

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 56)—MICK HEELAN of Caherelly

(By SEAMUS O. CBALLAIGH)

WEIGHT casting is predominantly an Irish event, as exemplified by records of the native and world arena ever since the commencement of organised competition in Ireland.

Munster provided the big majority of the gigantic Irish weight throwers, renowned men with the heavy weights, whose deeds travelled the world and held pride of place in the record books of all the English-speaking countries.

Limerick can claim the bulk of these southern weight men, and whilst giving due honour to the many other famous men the county has produced in all branches of sport, I believe the weight throwers must get pride of place by reason of the fact that many of them were not only famous at home in Ireland but were acclaimed the world over.

Many of our great Limerick athletes spread the fame of Ireland in other lands. This small nation of ours has set many an example that other countries could, with profit, emulate. We sent our athletes abroad to scatter blessings in a distant land, by fostering interest in a wholesome agency that, next to religion, is the most powerful in promoting the true welfare of people, for that is precisely the principal benefit of athletics, as in the old days, as well as the new, our sons and daughters leave our shores to spread the blessings of the Faith.

I have recalled in the course of this series great names like Paddy Ryan, John Fianagan, Larry Roche, Denis Carey, R. J. Casey, Dr. J. C. Daly, Willie Real, Mick O'Brien, J. J. Bresnihan, Dr. Ned Walsh, Ned and Jack O'Grady.

MICK HEELAN.

I now introduce to my readers another of that great galaxy of Limerick weight throwers, Mick Heelan of Caherelly, to whom his great friend and mine, the late Jack O'Grady, often paid tribute with the assertion that Mick "had the world record in the palm of his hand" had he been fired with the ambition to claim it.

That was a true appraisal of the possibilities of the Caherelly man, who was badly handicapped by the lack of a local athlete to keep him company in training, a difficulty that poor Jack also encountered at a period when stimulating competition would have meant a lot to him and to the figures standing to his name in the Irish and world athletic record books.

Mick Heelan's magnificent form dominated many an athletic gathering of his day, which could roughly be put as the first decade of the century, and I am glad to say that he is still hale and hearty, this tall, wide-shouldered man, who still looks every inch a champion.

It is true that we will not find his name as often as we should amongst our national title-holders, and not at all in the chronicles of records. Heelan had no taste for prize hunting. When a meeting took place within a reasonable distance of his home he competed, invariably with success.

HIS GREATEST YEAR.

1906 appears to have been his greatest year—as he set up his best figures, at least in competition, that season. His distance for the 28lbs. at Kilfinane Sports on June 14th was certified at 37ft. 5ins., and a few weeks later at Elton, thanks to the insistence of the late Ned McGrath, who ensured he was in perfect trim for the occasion, he returned 25ft. with the 56lbs., Pat Ryan of Pallas being second, as well as winning the 28lbs. with 37ft.

The worth of these performances can best be judged from the fact that the Kilfinane figure was only once exceeded, in 1916, in the All-Ireland G.A.A. Championships, when the late Jack O'Grady recorded 37ft. 9ins. to win the title. O'Grady, however, went to 39ft. 9ins. for his record. And the famous Danny Horgan of Banteer won the first G.A.A. Championship with the 56lbs. with 24ft. 1in.

It seems a pity that Heelan did not compete in the 1906 All-Ireland Championships, held at Cork Athletic Grounds, where C. Ryan, of Emly, won the 28lbs. at 33ft. 7ins., with J. J. Bresnihan second, and Con Walsh of Macroom won the 56lbs. with a throw of 26ft. 10ins.,

which was only once exceeded in the Championship—T. Ludgate of Mallow scoring 27ft. 10ins. to win the title in 1914, and our own Mick O'Brien of Bulgaden went to 26ft. 9ins. in 1913.

BRILLIANT SUCCESS AT THURLES.

