

10 L2 FEATURES

Then & Now

Tom Aherne



Limerick's first win - is one of its most impressive

The All-Ireland victory of 1897 was a hard fought affair

LIMERICK SENIOR All Ireland captains are few in number but highly thought of in their own locality and around the county. In hurling we have Declan Hannon, Eamon Grimes, Mick Mackey twice, Timmy Ryan, Bob McConkey, Willie Hough, and Denis Grimes, and in football Denis Corbett and Con Fitzgerald.

We have written about Mick Mackey and Willie Hough in past columns, so this week we take a look at the first winning captain Denis Grimes.

Kilfinane won the Limerick County hurling title in 1897 with a 4-9 to 4-8 victory over Cappamore. Following that win a strong Kilfinane selection emerged to represent the county in the All Ireland Championship. It included a number of first class hurlers from Cappamore, Ballingarry, Caherline, and Croom. Denis Grimes, (no relation of Eamon Grimes from South Liberties that dashing hurler who captained Limerick to All Ireland success in 1973) proved to be an admirable captain. Denis Grimes was born on August 7 1864 to John and Mary (nee Casey) and he came of humble origins. The opportunities were few at that time and he worked as a labourer. During his hurling days he played as goalkeeper on the teams he assisted.

Under his leadership Limerick appearing in their fourth Munster final had a resounding 4-9 to 1-6 win over Cork in the Munster final. Having won in 1891 against Kerry, an objection followed, and in the subsequent replay Limerick

lost. In 1893 and 1895 they lost heavily to Cork and Tipperary respectively. The Munster success set up a meeting with Kilkenny in the All Ireland final. It was fixed for Tipperary on November 20, 1898.

On the way to the final Kilkenny with a Tullaroan selection that included players from Mooncoin and Three Castles, got a walkover from Wexford in the Leinster final. They had earlier drawn with Dublin 2-6 each at Carlow, but they won the replay easily at Jones road by 6-13 to 1-4. They defeated Galway at the same venue in the All Ireland semi final on October 30 by 3-4 to 0-4. The competition in the championship had been very keen but disputes not at all uncommon in the early years of the Association caused the final to run into the winter of 1898.

As Denis Grimes led his hurling men onto the pitch on that November day one thing was certain. At the final whistle barring a draw, a new name would appear on the All Ireland hurling honours list, for neither county up to then had won a title. Kilkenny had unsuccessfully contested the finals of 1893 and 1895, and this was Limerick's first final. It is fascinating to record that the All Ireland hurling final of 1897 was



The Kilfinane hurling club pictured in 1897. Denis Grimes made history by being the first captain to lead Limerick to All Ireland victory

played as a curtain raiser to a Croke Cup football tie between Cork and Tipperary.

The referee for the hurling final was J. J. McCabe, chairman of the Dublin County Committee. T.F. O'Sullivan recorded that there was a very large attendance, and the game was splendidly contested. Kilkenny led at half time by 2-4 to 1-1, however they failed to score in the second half and Limerick won by 3-4 to 2-4.

Denis Grimes made history by being the first captain to lead Limerick to All Ireland victory. He had some great men in his lineout, including Vice Captain Sean Óg Hanley who played at full back. He has been described as the greatest hurler of his day. He played with London in the All Ireland finals of 1900 and 1903. In the mid 1950s that great reporter Carbery who had seen more than fifty hurling finals picked Sean Óg as his full back on his best ever team. Sean Óg died relatively young in 1915 and a Celtic Cross erected to his memory by his comrades, marks his grave in Kensal Rise Cemetery in London.

Denis Grimes led Limerick to further success in the competitions of 1887. In those days the Croke Cup competition generated tremendous enthusiasm and was no less exciting than the All Ireland championship. The cup was a magnificent silver trophy donated in 1896 by Dr. Croke,

Archbishop of Cashel and patron of the Association, as a token of his support for, and keen interest in Gaelic games. Limerick and Kilkenny confirmed their rating as leading hurling strongholds by qualifying for the final. Disputes and disagreements caused the final to be delayed until July 9 1899.

The game was played at Tipperary and T.F.O'Sullivan wrote as follows, There was a very large attendance of spectators, including the most Rev. Dr. Croke, and a number of clergymen. The Secretary of the Association Mr F.B. Dineen presented the teams before lining up to his Grace who imparted his blessing to the kneeling players. Denis Grimes led his team to victory on the score of 3-8 to 1-4 and Limerick therefore became the first county to complete the double of Croke Cup and All Ireland title in the same year of competition. Maurice O'Regan of Kilfinane supplied the following information.

Limerick played their first game in the Croke Cup against the holders Clare (Tulla) at Tipperary in 1898. It was a month before they played the All Ireland against Kilkenny on November 20 and they won by 4-6 to 2-5. The Munster final against Cork was played in Mallow on March 26 1899 and the game finished all square at four points each which both sides disputed. The Cork followers called referee Pat McGrath of Tipperary "A Bloody Orangeman" and he refused to handle the replay which took place at the same venue on May 21 1899.

One journalist described the replay as "the best since Fionn Mac Cumhaill hurled for three days at the foot of the Torc Mountains near Killarney, a game which ended when the ball got lost and was eventually located in the whiskers of a spectator". A fine sporting game under referee D. Woods ended with

Limerick victorious by the narrowest of margins on the score of 1-7 to 1-6. Cork (Blackrock) with some brilliant hurling men that included Steva Riordan and the famed Coughlan brothers Pat, Dan, Denis, and Jer had hoped to avenge their All Ireland championship defeat at the hands of Limerick but in vain.

A good story attaches to this Croke Cup Munster Final replay goes as follows, A few over enthusiastic Cork supporters in the huge gathering pelted sods of earth at some of the Limerick players. Denis Grimes faced up to the handful of misguided supporters and told them that the rope that hanged John Twist would not frighten his men, let alone sods of earth. It seems that John Twist was a patriot from Kildorrery parish in North Cork. A Limerick jury failed to convict him but subsequently a Cork jury did.

After the 1887 successes Denis emigrated to Wales and worked in the mines. Sadly like many an emigrant of that era he never came home. He died in 1920 and was buried in Wales, and his son John attended the funeral. I wonder is the cemetery known and his grave marked. It would be a pity if the final resting place of Limerick's first All Ireland captain was not known about 120 years after their win.

The following are the players that Denis captained to All Ireland success in 1887 and the majority of them also won the Croke Cup. Denis Grimes, Sean Óg Hanley, Maurice Flynn, Patrick Flynn, Mick Finn, Michael Downes, Tom Brazill, John Finn, Patrick O'Brien (Kilfinane), John Condon, John Hynes, Pat Mulcahy, Patrick Butler (Cappamore), John Reidy, Jim Cottrill (Ballingarry) Jim Flood, Dan Riordan (Caherline), and Patrick Ruskin (Croom).

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