

No. 124—JEREMIAH COOMEY of Bosnetstown

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

CROSS-country running is a form of sport which in the early days of the G.A.A. looked like becoming very popular in Ireland, but like athletics generally and handball it has suffered somewhat in recent times, even if a revival is now evident, if long overdue.

I recall that in my schooldays "here's the hare and where's the hounds" was one of our favourite amusements. In the evening after school when we met we selected one of the best runners in our crowd and set him off through the country before us as the "hare," with the remainder following up as "hounds." Sometimes we varied with a "paper chase."

This was cross country running in reality, as we had to travel through all the natural difficulties which lay in our paths, and it was also a form of amusement which gave us great enjoyment. It is a hard sport when it comes to actual racing and on this account the coaches and captains of teams should make it as interesting as possible and not too strenuous at the start.

MOST BENEFICIAL

It is a sport very well suited to boys, and most beneficial for them, as it makes them wiry and develops both their hearts and lungs. But it should not be overdone. Where possible real cross country work should be taken. This is better than running along roads as the good air of the open country is a tonic for anybody.

The subject of our little sketch this week — Jeremiah Coomey, of Bosnetstown — was one of the pioneers of cross country running in Limerick and a great advocate of the sport, particularly in the schools, where he maintained it was essential to make the start if the movement was to survive.

In his own schooldays, along with a number of enthusiastic companions, he did much to establish the cult of cross country work in his native district, and, in later years after he had emigrated to America and had an opportunity of studying conditions there, he formulated a number of suggestions designed to help the school-boy in his early efforts to develop the cross country habit.

HIS ADVICE

His advice is as valuable now as when written more than sixty years ago. This is what he said then:

"Three or four miles is the limit which young lads should be asked to run, and where possible real cross-country work should be taken. To carry out the idea of not making the runs too hard, the pack should be divided into a fast and slow section, or some other means devised so that the fast runners of the team will not distress the slower boys by making too fast a pace. If the pack is small the slow runners should make the pace for half the distance, and then the fast runners should be allowed to race home. Or the fast runners can be held at the start, and give the slow runners a handicap. It is always an advantage, of course, to have some fast runners in the pack, for if they are handled with good judgment they can be made a means of developing the slower runners without hurting either the fast or the slow boys.

"In training for cross-country races, the first thing to be assured of is that the boys can run the distance. This can be secured in about two weeks training. From then on the endeavour should be to increase the pace. This can be done by gradually increasing the speed, and also by having the boys occasionally running three-quarters of the distance at a fast pace. For the slow boys this is a very useful exercise, for they must develop pace if they are to be of any use to the team.

SPECIAL EXERCISES

"The greatest care of the stomach and abdominal muscles must be taken. Here is where most boys are weak; special exercises should be taken for the abdominal muscles, while extra care of the diet must also be observed. The most common ailment among cross-

country is a sort of stitch in the side. This is generally a muscle strain caused by over exertion, and can be remedied by body exercises and careful, easy training.

"The cross-country man should run more freely than the track athlete. On the track no obstacles are to be met with. The athlete is assured of a smooth course. In cross-country work, however, the athlete runs over all sorts of inequalities of ground. He frequently steps into holes in the grass, or the ground beneath his feet gives away. If he were to run as stiffly, or rather with the muscles at the same tension, as he does on the track he would run great risk of straining his ankle or other leg muscles. The cross-country man should, therefore, run rather loosely, so that when he meets an obstruction he can swing over it, or if he steps into a hole his muscles will then tighten up and not be strained.

"Clubs and schools should take up cross country running not so much for the racing side of the sport, but for the development that it is bound to bring. Cross-country work is sure to aid in all-round development, and if taken up with the proper spirit, it is sure to provide plenty of sport for its devotees."

WISE WORDS

These words from one of the big figures of the cross country arena, in the years of our athletic re-awakening that preceded the founding of the G.A.A., are wise ones indeed and should prove of assistance to those now striving to increase interest once more in this worth-while sport.

