

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 38)—P. J. KENNA
of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

ONE hundred and twenty-four years ago, a Scotch blacksmith in Penpot, by name Kirkpatrick MacMillian, put a pair of pedals on a hobby horse and created the first bicycle. He did not excite a whole lot of interest when he first got on the road with his invention, but this man, who never earned a penny from his bicycle, was truly the founder of a great sport, and one of the big industries of the present day.

Experiments were tried in France with the pedals on the front wheel, as against MacMillian's rear wheel drive, but the Scotchman's idea proved best, and remained the standard on which the "two-wheel marvel" continued to operate.

It was twenty years later before what became known as the "Bone-shaker" came on the market, the product of a firm in Coventry.

The manufacturers did not christen it; that came from the public, who had not yet taken too kindly to the new invention and, of course, the roads of the time were anything but suitable.

Next on the list was the "Penny-farthing," a machine with a big front wheel and a tiny back one with a front wheel drive, a model which persisted for some years, and had its adherents until quite recent times.

INTRODUCTION OF CYCLE RACING.

Shortly after the formation of the Irish Championship Athletic Club in 1873, cycling became very popular in Ireland, and the athletic revival that followed the founding of the G.A.A. found cycle-racing a valuable and fascinating adjunct that lent variety and balance to the sports meetings.

Coventry produced the first chain driven bicycle in 1885, but from Belfast came the invention that revolutionised the sport, when J. B. Dunlop successfully marketed his pneumatic tyre in 1887.

The battle of the tyres went on for a few seasons, following the appearance of the pneumatics at Queen's College Sports, Belfast, in 1889; and to R. J. Macready, rated the outstanding Irish cyclist of his generation, a lot of credit must go for the triumph of Dunlop's idea, particularly in England.

The All-Ireland Championship meeting in 1876, held at Lansdowne Road, Dublin, was memorable for the fact that the first bicycle races for championship honours were run there, under the auspices of the Amateur Bicycle Club. There were three bicycle events on the card—namely, one, four, and ten miles, and all received good entries.

As already pointed out, the racing bicycle of those days was very different from that of to-day. The particular model in use at that time was solid-tyred and very high, generally 58", thus debarring any but a very tall man from competing in races.

SPORT VERY POPULAR IN LIMERICK.

The sport was very popular in Limerick, and the old city amateur Athletic and Bicycle Club boasted many fine cyclists, amongst the most prominent of whom in the early days were Thomas S. Lowry, J. J. Trehy, Blakeney Gubbins, D. O'Connell, R. R. Parsons, T. C. Wilson, James F. Halvey, A. F. Kennelly, T. G. McKenna and the subject of my present sketch, P. J. Kenna.

P. J. Kenna had a very short but a very successful cycling career, winning five Irish Championship titles—the five and fifty miles in 1892, the twenty-five and fifty in 1893, and the fifty in 1894. He also won the fifty miles Inter-Club test in 1893.

A dozen years ago I had the pleasure of meeting with this old champion at his home in Dun Laoighaire. He told me that he had lived in Rosbrien during his years in Limerick, in a house that is now known as Rocheville, called after the owner, to whom he sold it.

When I asked him for some details of his cycling career he told me that he had a complete record

of all the meetings he had participated in, but that a man had called to the house some eighteen months previously and saw some of his prizes. He was very interested, and said that he took a great interest in cycling, spending a lot of his time out the Navan Road on week-ends.

The upshot of it was that "P.J." lent him all the records, and never saw or heard from him afterwards. He felt the loss of these mementos of stirring days very keenly.

STARTED CYCLING WHEN VERY YOUNG.

Nevertheless, he was able to give me a fairly complete account of his doings on the track, and this is what he told me:

I started cycling when very young, only seventeen years of age, and still attending school. I rode my first race on the "Penny-Farthing" machine in Ardnacrusha, in 1889, fifteen miles, four laps of the country. I finished the race and just crossed the tape, when I collapsed unconscious. A friend advised my father to give me some brandy but I was unconscious for two days. And I never touched a drop of drink since, which, I think, is something of a record, too.

It did not make me give up cycling as the following year a similar race took place and I improved so much that I was made scratchman and the limit man had twenty minutes start, and when I was starting he was coming up behind my back after covering a lap of four miles. I did not win, but I did it in best time, fifteen miles in fifty-four minutes—or seventeen miles an hour—at eighteen years of age.

A little later, I won a fifteen miles cycle road handicap race, my time on this occasion being 63 minutes 43 seconds.

That same season the pneumatic tyre made its appearance in Limerick, and at the L.A.A. and B.C. Sports there were races for both the High and the Pneumatic machines, and I won the one mile event on the former. Others who stuck to the old style at that meeting included S. MacAdam, B. Gubbins, D. O'Connell and A. E. Murphy, with W. Walpole the main champion of the new invention.

PNEUMATIC TYRE REVOLUTIONISED CYCLING.

The pneumatic tyre revolutionised cycling. I invested in a Beeston Humber racing machine, supposed to be the best, which cost me £30, a very big sum then.

I won a number of races in the next few years, including the one and two mile cycling events at the Limerick G.A.A. Sports in 1890.

The following season I opened up with a pair of successes, in the three and five mile cycling events at the L.A.A. & B.C. Sports, but the greatest thrill of my career up to that came in 1892, when I defeated the great Macready, the super man, in the Five Mile Championship in Tralee. We cycled that day on a new track, laid by some one who had made a lot of money out of Dunlop Tyres.

