

**N**EWs of the passing of Joe Leahy forces me to interrupt this series to pay collective tribute to the greatest family of athletes the world has known—the famed Leahys of Cregane.

Joe Leahy was a dear friend, and I was a regular visitor to Cregane in days when the happy homestead was the meeting place of many who were famous in a great spell of Irish athletics.

Many a pleasant evening I spent there, and many an interesting one, too, as we went over old cuttings and stories of the halcyon athletic days—the company usually including Tom, Jack, and Joe Leahy, with Larry Roche also present on a few occasions to add his quota to the tales of the great men that graced the arena in Ireland's greatest ever athletic spell.

Much of the material for this series was gathered at Cregane, for one had only to mention a Limerickman who excelled in any branch of sport to draw forth a fund of information concerning him from one or other of the brothers, whose knowledge of athletic events and the deeds of the great figures of their day was unsurpassed anywhere.

#### NOSTALGIC MEMORIES.

Joe's death will bring nostalgic memories to the remnants of the old school of Irish athletic followers, unfortunately getting fewer every day, who can recall the times when the Leahys, of whom there were seven brothers, reigned supreme on athletic fields, both in Ireland and abroad.

Nobody can challenge their greatness, and no matter what figures improved methods and modern approach may induce in the years ahead, the fact remains that no family has ever lived that could boast the athletic talent that first saw light of day under the Cregane roof.

Ireland had no worries concerning international recognition in the heyday of the Leahys, for like Maurice Davin's great challenge to the world's best in the infant days of the G.A.A.—a challenge which found no man fit to answer—the Leahys could stand in any stadium of the world and issue a challenge to any other six brothers anywhere. The Cregane men could more than hold their own not alone in one or two or three events, but in all that came under the heading of athletics, and, more remarkable still, could produce a sister, every bit as well endowed, and capable of maintaining her mastery in any company.

#### STAR ATTRACTION AT EVERY SPORTS.

Study the Leahy challenge in its implications and realise that the cold reading of facts and figures prove beyond question of doubt that the world over could not then, or since, produce a family with anything like the athletic capabilities of the little domestic circle of Cregane—humble, simple and unpretentious Gaels.

The Leahys often brought home a dozen to twenty prizes from a meeting. They went everywhere, and were the star attraction at every sports.

They were not "pot hunters." They went for the pure love of athletics, and no greater proof of this can be found than in the records we have of the occasions when they gave ten or twelve of their choicest prizes, won in the classiest of Ireland's athletic meetings, to a sports committee in order to help on the cause.

#### HEIRLOOMS THAT NO MONEY COULD PURCHASE.

And if many of the grand trophies the brothers won are missing from Cregane, it is indication of the affection in which they were held, that several who won the prizes with which the Leahys endowed so many meetings retained these as heirlooms in their household, which no money could purchase.

The death of Joe Leahy removes from Cregane the last of the grand family of brothers. There

lover of horses, and rarely bothered about athletics, although it was an open secret he could be as good as his more famous brothers if he only laid his mind down to it. I think he realised that in after years, and sometimes regretted not having developed his undoubted talents as the others did.

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Only one of the seven now remains—Mick, who lives in Mallow, so the ancestral home is lonely, bereft of the last remaining male link with its days of great glory.

Every inch of the house and farm at Cregane is packed with memories for the old timers, and any enthusiast who visited there in the heyday of its glory will remember the unpretentious little field where the renowned brothers practised—I will not say trained, because in the present day acceptance of the word it could not be called training.

#### FEATS TO MAKE THE WORLD GASP.

In this modest enclosure, however, feats were performed that would make the world gasp with wonder. The brothers brought out the best in each other in friendly rivalry and it is a well accepted fact that they performed "in their own backyard" in a manner that would do credit to an Olympic gathering. And many a world's title was won several inches less than the figures that were commonplace in the shade of the grim and solid looking, if ruined, old castle of Cregane, by the banks of the winding Maigue.

In looking back over many meetings with the Leahys, one occasion comes to mind with particular poignancy. It is of an evening after a great sports gathering at the Markets Field some thirty years ago.

The company included Joe, Jack and Tom Leahy. Other grand figures present were John Flanagan, Larry Roche, Jack O'Grady, Denis Carey, Matt McGrath, Tom Kiely, Davy O'Connell, John Kelly, N.T.; Dr. C. B. Molony, Con Fitzgerald, Willie Drake and P. J. Rea.

It is sad to think that all of that grand galaxy have passed from this world and athletics are certainly the poorer that they are no more.

#### MEMORABLE EVENING.

That memorable evening will never be forgotten by those lucky enough to have been present. The whole field of Irish athletics was critically reviewed by a jury well fitted for the task, but it was when they turned to reminiscences that the real pleasures of the evening were unfolded.

