

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 45)—Charles H. Davis of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

"WELL rode, Charlie"; "Good man, Davis"; "Limerick for ever." Shouts like these from thousands of delighted spectators proved one of the highlights of the 1918 All-Ireland Athletic and Cycling Championship meeting held at the Markets Field, Limerick—a remarkable gathering, ever to be remembered because of the fact that five championship titles were won by Shannonside athletes.

Read what "Carbery" had to say at the time concerning this meeting:

"Cold and sudden, the north-western autumnal showers swept over the hills of Clare at intervals, making the simmering Shannon shiver, shutting out the fine steeple of St. John's and sending the groups of lightly-clad athletes scurrying to shelter.

"This was, however, only during the short spells which divided the pleasant sunny periods which marked last Sunday's championship meeting at Limerick as the best of recent years. A big company was in attendance all round the enclosure and the recently erected stand was packed by an enthusiastic audience.

"The officials had arrangements perfected, and, even the very changeable weather failed to damp the spirit of the crowd. I have rarely seen spectators take a deeper interest in the events, and the fact that five championships fell to the home county was in concord. To my mind no better championships have been held since the big 1908 meeting at Fermoy.

"Now for the details. The century was a right good one. As anticipated, Keays and Fogarty figured largely in the sprints. The Pallas-green man revelled in the heavy going. He simply smothered all opposition in the hundreds' furlong. His great long stride, easy style and smooth running were a treat to see. The victories of the East Limerick man were highly popular, for Jim Keay's family are a popular sporting group in the lower Shannon Valley.

"In the mile cycle a batch of Dublin cracks were engaged, but they appeared to find the heavy going little to their liking. Even so, it was not expected that a mid-marker would lower their colours. Charlie Davis, of Limerick City, has been improving steadily as a wheelman, but he surprised even his best friends on Sunday. Riding a strong, steady pedal, he tore along in front, and putting a long sprint in from the bell, he came around the home bend in front, to the company of a rousing chorus from local throats. In the straight, the clever Dublin cyclist, Campbell, challenged on the inside. A great finish ensued. They rode up abreast and crossed the line locked together. When we learnt that Davis had won by half a foot, it was the occasion of a fresh, long-sustained outburst of cheering.

"O'Grady was out on his own in the weight events, winning the 56 lbs. and 28 lbs. On the very greasy sod record breaking was out of the question, but his throw—37 ft. 4 ins.—of the two stone weight cannot be set down as anything else than a superb performance. Last year's champion, Mick O'Brien, of Dromcollogher, was third in the hurdles."

Spectacularly, the meeting was right good. The interest was well sustained, and Barnes' fine riding was the feature of the cycle handicaps; the athletic clean-cut appearance of men like Britton, Keays, Fogarty, etc., and the striking proportions of O'Grady and Ryan were good to see in these days when rumours of race degeneracy are current. No fear—this little island is alright.

Eleven fought out that great tussle for the Irish Championship at Limerick Markets Field. There were two heats, and the final comprised three Dubliners—J. J. Barnes, W. A. Campbell and A. Robinson, with Charlie Davis the only representative of the Southern Province. It was a thrill-packed

race, with the last lap a terrific one. Scarcely a foot divided Davis and Campbell along the home straight and it was a proud moment for the huge local following when the popular Charlie scored his most notable triumph, after one of the greatest races of a grand career.

The All-Ireland gold medal he got for that win—exact replica of the treasured trophy the individual winners of the All-Ireland Senior Hurling and Football Championships receive annually—takes pride of place amongst the five hundred odd prizes he won during a great career that extended from 1911, when he opened his winning way in the three miles open handicap event at Newcastle West Sports, to September, 1941, when he bade farewell to the arena he loved with a great victory at Limerick Mental Hospital Sports in a special one mile challenge race.

On his watch chain he still wears the All-Ireland medal along with another valued possession—a gold medal as memento of a great performance at the Kerry championship sports, in Tralee, thirty years ago. The inscription reads: "Presented to C. H. Davis, Limerick, in commemoration of Kerry Championship sports, 1923, by Dr. Eamonn O'Sullivan, Inspector T. O'Reilly and J. M. Collins."

