

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 15)—Frank Dinneen of Ballylanders

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

FRANK B. DINEEN, of Ballylanders, will go down in Gaelic history as the man who sold Croke Park to the G.A.A.

Only the oldest generation of Dublin Gaels can recall the process of evolution which converted a wild market garden into Croke Park—Ireland's national stadium.

In early G.A.A. days, Clontarf Park was the principal venue for hurling and football inter-county contests, and many thrilling games were witnessed there.

Meanwhile the area between the Canal and Clonliffe Road and St. James's Avenue and Jones's Road had been converted into the "City and Suburban Sports Ground" by the late Mr Maurice Butterly. The low lying land had been raised to road level by the dumping of rubbish, the heterogenous character of which was long apparent at the surface.

It was projected as an all-sports enclosure, but there was not a great variety of pastimes pursued in Dublin then. All descriptions of football have been seen on its playing pitch, all sorts of entertainments took place in its pavilion, now replaced by the Hogan Stand, and eventually, in 1895, it became the venue for the All-Ireland finals.

PURCHASE OF THE PROPERTY.

It had fallen into disrepair when Frank Dinneen came along in 1908 and bought the property. He effected improvements and catered specially for Gaelic games and athletics.

Mr. Dinneen leased a large quadrangle in the south-east corner to Belvedere College as a playing field for its students—a transaction that has determined the limit of operations on the far side of the ground, and proved an unfortunate one for the G.A.A.

The Central Council bought the property from Mr. Dinneen in December, 1913. The purchase money, including law costs, amounted to £3,641 8s. 5d.—£1,641 8s. 5d. of which was paid in cash, and a bill given to the bank for £2,000.

When the Gaelic Athletic Association took over the property they at once, and with unanimous approval, decided to dedicate it as the most fitting memorial of all to the first and greatest patron—the late Most Rev. Dr. T. W. Croke. Under this designation it is now known the wide world over as the headquarters of the G.A.A., and the arena of pulse stirring contests in hurling and Gaelic football every year.

HANDICAPPER, SPORTS WRITER AND SPRINTER.

Frank B. Dinneen was the son of the late Nicholas Dinneen, of Ballylanders, and had attained his fifty-fourth year at the time of his rather unexpected death in April, 1916. Born in Ballylanders, he was educated there, and afterwards at Rockwell College. He returned to Ballylanders and remained there until he was thirty-six, when he removed to Dublin, where the rest of his all too short days were spent.

Most people were familiar with Frank as a handicapper and racy writer on all matters connected

with sport. His delightful and informative articles and notes were a striking feature in the "Freeman's Journal," "Sport" and "Telegraph," and there was no greater authority on the subjects on which he wrote.

Not very many, however, were aware of the fact that he was a classic performer as a sprinter in the early 'eighties; and remained for many years one of the select few certified as having run the 100 yards in the level ten seconds.

WON OVER 300 PRIZES

On August 2nd, 1880, we find first mention of him when he won the 100 yards at Kilfinane sports from Harding of Cork, and was also prominent in the high jump. Not blessed with a robust constitution, he retired from the track after a few seasons, yet won upwards of three hundred prizes. In 1882 he covered the 100 yards stretch in 10.2 seconds, which was then an Irish record. At Ballylanders sports he was second in the high jump, and tied with Highland Phelan in the 100 yards. In 1884 he is reputed to have clocked 9.8 seconds in the "hundred."

On his retirement from the track he turned his attention to handicapping athletic events, to become the best known and most capable official then, or since, in the country. He handicapped all the principal meetings of a great era in Irish athletics, and knew all the grand athletes of that time intimately. Very interested in juvenile athletics, he is stated to have given all his prizes away at local sports.

ASSOCIATION WITH G.A.A.

He became associated with the Gaelic Athletic Association at an early stage in the existence of that organisation, and competed at the first big athletic meeting, held at Blarney in 1885. At this time he was easily the best hundred yards man in Ireland, and an attempt was made by those opposed to the G.A.A. to get him not to run, but, like the true man he was, he scorned such meddlesomeness and boldly stuck to his resolution to throw in his lot with the nationalist athletes of Ireland.

