

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 13)—John J. Flanagan of Kilbreedy

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

JOHN J. FLANAGAN was not alone a great Limerick athlete but one of the greatest stars that ever graced the world athletic firmament.

Proof of this is to be found in Spalding's "official athletic almanac" which shows the various world's records made in athletics down the years. Looking through the figures representing achievements with the 16 lb. hammer and 56 lb. thrown from the seven feet circle we find the following:—

The Hammer Record—1888—J. S. Mitchel 130 feet; 1892, J. S. Mitchel, 140 feet 11 ins.; 1896, John Flanagan, 147 feet; 1897, John Flanagan, 150 feet 8 ins.; 1898, John Flanagan, 151 feet 10½ ins.; 1899, John Flanagan, 164 feet 6 ins.; 1901, John Flanagan, 171 feet 9 ins.; 1904, John Flanagan, 172 feet 11 ins.; 1907, Matt McGrath, 173 feet 7 ins.; 1909, John Flanagan, 184 feet 4 ins.; 1911, Matt McGrath, 187 feet 4 ins.; 1913, Paddy Ryan, 189 feet 6½ ins.

Slings 56 lbs.—1884, M. Queckberner 26 feet 3½ ins.; 1894, J. S. Mitchel, 35 ft. 10 ins.; 1901, John Flanagan, 36 feet 9½ ins.; 1904, John Flanagan, 38 ft. 7½ ins.; 1907, John Flanagan, 38 ft. 8 ins.; 1911, Matt McGrath, 40 feet 6½ ins.

DOMINATING INFLUENCE

The first thought that must strike one on looking at this record is a realisation of the dominating influence men of Irish birth have wielded in the realm of international athletics. With the single exception of Queckberner, all who figure in the above epitome of manly prowess were of Irish nationality and nativity—Mitchel from Emly Flanagan from Kilmallock, McGrath from Nenagh, and Ryan from Pallasgreen.

In these two events which might be regarded the extremes of weight-throwing our countrymen have won remarkable pre-eminence. As we can see, they were mostly called upon to surpass each other, and they seldom found much difficulty in overcoming the challenge of other races.

John Flanagan, Irish, English, Canadian, United States and Olympic champion, whose prowess is well epitomised in the achievements tabulated above, was born 'neath the shadow of the Moors-town mountains—a district in which many great athletes first saw the light.

"ALL-ROUNDER" OF THE FINEST TYPE.

John Flanagan was the grandest figure of them all. An "all-rounder" of the finest type, he brought the hammer record from 140 feet 11 inches to 184 feet 4 inches, and record at slinging the 56 lbs. from 35 feet 10 inches to 38 feet 8 inches—remarkable achievements surely.

Most men would be quite content to rest their claims to athletic distinction upon the above performances. For a period of almost a score years he was the embodiment of proficiency in the casting of weights, in the eyes of the outer world, and represented abroad the material and ability we possessed in abundance at home.

The co-ordination of movement and dynamic energy which Flanagan brought to the throwing of the hammer and slinging of the 56 lbs. were only one phase of his wonderful gifts. He was expert in all other weights; even the classic discus, then retaining its vogue, came ready to his trained vigour and deft hand. He furthermore possessed all-round ability of a high order, as many competitions proved, and he could hurl with the best in an area where the practice of the national pastimes reached a high standard of excellence.

IN AMERICA ARENA.

In America he devoted himself to the most usual of the weight events there, and to a great extent specialised in the hammer and "half hundred". His successes with these would suggest that they were his forte. It may, on the other hand, only have proved his adaptability, and it is more than likely that, with equal opportunities, he could have earned as much fame through any of the other media. The specialities were a limitation imposed by American conditions, not by his natural bent or endowments. In his epoch the practice of the weights was brought to a high pitch of perfection and every innovation found and left him master of the scene.

He was in every respect the successor of Mitchel in the American arena. Their careers partly overlapped and, no doubt, Flanagan learned much from the expertness of the great Emly athlete. He saw the transformation of the hammer head and handle, and introduced the new implement in the English championships. The nervous energy and body control which the Kilmallock man displayed were amazing. Most congenial of companions, he did not seek notoriety or fame, and his greatness struck one as a natural and inherent quality. His athletic prowess was simply the overflow of a super abundance of dynamic strength and energy largely inherent from his father Michael Flanagan, who

in his day and generation was one of the greatest athletes in Munster.

EARLY PROMISE OF ATHLETIC GREATNESS.

Born at Kilbreedy in the year 1868, John Flanagan early showed promise of the greatness that was to come. First he specialised in running and jumping, and in this particular line had few peers. When Dan Shanahan held the world's record for the hop, step and jump, young Flanagan defeated him at his own speciality in the town of Kilfinane many years ago when he won with the magnificent performance of 48 ft. 9 ins. Of course, Shanahan's record was 50 ft. 0½ in., but withal Flanagan's effort was no mean achievement. In the 220 yards, 440 yards and the running long jump, too, in those days, John Flanagan could win in the best of company.