From the Davins right down to the Leahys, the prowess of the great men who shone in the youthful days of the G.A.A. were discussed. We heard of the difficulties which beset the G.A.A. at every turn; the efforts made to break the organisation in its infancy; the great battles waged to control the Association after it became evident it was going to succeed; the gradual emergence of hurling and football in popular favour and the subsequent decline of athletics. All these, and a hundred other topics, were avidly debated during the most interesting few hours I can remember in any company.

#### MANY OF THEM WERE WORLD BEATERS.

Every man of that unforgettable group had contributed something really big to the Ireland of his day, if alone in the part he played in the athletic sphere. Many, indeed, were world beaters who raised the Irish standard high in almost every country of the world, as surely as the great Con Leahy did, in the company of Peter O'Connor and J. P. Daly, at the great 1906 Olympic games in Athens.

Con Leahy had to jump thirty-six times in sweltering heat before winning the high jump title on that unforgettable occasion and

Peter O'Connor in the 100, step and jump. Daly drew the honours in the five miles flat.

The Irishmen paid their own expenses to Athens, but when they won the British tried to claim the victories as theirs, maintaining Ireland was a subject State.

The protest the Irishmen made got headlines in the world's press of the time, and I will tell the story of this in next week's issue.

18th August 1956

## GREAT LIMERICK SPORTSMEN

# No. 180—THE LEAHYS of Cregane

**L**AST week we left Con Leahy at Athens, on the occasion of the 1906 Olympic Games.

We saw how he had to jump thirty-six times in all before winning the high jump event. The weather was very warm at the time, and the first half of the competition occupied the hours between six and nine of the evening. After eighteen jumps, Con's feet were roasting from the unfamiliar cinders. But he met good friends in some members of the American team, and after the contest that evening they took him in hands. He was brought to their headquarters, given a bath to open the pores, was then covered completely with olive oil, and provided with a bottle of stout as the only refreshment before retiring to rest for the night. In bed he was saturated with oil, and slept the sleep of the just with only a sheet as covering.

### EARLY RESUMPTION.

The jumping was resumed at 6 a.m. the following morning. Con jumped out of bed like a kangaroo, and when all the other jumpers were stiff, he was in the best of trim. He was over the bar on eighteen further occasions before 9 a.m. to win the event at 5 feet 11½ inches. The laths had been raised a quarter of an inch for every effort, and Con was as fresh as a daisy at the end. In fact, he was anxious to continue further but would not be allowed—the lath being removed when the next best effort was exceeded—a procedure that was also adopted then at the English championships.

### FLAG INCIDENT.

From Peter O'Connor, of Waterford, still happily with us, I got some years ago, the full, interesting story of the incident concerning the flag, which aroused such controversy at the time. Here is what he told me:

"Con Leahy and myself were supplied 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 with shamrock on the front; also with green flags, with a gold harp, and the words 'Eire go Brath' measuring about six feet by four feet. I still have the three of them.

"We left Ireland on April 15th and travelled via London, Newhaven, Dieppe, Paris, Turin, Brindisi, Corfu and Patras to Athens, arriving on April 20th, after four days and three nights confined in a train. The competitions opened on April 22nd, so we had very little time for rest or training.

### DESCRIBED ON PROGRAMME AS BRITISH.

"On arrival, I found that Leahy, Daly and myself were described as British in the published programme of the athletic events. On the advice of the President of the American Athletic Association, I wrote to the Olympic Committee protesting against this. I have a copy of that letter making a strong protest and stating emphatically that we represented Ireland, that our expenses were paid by Irishmen and that we objected, if any were successful, to our wins being recorded in any way as points for England.

"My letter came before the Olympic Committee, but on a vote the British scored a victory, the Greek delegates supporting the

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claim of the former that Ireland was then part of the United Kingdom.

### ATTITUDE STRONGLY RESENTED.

"The British judges strongly resented our attitude and refused to even be present when the long-jump contest took place. I was robbed deliberately in consequence of the verdict, through Halpin, the American trainer, acting as sole judge in measuring each competitor's jump.

"A Mr. James B. Connolly, who was a competitor in the running hop, and won that event at the previous Olympic Games in 1896 in Athens, came to me after each competitor had taken his first jump, Halpin, as sole measurer and judge, not announcing the distance and said: 'Mr. O'Connor, you have no chance of winning with Halpin in charge.'

"It had not occurred to me that the latter was the trainer of the American team; in fact, I never saw the man before. I got very excited, made a strong protest to Halpin, and he offensively said: 'I am a duly appointed judge and am entitled to act.' I then spoke to Prince George of Greece, informing him of my complaint, but got no satisfaction.

