

JUST sixty years ago Con Fitzgerald stepped into the Limerick Gaelic picture as an athlete and footballer, a dynamic personality, a great sprinter and a born football captain, who fitted into the role of leader as if he were born to the post.

Now living in retirement at Clonoughter House, Glin, Con, at eighty, is still a fine figure of a man. Limerick citizens will remember him for his great deeds on the football fields and athletic tracks, and also as the popular representative for many years of a leading wholesale wine and spirit house.

He was a splendid athlete, who shone as a sprinter mainly over the "100" and "220," and would have made a name for himself on the track had he not loved football so much that everything else was neglected when the call came from his dear Commercials.

FEATS OF STRENGTH.

A powerfully built man, in the best traditions of the typical Southern athlete, many are the feats of strength he performed even long after the speed had left his once flying feet, and the football boots, mementoes of a glorious career on the playing fields of Ireland, were mouldy and covered with dust.

"A man of iron," I heard him called by one who knew him better than most, and I am satisfied there was no attempt at exaggeration in that description.

He could lift a two hundred-weight bag of sugar off the floor with his teeth—a favourite pastime—whilst another regular feat was to "straighten" two fifty-six lb. weights over his head, using only the little finger of each hand.

At sixty he could still beat the most active member of the staff working with him at "vaulting" the counters of the warehouse, and at any other feat of strength the most venturesome could suggest—a striking reminder of the athletic prowess of the unforgettable figure that led Limerick to its second great All-Ireland football victory, that memorable February 6th, 1898, at Jones's Road, when a fancied Dublin side were forced to yield, the score: 1-5 to 0-7 in Shannonside favour.

SET A REMARKABLE HEADLINE.

Con set a remarkable headline as captain, and powerful man that he was, his demands on his colleagues were also exacting.

A fine player himself, and fit to enter any fray although weighing in his heyday no more than twelve stone, he expected the same from every member of his team.

He trained to a degree unknown in Limerick before his time, and any player that hoped to keep in his "good graces" had to accommodate himself to the rigours Con ordained. One of the hardest of task masters, he was also one of the most beloved of leaders, and to his iron discipline and wonderful control of men must go the lion's share of the credit for the successes achieved by that great team under his command.

A firm believer in ground play, he could not tolerate the "waste of time" that lifting entailed, and always insisted on his team mates kicking along the ground, and practicing that method of play until they were able to drive sixty or seventy yards at least. In after years, I often heard him say that the football of his day was much faster than at present, and he blamed the "handling" for the lack of pace now.

THE ATHLETIC TRACK.

It is hard to divorce Con Fitzgerald from football and from his beloved Commercials, but in switching for a few moments to the athletic track we will have Commercials there, too, as companions, for that famous club organised, in its days of greatest glory, some of the most remarkable sports gatherings held anywhere.

They were pioneers of some novel innovations, their first big meeting being held in 1886, at the Markets Field, over which the late E. J. Long was guiding light. The

(No. 51)—Con Fitzgerald of Glin

(By SEAMUS O'CALLAIGH)

sports were so successful and were so well patronised and appreciated by the public that they were continued for three successive Sundays and netted £310—a princely amount then.

Many powerful athletes competed and the members of the Commercials Club proved their worth by winning the lion's share of the prizes. The story of that great athletic gathering must await telling at a future date. Perhaps Limerick may not see its equal again.

HIS EARLY SPRINT WINS.

Con Fitzgerald first moved into the athletic picture on October 20th, 1895, when, at Tipperary sports he won the 220 yards flat event, off the 15 yards mark.

