember as a little lad his great jumping feats at Kilfinane sports. I remember his running that same year at Kilmallock, and so electrified was I with that wonderful man that it was to see him compete I made my first journey to Limerick City. Here he cleaned out the programme, with the exception of a couple of events that were won by T. M. Malone, that all round champion of the seventies and eighties. I have often stated that if there had been a governing body for athletics in Ireland then, that world's records made by Bob Coll would be still standing to his credit."

I could not give a better introduction to the subject of my sketch this week. Bob Coll, as he was familiarly known, was born at Maidstown Castle, Dromin, in the year 1854, and was educated at Weir's College, The Crescent, Limerick.

### FOUNDED DROMIN FOOTBALL CLUB.

In the early seventies he founded the Dromin Football Club, under a code of rules similar to those of the Rugby Union, and later on was one of the first in Limerick County to give his wholehearted support to the Gaelic Athletic Association.

Dromin, claimed to be the only parish in the world dedicated to the Blessed Trinity, boasts a connection with the G.A.A. dating from the foundation year—1884. They played under the earliest Gaelic rules, with a twenty-one aside team, on a field 175 yards by 45 yards.

Some of the matches are still discussed in the parish, particularly the time they played the famous Knockane team to a draw on two occasions in Kilfinane. On the third meeting Dromin beat them by a goal, after a gruelling hour and a half's football on a field covered with snow.

Dromin also played in Fedamore, Bruff, Kilmallock, Ballyagran, Kilfinny, Elton, Bulgaden, Athliscoa, etc., and won every match—hurling and football.

### CROSS-COUNTRY TEAM.

Bob Coll also founded a cross-country team, which won on every occasion and helped in building the tradition which credits Dromin with having produced the finest body of men in Ireland, as was proved by their success in many fields and in all forms of athletics—hurling, football, bowling, ball-playing, etc.

It will be observed that Bob Coll was born almost a century ago and he was in his athletic hey-day well before we had properly organised meetings and anything like correct recordings of the various events.

Dr. Ned Walsh has left in his memoirs the following reference:—"Although it takes me back about a decade before the men flourished concerning whose performances I feel able to speak of, I cannot pass over the appeal to my memory and conscience to mention Robert Coll, of Fanstown. He was an all round athlete of the highest order. A good sprinter, who had the means to train, what others less lucky were deprived of, he could do a quarter in fifty seconds, and the furlong well inside twenty-three seconds. He was an excellent jumper, and could put the 16 lbs. shot forty-four to forty-five feet. Now, these performances at a time which may be called the infancy and cradle of athletics, well before the G.A.A. came into existence, must be considered excellent. In those days the name of Bob Coll was a household word throughout Limerick, and an inspiration to the rising youths who were all imbibed with the spirit of

athletics to emulate those feats of agility and strength as displayed by this great man at sports and pattern."

### NEW COMET IN HEAVENS OF ATHLETICS.

Anxious to discover more about Bob Coll, and unable to find anything in the record books, I took up the matter with his nephew, Larry Roche, who gave me all the data he could find, mighty little as it proved, but accompanied by the key that unlocked the mystery door.

It was contained in the sentence: "If any living man can recall my uncle's deeds, it is our mutual friend, P. J. Rea." Accordingly, I lost no time in seeing the late Mr. Rea, that storehouse of Limerick athletic memories, and this is what he told me:—

"A new comet was born in the heavens of athletics with the arrival of Bob Coll, of the Castle of Maidstone. I fancy 1851 would be the year, and he had a thirteen year handicap from the Fenian Rising.

"The other brave men of the race of Firbolg had taken to the colours, for the Bogboys refused to carry the hampers for bad landlords when they could carry a rifle for Ireland of the Irish. The Sheehys, the O'Neills, the Mortells and the Moroneys fell into line with the Clerys, Gubbins and Owen Donegan, and William 'Henry' was out recruiting for the young blood of the Milesians.

"Athletics in every grade were eclipsed and the fields of the united parishes were deserted—but a bold peasantry, their country's pride, when once destroyed can never be supplied."

### EARLY ATHLETIC PRACTICES

"Young Coll grew up by degrees, and having received a good education and a careful parental overhauling, was considered to be—by the neighbours—a nice cut of a boy'. At the early age of 17, or at the most 18 years, Robert Coll began relaxing his muscles with a pair of dumb-bells, and by carrying a 28 lbs. weight in each hand, found a special delight in sprinting distances from fifty to seventy-five yards, and this physical drill he entitled 'building the calves.'

"During these practices our hero from Dromin would try feats of strength with the local boys, and tests of endurance were inflicted upon little Tommie O'Donoghue, who lived near Kilmallock, and who, by the way, became an ideal 'half miler.'