The Caherelly man was, however, at Thurles for the twenty-second annual G.A.A. Athletic All-Ireland Championships on July 28th, 1907, and he won the 28lbs. with 34ft. 3ins., Paddy Ryan of Pallasgreen, with 33ft. 4ins., being second. Ryan afterwards won the hammer title; other Limerick athletes who got All-Ireland medals that day being Jim O'Connor, Mick Creed, T. J. Aherne and Jim Fahey.

Heelan did not defend his title at Fermoy the following year, and C. Ryan recaptured it, his distance being 33ft. 6ins., with Paddy Ryan two inches lower at the exact same figure he recorded behind the Caherelly champion at Thurles.

The big Pallasgreen man found it third time lucky, at Mallow in 1909, when he collected the crown with a drive of 34ft. 1ins., to which Heelan was second at 33ft. This latter figure was sufficient to win back the title to Caherelly at the same venue in 1910—Mick taking the laurels, with J. J. Foley of Listowel well down the field at 30ft. 4ins. for the runner-up position.

REMARKABLE FEAT AT 18.

We must get back to the opening year of the century to find first mention of Mick Heelan, who, at eighteen, went to Pallas Sports and there put the "half hundred" a distance of 22ft. 3ins. in competition with such noted "sports" as Mick Dillon, Owen Conway, and the great tug-o-war exponent, Jim Ryan (Malachy). A little later, at Drombanna, Mick hurled the 7lb. weight over 80ft., a remarkable performance for a lad of his years.

At Clare R.I.C. sports, in Ennis on July 9th, 1901, he took first place putting the 28lbs., his distance, 33ft. 4ins. The next time we meet him was at Hospital Sports, a little over two years later, when he took the first prize in the 28lbs. at 31ft. 7ins., Joe Leahy being second at 30ft. 4ins.

Back at Hospital, twelve months afterwards, Mick started a friendly rivalry with the Pallasgreen giant, Paddy Ryan, when he beat him in the "28" with a throw of 35ft. 2ins., to which the reply was 34ft. 6ins. At Kilfinane, on August 13th, 1905, we find him winning from another good man of that period, Jack Carey of Kilbreedy, whose passing at an all too young age was deeply lamented.

RYAN HAD REVENGE.

Paddy Ryan had revenge at Bruff on September 3rd, 1905, when he won the "fifty-six" at 22ft. 2ins., Heelan being second with 21ft. 11ins. At the Limerick County Board G.A.A. Sports three weeks later, in the Markets Field, Mick beat J. J. Bresnihan to second place in the "28," the Caherelly man scoring 34ft. 10ins. to his opponent's 34ft. 4ins.

I have already mentioned his fine figures at Kilfinane and Elton in early 1906. He had a "double" at both venues—winning also with the "half hundred" (23 ft. 5 ins.), at Kilfinane, Carey being second in both events. At Limerick Commercial Sports on August 12th he won his favourite event, from scratch, at 34 ft. 9 ins.

He seems to have been content with his championship success next year, for we do not contact him again until the Emly meeting on August 30th, 1908, when his winning figure in the "28" was 34 ft. 8 ins. At Bruff on October 4th he captured another "first" in the same event with 34 ft. 5 ins.

June 27th, 1909, saw him at Kilmallock where the 28 lbs. fell to his cast at 33 ft. 8½ ins. At Elton, on August 1st, he had a double success in 28 lbs. (34 ft. 8 ins.) and 56 lbs. (24 ft. 4½ ins.). His last appearance I can find recorded, except for the 1910 championship victory, was at Bruff on September

12th, where we find him filling an unusual role—second in the 16 lb. shot to J. J. Bresnihan. He also took second place to Bresnihan in the "fifty-six."

HIS MOST MEMORABLE EVENING.

His most memorable evening on a sports field was an occasion when he encountered Dinny Horgan, who was endeavouring to make a world's record, at a big Hospital meeting. Mick had walked to the venue across the fields—a "tidy" distance, and had a few "pints" into the bargain. However, he was prevailed on to compete, so he peeled off his coat and let his braces hang by his side, as was his usual practice. Mick never stripped at a meeting, and never wore anything on his feet—just threw in his stocking vamps. He had eight inches of a "stand-out" from Horgan that day, and won the event by two inches, getting a splendid first prize and the congratulations of his many local friends including William Landon, M.P., and the late Ned Mitchell.