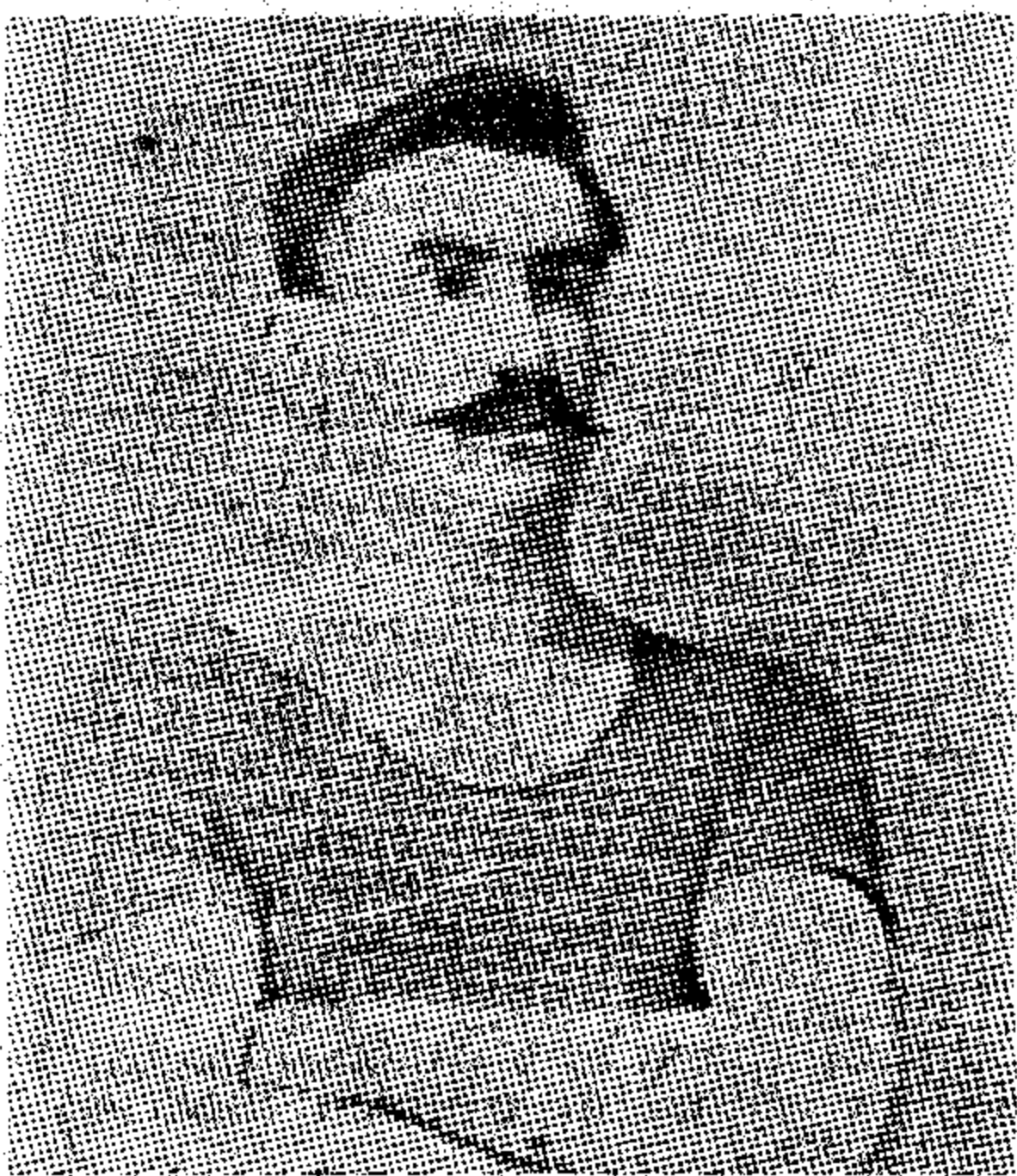
At the Limerick A.A. and B.C. sports the following June he was scratchman in the 100 yards flat confined and won that and the 220 yards club handicap, besides capturing the "open" hundred.

Football occupied a lot of his time in the following years, and it was 1899 before he again found the opportunity of participating in athletic meetings, finishing second in the 220 yards flat at a big Markets Field gathering on May 30th. He took the "100" open and confined, at the L.A.A. and B.C., and was second to D. C. Hartigan of Bruree in the "440."