"In a word, the pupil was beating the master, and little Paddy Hennessy, the expert National Teacher, came out to 'vet' Bob Coll. That he was sound in wind and limb Paddy had to admit, and with O'Donoghue, the three musketeers put on togs for the first time in real earnest. Surprise of surprises, Bob Coll cantered away in the 100 yards, leaving his sparring partner and his 'grinder' two clean yards behind him.

"This event marked the dawn of Bob Coll's day in the large arena of Irish athletics.

### "JAMSIE" CANTY.

"Let me pause awhile. In the town of Hospital, and near the fair field, a family carrying the honest and hospitable name of Canty, lived, loved and thrived, and out of which was conceived a nice young fellow by the name on the parish register as James, called popularly 'Jamsie.' Like Bob Coll, he devoted much of his spare moments to activity. A healthy boy is a clean boy, and a

clean boy is a naturally born athlete.

"Jamsie heard of young Coll and they both were like the proverbial pins and needles, until they met, and this meeting came about at the sports of Hospital some time in 1875. There were several 'heats' in the sprints, and even the Ardnamoher flier, Dick Doody, dropped out before the 'flying Dutchman,' Bob Coll.

Jim Canty was at loggerheads with the timing, and as both were craftsmen and fine spirited sportsmen, they resolved to settle it at Tipperary, where they could include Joe Gubbins. They were now only short Jack Purcell to make up a quartet of lightning flashes.

"Between the Hospital fixture and that of Tipperary in the old Henry Street field at the rear of the old Workhouse, would be about three months, and Robert Coll went into a perfect system of training on the strict principles of Eton, Harvard and Oxford. Bob Coll discarded the rough and tumble methods of the moderns for the pungent, cast iron regime of the ancients. He began by wearing a two-inch belt about his loins. He had a trot after an old breadvan for a three-mile limit, and, like an old 'thoroughbred' his bran mash was made of flour and oatmeal, with a water solution of a temperature of sixty degrees, and this tonic, he said, was the fine art of giving you wind."

### "A MASTER INSTRUCTOR."

"Robert, in a word, gave his locality for a radius of three miles, a new animal creation. He prided in collecting about him for collegiate and cultural advice the young men, irrespective of class, creed or clan, nor did he ever eliminate the farmer's boy. He differentiated between hip and muscle vaulting, and when and where expedient gave many examples, and from him Dan Carroll and Pat Nunan and young Ned Walsh learned with acumen the ideal art.

"The boy athlete now developed into a master instructor, and with the cultural phase of physical drill he associated the grand morale of anatomical calisthenics, until Coll virtually became a star of the first magnitude. He detested drones. He wanted about his environment no hot house plants, no summer house spalpeens. He wanted men in the making, and

where his keen, sharp and determined eye beheld the ground work he dug the first sod. Bob would have made a great schoolmaster."

### WONDERFUL RECORD OF SUCCESSES.

Bob Coll for the first time donned silk at Kilmallock, and in the general entry system took several of the events, notably the three standing jumps, putting the 16 lb. shot, vaulting the bar, and the 220 yds., open and confined.

At the Limerick Amateur Athletic and Bicycle Club sports in 1878 he won the 440 yards in 52 4-5 secs, and the 100 yards in 10 1-5 secs. At the Queen's College (Cork) sports he won the 16 lb. shot at 42 ft. 5 ins. In Thuries he was successful in the long jump at 22 ft. 10 ins., the 100 and 440 yards flat and was second in the 220 yards flat and the hurdles.

At Limerick the following year he won the 100 yards, 440 yards and shot, and at Kilfinane he was successful in the 100 yards, 440 yards, long jump and three standing jumps, clearing 38ft. 5ins. in the latter event.

In those early days, of course, sports meetings were not as numerous as a few years later, when the establishment of the G.A.A. brought a great change in the country. But in Hospital, Mallow, Knockainey, Kilfinane, Limerick, and Rathluirc his performances were so marvellous that, like "Malvolio" in "Twelfth Night," he "achieved greatness," and for a few years the name of Coll on the athletic track was not one to be conjured with. He won his place in public esteem, and the degree of honour, candour, and justice which marked his performances during his career was only excelled by the dignity, decorum, and true gentlemanly virtues which had characterised his ancient name in public life.

### GREAT HORSEMAN ALSO.

During the 70s and early 80s he was one of the most distinguished and fearless cross-country riders with the County Limerick Stag Hounds, of which the late John Gubbins, of Bruree, was Master. He also rode with Sir David Roche's Croom Harriers, Captain Stamer Gubbins' Harriers, Knockainey, and Kilmallock and Bruree Harriers; and his deeds of brilliant horsemanship are still spoken of at many County Limerick fire-sides.

He was a first-class amateur boxer and handball player, and a leading exponent of Irish step dancing. In later years he gave splendid public services as Chairman of Limerick County Council, where he could vault over agenda sheets as quickly and as successfully as he did over the bar in the athletic world.

No. 10—Denis Carey of Kilfinane.