In 1895 he turned his attention to weight-throwing, first of all establishing a record for the 7-lb. winging weight, which is still his, I think. Later he devoted much time to the throwing of the 16 lbs. hammer, and before leaving for America in 1894 was the record holder in Ireland for that event.

FIRST PUBLIC APPEARANCE IN U.S.A.

His first public appearance in the United States was at the games of the old Knickerbocker Club in New Jersey, where he not only won the metropolitan championship in the hammer throw, but established a new American and world's record by defeating big Jim Mitchel, who held the record in that event from 1888, when he arrived on the G.A.A. team that "invaded" America.

Flanagan's championship successes in Ireland were comparatively few; but taken in conjunction with his other performances they shed lustre upon the native arena. It is a tribute to the natural powers of the man that he at once "made good," to use a Yankee phrase, upon American soil. Indeed, he seems to have arrived there at a most opportune moment to take up the brilliant role which his neighbour, Mitchel, had played in the intensive competitions of the land of the Stars and Stripes. The metropolitan (New York) and A.A.A. national championships fell to his prowess quickly and repeatedly. Across the border, in Canada, he asserted his superiority with a champion's sway, and in so doing confirmed a world pre-eminence which could not be disputed outside Ireland at the time.

HAMMER AND LIGHT AND HEAVY WEIGHTS.

He secured the hammer event for his adopted country in three successive Olympiads, and established a record that Matt McGrath in due course took up. The range of his weight events embraced the 7 lbs., for which he can still claim the world's record; the 28 lbs., in which he surpassed most men of his time, and the heavy weights in all styles where strength could combine with active motion.

There are many methods of slinging the 56 lbs., and there have been variations in the form of the missile used. Those in which Flanagan excelled were of two distinct types, which together exhibited the complete qualities of the mover of ponderous masses. They were the Irish style, with unlimited run and follow, of which Kiely was a superb exponent, and the American method, from a seven foot circle without follow. The latter requires a man of massive build and tremendous propulsive force, a man of battleship muscularity and light cruiser activity. Flanagan and his successor in the world title (McGrath) were men of such proportions and vigour.

His first All-Ireland championship was won in 1895—a great year in native athletics—when he captured the 28 lbs. title, which he retained in the following year. This would have had conferred no exceptional distinction at such a period. He did not fail to strike a supreme line, however, for at Cobh he beat Mitchel's seven year old record with the 7 lbs. weight, his cast, 92 ft. 11 ins.—2 ft. 9 ins. beyond the previous best. On the same day he threw the hammer 148 ft. 2 ins.

VERSATILE ABILITY

That same year he contested the all round championship, and his score of twenty-seven points against T. E. Woods, Mike Ryan and P. McNamara ("Dockety") testified to his versatile ability and activity. In this competition he beat Kiely's record with the hammer, unlimited run and follow, with a throw of 145 ft. 10½ ins., and in addition to winning the 56 lbs. and shot he was second in the high jump and hop, step and jump, and third in the 100 and 440 yards flat. So we can see he was no massy monster, but possessed of the traditional attri-

butes of an ideal Irish athlete.

In 1896 he became English hammer champion, with a throw of 131 ft. 11 ins., and introduced the new style hammer with the steel wire handle, an innovation which heralded a rapid increase in the distances attained. During the summer of that year the G.A.A. sent picked teams of hurlers and footballers to give exhibitions for the newly organised Gaels across the Irish Sea. Flanagan hurried with the Munster selection, and it is recorded that he returned a goal delivery from mid-air through the posts whence it came a feat worthy of Diarmuid and the playing fields at ancient Temair. He won both the hammer events at the sports which were also held and, incidentally, created two cross-Channel records—156 ft. 4 ins. unlimited run and follow, and 147 ft. from 7 ft. circle, for which he was later presented with medals commemorative of his achievement.

WONDERFUL SERIES OF TRIUMPHS.

The next year found Flanagan in New York, and at the commencement of a wonderful series of triumphs. As "Carbery" has written of him:—"He revolutionised hammer throwing, broke record after record, was the biggest attraction in the athletic world of America during his period; won the hammer throw at succeeding Olympics, and carried the world's record from just over 140 ft. to 185 feet."

In this season of 1897, he won his first of seven American hammer titles. His earliest effort was 148 ft. 5 ins., and, with the exception of 1902, his winning throws were all upon a lengthening plane until he finished in that competition with the grand delivery of over 170 feet.

He made a throw of 39 ft. 2½ ins. with the 56 lbs. from the circle in 1903, which remains the Irish record, the nearest approach being 38 ft. 8 ins. by Matt McGrath in an exhibition throw during the first of the revived Tailteann Games.

