

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 42)—John Fitzgerald of Bruff.

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

**BRUFF**, through its ballcourt, has the oldest association with native games of any area I know. Nearly a century before the G.A.A. was founded, the sporting people of Bruff were playing handball and there is a stone still to be seen in the front wall of the local alley, proclaiming the fact that it was built in the year 1790. I wonder can any other centre in Ireland beat that? I doubt it!

Of the earlier games or players there is unfortunately no information available but very old residents have left on record that John Toomey was the best player in the 'forties and 'fifties of the last century. He was followed by "Eds" Dunne, Pat McCormack and Pat Moloney. The next generation produced top class handballers in one of the Carroll clan, whose nephew, Jim, made a name in the ballcourt in more recent times; Jim Meaney, whose son, Tom, was also a great player, not long ago retired from the active arena; Bob McNamara, Father Nicholl and Tom Fitzgerald. The last mentioned was one of three brothers—Tom, Maurice and Jack—who were splendid all-round athletes as well as being first-class handballers. Jack, the subject of our sketch this week, won numerous sprint events during the early days of the G.A.A.

### BEST KNOWN OF BRUFF BALL-PLAYERS.

Maurice Fitzgerald was the best known of the Bruff ball-players and must have continued playing for over forty years—a remarkable stretch for any man. Our present-day players or patrons can scarcely visualise a figure with a flowing white beard flitting around a ballcourt and holding his own in pace and punch with the youngest around him.

Neither could the Tipperary man of fifty or more years ago, until their representative was soundly beaten by Maurice.

Maurice, with Bob McNamara, played many memorable "doubles" for Bruff against all the great Munster clubs—notably Tipperary, Rathluirc, Fedamore and Limerick City.

In the 'nineties, his old companion having retired, Maurice took his place with the younger generation, which included Mick O'Shaghnessy, Jim and Dick Ryan, Jim Butler, Tommy Hannon, Peter Moloney, Paddy Finn and Jim Toomey.

Handball attained a wonderful popularity under the influence of these lads, and the court, like most others, which had only a mud floor at the time, underwent a complete transformation in 1890.

The front wall was repaired, and the side walls and floor cemented. The total cost was £140. One hundred pounds, a princely sum then, was subscribed by Pat McNamara, of Cork. Mainly through the efforts of J. Butler and M. P. O'Shaghnessy was the balance raised, whilst Tomas O'Shaghnessy contributed no mean quota by supplying the cement and other materials at cost price.

### MANY GREAT GAMES.

Great activity followed, and it is a pity that details are not available of the many great games in which the Bruff men figured during the early years of the 'nineties. We have records, however, of a "three-hander" (six match) at Fedamore, on June 8th, 1896, in which Maurice Fitzgerald, Jim Butler and Paddy Finn had a five games to three triumph over the best Tipperary could muster. The following month, Jim Butler, Maurice Fitzgerald and Dick Ryan repeated the success over Tipperary, and also defeated a Rathluirc selection. At Limerick, on the 27th August, 1896, Bruff were beaten by Fedamore, but a little later reversed the verdict and won by the odd game in nine after a splendid contest.

In July, 1900, Maurice Fitzgerald, then almost fifty years old, and

nearing the close of an unforgettable career in first-class handball, was beaten at Limerick City Court by the great J. J. Bowles, then setting out on the road that brought that grand city player such handball fame. Had it been possible for this pair to meet when both were in their prime what a game would have been the outcome.

Tom was also a useful ballplayer but I can find no reference to Jack in this connection. However, his son-in-law, Bill Duggan, was a keen handballer, and partnered Tom Meaney on one occasion in a handball challenge game at Broadford, where they had a two games nil success over Tommy Downes of Hospital, then the junior Limerick champion, and Mick Moloney, Broadford, the minor title holder.

### THREE BROTHERS TRAINED TOGETHER.

It is a real pity that so few particulars are preserved concerning the doings of the Fitzgerald brothers during their active athletic days. The late P. J. Rea had this to say of Jack on one occasion:

"There must be many records of poor Jack's ability in the half-mile and mile. These were his main events. By occupation a maker of hand worked shoes, he was also a specialist in the turning out of a splendid running shoe. He lived in a neat cottage, overhead the Fair Green at Bruff, with his two brothers—Tom, a famous 100 and 220 yards sprinter, and Maurice, a powerful 440 yards man.

"The three brothers trained together in a little copse above the town, where they cut out a track, which, to my personal knowledge, was precisely 275 yards in circuit; the trees served as turning posts and they trained each other—Maurice, the oldest, acting as handicapper, steward and starter.

"Their hospitality to an old athlete knew no bounds, and they went to all the local meets, winning all before them. Their best years—Maurice and Tom—were 1876 to 1882—before the G.A.A. was founded, and John began about 1884 or '5.

### A LOVELY STYLE.

"He was the youngest, and ran a lovely style—short stride like Tady McMahon, but fast, keeping well on the toes, and arms nicely raised from hips which he would drop when coming towards the tape. His best years were 1886, 1887 and 1888. I saw his prizes, and can say that between the three brothers they could easily stock a jewellers shop.

"They were also great historians, true lovers of their County and Gaelic to the backbone. I spent a night with them prior to the Bruff sports, and Jack put me on a road walk as he thought I was overtrained. Well, I could beat Quinlan, but there !!! I got what I wanted badly, however, a lovely watch.

