

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 36)—JIM CONDON of Lough Gur

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

JIM CONDON, often referred to by old timers as "The lion-hearted Condon from storied Lough Gur" was probably the most famous cyclist on a grass track that the Ireland of his generation produced, and some of his stoutest admirers still maintain that he was the best grass man this country ever saw.

Mention of Condon brings the retrospective mind back over the years to the glowing days of the late 1890's, when Jim flourished, and remained for many years the central attraction at grass track meetings in Ireland.

In recalling that period a long list of names return to memory, for he battled in great company. Condon figured in what might be termed the heyday of Irish cycling and athletics.

GREAT FIGURES OF THOSE DAYS.

Harry Reynolds had brought honour to Ireland by winning the mile cycle championship in record time in Copenhagen. Harry later travelled five continents, returned to Ireland and completed a great career at a splendid West Cork meeting in 1909.

Harry's brother, Bob, came into prominence then; Charlie Peace was the idol of the crowds who thronged Ballsbridge when the Tramway and other great sports were held there. Then we had Tom Goss, a great figure in handicap events, though he never managed to win a championship. He was deservedly popular with the sports loving public, and there was general regret when he emigrated to Canada. And others to hit the Irish limelight amongst the votaries of the wheel in those exciting days included Andy Kettle, the Martins, the Coyles, Oliver St. J. Gogarty, and noted Limerick colleagues in J. F. Halvey, T. G. Wilson, E. Caulfield, P. O'Donnell, J. J. Hurley and P. Halvey.

Another prominent southern cyclist in those days was T. O'Sullivan, who, in his time won scores of track and road events. Later, whilst residing in Waterville, he organised top grade sports meetings there, and brought all the Irish champions—from Tom Kiely and Paddy Leahy to Jim Condon and Denis Horgan.

THE CONDON FAMILY.

James J. Condon was born at Lough Gur about the year 1878. His father's name was Richard, and his mother's maiden name, Maggie McMahon.

Richard Condon owned a farm at the foot of Knockrue, near the shores of Lough Gur. He was also a shoe-maker and worked some years at his trade at Kilmallock. However, he returned to his farm in time, but did not prosper "on the land" and the farm was eventually sold.

Jim Condon, in his heyday, stood 5 ft. 9 ins. in height and was of stout build. He had two brothers, John and David, and a sister named Bessie. Bessie and John, on marriage, went to reside in Cork City, whilst David emigrated and died in Australia.

Jim left Lough Gur when very young, and was reared in Kilmallock, where he adopted his father's trade, shoe making. He worked at that trade in Kilmallock until he was twenty-five years of age, when the family returned to Lough Gur.

Jim Condon married Madge Hazel, a native of Hospital, and they had one daughter, who afterwards emigrated to Australia.

JIM'S CAREER AS CYCLIST.

The subject of our sketch commenced cycling while he was in Kilmallock, and won many prizes. His favourite track event was the three mile handicap. He spent ten years in Lough Gur, and during that time cycled at numerous sporting fixtures.

His favourite mode of conveyance then was by jennet and car, driven by Charley Hayes, who retains many pleasant memories of the great wheelman, and was recently able to give me some interesting details of his career. Charley

was a great old Gael in his day, and captained the Bruff hurling team at one time.

Charley regularly drove Jim to the Markets Field, Limerick, and to other sporting fixtures. They brought the bicycle in the car, held by Jim, while Charley drove the jennet.

Mick Hyland, Knocklong, with Jim and Charley, used also walk to Limerick to attend a sports meeting, a hurling match, or a meeting of the County Board, G.A.A. They generally met at Longford Bridge, near Herbertstown, before proceeding to Limerick.

Jim Condon was also a boxer of repute, having won trophies, and a title in light weight, at Kilmallock and Limerick.

COULD ALMOST DEFEY HANDICAPS.

Another Bruff Gael who knew Jim Condon well, himself a champion hurdler with Bruff and Young Ireland in later years, and a true soldier of Ireland when brave hearts were needed, Willie Hogan, tells me that he saw Condon, one day in Bruff, to give a round of the field to opponents, go off on his own, catch up on the whole group, break his chain and discard his machine, mount an ordinary bicycle and win the race.