"I then found the two English judges who should have acted, but they curtly informed me that owing to my letter repudiating England they would not act.

### SIMPLY FURIOUS.

"I was simply furious and I got Con Leahy, Daly and Mr. Connolly watch the distance of the American, Prinstein, as compared with mine in our remaining jumps. They took up positions opposite the landing pit. My third jump was distinctly far beyond Prinstein's, but was declared by Halpin to be foul and was not measured.

"I asked how it was foul, as in those days it meant a sprained ankle if your toe went beyond the board take-off, and I never fell back after landing, but pitched forward on my hands.

"Halpin then announced, after consulting with a Greek official, that Prinstein, another American and I had accomplished the best distances without announcing them and we had each three more trials.

"Of my remaining three trials, two more were declared foul and not measured. Finally, the result was announced, Prinstein, 23 ft. 7½ ins., first; O'Connor, 23 ft. 0½ ins., second; and the other American third at 22 ft. 2 ins.

"I was enraged and demanded Halpin to state the distance of Prinstein's six jumps, and it showed that his best and winning jump was his first effort and that the distances of all his five others were under 22 feet. If my wife had not been present looking on at this contest, which restrained me, I would have beaten Halpin to a pulp, as I was half insane over the injustice.

"Again I was numbered 44 and Prinstein 39 in order of jumping in the official programme. It was a cinder run-way that I was not accustomed to. In the contest Prinstein jumped number two

when ground was firm and when my turn came, number forty-four the track was rough and torn up. The day after the long jump jumped over 24 ft. on the same ground, as proof that I was robbed of the honour of winning my favourite event.

"The limit, however, was reached when the official hoisted on the Olympic masts the three flags indicating the nationality of the first, second and third winners of the long jump—the British Union Jack being down for my being second.

### UNFURLING OF THE GREEN FLAG.

"I was an accomplished gymnast in my youth and my active climbing of the post excited the spectators. At a height of about twenty feet I unfurled my big green flag and remained aloft for some time waving it vigorously. Con Leahy assisted in the demonstration by keeping fighting guards at the foot of the pole, meantime waving his green flag and defying every effort of the officials to prevent the demonstration, which caused a great sensation.

"The long jump was the first of our events; then came the running hop, which I won, with Con Leahy second; and lastly the high jump, which Con won.

"The British failed miserably in their efforts to annex any credit for the Irish successes, and the flag incident received wide publicity in the world's press and turned the spotlight very much on the Irish political situation at a period when very few dared to raise a protest against the British domination of our country.

And for that brave and manly and truly patriotic deed the names of O'Connor, Leahy and Daly deserve to be honoured in Ireland for ever.

## GREAT LIMERICK SPORTSMEN

### No. 180—THE LEAHYS of Cregane (Concluded)

ON the occasion of my last meeting with Joe Leahy—little I knew it at the time—he spoke nostalgically of the old days of sports meetings, hurling and football matches, many of them now blotted and erased by the withering hand of time.

It was difficult at any time to get him speak of his famous brothers, or of his own part in the arena, but some controversy of the day got him in reminiscent mood, and I learned more that evening of the inside story of the Leahys than in dozens of previous meetings, when all the other athletes and players of their day were freely discussed, but never a word about their own great deeds.

It was in 1895 that Paddy Leahy, then a green stripling of sixteen, won his first "pot" at a village meeting, to which he had stolen clandestinely, seven miles from his home. He jumped bare-foot, but cleared 5 ft. 8 ins. in a style that gave unusual promise and so started that long line of victories which stretched over six separate careers and put the Leahy name amongst the world's greatest jumpers, as first, Paddy, then Con, Joe, Tom, Mick and finally Tim, came and went, the while the world wondered was there any end to the unrivalled jumping train of brothers.

#### MOST STYLISH JUMPER.

Paddy Leahy was universally acknowledged the most stylish jumper that ever crossed a lath. Beautifully built, he ran, like all the Leahys, straight at his leap, rose almost perpendicularly, picked his knees to his chin in most natural fashion, swung around on top with no apparent effort, and landed facing his take off as lightly as a thistle-down.

Careless in his training he was also one never worried over much about records, with the result that his best efforts in several events did not get official recognition. However they are vouched as genuine performances by some of the most prominent officials of his day—high jump, 6 ft. 6½ ins.; long jump, 25 ft. 2 ins.; hop, step and jump, 50 ft. 10 ins.

#### ALL-ROUND PROWESS.

Then consider his ability as a sprinter, hurdle racer and weight thrower, also his prowess at the national game of hurling and you have some idea of the wonderful ability and versatility of this beautiful specimen of nature's art.

