

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 40)—Mick Connery of Kilfinane.

(By SEAMUS O'CALLAIGH)

KILFINANE and the Country around it was the home and breeding ground of Irish athletes, and more world beaters hailed from that part of the country than the whole round of the globe could, or did, produce, and it is an undoubted fact that many though they were whose fame was spread to distant lands, there were as many more who never ventured into the arena, and who were worthy competitors with those who focussed the eyes of the nations on those athletic stars who came from East and South Limerick in the closing years of the last century.

DAN SHANAHAN.

When I think of Kilfinane I am always reminded of the world's champion, Dan Shanahan, who, at Limerick Markets Field on August 6th, 1888, covered 50ft. 3in., in the Running Hop, Step and Jump, a record which was not beaten for thirty-six years, until Winters of Australia, at the Olympic Games held in Paris, in 1924, set new figures at 50ft. 11ins. Shanahan is credited with covering 52ft. on a famous occasion in Mallow, and he jumped 52ft. 11ins. at home in Kilfinane, under conditions that were vouched as unimpeachable in every respect. They were refused recognition, however, because they were performed as an exhibition and not in actual competition. Winters, of course, had the advantage of an intensive modern training, which was denied to the Kilfinane athlete, who had to do all his daily work and then practise on a very indifferent grass take-off. Winters' record, incidentally, held until the memorable games at Los Angeles in 1932, when Nambu of Japan, increased the distance to 51ft. 7ins., his fellow countryman, Tajima, carrying it to 52ft. 6ins. at Berlin, four years later. The Los Angeles games witnessed a remarkable Irish triumph.

THIRTY-SIX COUNTRIES REPRESENTED.

Two thousand five hundred athletes, representing thirty-six countries, competed there. The great nations sent their athletes by hundreds, in the hope of winning international athletic prestige. Countries like France and Germany did not succeed in winning a single athletic event. Britain, with all her dominions and colonies, won two; Ireland, which sent only four athletes, won two also!

Bob Tesdall, of Tipperary, won the hurdles event, and broke the world's record, and Dr. O'Callaghan, of Cork, won the hammer title—the only victor of the 1928 games at Amsterdam who was able to retain a world championship. O'Callaghan, of course, followed in great footfalls, for John Flanagan won this title at three Olympics running—1900 at Paris, whilst 1904 at St. Louis, and 1908 at London. Mick McGrath followed, and won in 1912 at Stockholm, whilst Paddy Ryan took the Olympic laurels at Antwerp in 1920. Tootell of the U.S.A. broke the Irish sequence in 1924, but O'Callaghan recaptured it at the following Games.

At Los Angeles, Eamon Fitzgerald, of Kerry, took fourth place in Dan Shanahan's old event, the hop, step and jump, and might well have won but for an injury received during training, his jump of 49 ft. 2½ ins. being the best he had ever done, and on six occasions figures well under that distance captured the Olympic crown. Ireland's fourth representative, Michael Murphy, of Clare, led the field for the first lap of the two mile steeplechase, over three-foot hurdles, twelve-foot water jumps, hedges and fences—the most strenuous event of the Games. He was second in the second lap, and carried on courageously under a pitiless sun until he collapsed in the last lap.

The remarkable success of the Irish at Los Angeles alarmed poor old "Mother England," and she immediately set about devising ways and means of keeping the tricolour out of future Olympics. How well

she succeeded is past history, but no credit to the "sports" across the Irish Sea.

MICK CONNERY'S RECORD.

However, we set out to consider the athletic career of Mick Connery, native of Ballinanima, Kilfinane, whose first recorded appearance at a sports meeting was on 16th June, 1885, a few months after the G.A.A. was founded. The occasion was the old Limerick A.A. and B.C. Sports, and we find him returned as winner of the high jump at 5 ft. 7 ins. Better still, was his performance in the hop, step and Jump, in which he took second place to Dan Shanahan with a 47 ft. effort, Dan covering 7 ins. extra to win. Eleven years later, the first Olympic title in this event was won, at Athens, with a distance of 44 ft. 11½ ins. In connection with his high jump success at this meeting, it is interesting to learn that one of the defeated competitors was E. J. Walshe, of Dublin, Irish and Canadian champion.

Next time we meet him was at Kilfinane Sports on October 1st, where he won the 220 yards flat and the high jump, and filled second place in the long jump.

BACK AT MARKETS FIELD.

Back at Markets Field the following June for another great L.A.A. and B.C. meeting, we find him taking high jump honours with an effort of 5 ft. 10 ins., and finishing second, again to Shanahan, in the "hop, step," the winning figures reaching the splendid distance of 49 feet 7 inches.

At Kilmallock sports, on August 15th, 1886, he put up his best performance in the high jump. Competing in his bare feet, he rose the magnificent height of 6 feet 0½ ins., which would be a record at the time but for Pat Davin's jump of 6ft. 1 in. a short time previously.

Three weeks later, at Newcastle West, he won the high jump at 5 feet 9 ins., and the three jumps with 32 ft. 4 ins. He was second to Dan Shanahan in the running hop, step and jump (48 feet 2 inches) and the running long jump (19ft. 6ins.). Shanahan's hop, step distance that evening was 51 ft. 1 in., over a foot better than his accepted record and ahead of Winters' Olympic figure by a couple of inches.

At the second annual G.A.A. championship meeting, held at Ballsbridge on Sept. 11th, Dan Shanahan won a pair of titles—the long jump and the hop, step and jump. Patrick McGrath of Anglesboro, retained the high jump title he won the previous year—Mick Connery being second with a leap of 5 ft. 8 ins. In a confined running hop step and jump event, Connery won at 45 ft. 4½ ins.

