

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 69—JOHN J. COLLINS of Elton

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

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HALF-A-DOZEN years ago matters Gaelic came very much to life again in Elton, when the local club acquired the splendid parcel of land from the Irish Land Commission which they turned into a fine sportsfield and dedicated to the memory of one of Ireland's noblest heroes — the great patriot and martyr for his country, Staker Wallace.

The Park is not yet what its sponsors hoped, but with the incentive present to make it worthy of the noble name it bears it is certain that time will iron out its defects and give to Elton a field in keeping with the proud standing of the district in Gaelic athletic records down the long years.

Elton has many happy memories of the days gone by. The youthful hurlers and footballers who indulge in the practice of the national pastimes in the new Park have traditions in plenty to encourage them in their quest for Gaelic honours. The name of Elton may not have figured often in the Championship Roll, but in that other place of honour where devotion to the cause, despite defeat and disappointment, finds fitting recognition, it holds its head high, secure in the knowledge that perseverance will gain its reward in the end.

MEMORABLE MATCH.

Glancing back over the outstanding events of its hurling history, many old timers will recall the memorable match between the "Stakers" and Caherline in the hey-day of that great combination. The Elton lads on that occasion were captained by Paddy Crowley, and it was considered a great achievement, indeed, when they held the famous East Limerick side to a draw. In that unforgettable contest, the noted high jumper, Mick Creede, gave a fine display but was knocked out just before half-time. To the surprise of the big crowd, his place was taken by Pat Hanley, who, although well past his prime, took off his coat and gave a really worth-while display.

Tommy Leahy and his brother, Michael, were all the time a thorn in the side of the Caherline defenders — long striking and fast movements being a feature of their play. Nearing the end, the pair figured in a classical passing movement, from which Tommy hit a powerful drive that travelled the amazing distance of almost a hundred yards to land right in the Caherline goal-mouth. The great Dick Casey, athlete and hurler of renown, of whom I have already written in this series, was standing unmarked with the goal at his mercy but the ball sank into a rut and the dashing Gael, known at the time as the scoring machine, was foiled for once in his great career.

THRILLING VICTORY.

Another long talked of encounter was that in which the "Stakers," then captained by that fine figure, Tim O'Regan, had a thrilling victory over Granagh, who on that occasion were assisted by an outstanding caman wielder in Denny Lanigan, who was later to figure so gloriously in many aspects of Gaelic endeavour.

A final memory of the hurling field concerns a hectic championship match played at the old grounds in the little town of the Knights Hospitallers between the "Stakers" and Kilmallock. The men from the Balbec of Ireland were in smashing form, but the "Stakers" won a grand game, under the captaincy of Maurice Heelan.

Our subject this week, John J. Collins, figured with the Elton

hurlers in all their important games during his years of active participation in athletics—roughly the first decade of the century. He had companions of the athletic field who were adept also with the caman, notably Mick Creede and Dick Casey.

TOP CLASS MEETINGS.

Athletic activity reached its peak in the district in 1904, and during July and August that remarkable season top class meetings were held at Bruree, Kilmallock, Bruff, Kilfinane, Hospital, Elton, Galbally, Ballylanders and Herbertstown.

Competition, too, was of the keenest, with grand figures like Charlie McGill, W. Ryan, O. D. Coll, Andy Kelly, T. A. Leahy, J. J. Hurley, J. F. McNamara and J. O'Connor out in the sprints; J. J. Leahy, W. Drake, Con. Leahy, Dick Casey, J. J. Collins, M. J. Creede, Jim Fahey, J. J. Bresnihan, P. J. Leahy and T. Murnane to the fore in the jumps; Paddy Ryan, J. Carey, T. Hayes, Larry Roche and M. Ryan figuring big at the weights; Mick Hynan, D. J. Herlihy, Joe Thompson, and L. Tobin almost supreme at the longer distances, and J. J. Condon, M. J. Murphy, J. Highfield, P. Halvey and P. O'Donnell our cycling stars.

The annual sports meeting at Elton, like the advent of the circus to the district, was an event of first rate importance that was eagerly looked forward to in the old days. Weeks of careful planning went into the organisation, and when the great day arrived, everything was bustle and excitement—the roads chock a block with people on foot and in traps or sidecars, all making their way to the sportsfield. The mechanical age was but a dream then and a motor car would create as much surprise as a jet liner might now, were it to come down in the Park.

SPECIALISED IN THE JUMPS.

John J. Collins specialised in the jumps, his favourite events being the high jump, the long jump and the "hop step." A near champion at the latter, he cleared forty-eight feet under favourable conditions a few times, and could certainly have done better had he paid anything like even elementary attention to training methods. Engaged in the creamery business, he had little leisure time during the height of the athletic season and it is all the more surprising, in consequence, that he succeeded in setting the figures he did.

