

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 66—JACK KEANE of Castleconnell

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

IN very few districts, as in the three-corner parish of Castleconnell, is it so noticeable that the prominent hurlers all come from the same families that produced the greatest before them.

But then, the hurling tradition is very strong in Castleconnell, and the return of the hurlers to Sallymount, after the winter respite, for their Parish League recalls the earliest days of hurling in the district.

Many years ago an old Castleconnell veteran told me of the great contests which started in Coffey's field, Sallymount, in front of Herbert's premises, in the good old days of yore.

"Hurling Home" was the earliest form of the game, for which two opposite sides of the country lined up without much restriction on numbers, and little reckoning as regards rules or regulations.

Immediately the ball was thrown in the excitement commenced, and over hedge, ditch, dyke, hill, hollow and bog hole the trial was which party should succeed in carrying the ball into their own territory and thus gain the victory. Naturally it required men of great strength and staying power to stick the rigours of the cross-country battle of those days.

The coming of the G.A.A. brought many changes in its train, and nowadays the national game has improved beyond all telling, to make it unrivalled as an athletic test and unapproached from the spectacular view point.

SALLYMOUNT BUNCH.

In districts, as in families, the old traditions are regenerated; and the Sallymount of another generation produced a hurling combination nearly confined to that townland fit to compete with any group. This Sallymount bunch were actually the forerunner of the famous Castleconnell team, which kept Limerick in the forefront of hurling for many years.

The caman men who revived the movement in Sallymount included the Herberts—Jimmy, Joe and Paddy; the Galligans—Dave and Bill; Denny Dillane, Mick Kett, Martin Carty, Mick Sweeney, Dave Conway and Paddy Bourke (Lodgeman). Castleconnell supplied a trio—"Tyler" Mackey, Sean Carroll and Jim Lee; while Clare furnished another three—Willie Bourke, Jim Scully and Mickey Ryan. And then we must not forget Tom Griffin and Tom Brennan.

Time and the emigrant ship put a sad scatter on this manly group of Gaels. Later years produced the famous centre, Mick Danaher; the clever back, Tom Brennan of Anacotty; the resourceful "full," Paddy Vaughan of Killeengariff; and his brothers, Ned and Johnny; Sean Carroll's two brothers, Bill and Ned; "Tyler's" three—Mick, Jimmy and Edward; Patrick Scanlan, Patrick and Edward Delaney, Barney O'Connor, Martin Doherty, Tommy Benn, Jimmy Hogg, Tom Joyce and that prince of goal-keepers, Jack Ryan. Poor Jack was the admiration of the county. Old timers maintain that as a cut baire we will never see his equal again. Many and many a time he saved the game for his club and county.

FIRST IN PARISH TO WIN ALL-IRELAND MEDAL.

These great men were fading from the hurling picture when Jack Keane appeared on the Gaelic horizon. That powerful and plucky winger well upheld the prestige of his district, and has the proud distinction of being the first man from that great hurling parish to win an All-Ireland medal.

That he was well worthy of such an honour can be judged from a tribute by no less a hurling judge than the late Captain Johnny Leahy, of Tipperary, who once said that: "In years to come, when the history of the game will be written, Jack Keane's name will hold an honoured place as one of the best wielders of the caman Limerick has produced."

Growing up in his native Castleconnell, Jack Keane learned the rudiments of the game, and soon became adept at the art of swinging the caman. There was no organisation for youths in his young days as the G.A.A. did not then cater for the minor grade, but the young lads of the district were very keen on the game and they arranged their own matches with neighbouring localities, such as O'Brien's Bridge, Clonlara, Birdhill or the sister parish of Ahane.

HIS FIRST SENIOR MATCH.

At the age of fifteen, Jack went to America, where he remained for twelve months. He actually played no hurling for two years, and his first senior match was really an accident. He attended a hurling game in Clonlara where the Castleconnell men were short owing to the failure of one of their players to appear. Jack was persuaded to fill the gap. So well did he figure that day that he was selected for a Senior County Championship game against Fedamore a few weeks later.