Actually, it seemed almost impossible to handicap Condon out of a race. Even prominent cyclists were in receipt of long handicaps from him, and the gradual way in which he overhauled the limit men who were often in receipt of two laps of a lead, was almost uncanny in its art. He had brain as well as brawn. It is doubtful if any athlete ever succeeded in winning a greater number of prizes than he, and it is said that the number of first prizes won by him easily reached the four figure number.

Certainly a glance through the press reports of the leading sporting gatherings during the dozen or so years following his debut at Kilfinane Sports on 15th August, 1895, would confirm the statement that he was supreme during a golden spell in Irish athletics. He won with equal ease at distances from half-a-mile to five, and often competing at thirty or forty meetings during a season.

He knew all the great athletes of his day, and competed against the leading wheelmen in the country. Local contemporaries who used travel and participate with him at fixtures in many centres were Ned Caulfield of Hospital, Patrick O'Donnell of Bulgaden, and J. J. Hurley of Rath Luirc.

DID NO TRAINING IN MODERN SENSE.

Jim did not train for cycling in the sense that we speak of it today. In fact, he did not train at all, just cycled to Kilmallock, Hospital and adjacent towns. And, it is well to remember, there was no such thing as steamrolled roads then.

Neither did he pay much attention to health rules, and often was at fault in neglecting even his meals, so that it is remarkable how he attained the fame he did under such circumstances.

Also fond of shooting and swimming, Jim left his beloved Lough Gur at the age of thirty-seven, and went to reside in Dublin where he led a roving life. Nevertheless, he maintained his interest in athletics and acted as Judge at Metropolitan sports meetings.

Sad to relate, Jim had a tragic end. One day while walking a Dublin street he was struck in the head and shoulders by timber in a passing lorry. The wounds became septic, and cancer developed from which he died. And now, he

sleeps his last sleep in Dean's Grange Cemetery.

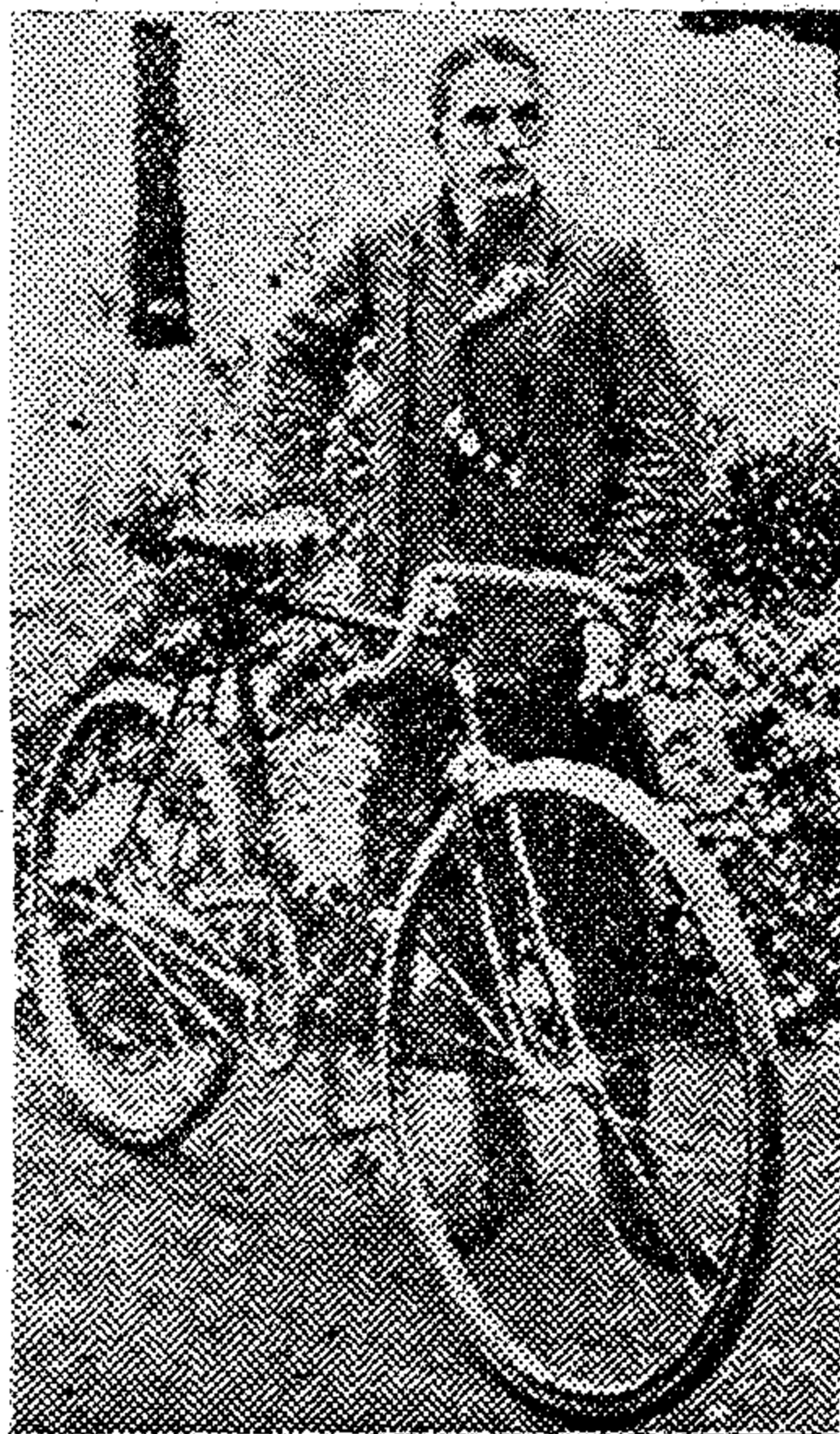
Thousands of admirers everywhere learned with deep regret of his passing, and many tributes were paid to his memory. Because they were written by old friends, I would like to give extracts from two of these.