Beating such a figure in a championship event, naturally, turned the spotlight on me, and actually caused a great sensation. Besides beating Macready, I picked up a half-sovereign. When we were about to start I looked down to see if my feet were properly on the pedals, and just under my feet was the half-sovereign. I got off anyway, race or no race, picked up the half-sovereign, got on the machine again and the race was started. Every one expected it to be a walk over for Macready, who was leading in

the last lap, with the people commencing to clear out, when I beat him up the final straight and caused the sensation of the season.

SELECTED ON INTERNATIONAL TEAM.

I was then selected on the International team, and was sent to Birmingham a month later. I went to Birmingham to represent Ireland, and I went there a week before the meeting so I could have some training. You see, I was badly handicapped, as there was no track in Limerick.

In the International race I was last of both teams coming into the finishing straight, and I finished second, being only beaten by half a foot on the post. The papers said if I came a bit earlier I would have won.

Then I competed in the Ten Mile Championship of England and I was up against one of the best men in England—Osmond. He was going for the world's record and had two Tandems to cut out the pace. The race started and after five miles was covered every one was wiped out except Osmond and I. Then at nine miles Osmond himself collapsed, and I finished alone, anyway I liked, first.

DEFEATED A WORLD CHAMPION.

Besides those events I won the Twenty-five Miles Championship of Ireland in Ballsbridge in 1893, and defeated a world's champion—Timmerman, the German American, in a contest that had been declared open to the world. My time on this occasion was 1 hour 12 minutes 26 and two fifth seconds. In addition to Timmerman, E. O'Callaghan (Cork) and A. Watson (London) were amongst the twenty competitors.

A few days later I was at the Limerick A.A. & B.C. Sports, and won the Five Miles Cycle for the Barrington Cup, from scratch, my time, 16 minutes 2 seconds. On the same occasion I won the Two Mile Roadster, from scratch.

A few weeks later I was first home in a Twenty Miles Waterford v. Limerick inter club contest at Blackwater.

I won the Fifty Miles Championship of Ireland three years running, in the Phoenix Park, in 1892, 1893 and 1894 and also the Fifty Miles Club Championship, in which eight of the best clubs in Ireland—sixty-four men competed.

In actual fact I was never beaten in the "Fifty," and never raced after I was twenty-four years of age.

Thus ends Mr. Kenna's own summary of his achievements.

LETTER FROM AN OLD MUNSTER CHAMPION.

In bringing this notice to a conclusion, I would like to express my sincere appreciation and thanks to an old Munster champion cyclist on grass and cinders—Mr. Tom Cullen, now President of the National Athletic and Cycling Association of Ireland, for his recent letter, in the course of which he wrote: I wish to express my very best thanks for your grand series of articles in the "Limerick Leader," entitled "Great Limerick Athletes." It was my privilege and my pleasure to "soldier" on the athletic fields of Munster with most of those great men whose athletic careers you have covered so truly and so well. Great friends of mine in the early years of this century were that great Leahy family—Con, Paddy, Tom, Joe and Mick. Tim only came into prominence at the end of my cycle racing career. What a family of athletes! I should say the greatest in the world as a family—six brothers all in the top rank, plus a sister almost as good as the boys. Then others

of my old friends of those far-off days covered by you were Paddy Ryan, Jack Bresnihan, John Flanagan, Dan Ahérne, Tim Ahérne (I was present at the 1908 Olympic Games in London when Tim won his gold medal), Jim Bourke, Mick Creed, and other great athletes of that period such as Peter O'Connor, Con Walsh, Denis Horgan, Tom and Larry Kiely, Big Tom Phelan, etc. and the Kirwan's of Kilmacthomas, all natural athletes, born, not made. What men.

Denis Carey, I got to know well in later years. I only knew Frank Dineen as a handicapper, and I often started to the crack of his pistol.

Your pen pictures of these great athletic giants take me back half a century and have helped me to live my early life over again. What a pleasure each Saturday night to read and re-read all these athletic achievements, many of which I can recall being present on the dates mentioned. What a galaxy of athletic talent and athletic achievement by what we could call "men from the farm"; men whose only training was their everyday work—ploughing, sowing, reaping, mowing.

While most of those great men have finished their last race and passed their final judge, we still have, Thank God, a few of the old stalwarts with us—Jack Bresnihan, Paddy Ryan, Percy Kirwan, Larry Kiely, Peter O'Connor and perhaps a few others.

Your last two—Bill Drake and Jim Condon—were great friends of mine. Jim Condon was to my mind the finest grass track handicap rider Ireland ever produced. By a coincidence I was at a dinner in Limerick when Jim died and I had to return next day for the funeral. By the way, he is buried in Mount Jerome, not Dean's Grange. Another great Co. Limerick cyclist of later years was my old friend and worker here on the athletic and cycling Councils—Wm. J. ("Joe") Quinlan, of Moorstown, Kilfinane. He was buried in Dean's Grange in October, 1948. Jim, Paddy and Ned Halvey, Dick Matthews and Ned Caulfield were of an earlier generation and in my time.

For some months now I have enjoyed the "Limerick Leader" every week. No doubt many others, too, have lived their early years over again like myself. And what an incentive for our present day, picture going, apathetic youth if they will only read it all, sit up and take notice.

GRATEFUL.

Mr. Cullen has paid a graceful tribute to the grand Limerick men it has been my pleasure and privilege to mention in the course of these articles, and I am grateful to him for the kind thought that prompted his letter.

No. 39—Michael Hynan of Garryspillane.