

# Great Limerick Athletes

No. 88—MICHAEL CORBETT of Borrhigone

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

WE visit Borrhigone for our athletic star this week, and there meet Michael J. Corbett, who opened a very successful career in 1924, while still of tender years, and won something over five hundred prizes before he hung up his spikes in 1945.

An all round performer of no mean ability, the principal events in which he figured were the 120 yards hurdles, the high and long jumps; the hop, step and jump; the 220 yards and 440 yards flat.

And to get the background to his deeds we take a look at those with whom he competed: Tom Wall, the Guiney brothers—Tom, Jack and Paddy—and their cousin, Dave; J. O'Keeffe, Con Sheehan, Dick O'Rafferty; Donal O'Flanagan and his brother, Brendan; Fergal Flynn, the Appleby brothers, Paddy Flanagan of Kells, Bill McKee, Belfast; J. J. Barry, J. J. McGuinness, J. J. O'Donnell, Ned Tobin, D. Walsh, G. Lestrangle, Joe Kelly, the Cork hurler; J. Murray, Martin Egan, K. Sheehan and G. Lillis — to mention only those that come readily to mind.

## UNFORGETTABLE DAYS.

Michael Corbett's prizes tell their own story of unforgettable days and thrill-packed episodes on far flung fields. There is almost a "story" around every trophy but where is the space to give them? We can only look through a "collection" of silver cups, championships and other medals by the dozen, clocks, watches, fireside chairs, canteens of cutlery, breakfast and dinner sets, silverware of all types, even shoes and pipes, and marvel how one man could win them all, particularly when we realise that he had many other sporting interests besides athletics, and devoted much time to these other pursuits.

He travelled widely, and was an annual competitor at meetings in Dublin and Belfast, and in towns in Counties Armagh, Sligo, Galway, Wexford, Wicklow, Carlow, Waterford, Kilkenny, Meath, Westmeath, Roscommon, Louth, Kildare, Clare and Limerick. His usual mode of travel was a 500 c.c. Norton motor cycle, but later, during the war years he got around quite well on a tandem, with his wife as team-mate.

## MADE HURLING MARK AT 16.

At sixteen, the Borrhigone lad was making his mark on the hurling field, and played with Limerick minors at Thurles in 1928. For the following three seasons he figured with Wicklow County, who then had a promising hurling side, and played in many Leinster championship games with them.

Later he joined the Dublin Young Irelands side, and playing midfield for their senior string won many medals and championships with them. In 1937 he helped St. Dymphnas win a Dublin County Junior title.

Michael won two All-Ireland Championship titles in the 120 yards hurdles—that for 1941 in a time of 16.1 secs., and again in 1945, when his time was 17 secs. A Leinster Championship in the High Jump came to him in 1942, and he was runner-up for the 120 yards Hurdle crown that year. In 1945 he had two championship seconds in the Eastern provincial tests—the Long Jump and the Hop, Step and Jump.

He drew the standard bronze medal in the all-round Championship of Ireland in 1943, and the following year secured the silver medal, being second to P. V. Guiney for the championship. In the special provincial competition under Leinster Council auspices he won in the hurdles and was second at the High Jump. For the 1945 Dublin championships he beat P. V. Guiney to win the High Jump and was second to Lillis in the 120 yards Hurdles.

## OF GOOD ATHLETIC STOCK.

Michael Corbett came of good athletic stock, his father being a useful cyclist as partner on a tandem to the ever popular J. F. Halvey of Limerick. As a youth of tender years he had his introduction to athletics when he won the boys 100 yards at Foynes Sports, with T. Fitzsimons second, and M. Conway third. It is of interest to note that Fitzsimons was son of the famous Pat Fitzsimons of Mount Pleasant, the great hurler of other days.