Descended from good athletic stock, this tall, lithe and gentle man had a son Martin, who gave every promise in after years of setting worth-while figures in the high jump.

John J. Collins, Elton born and bred, began hitting the athletic high spots at the turn of the century, about the same time as he celebrated his twenty-first birthday. His first outing was at Herbertstown, and he signalled the occasion by taking first place in the high jump at 5 ft. 9 ins., and the long jump at 21 ft. 10 ins.

At Pallas, a few weeks later, he was again successful in the same events, returning similar figures in the flight for height, but down to 21 ft. 6 ins. in the "Long" effort. His first hop, step and jump win came at Bruff, the distance 45 ft. 10 ins., and the same day he took second in the long jump with a 20 ft. 10 ins. performance. Last appearance of the season was at Kilmallock where he notched a hop, step and jump success.

WINNER OF OVER 200 PRIZES.

The winner of over two hundred prizes altogether, his principal successes the following season were gained at Cashel, where he won

both the high jump, and the hop, step and jump; at Tipperary, when high jump honours came his way, although he had to be content with second place in the "hop, step." At Cappawhite, the position was reversed, for he won at the hop, step and jump and was second in the run over the bar. At Kilfinane, near the end of the year, he repeated the Tipperary performance.

The visit of S. Jones, of New York, enlivened the jumping scene during 1902, and although there is no evidence of J. J. Collins having actually tried conclusions with the American star, there is no doubt his presence had much to do with the improved performance that the figures for that year disclose. Wins at Bruree and Kilmallock in the hop, step and jump opened the road for the most important event so far of his career when he faced the renowned Con Leahy at Kilfinane sports, on August 15th, in the high jump. It was a thrill-packed contest, with the final decision going to the Cregane man by a solitary inch. The official return was:—Con Leahy (scr.), 6ft. 2ins., won; J. Collins (5ins.), 6ft. 1in., second.

WEALTH OF TALENT.

The wealth of talent in Limerick at the period was demonstrated at Bruree Sports on September 13th, 1903, when J. J. Collins took the honours in the hop, step and jump, from his townsman, Mick Creede. Full results at that meeting will be read with interest:—100 yards flat—J. J. Hurley, Kilmallock (10 yards), won; Andy Kelly (6 yards), second. One Mile Cycle—J. J. Condon (10 yards), won; M. Dee, Templeglantine (200 yards), second; P. O'Donnell (Bruff), 190 yards, third. 850 Yards Flat—M. Hynan (10 yards), second. 220 Yards Flat—C. Harty, Knocklong (20 yards), won; J. J. Hurley (20 yards) second. Two Mile Cycle—P. O'Donnell, Bulgaden (300 yards), won; M. Dee (350 yards) second. 440 Yards Flat, M. Hynan, won; J. Treacy, Knocklong (30 yards), second. Running High Jump—M. J. Creede (3 inches), 6ft. 1in., won; J. J. Leahy (3ins.), 6ft. 0in., second. Putting 28 lbs. with follow—J. J. Leahy (3ft.), 31ft. 1in., won; R. J. Casey (Martinstown), (3ft.), 27ft. 6ins., second. Three Miles Cycle—J. J. Condon (scr.), won; P. O'Donnell (400 yards), second. Slingsing 56 lbs. without follow—J. J. Leahy (3ins.), 27ft. 9ins., won; M. Bresnihan (scr.), 27ft., second. Running hop, step and jump—J. J. Collins, Elton (2ft. 6ins.) 46 ft. 1in., won; M. J. Creed (2ft. 6in.), 44ft. 10ins., second. Running Long Jump, J. J. Leahy (2ft. 4ins.), 22ft. 10ins., won; C. Harty (2ft.), 20ft. 4ins., second. Five Mile Cycle (Howardstown Dairy Challenge Cup), J. J. Condon won; M. Dee (600 yards) second.

A fortnight later, at Hospital, M. J. Creede had revenge when he won the hop, step and jump with an effort of 46ft. 5ins., to which the reply by J. J. Collins was 4ft. 8ins. At Ballylanders, "J. J." had the best day of this season when he took honours in both the high and "hop, step" events.

Football very much held the stage in Elton during 1904, and the local Club organised a successful tournament that attracted great interest and aroused much enthusiasm.

OTHER SUCCESSES.

Recorded meetings at which J. J. Collins successfully figured this season included Bruff, on August 7th, where he won the running high jump at 5ft. 9ins., R. J. Casey filling second place at 5ft. 6ins. A week later, at Kilfinane, he tied with M. J. Creede, at 6ft. 0ins.,