

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 1)—DENIS J. CUSSEN of Newcastle West

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

IRELAND has produced many fine athletes who have attained remarkable fame in the athletic world, but practically all these achievements have been secured in field events.

Our track athletes have not, generally, attained this high standard, especially where the "hundred" yards is concerned.

This reason good judges attribute mainly to the climatic conditions which prevail in this country, together with the non-suitability of grass tracks to the making of fast times.

It will be noted on looking up world's records that most of the wonderful times accomplished in this event have been made in America, especially in the State of California, where the climate is ideal for sprinting, and tracks are at least two yards faster than in this country.

Ireland, however, produced one athlete who brought the standard of this event close to the world's record. Denis Cussen, of Newcastle West, equalled the world's record for the 100 yards, grass track, at Croke Park, in 1928.

Here is an eye witness account of that unforgettable day at the National Stadium:—

"I have attended many Irish championships and have seen many athletes from different nations in action, but the athlete who stands foremost in my mind is Denis Cussen, of Newcastle West, and the day, when he equalled the world's grass track record at Croke Park in June, 1928.

"Denis Cussen was a strange fellow, and opinion was always divided as to his capabilities. His admirers, and I was one of them, always stoutly maintained that he had the stuff of a world beater in him.

"But he was continually disappointing us, and I do not think he ever trained along orthodox lines for any athletic event in his life. I think his philosophy of life was against him—the successful athlete must be egotistic and self-centred. Denis Cussen had not a scrap of these in his mental make-up. He was a very finely built man, and ran with an easy grace, yet with that latent power in every stride. I have never seen a sprinter with such broad shoulders and deep chest, and I did not know which to admire most—the swift moving legs or the powerful torso.

"But, that day in June, 1928. It was a lovely summer's day—not a breath of wind, and the large crowd seemed to sense the keenness that was displayed by the athletes, for the Irish Olympic team was being picked on the results.

"The heats of the 100 yards were run off early, and splendid form was displayed by Eustace, Cussen and Gummer, the two former re-

turning 'evens' while Gummer, was only a 'fifth' outside.

"When the four got on their marks for the final, a hush fell on the crowd, and all eyes were on the four white intent figures as they crouched on the line. The pistol report released them as one man, and as one man they came together for twenty or thirty yards.

"Here Eustace and Cussen drew away from the others, side by side up to the half-way mark. An extraordinary change then came over Cussen's style. He seemed to get his head more forward, his arms thrashed the air like sails, and his stride lengthened until it appeared as if his legs were being driven out of his body by big, powerful springs. He shot away from Eustace, who seemed to be running backwards by contrast.

"His running captured the imagination of the crowd, who started to their feet cheering and shouting while he was yet twenty yards out from the tape.

"The cheering spurred him on to further effort, and rising his chest, as if with a deep breath, he literally burnt up the last ten yards and flung himself at the tape as if his very life depended on it.

"He breasted the tape to a regular salvo of cheering, which was succeeded by an eerie silence as everyone listened intently for the time. When the world's record time of 9.4 seconds was announced, the cheering broke out anew, for every one felt that they had seen a truly memorable performance.

"Cussen is the second or third man in the history of world's athletics to have run 100 yards in 9.45 seconds on a grass track, and in my opinion this time will never be beaten on the grass. I am quite confident, from the power, and speed he displayed that afternoon, that if he was running on cinders he would have returned 9½ seconds.

"I never saw Denis Cussen running again, and I often felt since that if he had been an American, or even an Englishman, instead of an Irishman, to what heights would he not have attained in athletic spheres. Like many another Irish athlete, he had abundance of natural ability, but he never seemed to develop it to its fullest capacity, except on that wonderful June afternoon in Croke Park many golden years ago."

Denis Cussen started his career as an athlete at Blackrock College, and in 1918 we see him winning

the 12lbs. shot and high jump at the schools championships at Lansdowne Road.

"He breasted the tape to a regular 1919, and the following year, at the College sports, he won the 100 yards (Freshman), 100 yards championship, the long jump, and tied for first place in the high jump. This was an outstanding performance for a youth of 18½ years.