Hurling took most of his time during his late teens and almost all through his twenties and it was 19th July, 1941 before the name of Corbett began appearing regularly in the press reports of athletic sports throughout the country. The paper of above date opened a new chapter in his career in this fashion: "The 1941 Tramway Sports at Croke Park on Saturday was one continual thrill for a record crowd. Take the two All-Ireland Cham-

pionships, for instance. The Hurdles—won by M. J. Corbett of Dublin City Harriers, who, running his first race over hurdles, beats the far famed Guineys of Duhallow to take the national title. He was helping the Guineys in a mid-week try-out, decided he wasn't too dusty himself and stepped in to take the honours.

"And the three miles cycling—won by Matt Kelly of Round Tower, world record holder for the 25 miles and Irish record holder for 50 and 100 miles, whose last lap was electrifying as he swept away from the field to win pulling up.

## A GREAT DOUBLE.

"Hurdles champion Corbett then proceeded to clear 5 ft. 10 ins. in the high jump and stopped jumping, his 5½ inches handicap leaving 6 ft. 3½ ins. for the scratchman to aim at. Tom Wall and Paddy Guiney responded brilliantly, clearing 6 ft. 2 ins. and narrowly failing at 6 ft. 3 ins. in a duel that gave the great crowd its biggest thrill of the afternoon. Consider that there was neither pit nor sawdust and you'll appreciate that that's jumping; That was Corbett's double.

"Young Walsh of Round Tower had one, too, in the half and mile cycling, but most spectacular double was 18-year-old youths dual champion, M. Moloney of Charleville in the mile and four miles. He ran two brilliant races and is without question the most promising middle distance runner Ireland has produced for years. But he's doing too much of it. For his own sake and the sake of what athletic honours he could bring to this country he must be persuaded not to run himself out before reaching the top.

## BIGGEST DISAPPOINTMENT.

What Michael described as his biggest disappointment in athletics was associated with his effort to defend his hurdles title at Iveagh Grounds in 1942. "I was a very fit man," he told me, "and I would say I was at my peak as an athlete. During training I frequently clocked 15-4-5 secs. for the distance. On the day of the meeting I was drawn for the second heat in which the other participants were Donal O'Flanagan, J. J. Guiney and D. McGrath. I broke very fast knowing Donal was so fleet and led all the way. At the seventh hurdle I had at least three yards advantage but on reaching ground from this jump the spiked shoe on my left foot broke clean in two and was tripping me. I tried to kick it off before reaching the eighth hurdle and the attempts to do this left me about 4½ feet short on rising for the eighth obstacle. But worse still was to follow, when I put my right leg clean between the hurdle bars and crashed and saw my title go with the fall. The event was a final between the brothers Flanagan, Brendan just winning in 16-2-5 secs., with P. V. Guiney third and Horgan fourth. The next year I was there again but was left on my mark, and did not rise at all. In 1944 I had a sprained ankle, sustained in jumping and thus had to wait until 1945 to regain the title."

The press report of the 1945 All-Ireland N.A.C.A. Championship meeting at Dundalk had this to say: "Even as things were, with the track sodden and the rain pelting down, nineteen-years-old J. J. Barry of Ballinacurry, put up a really remarkable performance in winning the four miles in 20 mins., 3 secs. It was a magnificent run in the circumstances — one enthusiast said: 'He didn't run that race — he swam it;'"

## REGAINED THE HURDLES TITLE.

"There were no real surprises, excepting, perhaps, M. J. Corbett's regaining the hurdles title that he last held in 1941. The ex-Roscrea champion, J. Lillis, was strongly fancied to take the honour and confirmed early impressions by beating Corbett in his heat, but, in the final, Corbett made no mistake and finished very strongly to reverse the placings and beat Lillis by a yard, with Lieut. T. Ryan, who had won the 440 yards hurdles title at Wexford the previous week close up third in one of the most exciting hurdles races for a long time."

Space will only permit a few references to other important wins:-

Trim, 28th June, 1942—Won High Jump (5 ft. 10½ ins.) Second in 16 lb. Shot (29 ft. 11 ins.)

Ballinasloe, 12th June, 1942 — Won High Jump and second in Long Jump.