Running parallel with his athletic achievements were his great deeds on the football fields. He became captain of the Commercials in 1894, and under his direction a rigorous course of training commenced.

HOW THEY TRAINED.

Every second Sunday the entire team walked to Cratloe, where



Mr. Con Fitzgerald in the days of his athletic greatness.

there was a rising generation of good footballers, played a hard match, and then walked back to dinner. Yes, those were the days of the real enthusiasts, when the game meant everything and the pleasure derived from mere participation was rated ample compensation for any discomfort! On the other Sundays Cratloe were visitors to Corkanree, where Commercials trained.

This continued for twelve months and Con proved the value of such methods by leading Commercials to victory in the 1896 County Championship, and disposing of Cork, Waterford and Tipperary for the Munster title. Then they met, in Dublin, the famous Metropolitan Young Irelands and achieved a magnificent victory, which reflects the highest credit on the dashing and unconquerable Limerick men. In Dublin they met opponents worthy of their steel in every respect, holding a splendid record and enjoying great renown with the Blue Ribands of 1891, 1892 and 1894 to their credit. It was a great

All-Ireland final, decided in a fine sporting spirit.

THRILLING MATCH.

The match was a thrilling one, and the Dubliners lost because they were confronted by a well-trained team capable of meeting them at all points of the game. The homesters scored a point before ten seconds had elapsed, which they soon supplemented by two other minors. Limerick then dashed for the objective, and Nash put Campion in possession. The latter player, assisted by Dalton, passed to Bill Murphy, who made no delay in banging in a goal for the visitors amidst the wildest excitement.

Some dour bouts followed, and Limerick had a few overs before Nash raised the white flag for them. Buttiner, Campion and Bill Murphy each followed with a minor, to leave the visitors leading on the turn-over, 1-4 to 0-3.

In the second half Commercials faced a stiff breeze, but they succeeded in adding a point to their total, while their opponents secured four before the final whistle, which left Commercials winners, 1-5 to 0-7.

THE SWIFTEST MAN ON THE FIELD.

For the first fifteen minutes the prospects of the Limerick men seemed at zero, but once they secured the first score they stubbornly contested every inch of the ground with consummate skill, and proved their superiority. They were the heavier team, and though not so clever at footwork as their opponents, they were much the faster combination. Con Fitzgerald was by far the swiftest man on the field and did great work in all departments, playing a real captain's part, whilst Larry Roche, despite his sixteen stone avoirdupois, played a splendid game. The full Commercials selection was Con Fitzgerald, captain; D. Birrane, goal; W. Guiry, John O'Riordan, M. Ryan, Larry Roche, Jim O'Riordan, Larry Sheehan, P. Roche, Albie Quillinan, J. Buttiner, Tom Campion, James Dalton, Bill Murphy, W. McNamara, Jack Murphy and J. Nash.

ENTHUSIASTIC WELCOME.

When the victors returned to Limerick they were received by a huge crowd, headed by the St. Mary's Band, and the utmost enthusiasm was displayed.

After the "All-Ireland" laziness set in for a time, yet Pallas were beaten on a pair of occasions for the County championship, and in June, 1898, in the inter-county competition Commercials beat Clare, but lost to Cork, the Dunmanway Dohenys, who subsequently contested the All-Ireland final with Dublin.

Smarting under this defeat, Commercials again beat Clare and finished '98 by shattering the prestige of the best football team that Waterford ever put on the field.

In 1899 they were beaten by Cork and subsequently by Dublin Kickhams, but reversed the latter decision in Limerick some time afterwards.

RED LETTER DAYS.

The 23rd July, 1898, and 30th July, 1899, will long be remembered by followers of Munster athletics as red letter days in Irish sports history, for on those dates were held two great Commercials sports meetings—the most spectacular ever in Limerick under G.A.A. laws, and they attracted huge crowds to the Markets Field.