His gold watch was won at Kinsale, for the five mile cycle event. To get there he had cycled to the Limerick Junction, where he got a train to Cork. From Cork to Kinsale the journey was by "long car" and it rained incessantly the whole time, with the result that they got to their destination thoroughly drenched. The committee were on the point of postponing the meeting when the weather cleared up, and Charlie got one of his best prizes.

His beautiful sittingroom "houses" many splendid trophies won at far-flung venues—Castlebar, Westport, Skibbereen, Youghal Galway Waterford, Killorglin, Cork, Tralee, Killarney, Kilrush, Birr, Listowel, Banteer, Mallow, Miltown, Dungarvan Fermoy, Ballinasloe, and, of course, all the local centres. One wall is covered from ceiling to floor by a splendid glasscase containing a choice selection of cups and other silver ware. One of the first to catch the eye is a silver cup presented by J. S. Noble to the Fermoy sports in 1922 for the three mile cycle scratch race. Another was the gift of Captain Willie Redmond, M.P., to Ennis Sports Committee, June, 1914.

It would be impossible, in the space at my disposal, to refer, even briefly, to the many meetings at which he won prizes, over five hundred in number, as already stated, and including twenty-one Munster championships, in addition to his All-Ireland crown.

We must be satisfied with a quick run through an old scrap book, there to pick out some outstanding items.

His initial success was gained on a Saturday evening at Newcastle West, the year 1911, and he was then a youth in his late teens. Wretched weather conditions spoiled the fixture and the programme was considerably curtailed. Only one cycle event was held—the three miles open handicap, and Charlie won it; H. Sherwood, of Adare, filling second place.

At Mallow he won the five miles open event; and filled second place in the three miles to D. O'Brien and in the one mile championship of Munster to J. O'Sullivan, Donegal.

In a great inter-county contest at Killarney, Charlie won the half-mile cycle for Limerick, with

another Shannonsider, J. J. Quinlan, second, D. Farrell (Cork) was third and T. Jones (Kerry) fourth. The latter has a son now in Limerick who is a very useful athlete and star full back on the Garda and Limerick football teams. Speaking recently of old cycling days, he said: "They have a great respect for Charlie Davis still in Kerry."

From "Carbery's" pen we find, in reference to a great Cork City meeting: "The most attractive cycle event was, of course, the Munster Championship, over a mile. It was pretty clear after the heats that the final struggle would rest between the little Corkonian, Falvey, and Charlie Davis, a persevering performer from Limerick City. A fine race resulted. Davis went into the lead just before the bell, for Falvey to challenge at once. Amidst much excitement the smaller man jumped clear and, showing superior ankle work and pace, went away to win."

Davis had revenge on Falvey at Killorglin Sports a little later, winning the three miles cycle event after a great struggle with C. T. Donnelly, the crack Dublin man, leaving Falvey an "also ran."

The pair had a regular "see-saw" at the Munster inter-county contest at Tralee, Davis winning the half mile in 1 min. 7 secs., with Falvey third. Falvey won the mile, with his great Limerick rival second; whilst Davis triumphed in the three miles (8 mins. 39 secs.), with the Cork man second.

At the Father Mathew Hall Sports at Cork, Charlie won the three and five miles open handicap events and filled third place in the mile race for the Munster Championship.

Long threatening came at last when Davis won his first Munster title, the mile, before an immense gathering at Tralee. His time was 2 mins. 37 secs., and he was inches ahead of another Limerick man, J. J. Quinlan (Killfane) at the finish of a most exciting race. The same evening he beat B. J. Donnelly in the five miles after another great race.

At Birr, he won the one and three miles open handicap events, and at Limerick Co. Board G.A.A. meeting at the Markets Field won his second Munster title when beating J. J. Quinlan over the three miles distance. Third on that occasion was M. J. Kelly, and a Limerickman also filled the fourth position—that great worker for athletes—A. W. Moorehead. Davis also won the mile that evening.

He retained the three miles Southern crown by a great win, at Nenagh, the following season, during which he also took five mile honours at Listowel, and the one, three and five mile prizes at Newcastle West. A notable success at the National Cycle Club meeting at Cork Mardyke, was the defeat of the fancied Thomas Ginnell, of Devlin, in the one mile event. At Athlone, about the same period, he beat W. Matthews, of Killeagh in the mile but found the position reversed in the five miles race.

