

GREAT LIMERICK SPORTSMEN

No. 192—THOMAS HARTNETT of Newcastle West

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

THOMAS Hartnett was twenty-four years of age when the G.A.A. was founded that November Day of 1884, and keenly interested in cycling.

The inauguration of the new Association was followed by a remarkable revival of interest in athletics, and in which cycling also had a full share.

The birth of the G.A.A. was by no means a peaceful one, and the early days of the Association were marked by many near violent efforts by reactionary forces to kill the infant organisation.

The Irish Cyclists Association fought possibly the most bitter battle of all against the new order of things—a feud which continued for many years but failed to stem the growth of the Gaelic body, which attracted and held the support of the "plain people," and eventually left the I.C.A. dependent on a few clubs in the larger centres for its continued existence—something similar to the position to-day of the Partitionist Athletic Body—whose activities are almost entirely confined to the Metropolitan area.

SAW THE CYCLING PIONEERS IN ACTION

Thomas Hartnett grew to maturity in an era when the I.C.A. had the field to themselves as it were, and the Newcastle West enthusiast was fully conversant with the earliest feats of Irish cyclists.

He could recall the prowess of Louis Meldon, later a well-known Dublin solicitor, who in the seventies gained the distinction of being the first man to ride a bicycle across the Alps. Hartnett later saw Meldon win some of the early bicycle races at Lansdowne Road, where he also witnessed the cycling feats of such pioneers of the sport as H. M. Wright and R. J. Macredy.

The Newcastle West man was very anxious to test his mettle against some of these famed cycling figures but Thomas, a blacksmith by occupation, would not be admitted to the select company to which competition was confined by the then ruling classes in this country.

INAUGURATION OF UNSURPASSED ATHLETIC ERA

Naturally enough, the founding of the G.A.A. dealt a mortal blow to the pride and prejudice which had stifled athletics in Ireland for so long, and it was not surprising that the noble Irish peasantry, so long denied an outlet for their athletic ability rallied enthusiastically to the new order of things and flocked to the G.A.A. standard to inaugurate an athletic era unsurpassed in the sporting history of this or any other country.

Thomas Hartnett was one of the first to rally behind the Gaelic banner and he witnessed the evolution of the cycle, through the high bicycle and the tricycle period, to the introduction of the pneumatic tyre. In the world class during a period which might be termed the halcyon days of Irish cycling were men like Harry Reynolds and Charlie Peasse, and Hartnett never lost an opportunity of watching the masters, and learning, if possible, something from them.

SHOULD HAVE BEEN DEAD YEARS EARLIER!

It is almost twenty years ago since I last met the old veteran cyclist. At the time he was almost eighty years of age and in recalling some incidents of his career he told me that mention of athletics and cycling carried him back more than three score years or practically all his lifetime.

With a smile he told me that he was often called "a born athlete," and there was humour in his further summing up, when he added: "If they die young I should have been dead half a century ago for I went through the roughest treatment of them all."

Born about fifty yards from the

home of another of Ireland's greatest athletes—J. J. Bresnihan, he served his time in a forge, then a busy place in rural Ireland, and worked for many years as a blacksmith.

GREAT TUSSELS WITH IRISH CHAMPION.

From a young age he was in the thick of the activities of the men and boys of that early era. There were crossroad sports at many West Limerick centres then and open air dances that night and Sunday after Sunday found him one of the hardest battling of the athletes, besides first on the "floor" at every dance that was called.

His collection of cups, medals and prizes was already a respectable one when at the age of sixteen years nine months he competed against McGuinness, the then Irish half-mile champion, in a one-mile event. The West Limerick lad was off the 10 yards mark; all the other competitors were off marks up to 65 yards. Hartnett and McGuinness were together five yards from the tape when the champion fell and the Newcastle West representative got the first of three prizes which he won that day.

He had another exciting encounter with McGuinness shortly afterwards over a longer distance, and after a thrilling race the champion secured a split second decision as recorded by the official timekeeper.

GAVE AWAY THE BULK OF HIS PRIZES.

Thomas filled his house with silver articles won in many fields. He had a grand collection but shortly after retiring from the active arena he interested himself in the organisation of sports meetings in his native district and with a few kindred spirits helped to furnish the bulk of the prizes from their own winnings. In 1900 they helped in the formation of a cycling club but by that time the big lot of his prizes had gone elsewhere.

After athletic fields, fishing and fowling were his only recreations. He was reputed one of the best cyclists of his period and it was a real pity that the disputes between the two Associations prevented him meeting some men against whom he was more than anxious to compete.

UNUSUAL COMBINATION OF FOOT AND WHEEL

The winner of many road race medals, in addition to his numerous successes on the track, he was also a great man on the flat. It was unusual even at that period of great all-rounders to find an athlete competing both in the flat and cycling events. Still more unusual was it to find a man doing near even time in the sprints, being particularly successful over the 100 and 220 yards, and again closing in with the best over the full mile stretch.

He gave us smithwork in 1892 to found a firm of cycle agents. He was the pioneer of the bicycle business in West Limerick, and was himself responsible for the manufacture of a model which proved a very popular machine in the earlier days of cycling. In addition he made his own path racer, which old timers say was a very neat job and weighed 18½ lbs.

A progressive businessman, he kept well abreast of the times, and extended his activities to embrace all the latest developments, being not slow to establish a first class garage when motoring got beyond the experimental stage.

A popular figure also in the social and religious life of that town, he had the great honour of receiving a short time before his death, which sad event occurred on December 23rd, 1940, a special medal commemorating long and devoted membership of the Newcastle West Branch of the Holy Family Confraternity.