

No. 126—LARRY FEORE of Kilmallock

YEARS before the G.A.A. made its impress on the Irish athletic world, the area of South Limerick around Kilfinane and Kilmallock played a leading part in re-introducing the cult of athletics to a countryside just recovering from the terrible effects of the Famine.

Ireland and Greece may, without fear of question, claim to be the world's schoolmasters in the sphere of athletics and physical efficiency. Greece's greatness is recorded by Homer, and there is no doubting how much historians of Greece's ancient splendour owed to the great Olympian festivals celebrated at the foot of the hill of Cronus. These contests, which formed the chief national celebration of the Greeks, had their origin long before the dawn of history, and for some reason were allowed to lapse, but Lyeurgus, the great law giver of ancient Greece, revived them; the gatherings and games soon attained great fame, and have left a very worthy impression on the brilliant records of a vanished, though still potent civilisation.

It is, however, well to remember and to remind some people that European civilization did not begin with Greece and continue with the Roman Empire, for the Celtic race had spread the influence of a high state of civilization on the Continent long before either Greece or Rome was heard of.

Great empires have come and passed away, but the Celt has remained as a steadfast figure in the affairs of nations down through the flight of ages and all the history-making epochs that have left their marks and spent their forces in the shaping of the world's affairs.

According to ancient records, the Tailteann Games were inaugurated in the cemetery of Queen Tailte more than three thousand five hundred years ago, at the time when Lugh Lamhfhada held the sovereignty of Erin. Field games such as hurling and football, and athletic contests in running, jumping and wrestling, always formed a large part in the programme of these gatherings.

Hurling, which still flourishes so triumphantly as Ireland's national game, formed one of the chief attractions of our ancient festivals, and it is very much the same to-day as it was "ere the emerald gem of the western world was set in the crown of the stranger." And the old Bardic tales are lavish in their allusions to the wonderful displays that took place and the different notable gatherings.

Almost a hundred years ago, in 1859 to be exact, the first rumblings of the athletic revival were heard around Kilfinane way, and for half a dozen years many great figures ran, jumped and played for the honour of their respective townlands or parishes.

Athletics were ignored in the decade from 1865 to 1875, and in its stead came the rifle and the cart-ridge, as young men rallied to the Irish Fenian Brotherhood, to strike another glorious, if unsuccessful, blow for national independence.

Around 1876, the old shelves were being ramsacked again for the jersey and the running shoe, and into this picture steps the subject of our sketch this week—Larry Feore, of Kilmallock, who quickly rose to top class and was soon bracketed with the leading 440 yards men in the country.

Larry was typical of the fine athletes growing up all around his native district at the time—many of them "sprung from the soil," great natural athletes of rude health and glorious bodies. They found a new healthy outlet for their youthful manhood and brought fame and credit to their locality on many a field.

Feore, by trade a butcher, was possessor of a pace that was both rare and powerful and quickly became the athletic hero of his native district, and looked the part! and long before the famed Tim O'Mahony made his own of that all-embracing title of "Rosscarbery Steam Engine," the Kilmallock butcher was known far and wide as the "Steam Engine."

That the title was a well-earned one can be judged from the fact that its bearer was one of the most prominent men at all the great meetings of his time, and although these were limited in number and got little publicity from the Press of the day, it is on record that he won well over a hundred prizes during the half dozen or so years that could be termed his heyday.

His favourite event was the quarter mile flat, but he also won many prizes for the furlong, and was fond, too, of the 440 yards hurdles, in which he had several good successes.

The Kilmallock man had retired from the active arena a few years before the G.A.A. saw light of day, but the glamour of the new order of things and the wish to be associated with the move to popularise athletics in a democratic organisation, induced him back into togs to give some fine performances that were certainly remarkable for a man well past his prime.

He competed at the second big meeting under the rules of the then infant G.A.A., travelling to the Mardyke, Cork, for a great sports held there on June 3rd, 1885. Opposed by J. J. Manning of Six-milebridge, who won the All-Ireland title in the one mile flat that season, he took a pair of "seconds" in the 440 and 880 yard events, Manning winning both narrowly in splendid times.

At a very successful meeting in Hospital on September 24th, 1885, he took first in the 440 yards hurdles and finished just behind J. Fitzgerald of Bruff in the "quarter."

Amongst the competitors at this sports were the two greatest of our early weight men—Ned O'Grady and Willie Real.

Feore does not appear to have competed in 1886, but the following year, when efforts were made to break the G.A.A., he rallied to its support and donned togs at a big Limerick County Board meeting at the Markets Field, held on September 11th. The entry was a huge one—thirty or forty competitors lined out for several of the

events and it was an achievement in itself to collect second place in the 440 yards and a third prize in the furlong.

At Emly, on November 6th, we again find him in action and he completed a great career by taking first place in the "quarter."

Larry Feore did not appear again in regular competition but continued to take a deep interest in athletics, and particularly in those who later specialised in the events he was so fond of in his time.

The O'Sullivan brothers, of Banteer, appear to have been his favourite performers in after years, particularly the deep chested, broad shouldered, muscular Harry, who competed and won at all distances from 440 yards to ten miles.

This Harry O'Sullivan was a remarkable man. Picked on one occasion to run with the Cork City Harriers in the International Championships in England, he found himself a party of 150 runners, representing Ireland, England, Scotland and France.

The world's record holder, Alfred Shrubbs, was one of the English representatives. The recognised wonder man of cross-country running at each outing he smashed existing records and set up new figures over a number of distances. No man then competing succeeded in keeping him in sight to the finish of any cross-country race.

The Irishmen were opposed by a strong, close-packing English team, experienced in teamwork, running to plan and pacemaking for each other. Shrubbs, contemptuous of all competition, outdistanced them all but one—the powerful runner from the Duhallow Hills, who matched him step for step over the full nine miles.

O'Sullivan's only ambition was to beat the world's champion. In a fierce race, Shrubbs used every effort to shake off the tenacious Irishman, but failed completely and eventually collapsed in a ploughed field, so hot was the pace.

The Banteer man retired some time afterwards but we were to hear of him again. In 1921, while an I.R.A. column was engaged in an attack on enemy British troops near Millstreet, word reached them of the approach of a reinforcing British convoy. The leader of the ambush party decided to detach a section of his men to intercept the reinforcing party, and this group raced across the hills to the attack.

At the head of the section was a young man in perfect condition and a fine runner. In his anxiety to accomplish the task, he forced the pace until it was impossible for others not in the same physical trim to keep in line. An old man, however, ran with him shoulder to shoulder, without difficulty and entirely undistressed. The section got there in time to perform its necessary work, and the Section Leader later congratulated the older man on his magnificent running.

"That was no trouble to me," answered Harry O'Sullivan, "I once beat the great Alfred Shrubbs."

That grand spirit of O'Sullivan's was Feore's also. They are both gone now, may the sod which their feet touched so lightly, as lightly rest on the breasts of a pair of Ireland's greatest trackmen and most loyal sons.