At Blarney he won the hundred in 10 three-fifths seconds, and the running high jump at 5 ft. 4½ ins., and on the 3rd June, 1885, at the Mardyke, Cork, he was second in the "hundred" to T. J. O'Mahony, "the Roscarbery Steam Engine."

PROMINENT MEMBER OF CENTRAL COUNCIL.

He competed at some other meetings under G.A.A. laws, but soon retired from athletics as a competitor and became handicapper of the Association. He also became a prominent member of the Central Council, and undoubtedly exercised a big influence in spreading the organisation outside the confines of the county and province in which it was established.

He refereed the famous contest in Dungarvan in 1908 between the two athletic giants, T. F. Kiely and Martin Sheridan, when both men were in their prime and had created several world's records at weight-throwing.

When the split occurred in the ranks of the G.A.A. in 1887, Mr. Dinneen sided with the physical force party against the constitutionalists, but in the later years of his life he was on terms of close friendship with the leaders of the Irish Party.

IMPRISONED UNDER COERCION ACT.

In his early days he was imprisoned as a "suspect" under the Coercion Act of 1881 and when the Ballylanders district was in the thick of the struggle against "Buckshot" Forster's efforts to strangle the Land League movement. He had Mass offered for the Invincibles in 1882, and was associated with Dillon, O'Brien and Dr. Tanner in Mitchelstown in connection with the Shinnick and Lonergan case.

Frank Dinneen succeeded Mr. P. J. Kelly as President of the G.A.A. in 1895, and filled the position until 1898, when he became the Secretary of the organisation, a position he occupied until September, 1901.

Elected first President of the Athletic Council he was largely responsible for the organisation of an Irish team to attend the sports in Rome in 1908 in honour of the Papal Jubilee. He resigned the Presidency of the Athletic Council the following year.

USEFUL PUBLICATION.

In 1906 he published the "Irish Athletic Record"—the first publication of the kind issued in this country. It contained Irish, British and American athletic records, and was a very valuable compilation, involving a good deal of research. He planned a more ambitious work giving a lot of interesting details of the careers of all the great athletes of his day, but did not live to see the project through. When we appreciate the contacts he had and the big figures he met, we realise the grand addition such would have been to Irish athletic lore.

Writing of him in "Sport" just following his death, "H. H." said: "Strangely enough, very little seems to be known or remembered of Frank Dinneen's athletic performances. His career on the field was so brief as to be almost meteoric, but while he was there he dazzled the south of Ireland with his marvellous turn of speed. I have often thought he could have made a world name for himself if he had only the push and the heart, but for a man of his fine physique he seemed unable to face crucial tests if challenged.

"It was in 1884, at Macroom, that I first saw the Ballylanders youth.

A well set up, slightly built, handsome lad, fully grown, he was reserved, if not, indeed, shy, and when he entered our dressing tent all eyes were turned on him, for a few races earlier in the season had heralded his doing, and the day previous, at Bandon, he was clocked for evens in the 'hundred.'

A GREAT TEAM—BUT BEATEN.

"He donned his green silk trunks and got on the scratch mark without speaking to anyone. We were a great team, and were confident of showing him clean heels from our marks, for we had many men of the 10.8 type or so, who, from a five yard mark, where I was stationed, amongst others, with the late Pat Looney (one of the 'American Invasion' team of 1888, and himself a world's record holder for a few minutes at Limerick in the hop, step and jump, where his 49 ft. 10½ ins. was beaten by Dan Shanahan's 50 ft. 0½ ins.—both performances being long unequalled)—to the eight and ten yards mark.

"It was a case of everyone for himself, of course, but before the echo of the pistol died away the green trunks were level with us, and with a dash that simply took away the little breath we had we were compelled to see him running away with the tape, five or more yards in front, hopelessly outpacing the whole bunch. And here again the watches said ten seconds.

"Both Macroom and Bandon tracks were in splendid condition, and the advantage of fall of ground or of wind must have been very slight. In every case a record was never established or, I think, sought to be established.

"The following season Dinneen met and defeated the 'Roscarbery Steam Engine,' the late T. J. O'Mahony, in Cork Park, a result which was reversed a little later in the year at Blarney. As a child of the G.A.A. it was but fitting he should be afterwards one of its principal officials."

No. 16—Dr. J. C. Daly, of Dromin.