At the '99 meeting there were three hundred and fifty entries, including Horgan, Kiely, O'Connor, the Leahys and J. M. Ryan—all record holders. In '98 P. J. Leahy, in the high jump cleared 6 ft. 5 ins. to accomplish a world's record, which, however, never gained recognition. On the same

occasion he covered 21 ft. 7 ins. in the long jump.

Commercials again won the 1899 County title, beating Abbeyfeale in the decider, 4-4 to 0-5.

They opened the new century by beating Shamrocks 1-12 to nil, and Pallas 1-13 to nil in their Championship ties. Knockane held them to level terms in the Eastern final at Croom on May 6th, but refused to travel there again for the re-play, and Commercials got the match and the title, for Glin, who were Western champions, failed to play the final.

In November, 1901, the Limerick men beat Tipperary at the Markets Field, and in March of the following year Clonmel Shamrocks, then Irish champions, defeated them by three points after a terrific game.

Slate Quarry Miners (Kilkenny) beat the Shamrocks in the All-Ireland semi-final but a re-play was ordered by the Central Council, and Slate Quarries did not play.

CHALLENGE GAME.

A challenge game was then arranged between Commercials and the Slate Quarries for Waterford, on August 14th, 1902, a set of gold medals being offered for the winners. After a great struggle Commercials emerged victorious, 0-9 to 0-4.

During their training for this match the Limerick men met Isle of the Seas, Dublin, who beat them by a point, and O'Briens of Cork, with whom they drew at the Markets Field and again at Turner's Cross, Cork.

Nils (Cork) beat Commercials 1-9 to 1-6 in the Munster semi-final at Tipperary, and the next item on the Limerick men's agenda was a County Championship clash with Knockane.

This produced a remarkable series of games. The first meeting at Kilmallock saw Knockane, aided by a strong breeze, leading the city side 1-4 to nil after twenty-five minutes play. They were then disallowed a goal and refused to continue. A re-play was granted, and the score at the end of this hour was: Commercials, 2-2; Knockane, 1-4. For some unexplained reason the Munster Council ordered another meeting between the pair, and this was played at Clonmel under Munster Council auspices, where Commercials won well, 1-10 to 0-1.

AT THE MARKETS FIELD.

Two splendid games were played at the Markets Field on October 4th, 1903, Commercials beating Lees (Cork) in football 1-3 to 1-1, and Young Ireland completing a home double by beating Redmond hurlers 2-11 to 2-3.

In a return bout at Cork on November 8th, the Leaside teams reversed the verdicts, Lees taking the football 0-6 to 0-2 and Redmonds proving best in hurling 0-10 to 1-3.

The same Limerick pair travelled to Fermoy on October 23rd, 1904, where Young Ireland hurlers beat Dungourney 5-4 to 1-7, and Commercials drew with Fermoy, two points apiece.

That closed Con Fitzgerald's account with the Gaelic football arena. For Commercials, too, it completed an era, and it is interesting to find that between September, 1894, and October, 1904, the famed Limerickmen scored 74 goals and 446 points, against their opponents' 12 goals 121 points.

GAVE VALUABLE HELP AS ADVISER.

When Con Fitzgerald left the arena he was not finished with football, for the annual meeting of Commercials, held at 49 William Street, Limerick, on February 9th, 1905, elected him a Vice-President of the Club—a position he held for many years, continuing to give expert advice and assistance to another generation of city footballers.

In athletics, too, Con gave of his best as a committee member of the old Limerick Athletic Club, for long years being associated with the many triumphs of the late Jack O'Grady and the organisation of some great sports meetings.

GOLDEN MEMORIES.

Con Fitzgerald lived through stirring times and saw the rise and fall of many great movements. Still happily with us, he has golden memories of many Limerick days of glory, to which he can add the best wishes of his legion friends and admirers for many more happy years amongst us.

No. 52—James J. O'Connor, of Limerick City.