Paddy Leahy looked an athlete all over—not so his brother, Con, who entered the arena in 1897, but was in private life the last man in the world you would take for a world beater in athletics.

He had not Paddy's talent, but by careful training and intelligent application he developed into the most consistent and best jumper in the world of his day.

He had a strained tendon when he performed at Athens, but sheer determination carried him through and this gritty Limerick man jumped clear where the

world's greatest failed and brought home to Cregane one of the few laurel crowns which fell to Europeans that year.

After Con came Joe—breezy, gay, all-round athlete and sportsman—a shrewd judge of men and form, and a keen follower of athletics to the very end. Joe won well over two hundred prizes in his long, victorious years on the track.

#### STIRRING MEMORIES.

Joe had some stirring memories of his active days and spoke to me of a particular occasion in Ennis when he had to jump 6 ft. 0½ ins. in order to beat off the challenge of a Killaloe teacher named Moynihán, a native of Canovee, who often jumped in earlier years against Paddy Leahy. Another competitor of promise that day was a lad named McKenna, from Tulla.

On another occasion, in Ennis, at the Castle Grounds, Joe won the high and long jumps, and the 120 yards hurdles from very strong fields.

The best race of his life, he told me, was run at the Markets Field,

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Limerick, against a then clerical student in Maynooth, who is now Most Rev. Dr. P. O'Neill, the revered Bishop of Limerick.

It was in the 120 yds. hurdles and Dr. O'Neill won the Championship of Ireland a short time later at the G.A.A. Athletic Championship meeting, held that year at Mallow.

#### ALL-IRELAND WINNER

##### THRICE OVER.

Twelve months afterwards, Dr. O'Neill was again an All-Ireland winner—this occasion thrice over, when he took first place in the 100 yards, 220 yards and 440 yards flat events.

Another great athlete of Joe's time was the present Very Rev. Canon Kennedy, of Murroe, who was the best quarter miler in the Ireland of his day and a top notcher in many other events as well.

Dr. O'Neill's interest in athletics was not confined to the track, and the day Tim Leahy jumped 6 ft. 5 ins. at the Markets Field his Lordship took five "snaps" of the Cregane lads jumping, from 6 ft. 1 in. up.

Joe Leahy was, like his brother Paddy, also a prominent hurler and figured in several County Championship tussles as a member of the Ballyagran Club. Picked for the County on numerous occasions, he played in Munster Championship ties at all the leading Southern venues.

Both Paddy and Joe were members of the Limerick team which travelled to London for the game arranged by Larry Roche, and in which they beat the London Irish, who were then All-Ireland title holders—the only occasion the All-Ireland Senior Hurling Cup went across the Irish Sea. Joe prized the medal he got that day in Lon-

don, and was proud of the fact that Limerick were able to defeat the champions on their own grounds.

#### ATHLETICS HELD THE STAGE THAT TIME.

Athletics held the stage at that period, Joe told me, and hurling only took second place in Munster in the affections of the populace.

Tim Lloyd of Caherline, captained the Limerick team for their London visit, and players that particularly thrilled the exiles on the occasion were Jimmy Herbert of Sallymount, Mick Danaher of Murroe, Bill Sheahan of Rathkeale and Mick Clifford of Ballyagran.

One of Joe Leahy's favourite events was the raising and striking of the hurling ball. He drove a nine ounce ball 86 yards one evening at Thurles, to beat all comers, including many prominent Kilkenny and Tipperary hurlers. On another occasion he had a notable triumph at Nenagh.

I could write on and on about dear Joe, his own deeds, and his memories of the other great men of his day. But I must regretfully pass on, as space is short.

#### THE OTHER BROTHERS.

Next of the Leahys to grace the arena was Tom—also a close friend of mine. A fine performer, he was likewise a splendid organiser. The best of company, he bubbled over with good humour, was an interesting and pleasant conversationalist, and ever willing to sing a good song or play a glad tune.

Mick, the only surviving member of the family, was best over the hurdles and in the pole jump, but often won, too, at the "family favourite"—the high jump.

The last of the batch—Tim—appeared in 1907 at Cobh, and when he cleared 6 ft. 5 ins. at Limerick in 1913 he had still not reached his peak. He might have been the greatest of the lot, but fate decreed otherwise, and his untimely death during the big 'flu epidemic was a heavy blow to Irish athletics.

Jack was the horse lover of the family, but he knew a thing or two also about athletics and could tell interesting tales of the halcyon days.

So passes out of Irish athletic life the greatest family of jumpers of all time. It will be long before another such as these are cradled under the same roof. But the story of their deeds will be told to future rising generations around many an Irish fireside. The Leahys may be gone but their spirit will live and the memory of Cregane will continue a beacon light as long as athletics are held in reverence in Ireland.