

MIKE KENNY OF CLARINA

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH) 207

OUR present day hurlers and footballers are definitely not as accurate off placed balls as were the players of the olden arena and many keen students of the game name, as the reason for this deterioration in an important factor of the play, the neglect in recent years of events so popular in the past, namely, the Long Puck and Long Kick Competitions.

Malachi O'Brien was a renowned place-kicker in the golden days of Limerick football greatness, and, in hurling, we had the great figures like Con Scanlan, Tom Hayes and half a dozen others, who rarely missed a score from anywhere inside the half-way mark. If we had a man of that nature nowadays, he would be the toast of the entire country.

From the earliest days of G.A.A. control the hurling puck was a popular item at athletic meetings and some great performances are to be met in the record books. It is difficult, however, to make comparisons, as the weight of hurley and ball have altered materially over the years and in this climate of ours there is always some degree of a breeze blowing, and how much it helped the various long pucks is now impossible to judge.

REMARKABLE PERFORMERS

Apart from the placed ball, we often find mention of renowned players who had a great puck of the ball from the hand. Recent performances by the Kilkenny goalkeeper, Ollie Walsh, who can pucker a ball into his opponents' "twenty-one," bring to mind some remarkable performers in this respect. Here, also, we must remember that lengths of fields differ and a following wind is often a very great help.

Paddy Scanlan, the great Limerick goalie of the '30s, is credited with pucking a ball from one end of a field over the bar at the other end. John Hennessy of Emly, whom many of us remember as the organiser of some great club tournament games, some thirty years ago, is credited with the same feat.

The classic effort in this regard is held by garage owner Paddy Hasset of Cork, who drove a puck out from the City goal of the Athletic Grounds into the square of the Blackrock goal, where it hopped right into the net. It happened during a game between Nemo Rangers (Paddy's team) and the 'Rockies, in 1925.

TRADITION AND STERN FACTS

Tradition credits Cuchulainn with the record long puck, for it is said he pucked a ball from the Gap of the North to Tara, ran and caught it before it fell, and pucked it back again. But if we emerge from the realms of Celtic mythology and face stern facts the best performance we can find in the home arena, off a placid ball, was set up by Tom Semple at Thurles—a distance of 104 yards, with Bob O'Keeffe, of Laoighis, second, with a drive measuring 102 yards.

Mick Madigan, of Rathkeale, put up a great performance one evening at Foynes, and in a famous Limerick competition decided on September 18th, 1910, the result was: M. Danaher, Castleconnell, 94 yards 1 ft. 5 ins., first; M. Feely, Croom, 83 yards 2 ft. 4 ins., second. At Nenagh on an occasion, Frank McGrath won with a drive of 98 yards.

Tommy Irwin, one-time Secretary of the Cork County Board, is generally credited with the longest puck in Cork, with Billy Murphy of Ballincollig, whose wonderful drives often brought the Rebel men much appreciated relief, a close second.

A few years ago, Cork revived this competition and after a very close and exciting bout the honours went to Johnny Clifford of Glen Rovers, with a return of 84 yards 1 ft. 3 ins. One of the Cork old timers present that evening didn't think much of the performance. "I remember a time," he said, "when the nearest man, was ten yards behind me. That was Mick Gill of Dublin; he struck it 90—against the wind. God be with the days."

REVIVED AT TAILTEANN GAMES

When the Long Puck was revived for the last time on a national scale, at the Tailteann Games, the contestants had to drive the ball between two lines, twenty-one yards apart, and this, of course, shortened the distance of the various pucks as each of the contestants had to try for accuracy. The competition was won with a puck of eighty yards—well behind the old-time figures, set with a heavier ball, and a clumsy caman.

The Long Puck contest was introduced to America by the Irish "Invasion" team of 1888, and it soon became a very popular event at Gaelic sports meetings there. One of the finest exponents in the early days was Mick Ryan of Brensha, Emly, who starred with the Emly Blues before emigrating. Noted for his long and effortless pucks, his outstanding achievement, a drive of 110 yards, which won him a gold medal and other trophies in a competition in Celtic Park, New York, roused the thousands present to such a pitch that the band which paraded for the contest played the Emly man off the field, the music almost drowned by the salvos of cheering.

Long puck thrills were a feature of Gaelic gatherings at Celtic Park, and some of the best hurlers who ever left the Emerald Isle tried their hand there, some of them putting up figures well in excess of anything existing in the home arena.

MICK KENNY OF CLARINA

Into this highly competitive field, somewhere in the 'twenties, stepped a brawny son of Limerick, a lad who had figured in his youth on Limerick hurling fields with the boys from Ballybrown, a youth nurtured in the hurling tradition in a district where the game always held sway and was particularly strong as Mike Kenny grew to manhood.

Mike's loss to the home club, when he left to seek fame and fortune in the Land of the Free, was softened by the news of his successes in America, triumphs that brought his native Clarina much credit and renown.

On many occasions he made the welkin ring in Celtic Park, but he reserved his greatest effort to make memorable a historic day in the story of the grand venue—a farewell fanfare as it were—a last spectacular drive that raised world record figures on the day old Celtic Park closed its gates for ever on the great men and the great events that will live always in the athletic story of America.

I conclude with an extract from an Irish-American newspaper of August 16th, 1930, dealing with that unforgettable occasion.

"Since the golden age of Ireland's athletic greatness the name of Limerick has been synonymous with doughty deeds and valorous wonders on that fair field of Gaelic pastimes, where the ancient Spartan theory, the survival of the fittest, is vividly brought to action, where superb speed, skill and stamina of the competitors are the factors alone that bring victory.

"So true to the proud heritage of the Gael, remembering the glories of Kincora, the people of Limerick at home and abroad will be proud and glad to learn that

in a great competition held at the annual athletic carnival of the Tipperary Men's Association, which marked the closing of the renowned Celtic Park, Mike Kenny, a stalwart son of Limerick, from historic Clarina, established what is believed to be the world's record by raising and striking the hurling ball a distance of one hundred and twenty two yards.

"Twenty-four tried for the 'long shot,' the first prize going to officer Mike Kenny of Traffic B, with a record drive of 122 yards. It is doubtful if this mark has ever been equalled. Jim O'Mara, the flashy Tipperary hurler, got second prize with 118 yards.

THRILLING CONTEST

"It was a thrilling contest for supremacy where the best caman wielders in America tried conclusions, the victory of Kenny bringing round after round of cheers. His perfect swing of the ash has won prestige for Gaelic athletics so desirable in this age of progress.

"Mike's brawny arms and sturdy frame, like an Irish Round Tower, was built up by his boyhood training as a blacksmith in his father's forge. He is one of New York's finest police officers, attached to Traffic Squad, a worthy exponent of the Gaelic code, a famous hurler, a splendid fellow, well and widely known, New York is proud of Mike Kenny.

"Celtic Park is but a memory—No more we'll hear the crooked ash

Resound through Laurel Hill
Or see again the fiery dash
That gave the fans a thrill.

"But though past is all its fame,
The hero of its passing is Mike Kenny."