"God be with them—they were three great Gaels, three of the ablest athletes of the eighties, and in any cause they espoused for the welfare of sport, feis or charity concert, their influence was felt, appreciated and sustained. Jack did a few meets of L.A.A. and B.C. and won the mile, I think, in 1889 and '90. I saw Tom win at Kilfinane in 1878 and 1879, and Maurice also got the '220' against Larry Feore at Kilmallock. I might mention that, between 1881 and 1886, Larry Feore, a butcher, of Kilmallock, was an unbeaten 440 yardsman; his record was won—no visible training unless following cattle at fairs."

### PARTICULARS FROM LATE

#### CANON HOGAN.

Another great friend and admirer of the Fitzgeralds was

Canon Hogan, who died some years ago whilst Parish Priest of Abbeyfeale. The Canon had this to say to me once concerning them: "There were three brothers, but I cannot say that I ever saw Tom competing. I remember Maurice doing a little sprinting, mainly the 220 and 440 yards. Jack was a distance runner—mile, half mile and occasionally the quarter. He sometimes competed in two miles, an event which was not popular at sports in the 'eighties.

"Jack had something over sixty prizes nearly all firsts. He won the mile at Limerick three years in succession, I think, and Cannock's, on at least one of these occasions had given a special prize for that particular event.

"He ran second to O'Neill for the championship mile one year and beat him the same season at Clonmel from the five yards mark. He lost the championship through trying to pass O'Neill at the turn coming to the straight, and got put out of his stride. I cannot fix dates but I know he was running in 1886, at Limerick. He afterwards went to America and remained there for some years. He came home married. I can't fix the date of his death.

"Maurice was champion handball player, in hard ball, of Limerick for a couple of years. He and Robert McNamara made a good pair and beat all comers in the county and thereabouts, travelling to Rathluirc, Kilmallock, Tipperary, etc. Tom was also a handballer.

"The three were members of the Bruff hurling team after the start of the G.A.A. and when some split came they played with meaneus. Tom was goalkeeper, Maurice and Jack in the backs, immediately in front of him."

### SUCCESSSES AT SPORTS MEETINGS.

Going through the few records that are available of sports meetings in the youthful days of the G.A.A., I find first reference to John Fitzgerald as filling second place at Hospital Sports in the 440 yards flat—the date, 24th September, 1885. Just a week later we find him winning the same event at Kilfinane.

In 1886, we find him second in the 880 yards flat at North Tipperary G.A.A. Sports on August 9th; winner of the one mile flat at Kilmallock on August 15th and second in the same event at the Munster Limerick G.A.A. and I.C.A. meeting on September 19th.

The following year, on September 11th, he won the 880 yards flat at the Limerick G.A.A. Sports, and was again second in the "mile." At Emly, on November 6th, he also took second prize in the latter event.

His 1888 successes included second in the half mile at the L.A.A. and B.C. Sports on June 13th, and victory in the "mile" at Limerick G.A.A. Sports on September 9th.

On the 12th June, 1889, he won the one mile flat (from scratch) at the L.A.A. and B.C. Sports, and repeated this success at the same meeting on 11th June, 1890, also from scratch, his time on this occasion being 4 mins. 45 secs.

The passage of over three score years has effaced more memories than those dealing with the prowess of the famous Fitzgerald brothers, and I was consequently disappointed to find that some old sporting papers, with a considerable amount of data concerning them, were destroyed some time ago. Thus perished some gems, no doubt, that would add much to our available knowledge of a period rich in athletic worth, and I would appeal to any of my

readers who may know of the whereabouts of like material to see that it is preserved, and not allowed suffer the same fate.

### WALKED 16 MILES AND WON MILE RACE.

Only one memory has survived the length of years. It is of Tom Fitzgerald leaving Bruff one morning after First Mass and walking sixteen or seventeen miles to a sports meeting at Rahoon. After arriving there, he completed in, and won, the mile race, and then walked back home again that evening, with the prize, a clock, under his arm.

Bruff was a great centre for ballplayers, athletes and hurlers in other days, and I remember a visit there about a dozen years ago to see the renowned jumper, Mickey Creed, who called my attention to other famous men in the district.

These included "celebrities" like Mick Finn, member of the Kilfinane team that won Limerick's first All-Ireland Hurling Championship away back in 1887. The same year they also won the Croke Cup, and in the few seasons of their greatness that lovely Kilfinane side won 11 sets of medals, including a Munster and two County Crowns, in addition to the All-Ireland successes. Mick was through them all.

### OUTSTANDING GAELIC WORKERS.

In Willie Naughton, Bruff was able to boast of an outstanding Gaelic worker and Chairman of the Limerick County Board for an extended spell. Others that gap the passing years were hurlers Mick Quinlan and Mick Whelan, both well-known players of the Bruff senior side that gained inter-county prominence many years ago; Con Scanlan, renowned with Fedamore, captain of that parish team when they won the Lyons Memorial Final in 1911, and member of the Limerick team that won the 1910 and 1911 Munster Championships and the Cardinals' Medals in 1913; Chris Ryan, a member of the Limerick side that won the 1921 All-Ireland Final, and of the Army selection that won the first All-Army hurling title; Ger. O'Donnell, well-known inter-county player, who won the 1927 County Crown with Fedamore, and the following year's title with Young Ireland; Bill Hogan, a member of the 1928 Young Ireland team also, and Bill Moroney. I could mention many others, well worthy of the honour, but space considerations demand that I call a halt, and so I leave Bruff, and the memory of the great Fitzgeralds that, in the great days of Irish athletic history, kept the parish name high up in the annals of the Gael.

No. 43—Tom Flanagan of Kilmallock.