Opening a further year, he won the mile at Kilrush, and had a like success at the Limerick G.A.A. meeting, the evening Tim Leahy, of Cregane, did his wonderful high jump of 6 ft. 5 ins. At Tralee he won the three miles, and at Clarecastle was successful in the one and three miles. At the National Cycle Club meeting he beat Falvey by a wheel, for the two miles championship of Munster. Banteer meeting saw him winning the five miles Munster crown, and the three miles scratch, the latter by half a wheel after a magnificent race.

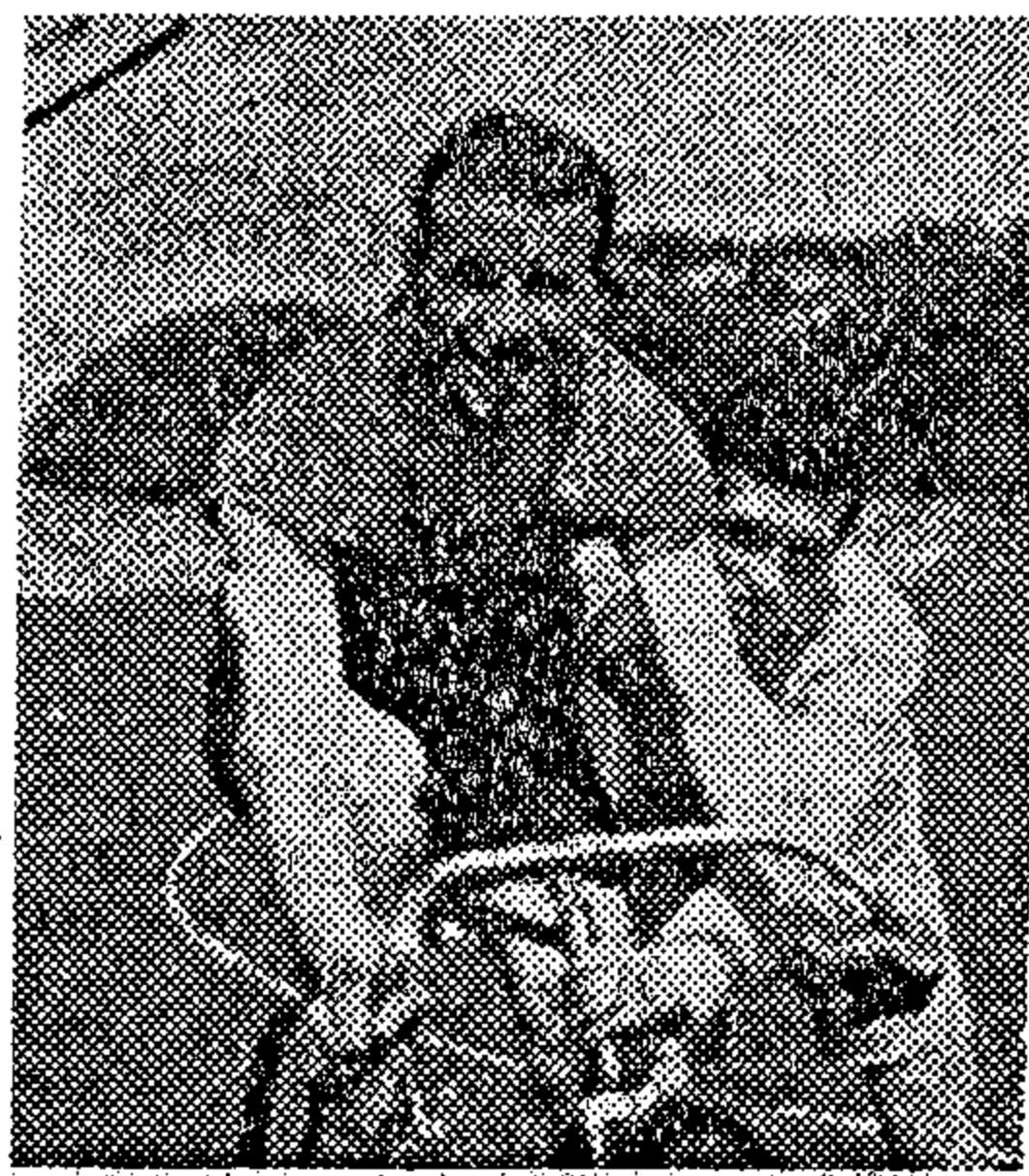
As the seasons roll on, we find him figuring as the winner of the

one mile cycle scratch race, and the three mile handicap at the O'Connell Club sports in Ennis. He had two exciting successes at the Cork Fr. Mathew Hall Sports, gaining first place after three miles hard slogging, by a wheel, and finding that distance actually cut in two at the end of the five miles open handicap.

