

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 14)—CON LEAHY of Cregane

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

CON LEAHY was the eldest member of the world-famous family of jumpers and had a distinguished athletic career. Somewhat eclipsed in his early competitions by his brilliant brother, Paddy, by careful training this cool, lithe, swarthy athlete worked up his form till in 1901 he captured the G.A.A. high jump championship with 5 ft. 11½ ins. He followed this up with a sequence, winning the event in 1902 with 6 ft., in 1903, with 6 ft. 2½ ins., in 1904 with 6 ft. 2 ins. and in 1906 with 6 ft. In 1905 he won the English championship with 5 ft. 10 ins., and also established a sequence, winning in 1906 with 6 ft., in 1907 with 6 ft., and in 1908 with 5 ft. 11 ins.

Con was a successful competitor at the Olympic Games held in Athens in 1906, where he won the high jump from a field of fifty-seven competitors, in broiling sun, the competition lasting eleven hours—truly a wonderful feat of endurance.

In 1905 Con Leahy represented Ireland in the annual athletic contest against Scotland, and won the high jump at 6 ft. 1 in. and the long jump at 22 ft. 5½ ins., while he "walked over" for the I.A.A.A. championships of that year with 6 ft. and 20 ft. 10 ins., respectively.

In 1902 he won the G.A.A. long jump championship with 22 ft. 2 ins., and the hop, step and jump championship of the same year at 46 ft. 3 ins., also winning the standing hop, step and jump championship of 1905 with 31 ft. 3 ins.

### WON 220 PRIZES AND MEDALS.

In all, Con Leahy won two hundred and twenty prizes and medals during his athletic career, and it must be remembered that he would have added many other victories to his list but he was up against his brother, Paddy, one of the greatest jumpers of all time, and other renowned athletes, including the famed Peter O'Connor, who was also a wonderful jumper, and a world's record holder in his favourite event, the long jump.

Con Leahy was born in Cregane, the parish of Colman's Well, in the County of Limerick in 1876. Of a sensitive and retiring disposition, he grew up a shy schoolboy, fond of study and seclusion, and it was only the inherent lure of the sports field that brought him into contact with the crowds that were later to prove such admirers of one of the greatest of a grand galaxy of Limerick athletes.

His love of the arena gradually melted down his reserve, his insularity became less and less noticeable and he was soon recognised as one of the leading authorities on all matters connected with athletics, his knowledge of the performances of the great masters of the sports field, records, dates and like data, being widespread.

### ASTOUNDED HIS SCHOOL MATES.

First indication of the talent that was to prove itself in such ample measure later, was revealed to a group of astounded school mates when Con, at sixteen, was returning home one evening in early summer, from Rath Luirc C.B.S., where he was studying hard for an examination.

His pals, like most youths of his day, were athletically minded and

on this particular occasion were swapping rather "tall" stories in recounting marvellous things they had done in jumping and other athletic pursuits.

As they approached "Mannix's gate," which stood 5 ft. 8 ins. high, spiked on top, one of them asserted that he had jumped it a few evenings previously.

It was generally admitted as a grand performance, and the youthful boaster was implored to do it again "only once" for the edification of the Company.

All appeals naturally got the "deaf ear" but meanwhile, Con had laid his bundle of books on the roadside, and buttoning his coat, bade the other chaps stand back.

They thought he was carrying on the joke when he began to tiptoe at the other side of the road, but when he came to the centre with his pale face a shade whiter, and set in lines of certain determination, he gathered speed, and with a mighty bound was over the forbidding-looking spikes and surveying his pals from the other side.

### A DARING FEAT.

It was one of the most daring feats that could be imagined and the hero who did it was the least concerned of the bunch of boys, whose hilarity of a moment before was swiftly changed to awe and wonder and silent respect for the quietest and least boastful of them all.

Like most promising athletes, Con was slow to put on the war-paint, because his early performances were of a mediocre character, but like the proverbial snail that got to Jerusalem by the sheer dint of perseverance, Con commenced to creep before he could walk, and first stripped at Kilfinane on August 15th, 1895, where he was second in the half mile, competing against some well-known performers. He travelled to Kildorrery in the same year, and secured to his credit two seconds, in the half and quarter, respectively, after which date he repaired to Cobh, where in a brilliant race for the half mile he beat the renowned Gerald Irvine for first place.

This gave him a new impetus, and in the following year, at Queen's College, Cork, he tied with Irvine for second place in the half-mile, both being outpaced by the celebrated T. R. Byrne. To show the extraordinary self-will and dogged perseverance of this new champion athlete, he went to five principal meetings in that year, and invariably only captured seconds in the high and long jumps and a now and then second in the 120 yards hurdles.

### SET THE BALL ROLLING.

In 1897 he set the ball rolling by picking up two more seconds in the long and high jumps, beating Tom Woods, the previous champion, at the Limerick A.A. meeting held in June. Kilmallock fixture was held in July and here

he got one second to his brother, Paddy, in the long jump, and cleared the bar at 5ft. 9ins. in the high jump to take first place. The same day he added to his laurels another second in the hurdles.