In 1921, he won the 100 yards, 220 yards and long jump at the I.A.A.A. championships at Lansdowne Road. He also performed this hat trick at the Inter-Varsity Sports at University Park, Terenure.

As will be noted from these performances, he had attained a high standard in these events and was undefeated in both the 100 yards and long jump for the season.

In 1922 he reached the "peak" of his long jumping. It was a great pity he was not properly coached in this event, as I am sure he would have broken twenty-four feet. He jumped over twenty-two feet on several occasions, relying on sheer speed and a natural spring.

An accident in 1923, when he broke a bone in his ankle, marred his career for a few seasons, but in 1925 he came back to form better than ever and at the inter-varsity meeting showed himself an all-rounder of no mean merit, winning the 100 yards in 10.15 seconds, discus, 115 ft. 8 ins., and 16 lb. shot, 36 ft. 8 ins. These distances for the shot and discus broke the existing inter-varsity record.

At the Irish championships he equalled the 100 yards record by doing 10 seconds dead. The same year he had very bad luck in not recording the first win for Ireland in this event at the triangular contest between Ireland, Scotland and England at Croke Park on July 11th. The brothers Cussen formed the wings of the "sextette," "R. J." being on the outside with Goody on his left. After a break they got away to a perfect start. At about sixty yards Denis Cussen, slightly in front, staggered as the result of putting his foot in a hole. Goody won from his compatriot by half a yard, with Cussen three yards off. The time was ten secs.

At the Grocers' Sports at Croke Park the following Saturday, Denis won the discus from handicap with an actual throw of 120 feet. The famous American Club, Illinois, were competing on that day. His opponents were the Irish champion, J. J. Bermingham, and

H. Schworz, the American champion. A report of this event concluded: "It was quite amazing to see the little fellow competing with the two giants; it was something in the nature of a David and Goliath contest."

Professional duties kept Denis out of the athletic arena during 1926 and 1927. In 1928 he was again to the fore, and attained great heights. At the Hospital sports he showed he was as good as ever by doing ten seconds in the "hundred," beating the famous New Zealander, A. E. Parsitt—who was third in the Olympic 100 metres at Paris. He also showed a return to his former prowess in the long jump by clearing 22 feet 9½ ins. off grass and without a board take-off. On June 14th he again did 10 seconds dead for the "hundred" in the United Irish Hospitals Sports, equalling a record established fifteen years before.

Picked to represent Ireland at the Olympic Games at Amsterdam in this year, he made a valliant effort for his country, losing to W. B. Legg of South Africa, who equalled the existing Olympic record in beating him.

This season saw Denis Cussen's last appearance on an athletic track but his career remains one in which we can take pride without reservation, for he was as true to his national institutions as he was worthy of his national endowments.

His achievements present an instructive and inspiring example of what native worth can accomplish, and Limerick can claim his glory as its own, and as inseparable from its traditions as the wide stretches and heroic memories of the "Golden Vein."

Herewith I append a short summary of his main achievements on the athletic field:—

Irish Record—100 yards, 9.45 sec. Irish Championships (under N.A. and C.A.), at Croke Park, June 24th, 1928.

Irish Championships—100 Yards (under I.A.A.A.), 1921, 10.15th sec. 1922, 10.3-5th sec. (under N.A. and C.A.), 1925, 10 sec. 1928, 9.4-5th sec. 220 yards (under I.A.A.A.), 1921, 24.1-5th sec. Long Jump (under I.A.A.A.), 1921, 20' 11", 1922, 22' 1".

University Championships—100 yards 1921, 10.3-5th sec.; 1922, 10.1-5th sec.; 1924, 10.4-5th sec.; 1925, 10.1-5th sec. Long Jump, 1921, 20' 3"; 1922, 21' 9". Discus, 1925, 115' 2"; 16 lbs. shot, 1925, 35' 4".

Besides his renown in the field of athletics, Denis J. Cussen also gained fame as an International Rugby player and was reputed to be a good amateur boxer.

His three brothers—Robert, John and Michael—took an active part in athletics, and I hope to return to the career of the first named (now a solicitor in Newcastle West) later on in this series.

Next article—Larry Roche & Bruree.