FROM HOSPITAL.

From Hospital this tribute came:

James J. Condon was champion cyclist in his day and was a wonderfully expert, vigorous and clever wheelman. It was a treat to see him steadily wear down the big handicap he had so frequently to face, and the spectators generally went wild with enthusiasm to see him overtake and beat competitors who were laps ahead of him in a race.

Jimmy Condon's contemporaries of forty and more years ago, speak



The Late J. J. Condon.

still with reverence akin to awe of his many exploits on cycling tracks. Native of Lough Gur, he developed a rugged frame and iron constitution on the hills around the lake shore.

He took early to athletics and found congenial companionship in Hospital, being encouraged in all his competitions by E. J. Mitchell, J. J. Power, solr.; Tom Hayes, Michael Curran and others. Doyen of Irish cyclists at the beginning of the century, his name was a household word, and he was a familiar figure on grass tracks all over the country. With his genial smile, gay and cheery temperament and care free disposition, he was the jolliest of company and was as popular in social life as he was in the sportsfield.

MARVELLOUS ACHIEVEMENT

And now a little incident to serve to illustrate the calibre of the man and his prowess as an athlete. Having entered for all the cycling events at a sports meeting in Clonakilty he set off cycling on a certain Sunday morning from Hospital to Limerick Junction, hoping to get a train there for Cork.

He arrived too late, but decided to make the journey on wheel to the Southern Capital, where he might still be in time for the "special" going to the sports.

Luck was against him, however, the train having departed some time before he arrived in the city. A lesser spirit might have been daunted. Not so Condon. Remounting his bicycle and facing west, he

struck out for the coast town, and reached Clonakilty in time for the sports meeting, setting the seal to a marvellous achievement by winning all the cycling events on the programme.

WHAT "CARBERY" HAD TO SAY.

And now, to conclude, let us see what "Carbery" had to say concerning him at the time:

Jim Condon had no cycling peer on a grass track in his generation. Beautifully built, he could drive a bicycle like a railway train. He won hundreds of prizes. At one period Denis Power failed to handicap Condon—the Kilmallock man could win the five miles cycle handicap from scratch with the next best man on the field, starting off the limit. He had no training opportunity on cinder or cement tracks, but he beat them all—Reynolds, Peace, Goss and Meade amongst the number, and he often rode sixty miles to a meeting. He once missed the Cork train and cycled to Clonakilty, to win his races, and proceed awheel through Cork and Youghal to win at Dungarvan next day. An iron man, he travelled many fields and suffered his share of buffeting from a hard world. But Jim Condon was the noble soul to the end. I remember a day in 1909 when he rode down to Kilbrittain and won three races from scratch on an old creak of a cycle he had borrowed. Poor man was unemployed then. He cashed the order for goods which he had won—a welcome and substantial sum. Affluence came his way, but Jim was always free with his money—a noble, selfless man. It is a solace to know that I often befriended him. And he never forgot.

No. 37—Richard J. Casey, of Martinstown.