Also a first-class hurler, Mick Heelan was captain of the Ballybricken hurling club for many seasons. Later he threw in his lot with Caherline, with whom he won two county senior championship medals; the first in the 1905 competition, the final of which was not played until 22nd September, 1907, when Caherline beat Rathkeale, 3-5 to 2-2. The 1907 decider was played a few months later—16th February, 1908, when Caherline beat Ballyagren, 3-8 to 0-1. The same occasion created quite a surprise by beating Commercial's, 1-5 to 0-4, for county senior football honours.

Mick regards Jack Carey, Kilbreedy, Paddy and Con Ryan, Pallasgreen, the latter every bit as good as his more renowned brother: J. J. Bresnihan of Castle-townconyers; Mick Ryan of Ballyluddy; Denis Horgan of Banteer and J. J. Foley, Listowel, as the best athletes he met in the course of his years in competition.

LONG WALKS NO TROUBLE TO HIM.

It was no trouble for Mick to walk from his home to sports meetings ten or twelve miles away, and when he wished to go further afield, P. McCarthy, of Ballyhouldane, provided the mode of transport. "This nag is as good as an engine" was a favourite saying of the latter, and often it proved that way when driving to Kilfinane, or some such venue, or when going to Boher or Limerick to catch a train for the more distant places. His companions to many a meeting were Martin Lynch, a fine runner and very strong, and his brother, Thady, both of Caherconlish.

Mick had a brother, Phil, who was a fine cyclist and won a lot of races. Other brothers, Jim, Jack,

Ned and Martin, were well known weight pushers at the local gatherings of their day, and were also great tug-o-war exponents, some of their feats, particularly against the Pallas giants, being spoken of to this day. Martin later distinguished himself as a member of the D.M.P. with their world-famous tug-o-war team.

There is a romance of the hurling field associated with Mick Heelan's marriage. One day, when playing against Croom, he was in a clash with that grand hurler, Mick Feely, and both had a few right tough tussles, but all marked with the stamp of clean sportsmanship. The result was that they emerged from the struggle firm friends. Next time they happened to meet Feely was accompanied by his sister and the Caherelly man struck up an acquaintance that eventually led to the altar.

Herdsmen on the Furnell Estate, with five hundred acres of Golden Vein land under his care, he walked a good ten miles daily in the course of his duties. That, with a few throws in the evening was sufficient to keep him in training. Just as well, for he had no athletes in his district to compete with him.

Now farming his own thirty-two acres of the best of it; his sons, Ned and Frank, help him in his work on the Estate. Both are well known hurlers with Ballybricken, while another son, John, the popular and efficient referee, plays with Pallas.

OPINION OF PRESENT-DAY ATHLETES.

Mick's opinion of present-day athletes is that they are not as good or as strong as in his time. He holds that you want power for the weights and strength in arms and legs, a characteristic that marked all the old champions.

Many will share with him the regret that he had finished his athletic career when his great parishioner, Jack O'Grady, commenced hitting the headlines. Lack of worth-while opponents kept Jack from setting even greater figures than anything he achieved, and under the urge of Caherelly opposition he might have given us records that time would not conquer.

Both were firm friends, and Mick tells a good story of a night spent with Jack in his digs in Thomondgate. The landlady, who retired early, was not aware that Jack had a visitor, and when both appeared for breakfast in the morning she exclaimed: "Yerra, Jack, where did you put that LITTLE LAD last night?"

A most industrious and progressive farmer, Mick Heelan still lives his happy, healthy, rural life on the land he knows and loves so well. He is happy there, a fine specimen of Ireland's race of athletic men in days that are, unfortunately, all too long gone. His many friends and admirers will be glad to learn of his well-being, and will join with me in wishing him many further long years amongst us to tell of the glories of the past, in which, when all men get their due, Mick Heelan must find an honoured place.

No. 57—James Hanley of Kilfinane.