And, believe it or not, his third game in senior company was some months later when he was selected to play at centre-field for Limerick County in a tournament. That was towards the end of the year 1912.

That day Jack Keane opened a hurling account with his native County, and when he retired in 1927 he had a substantial credit balance.

Also very keen on athletics, the Castleconnell man attended numerous sports meetings, figuring in one on almost every occasion that he was free of a hurling engagement. A great believer in the value of athletics to keep fit for other sports, he competed in many track events, particularly the 440 yards the half mile and the mile. His main object in doing so was to keep in trim for hurling, and he got plenty of pleasure out of his participation in these sports in all localities, without winning anything outstanding in the line of prizes.

UNLUCKY CIRCUMSTANCE.

Jack Keane was unlucky in that the bulk of the great Castleconnell man who made hurling history in the first decade of the century were past their prime when he came into the picture. The Castleconnell men, great sports that they were, reached their zenith on a memorable day at Tralee when the pride of Cork were humbled, and Munster honours assured. Cappamore, Croom, Fedamore and Young Irelands helped the Shannon boys on that unforgettable occasion. The check by the muddling umpires in dark November, 1910, when Wexford got championship honours by a point, was a set back yet the boys came back again in 1911, and entered the All-Ireland final, which unfortunately resulted in another muddle in the Cork puddle.

These disappointments naturally had their effect on the Castleconnell stars with the result that the championship honours list knew them no more. They, however, did not go altogether from the picture and, attractive team that they were, they were invited to play in many tournaments. In these they figured with great success and Jack Keane helped them win many prizes, medals and shields at scattered venues all over Munster and often well beyond the bounds of the province.

JOINED THE YOUNG IRELANDS.

The passage of time unfortunately writes finis to every great combination and the story of the G.A.A. is packed with thrilling

deeds and episodes recalling clubs and men who were, in their heyday, the pride of the country. So it was too with Castleconnell, and when the famed old club were unable to put a team on the field for the 1918 championship Jack Keane threw in his lot with the then great city blue and gold combination—the Young Irelands, of happy memory.

He helped the city men to county championship success on a few occasions, two of these county final victories being the forerunner of Munster Championship renown, an All-Ireland win over Dublin in 1921, and a defeat by Galway in the sensational blue riband decider of 1923. Jack, too, was in the winning, with the Newcastle West "pick," of the 1918 All-Ireland title.

A member of the Young Ireland Club from 1913 to 1925, and boasting as club mates such great hurling figures as Denny Lanigan, Bob McConkey, Paddy McInerney, Mick Murphy, Willie Gleeson, Mick Fitzgibbon, Paddy Hartigan, Clem Garvey, Willie Hurley and Jack O'Shea, it is no wonder they were such an attraction wherever they went.

The blue and gold lads hurled anywhere they were asked, and many worthy objects of a national and religious nature were materially helped by them. Some of their games stand out as landmarks in the development of hurling by the Shannon, and the clashes with the other glamorous city combination of that era—Cloughaun, of undying fame—will be remembered as long as a hurling lover of that time lives to tell the tale.

HIS OUTSTANDING MEMORY.

Jack's outstanding memory in club hurling is of a match which he played against Blackrock, the great Cork side, in a tournament final with Young Irelands. And his inter-county "best-ever" he rates the drawn game in the Markets Field against Tipperary for the Munster Championship.

The holder of two All-Ireland medals (1918 and 1921) and of three Munster Championship souvenirs (1918, 1921 and 1923), he won his first inter-county trophy in a great tournament final against Tipperary in his first year "out" for Limerick—1912. He also won important inter-county Shield and medal games against Kilkenny and Cork, as well as Thomond Feis and other trophies in generous measure.

