

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 7)—TOM LEAHY of Cregane

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THIS Christmas week-end I must ask my readers to come with me again to that happy little home at Cregane—the abode of the world famous family of athletes, the unforgettable Leahys.

Christmas is the season of memories, of visiting and of story-telling, and another great Limerick athlete, the late Larry Roche, has left on record something worth while concerning life in the days when the famed brothers were at the zenith of their power and glory.

For half a dozen years, until 1908, Larry resided in Colmanswell, a few hundred yards from the Leahy home, to which he was a nightly visitor.

"We often sat up all night 'till the early dawn discussing athletics," Larry related. "Most times the seven brothers were there, and as I was a bachelor then, we had rare and refreshing talks — they were grand companions!"

ROLLING BACK A HALF CENTURY.

Let us roll back, in spirit, the full half century and spend an afternoon in care-free enjoyment of true Irish hospitality amongst some of the greatest figures that ever adorned the athletic stage.

As we sit around the glowing fire at the Leahy home the talk is mostly about athletics, of course, but not a word can we induce concerning the prowess of the Cregane lads themselves.

Instead the good points of all the other Irish athletes are recounted with pride. We hear of the deeds of the great Tom Kiely, a blood relation, by the way, of the Davins. Few are forgotten, and we recall them just briefly—Shanahan, Purcell, Bolger, Vigne, Real, Mitchell, Daly, Carroll, P. J. Kelly, Conniffe, Barry, Dinneen, O'Mahony — all great men, indeed.

Hitting more into the Leahy era, we hear a hundred different tales of such athletes as Tom Donovan, J. P. O'Sullivan, Forrest, Farrelly, Mulligan, Carey, Wood, Roche, the Murrays, the Ryan brothers of Rockwell, John Flanagan and Halloway.

And in America, when Tom Kiely had won the Individual All-Round Championship of the world, there arose another athlete of Irish birth, Martin Sheridan, of Mayo. He is not forgotten, nor are some more of the kith in the States—Mitchell, the wonder from Emly; McGrath, of Tipperary; McDonald, from Clare, and Paddy Ryna, of the home county, all making a deep impression upon the international scroll of fame.

THE EARLY LEAHY SPELL.

During this early Leahy spell we meet in the sprints, Magee, Meredith, and Roche; in distance events, Sinclair, Mullen and O'Neill loom up; whilst in walking, Carroll and Forrester are to the fore. Starring in the jumps with Pat and Con Leahy, we find both Wall and Courtney, with Horgan, Mangan, C. Ryan, Delaney, Phelan and Ludgate prominent in the weights. And we catch a brief glimpse of Mat Rosengrave as he passes quickly over the native sod on his way to Australia where, like Tom Malone of earlier renown, he demonstrated by enduring performances the vitality of Irish muscle and courage.

We talked and talked about a hundred and one different things, but no matter where the conversation moved it always reverted to the subject most dear to the hearts of the company — the "Sports Field."

Passing along, let us give a minute's thought to later champions, like Daly, Joyce, Hayes, Hales, P. Kirwan and J. J. Bourke. Then Newburn and O'Connor, leading the world in the broad jump, and the latter setting a record that is not likely to be surpassed by any one jumping under similar conditions.

We must pause now, as tea is

served, then some music and a song or two. We were joined by the good "woman of the house" and the girls. And then we succeeded in opening the subject of the Athens Olympic, and the notable part Con Leahy, with Peter O'Connor and J. P. Daly, played in it.

They were a grand trio, and I will be dealing in a later article with the remarkable stand they made on that occasion for international recognition for Ireland a nation.

STORY OF CON LEAHY.

But I want to conclude our present visit to Cregane with the story of how Con Leahy 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.

The jumping was resumed at 6 a.m. the following morning. Con hopped 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 ft. 11½ ins. 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 in the I.A.A.A. and Stamford Bridge championships.

TOM LEAHY.

We really went to Cregane on this occasion to meet Con's brother, Tom, a fine looking lad in his hey-day, his splendid form spelling athlete every inch. Paddy Leahy was rated by many sound judges the most perfectly built athlete of all. Tom was also of very fine build—the ideal cut of an athlete, nicely proportioned, his lithe figure proclaiming him a "speed merchant," and again reminding one of the ever familiar fame of that prince of the athletic nobility of the Gael—the late Pat Davin.

Tom Leahy was early threading in the distinguished footfalls of his illustrious brothers, Paddy, Con and Joe. In the home training ground—scene of doughty deeds that may never be repeated anywhere—he gave promise of the brilliance that was later to mark him as one of the outstanding sprinters in the land, besides maintaining the grand tradition of his noble family in the flight for height.