An athletic enthusiast who has not missed an Olympic Games in two score years told me some time ago that he saw women almost made men of by perfect training and by a rigid system of physical deportment. But to him it seemed so close to professionalism that he decided he was finished with the Olympiads. Nearer home, of course, we have people flocking to see paid footballers at their day's work and one is forced to ask: "Is the athletic prowess of the sons of Innisfail a dream of the past or are the offspring of the old Gael but memories of an almost forgotten era?"

Along with Jeremiah Coomey of Bosnetstown, the names of Will Downes of Kilfinane, Willie Powell of Ballylanders, and Terry Howard of Ballintubber, might be coupled as the fathers of cross country running in Limerick. It is over eighty years ago now since they flourished and although little ever appeared in print concerning their doings tradition has it that great interest centered in their appearances, and no sooner was the last Mass over than the crowds flocked to the races. The throngs who followed their heroes became so excited that usually it was hard to keep the track clear. The backers of the respective runners were numerous and victory for a townland was eagerly sought, with the result that rivalry was very pronounced.

WAS VERY POPULAR

Where Kilfinane led, other parts of the county soon followed and cross-country running was very popular for some years. The fine old city team of the early nineties was paced by the late John Kelly. The members were a fine old lot, genial and jovial, with Charlie Lord as captain and including Thady McMahon, Blakeney Gubbins, Willie Woodhouse, Ned Finucane, Stan McAdams, Mick Roche, Joe Guinane, Alby Enright, the brothers Dick and E. A. Smith, Bertie Cummins, Jack Coll, Coleman O'Connell, Willie Collopy, Jack O'Sullivan and Andy Egan. The evening runs were over the Castlepark course roughly six miles and were fast and fierce. Numerous fines for "funking" the jumps were inflicted, and in a few instances, the backsliders were ducked in the Caherdavin river.

These runs were revived by the Limerick Athletic Club in the middle twenties and with which I had the great pleasure of being associated. I remember vividly our

first outing. It was over the Meelick Course and with Father Paddy Lynch (now P.P., Stonehall) as pace it proved a tough one. Father James Moloney (now P.P., Effin) followed on horseback, "urging the lazy ones." Others in that company included the late Dan Gleeson, Mick Kerley and Eddie McMahon. We prepared for these runs in the old Boardroom of the City Home and the course was through "Delmegees" over the railway and along by the "Bleach" to Meelick, returning by the Lansdowne bank and crossing the old Cratioe Road at the forge. After a few seasons the Meelick course was abandoned for a circuit embracing the ground on which Lansdowne Park now stands, but this restricted run had little appeal for those that gloried in the Sunday morning visit to Meelick, and many of the "old gang" fell out. Later still, the racecourse was secured, and we had some interesting runs there, but none could equal the enjoyment and variety of the earlier circuit.

WELCOME REVIVAL

The revival in many parts of the county in recent years is very welcome—an example that could be followed with profit by schools and clubs in every parish.

Jeremiah Coomey had passed his best by the time the G.A.A. was established, but he lent his aid to the advancement of the new organisation and led the young blood back to the sports fields and emerged from retirement himself to encourage them.

Walking was a popular pastime in those early G.A.A. days and it was only natural that many of the former cross country runners should become devotees of this fine exercise. Walking events were a feature of the programmes at Knockaney and Kilfinane Sports in the first year under G.A.A. control and Coomey took second place in the two mile walk at both — J. O'Rourke beating him at the former meeting and J. P. Touchstone at the latter.

THE OLD CALL OF THE TRACK

The following year the old call of the track induced him out in the one mile flat event at Kilmallock Sports, where he amazed all his own admirers by running a good second to the famous J. Fitzgerald, of Bruff.

1887 again saw him at Kilmallock, where he won the one mile walk event; finishing his career at the Markets Field a month later when he filled second place in the two mile walk event at the Limerick G.A.A. meeting.

Shortly afterwards he emigrated to America, where he continued for many years to take a deep interest in athletics and particularly in the wonderful deeds of Irishmen, many of them Limerickmen, the world over.