Mulhuddart, 25th June, 1944—Won 120 yds. Hurdles; second in 440 yds. Flat; tied for second in High Jump with J. J. Guiney at 5 ft. 10½ ins.

Monasterboice, 9th September, 1944—Won the 440 yds., High Jump and Long Jump; second in the 100 yds. and 16 lb. Shot.

In the All-Round Championship of Ireland, decided at Crumlin on 30th September, 1944, the winner was P. V. Guiney with 5,404 points, M. J. Corbett being runner-up with 4,810 points. Others competing were D. McGrath, Cpl. J. O'Brien, Cpl. Martin, D. D. Guiney, C. F. Cox, E. Tobin, and Cpl. L. Moran. M. J. Corbett won the Hop, Step and Jump at 40 ft. 8½ ins. and the 110 metres Hurdles.

## GIFT TO ATHLETIC CLUB.

Michael Corbett took a great interest in the development of athletics during his years in Dublin and a much appreciated gesture was the presentation by him of a silver cup to the Drinagh - Murrinstown - Piercestown Athletic Club. The Secretary announcing the gift to a club meeting said the donor was one of Ireland's foremost athletes and was runner-up in the decathlon championships. When he won the Irish hurdles title in 1941 he was credited with the best time since R. M. Tisdall's days, and was also holder of several provincial titles. The Chairman said the trophy would be a great incentive to them, it would be known as the Corbett Perpetual Challenge Cup and offered for the Club championship. A great honour had been paid the Club and the cup would always remind them of a great athlete and a gentleman, who was also a sportsman of the highest degree.

Another incident in his career deserves to be recorded. A horse attached to a cart took fright and ran away, on the main road between Borrhigone and Limerick. Michael, who happened to be home on holidays at the time, grabbed a bicycle and pursued the animal. After some dangerous experiences he pluckily grabbed the reins and succeeded in bringing the runaway to a standstill near the railway bridge a mile from Borrhigone.

## ESSENTIALS FOR ATHLETIC RENOWN.

The essentials for athletic renown, Michael holds, are: early bed, early rising and a clean, good life. He trained three nights weekly at the Army Grounds, Phoenix Park, under coach J. J. Ryan, a Dublin man to whom he attributes any success he gained in athletics. "J. J." was a good half-miler in his day, besides being a useful wrestler. Proprietor of a sheet and metal works at Arbour Hill, he invented a starting clapper which echoed like the pistol used by starters. By means of this he trained the boys to fast starts, and Michael says that he was only once left and that was at Thomond Park, Limerick, where he mistook a whistle used for the start as a signal calling back some who had "broke" too soon. That cost him a possible win in the 220 yards. However, he compensated by taking the 120 yards Hurdles, the High Jump and sharing in the Relay success.

## EXCITING EXPERIENCES.

Michael had a few exciting experiences in connection with his attendance at meetings in Northern Ireland during the war years. On one occasion Bill McKee, of Belfast, invited F. Flynn, the Guiney brothers, J. J. McGuinness and himself to compete at a meeting, posting them identity documents secured from the R.U.C. At Gorwood Customs Michael was walking along the platform when an R.U.C. man hailed him and asked to see his credentials. Not being satisfied with the document, which he had left unsigned, Michael was taken to a room and searched, just getting out in time to board the train as it moved away. However, he won the 220 yards and was second in the High Jump at Corrigan Park the following day.

On another occasion the Appleby brothers, F. Baird and Michael travelled to Armagh City on the invitation of Pole Vault champion, Jimmy Nalley. The four of them slept in the one room at a local hotel. It was during the height of the air raids and no lights of any description were allowed. When planes roared overhead, not knowing the ropes, they were upset and got up. In the rush to dress, Baird put on the wrong clothes, and the humour of the situation that later developed caused them many a laugh afterwards.

## SCHOOL SPORTS.

Michael believes there is a great future in Irish athletics and his parting words to me were to stress the importance of school sports. "Train the boys young," he said, "and let them have all the encouragement and facilities possible."

No. 89—John O'Brien of South Liberties.