

No. 156—CONNY COLLINS of Abbeyfeale

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

ABBEYFEALE'S recent great win, that brought the first minor County football crown to the parish, revives memories of grand football days by the Feale, when the great and dearly loved Pastor, Father Casey, played such a noble part in planting the Gaelic seeds that produced rich return.

Father Casey spent thirty-six memorable years as Parish Priest of Abbeyfeale, and when he died, nearly fifty years ago, the people of the parish erected a bronze statue on the Square, there to remain a permanent reminder of the remarkable figure that left such an impress of the Ireland of his day.

Long before the G.A.A. was formed, Father Casey was trying to revive the games of Ireland, and a dozen years prior to the introduction of proper rules, he organised a big football match, in which teams of twenty-six aside were engaged and which took three and a half hours to play.

When the G.A.A. got going, the Abbeyfeale lads quickly rallied to its support, which was only very natural considering that Father Casey had already established a close friendship with the first great patron of the new organisation—Most Rev. Dr. Croke, Archbishop of Cashel. This came about when Father Casey proved the first Parish Priest to side openly with Dr. Croke on the land question.

FIRST AFFILIATED TEAM.

The first team Abbeyfeale affiliated under G.A.A. rules was captained by Conny Collins of Kingsland, who proved a fine leader, and although he never had the honour of leading a side to full championship victory, the lads under his command set the tradition that has prompted successive generations to earn football fame on the playing fields of Limerick and far beyond its confines.

The very early Abbeyfeale combinations were noted for their earnestness, strength, and determination—characteristics which each and every one of the old Gaels seemed to possess in full measure.

As the years progressed, and Abbeyfeale sent many of her sons to college and seminary, the students introduced scientific tactics to the aid of the old glory methods of the earlier days, and this development aided the team in its efforts to win a place of honour in Limerick football.

Training was never neglected under Father Casey's mode of preparation, and when an important contest was approaching Conny Collins gathered his lads for practice matches between town and country struggles just as tough and antagonistic, if not more so, than any against an outside combination.

STRICT TRAINING.

The training schedule was strict, and Father Casey, a great Temperance advocate, always tried to ensure that drink was barred, at least "for the duration." And if any leaned towards a few extra, he took good care his reverence did not find it out.

The good Parish Priest was a great believer in having the whole parish rally round the team for any important game, and he made

every effort to induce as many as possible to travel on such occasions.

Another of the prides of Abbeyfeale at the time was a first class Brass Band, and this was always commandeered for the occasion, heading the cavalcade, which was generally led by Father Casey, on horseback, with outside cars, common farm carts, donkey carts, and a great contingent on foot making up a splendid following.

MEMORABLE TRIP.

One of the most memorable trips this early Abbeyfeale side made was to Croom in the late summer of 1891, there to play Doon in a vital championship tie. The full contingent, consisting of the brass band, under Jack Scully, the footballers under Conny Collins, and the usual big muster of side line warriors and youthful aspirants to the popular colours of green and gold, were detrained from a special at Patrickswell and marshalled by Father Casey for a march to Croom.

Doon turned up there on wagonettes, a fine set of strong-limbed hard-faced, fearless-looking men, who seemed to care little for the great Abbeyfeale crowd.

The men from under the shadow of the Galtees made the running in the earlier stages of the game and were unlucky in an effort for goal. A second sally was saved by some hefty arm strokes of the Abbeyfeale backs, then permitted, but Doon were back again only to fail in front of the posts.

PANDEMONIUM REIGNED.

After ten minutes exciting football, two Western forwards, following some hard fought exchanges, in which Mick McEnery "The Kerr" Sullivan, Conny Collins and William Dee were prominent, got possession and placed their top men in dangerous ground, when he was deliberately tripped by an opponent. The referee attempted to mend matters with a close in free, but this only invited further aggressions, and immediately pandemonium reigned in a scene that was one of the worst witnessed in the long story in the long story of Limerick football.

All hope of finishing the match was abandoned, and, although Abbeyfeale were awarded the verdict the trip back to Patrickswell, to catch the return train, bore little resemblance to the lively march of the morning.

Most memorable of all the meetings of early G.A.A. days were the clashes between Abbeyfeale and Templeglantine, bringing as they did into opposition two sides of powerful physique which any parish or country might well feel justly proud to own. Athletic, virile, fearless, well trained, and of wiry build, they played terrific football with all the fire and verve they could command, and rarely called a stop for the recovery of a player, despite the fierceness of the exchanges.

THRILLING FOOTBALL.

When Conny Collins lined up his men at Mountmahon, or some other such meeting place, there was something to quicken the spirits of both old and young. They met, too, in Templeglantine oftentimes, and always provided strenuous, thrilling football, with the issue generally so close that when it came to the balancing of

accounts at the end of the season there was rarely a lot between them.

We had no great Gaelic enclosures then, but the sidelines were kept clear by Father Casey at one side on horseback, using his riding crop to keep the more venturesome ones in control, whilst the parish priest of Templeglantine, Father Cliford, who later bred a Grand National winner in "Kirkland," performed a like service on the opposite wing.

Those far-off days are recalled with particular reverence by the real old stock of West Limerick men who thrilled to the memory of figures like Conny Collins, Denis P. Lyons, Jack Forde, the Hourkes, the Cotters, Jim Horgan, the Hartnetts, Patsy Leahy and all the other great men of pioneer football days by the Feale.

LATER TIMES AND OLDER PLAYERS.

In later days another generation of players grew up in the ranks of Father Casey's Club, and I hope that some other occasion will see just tribute paid to men like Jack Larry Collins, Heck Moloney, Jack McCarthy, Bill and Jim Horan, Jack Cahill, Jack Connell, Denis O'Connell, Roger Finnerty, Flor O'Connell, Denis McCarthy, Davey O'Connor, Paddy Fitzgerald, Paddy Meade, Tommy O'Connell, Jimmy Collins, David Shanahan, W. D. O'Connor, Willie Phelan, David Nash, and the many more who deserve to be remembered.

And before Abbeyfeale won their first Limerick county crown we must not forget that nine Abbeyfeale men were members of the Limerick football team that won the American championship in 1907 with Denis O'Connell their captain.