A THREE-DAY FIXTURE.

The Limerick G.A.A. and I.C.A. Sports commenced on September 19th, and continued for three days, being divided into sections: (1) Athletics, (2) hurling, football and tug-o'-war, (3) band contests. Jack Connery won the pole jump (8ft. 9½ins.), and was second to Shanahan in the "hop" (43ft.), while Mick won the high jump at 5ft. 6½ins., a success he repeated at Aherlow Sports on November 11th.

Jack Connery was to the fore at the L.A.A. & B.C. meeting, of June 8th, 1887, winning the long jump (21ft. 10½ins.) and the pole vault (9ft. 6ins.). Mick was second in the hop, step and jump (45ft. 11ins.). Other results during this season were: Kilmallock, August 15th—High Jump, won by Mick Connery; 100 yards flat, Jack Connery, second. Limerick G.A.A., September 11th—Pole jump, Jack Connery, 8ft. 8ins., won; hop, step and jump,

Mick Connery, 45ft. 9ins., second; running high jump, Mick Connery, won, with Jack second. Emly G.A.A., November 6th—Jack Connery won the long jump and second in the 100 yards; Mick Connery won the high jump at 5 ft. 10 ins., P. M. Quinlan being second.

REMARKABLE FEAT.

Mick Connery's most memorable feat, however, was not performed on any athletic track. Just below the town of Kilfinane there is a road, sunk about six feet under the ditches on either side. Some years ago that great chronicler of the past, the late John Tobin, took me down to see the place, and explained that the ditches were in the same condition, or nearly so, as on that unforgettable day in 1887, when, in the presence of a big crowd, Mick Connery performed the dangerous and remarkable feat of jumping from bank to bank—the distance from take-off to landing being not less than 23 feet 10 ins.

1888 was the last year the Connerys spent in Ireland, and we might as well have a look at their performances during that season. Here they are, in datal order:—

June 13th, L.A.A. and B.C. Sports. Running hop, step and jump. M. Connery, 45 ft. 3 ins., won; J. Connery, 44 ft. 2 ins., 2nd. Pole jump. J. Connery, 9 ft., won.

August 5th, Fourth annual athletic championships, at Limerick, the meeting, at which Dan Shanahan set his world's hop, step and jump record of 50 ft. 0½ ins., and Willie Real made another world's record with the "56 lbs." (23 ft. 9½ ins.). Jack Connery was second in the long jump at 21 ft. 3½ ins., and tied for first place in the pole vault with P. M. Nunan, at 9 feet 6 inches.

August 18th, "Freeman's Journal" Sports, at Ballsbridge. Jack Connery won the high jump (5 ft. 4½ ins.) and was second in the long jump (19 ft. 11 ins.) and pole vault (9 ft. 9 ins.).

TOUR OF AMERICA AND CANADA.

About this time, the G.A.A. decided on sending a team of 50 picked hurlers and athletes to tour America and Canada, to give athletic exhibitions and popularise hurling. Arrangements were quickly completed and the team sailed on the "Wisconsin" on September 16th, fifty-one strong, most of whom never set eyes on their native shores again.

The party included the following Limerick athletes: Dr. J. C. Daly, of Dromin; Willie Real, Pallas; Dan Shanahan, Jack McCarthy, Michael and Jack Connery, of Kilfinane. The three latter were also members of the hurling team, being attached to the Staker Wallace Club. D. Godfrey, of Murroe, also travelled as a hurler.

Wherever the "Invaders" went, from the day they landed at New York until the departure of those who returned home, they met with the most enthusiastic receptions. They were feted by Irish Societies in every town they visited.

In Boston the entire company was paraded in carriages through the principal streets, headed by bands, and at the grounds afterwards the teams were virtually mobbed by the big crowd present. The hurling exhibition created a veritable hurricane of excitement and applause. The very sight of the old ashen hurleys seemed to call up memories of bygone days to many old people there that day.

THREE OLD LADIES KISS HURLEY AND WEEP.

I remember the late Pat Davin telling us one day in Carrick-on-

Suir how he remembered seeing three venerable looking old ladies with a hurley, which one of them had borrowed from a player. Each of the three took it in turn and kissed it with reverence, while all wept copiously and unashamed. The sight of the old Irish hurley reminded them of their early days at home, the great hurling matches they witnessed in their youth, and probably, also, of some of the old-time players.

This was but one of the many incidents of the kind. The broken hurleys were eagerly sought for and taken away as souvenirs, and out of 200 hurleys brought from home with the teams only two returned to Ireland.

That the Gaelic Invasion of America was a financial failure, there is no denying. The gate receipts at the various exhibitions given by the teams were not sufficient to cover the travelling expenses and cost of the maintenance of such a large number of men. America was in the throes of a particularly hard-fought Presidential Election at the time, and a lot of the people took little interest in anything else.

AFFECTING LEAVE-TAKING.

Worst feature, however, from the Irish viewpoint was the fact that only 24 of the 51 members of the band who sailed from Cobh six weeks earlier made the journey back. Some hundreds of Irish exiles and the remnant of the Gaelic teams assembled at the wharf to see them off, and the leave-taking was, indeed, a very affecting sight.

Amongst those who remained in the States were the Kilfinane trio—Jack McCarthy, Mick and Jack Connery, and there, too, on that New York quayside we must take leave of a grand trio, with the hope that out of the memory of their greatness new champions may yet arise to defend the honour of old Kilfinane, and re-establish and uphold the prestige that was theirs.

No. 41—John Kelly of Ballygran.