Flanagan's first transatlantic championship with this weight was won in 1899, and he secured it six times in all. His sling of 38 ft. 8 ins. constituted the world's best until McGrath's supreme heave of 40 ft. 6½ ins. in 1911.

OLYMPIC RECORDS.

The Olympics at Paris in 1900 inevitably found him as the American representative with the hammer. He won with 167 ft. 4 ins. As in the American championships, his two later appearances in Yankee colours at intervals of four years produced improved distances, until he finished his Olympic record with 170 ft. 4½ ins. in London in 1908. Flanagan also won the British hammer championship in 1908 with 163 ft. 4 ins., a record for that competition.

Flanagan's career of success continued unchecked and records staggered at every meeting where he competed. He lifted the hammer record to 171 ft. 9 ins., and the 56 lbs. to 36 ft. 9½ ins., and also created a new distance of 207 ft. 7½ ins. with the 12 lbs. hammer.

The year 1904 was one of his peak seasons. He added further to his effort with the hammer and brought the 56 lbs. measurement to 38 ft. 7½ ins. The Canadian championship with the same implement came to him with a throw of 163 ft. ¾ ins. and the 56 lbs. title with 35 ft. 6½ ins.—a new Canadian record. Still a further record came to him with the big weight—64 ft. 2 ins., unlimited run and follow. Another noteworthy performance during this year was a cast of 29 ft. 6½ ins. from a stand without follow, which he improved next year to 31 ft. 5 ins. This was also a record.

In the Canadian championships he was second to Sheridan in the discus, and on several other occasions was beaten only by the Mayo expert. The New York championships in the hammer and "56" were again annexed with throws of 162 ft. 7½ ins., and 36 ft. 9 ins. respectively and at a Tailteann Games organised in New York he won these events with 163 ft. and 28 ft. 3 ins.

IN NEW YORK IRISH-AMERICAN A.C.

His pre-eminence was uninterrupted during 1905. He had by this time joined the Greater New York Irish-American A.C., and in this year, when that invincible combination had carried off most of the laurels to be won in American arenas, he stood a distinct first in aggregate scores with an individual grand total of 138 points.

This period probably indicated the summit of his triumphs. It was during it that he got the 28 lbs. shot 39 ft. ½ in. which would surpass Jack O'Grady's Irish record, but with a different class of missile. His capacity to hurl the "half hundred" remained unimpaired by time, and his ability to win was

proof against intensifying rivalry. He beat the record twice during the year, the best effort being 38 ft. ¾ in. This he finally exceeded in 1907 with 38 ft. 8 ins.

I must condense this tale of monotonous triumph, and skip to 1909, when he twice broke the hammer record with 180 ft. 1 in. and 184 ft. 4 ins. In 1910 he won the metropolitan event with 180 ft. 10½ ins., and made two new Canadian records: hammer, 179 ft. 7½ ins., and 56 lbs., 36 ft. 2½ ins.

He came to the Irish championships in 1911, and won the hammer with a fine effort of 172 ft. 4 ins., and retained his title in 1912 with 165 ft. 8 ins. The contests between Flanagan and McGrath, whose ambition for weight throwing renown had been first stirred by the sight of Flanagan in action, form one of the epic tales of new world competition—time and again each excelled in turn, until finally Flanagan retired, weighed more with honours than with years.

VERY PATRIOTIC.

John Flanagan was a very patriotic Irishman, and during his time in America was a member of the New York Clan-na-Gael. He was a close friend and great admirer of the late John Devoy, and it is interesting to recall that the last letter written by that sterling Gael was addressed to John Flanagan, and included the following passages: "It is one of my pleasantest memories to stand in Celtic Park watching your splendid figure as you whirled the hammer around and sent it flying into space. I only wish I could witness the sight once more. You have done more credit in the athletic field than any other man, except, perhaps, Martin Sheridan, and I always held you as the finest type of the old Gallowglass; you reminded me of the day when they were hurling back the English men-at-arms, winning glory for Ireland. At Croke Park, in 1924, it was a great pleasure to see you again, although my failing sight prevented me from getting a clear view of what was in front of me, but I was able to pick up your magnificent figure from the surrounding groups and recognised my old athletic demigod. I returned to America with renewed hope for the future of Ireland, saying to myself—so long as Ireland produces John Flanagan there is hope for her future. You have no better well-wisher in the whole world than your old admirer, John Devoy."

IN NEW YORK POLICE FORCE.

During his American athletic career John Flanagan was a member of the New York Police, in which so many of our weight champions have served, and his experiences both as an athlete and peace officer embraced many pleasant, amusing, and trying incidents. He returned to his native Kilmallock about 20 years ago—a great figure of a champion. His interest in athletics never declined, and he had always a concern in sports meetings in his native county, where he was ever a "big man" in the eyes and hearts of the people, to whom he personified the acme of athletic brawn and fame.

No. 14—Con Leahy of Cregane.