As far as inter-county tournaments are concerned, Jack remembers best the occasion Limerick played Cork at the Athletic Grounds. The game was in aid of the South Infirmary and Fever Hospital, and Limerick won 3-1 to 1-2. The Lord Mayor of Cork, Ald. T. J. McSwiney, threw in the ball.

The teams were level at the interval, 1-1 apiece, but Limerick pulled ahead shortly after the resumption. Nearing the end, one of

the Cork players remarked to Jack: "It's easy for ye to win, for the Black and Tans had us on the run all night."

BRIXTON PRISON FAST.

That was one of the last public acts of the Lord Mayor of Cork, who was shortly afterwards arrested. The Munster senior hurling final also between Cork and Limerick, fixed for Thurles on 29th August, 1920, was postponed, owing to the precarious condition of the Lord Mayor who was on hunger strike in Brixton Prison. As a token of sympathy no G.A.A. games were played during the period of the fast, which ended with the death of the heroic patriot at 5 a.m. on the 25th October after seventy-three days suffering. Sunday, 31st October was declared a closed day all over Ireland as a mark of respect to his memory and as a protest against the inhuman treatment of him by the British.

Jack Keane was twenty-three when he won his first All-Ireland medal. Right half-back was his berth on the Limerick team, where three big men operated: Jack Keane, 14st. 5lbs.; Willie Hough, 14st. 2lbs. and Denny Lanigan, 14st. 7lbs. — a "Hindenberg line" if ever there was one on a hurling team.

Jack's style was very determined and he was a fast runner with a high and powerful stride that carried him through all opposition. His long, raking clearances were a power in themselves. He rarely took the leather in his hand but could hit off the turf stronger and longer than most defenders could from the hand. He had a peculiar cut that raised the leather well into the air, propelled by the avor-dupois that put all he could into a distance effort that rarely misfired.

HOW HE KEPT FIT.

When I asked him how he trained I remembered his interest in athletics, and his frequent appearances on the sportsfield. However, this is what he told me: "In my playing days I kept fit by an early morning swim, evening hurling for about an hour and before retiring a walk of approximately six miles. I also did sprints, as well as hard work in the fields all day at my occupation as a farmer. Before a few important games I took part in collective training but must state that my own training at home kept me fit."

Jack, who cycled to play some of his most important games, had many other sporting interests, particularly coursing and track running of greyhounds.

The best players he met on the hurling field he rates Dick Grace and Matty Power of Kilkenny, who were outstanding ball players; Paddy Power, Ger. Collison and his old friend, Paddy Leahy of Tipperary; Jim Hurley and Michael Byrne of Cork; whilst on the "home front" he had a great opinion of Willie Ryan of Cappamore, and Willie Bourke of Castleconnell, "who was, in my opinion, one of the best men that ever caught a hurley." Jack added: "I could name very many more, as practically every inter-county man then was an expert in his particular position. There was little between them."

This great Limerick hurler is of the opinion that hurling is not as good now as in his time. He then said: "In matches in which I am reputed to have played outstandingly and in fact most of the games of any importance, it was the result of wonderful co-operation and help from some of the great players that played around me."

THE ESSENCE OF GOOD HURLING.

Jack, who still takes a deep interest in the fortunes of his native parish and county concluded the interview by saying: "Footballers make a good show of keeping up the traditions of good football but not so the hurlers. Hurlers to-day, in my opinion, are far from adept in pulling on a flying sliotar, whether on the ground or overhead. Enough of attention is not given to this phase of the game in coaching. The essence of good hurling is when the ball is kept moving by quick striking overhead and on the ground, and not when stopped by a player to lift, as he is prone to be robbed or fouled."

A well-known and popular referee of County Championship games, for some years following his retirement from the playing arena, he took a prominent part in shaping the destiny of many of the Ahane teams that made hurling history in the unforgettable thirties.

And he still has worth while advice to give the young hurlers growing up around him, who may yet emulate the Gaelic field deeds of great men like Jack Keane of Castleconnell.

No. 67—Harry Sheehy of Court.