Inches won Charlie the Noble Cup at Fermoy on June 18th, 1922. It was a three miles scratch event, and his old rival, D. Falvey, was the runner-up. A little later in the year he won the two miles event at Ballytruckle, and, on September 10th beat M. J. Lynn over the three miles distance, at Ballinasloe.

He had a useful double at Croom sports on July 18th, 1926, winning the one and three miles open events. At the inter-county match with Tipperary, at the Markets Field, he was successful in the three miles, a triumph he repeated at the 4th Infantry Brigade Sports at the Markets Field.

Moving along to July 29th, 1928, we find him the winner of the one mile cycle event at the Limerick Garda Sports. At Youghal, on



CHARLIE DAVIS IN HIS PRIME.

August 4th, he won the one mile and three miles events, and was second to J. Murphy of Dungarvan in the five. An easy victory came at Banteer in the one mile, where he held command all the way to win as he pleased.

Thirty years on the track is a remarkable spell, and certainly few are to be found nowadays with a greater record than Charlie in his favourite pastime.

When I asked him what type of a bicycle he rode, he answered that his favourite was a "Triumph," but that he rode all makes at different times.

He also encountered all the great cyclists of his day, particularly Donnelly, Barnes, Rodgers, Ginell, Lynn, Falvey, Cronin and Goode.

Charlie, popular idol that he was, was often nicknamed "The man with the shake hands." Asked to explain the origin of this, he told me: "Whenever I put my hand out to shake hands with anybody, they would say: 'Ah, no, Charlie, I've been had before.'"

Long distance riding was one of his favourite pastimes. On one occasion he went from Limerick to Galway, thence to Sligo, Enniskillen, Dundalk, Drogheda, Dublin and back to Limerick in five days. Other exploits of his included Killee and back in 6 hours 40 secs., and Lahinch and back without stopping.

Charlie thought nothing of riding 50 or 60 miles to a meeting, competing, and then cycling home again. On one occasion he cycled from Dundalk to Limerick on a Saturday, travelled on to Newcastle West the following day, and won three races there.

Another day he cycled up to the heart of Offaly, and when he arrived there the handicapper said he could not compete, as his name was not on the programme—so that journey was in vain.

During the War of Independence he cycled down to a sports at Kilrush. When he got there he found that there had been an ambush in the locality, and that put a finish to the sports.

Another "spin" was to Fermoy, which he reached as the competitors were on their bicycles for the one mile. He asked the handicapper to hold it up until he got into his togs. The latter agreed, and off Charlie went and won the mile and three, and was second in the "five." And, after it all, he turned about and cycled home again.

A few races Charlie will not forget include the five miles scratch, which he won at Listowel following a crash, in which several riders, including himself, came down. Another day, at a meeting in Birr, during the three miles race a crash occurred, and Charlie went right over one of the competitors' cycles, but luckily did not fall, and won the race.

On another occasion, having competed at a sports meeting at Gort, a few friends asked him to cycle home. Off they started, and when Ennis was reached they parted company. Charlie continued on his own to Limerick, but got a puncture at Newmarket, and having no outfit or pump was forced to walk home, it being already midnight. By the time he reached his destination he was well tired.

It is not generally known that Charlie's brother, Willie, was a long distance cyclist of note, but never competed at sports.

Charlie has stories to tell of all the top rank athletes in running, jumping, weight throwing, etc., he met during his years in the active arena.

His training consisted of cycling all the year round, and gymnasium work, plus a bit of boxing, during the winter months, with an occasional long walk. His parting words to me were: "We had the use of the Markets Field in the good old days and trained there. It was like sports every night, with plenty of spectators to encourage us. There was usually about 30 athletes present, all training for their different lines of sport."

No. 46—James Sheehy of Court.