From that on he never looked back, and quickly developed into a consistent performer of a high class. I have already mentioned his main championship successes, and need only add that his highest jumps were near approaches to the then existing world's records. Noteworthy performances of his included: Running high jump, 6 ft. 4 7/8 ins. at Adare, 1908; 6 ft. 4½ ins. at Errill, 1901; 6 ft. 4½ ins. at Templemore and Limerick, 1904; running long jump, 23 ft. 4 ins. at Listowel, 1901; running hop, step and jump, 49 ft. 7 ins. at Ashford and Banteer, 1902; 880 yards, won at Cobh, 1895; 120 yards hurdles, won at Kilmallock and Midleton, 1898; pole jump, 9 ft. 7 ins., at Broadford, 1901; 16 lb. hammer, 16 ft., at Broadford, 1901.

### HISTORIC OCCASION.

When the American, Jones, won the high jump championship at the Third Olympiad, neither Con nor Paddy was a competitor, but both met him on a historic occasion in 1900 at the Mardyke, Cork. There was a big entry for the event, and at 5 ft. 10 ins. all the small fry were eliminated, and only the redoubtable brothers and the American remained. Jones failed at 6 ft. 1 in.; Con went half an inch higher, and Paddy sailed over the bar at 6 ft. 2½ ins. Never was there such enthusiasm or such an ovation given to a winner. The crowd went mad, and cheer after cheer echoed from the field and away.

In 1902 Con was as consistent as ever, and only on three occasions at twenty-three recorded meetings was he under the six-foot mark in the high jump, and several times he passed 49 ft. in the hop. Every year from this forward to 1908 he accounted for the high jump in the Ireland v. Scotland encounter, but the crowning triumph of his life was to come at the Olympic Games at Athens in 1906, when Ireland was represented by Con Leahy, Peter O'Connor of Waterford, and J. P. Daly of Galway. Con won the high jump at 5 ft. 10½ ins., Peter the hop, step and jump, and was second in the long jump, and Daly drew the standard medal in the five miles flat.

They attended the games entirely at their own expense except that they were provided with lovely green blazers bound with gold braid around the sides, cuffs, collar and lapels, with a gold shamrock on left breast, and green caps to match and shamrock on the front, also with green flags—the recognised national flag of Ireland at the time, bearing the sunburst and the words "Eire Go Brath" in gold—and measuring about 6 feet by 4 feet.

### REFUSAL TO ACKNOWLEDGE BRITISH FLAG.

The English team competing at the Games tried to class the victories achieved by the great Irishmen as British, but the worthy trio refused to acknowledge the British flag, and presented the flag of their country to the King of Greece, whose function it was to hoist the flag of victory for the representatives of the winning nations and present the olive crown to each victor.

It was a bold bid for international recognition, but it did not succeed as far as the Greek Ruler was concerned, for he refused to recognise Ireland as an independent nation and knew of it only as a dependency of Britain, having no Parliament of her own.

The King's son, Prince George, had chief control of the games, and a letter was addressed to him objecting to the three Irishmen being described as British in the published programme of the athletic events, and stating emphatically that they represented Ireland, that their expenses were paid by themselves and that they strongly objected, if successful, to any wins being recorded in any way as points for England. The letter came before the Olympic Committee, where, on a vote, the British scored a victory, the Greek delegates supporting the claim of the former that Ireland was a conquered nation.

### SENSATIONAL DISPLAY.

However, the Irishmen did not let the matter rest there, and when the Union Jack was hoisted to denote the victory of Peter O'Connor in the hop, step and jump, the Waterford man, an accomplished gymnast, quickly climbed a twenty-foot post and remained aloft for some time waving his large green flag, with Con waving his from the ground underneath, all the time standing guard with Daly to prevent any person interfering with O'Connor, whose rapid climb and protest caused a great sensation.

The English were furious, but the American Press gave the incident much publicity, a typical comment reading: "Who talks of degenerates—England supreme in hop, step and jump forms a large headline in one of the British morning papers. When the news from Athens is so glorious as this, we may well overlook the fact that the 'Englishman' who was 'supreme' is named O'Connor and comes from Waterford."

Con Leahy was second to O'Connor in that memorable hop, step and jump event.

### IN PRIVATE LIFE.

In private life, Con was quiet, silent, honourable and deeply religious. He worked for some years in the County Council offices in Cork, where his graceful personality won many sincere friends.

Later he emigrated to the U.S.A. but New York life did not suit his health. A serious attack of pneumonia left him weak and from this he never really recovered. His final illness was brief, and his untimely death in December, 1921, came as a great shock to his legion admirers. Hundreds of floral tributes at his burial testified to the esteem in which the great athlete and sterling Irishman was held.

No. 15—Frank Dinneen, of Ballinlanders.