I have written of the dash of Larry Roche, and how it was likened to the gallop of the horses of the Dublin Fire Brigade in days long gone. Tom Leahy was also famed for his dash, and this, coupled with a very graceful style, brought him through victorious in many a memorable sprint—the last ten or twenty yards of his race being always certain to provide

thrills in plenty for the spectators.

His first recorded success was at Bruff on 22nd June, 1904, when he was second in the "880." Seven days later at Bruree, he advanced to top place in the same event. From then to his all too early retirement, after the close of the 1909 season, he won prizes galore, was numbered amongst the top notchers on the fast track, where he beat the best in open competition, besides proving himself a real Leahy when crossing the horizontal bar.

HIS WONDERFUL FINAL SPURT.

What was really characteristic of Tom Leahy as an athlete? Undoubtedly it was the final spurt of his that oftentimes left the fastest trackmen literally standing and snatched thrilling victory in the last yards. It was part of the man, and, were he feet in front or yards behind, that wonderful effort facing the tape was to be expected. He reserved the last ounce for a dashing finish, and always felt he had to use up that final bit of energy. He timed his race to perfection, and finished with clocklike precision, usually always that little bit ahead sufficient to draw the prize and if not, well, it was not for want of trying.

In proportion to his other successes, Tom Leahy's championship essays were rare. Actually, he only won one title, a Munster championship, in the 440 yards flat, at Thurles, on July 10th, 1906. He was second in the 220 yards the previous year at Crosshaven.

Nevertheless, his career must be written down as a remarkably successful one, and I doubt if he ever returned from a meeting without some token of remembrance, whilst on numerous occasions he secured a number of prizes, winning four or five events sometimes.

AWARDED SPECIAL GOLD MEDAL.

At Coachford, on July 19th, 1908, he was awarded a special gold medal for the best all-round performance, an award he would have qualified for on numerous other occasions were such a procedure general.

A list of his successes at the various meetings would be almost monotonous in its repetition of victories in the 100, 220 and 440, as well as the high jump, relieved somewhat by occasional wins in the hurdles, 440 yards relay, the hop, step and jump, and the broad jump.

It is of interest to recall that one of his successes in the relay was accomplished in company with his brothers, Mick and Joe—the trio coming home nicely at Dromcollogher on October 20th, 1907. Of course, very few meetings in the early days of the present century were held without a member of the Leahys attending, and when a trio of that famous family were present they usually accounted for the majority of the events, providing for the spectators top-notch performances always.

Tom's appearances over his half dozen years in active athletic service included such far flung venues as Bruff, Bruree, Gort, Limerick Market, Field, Kiilmeedy, Ennis, Nenagh, Ballaun, Kilbeacanty, Castlebar, Crosshaven, Loughrea, Killaloe, Adare, Thurles, Cork, Rath Luirc, Hollycross, Foynes, Pallaskeenry, Macroom, Foehenagh, Kilnamartyra, Dromcollogher, Knockavilla, Callan, Templemore, Kilmichael, Blarney, Coachford, Kilbrittan, Emly, Skibbereen, Craughwell, Clonmel, Kanturk, Mitchelstown and Donoughmore.

TYPICAL OF THE MAN.

Many a good story could be told of his experiences, but space does not permit relating them here. I have selected one very typical of the man, however.

On a Saturday evening, away back in August, 1906, a few of the Leahy brothers set out for a sports at Loughrea. Tom decided not to go, and saw his brothers off with a "God speed."

During the night he got sorry, and was up with the dawn in the morning. Without waiting for breakfast or any preparation, he tackled the nice little pony the household boasted to its trap and raced to Bruree Station. The gallant little steed proved equal to the occasion and got Tom on the platform just in time for the Limerick train.

At Limerick there was no time for refreshments if he was to catch the west-bound train, and catch it he did. Craughwell was reached, and again nothing to eat. But there he was lucky to meet Frank Fahy, the recent Ceann Comhairle of An Dail, who secured him a car for the final stage of the journey—a six miles drive through the Ash-town Estate, to Loughrea.

Michael Hynes provided half a glass of port and an egg as he mounted his sidecar made for two, pulled by a piebald pony. The drive was another bustle, the Abbey Field, where the sports was being held, being reached just at the start of the meeting.

Paddy Leahy was the handicapper, and the athletes were on the mark for the last heat in the "100." Tom had stripped on the journey from Craughwell and entered the field in togs and overcoat. He roared at Paddy as he entered the field; there was a brief delay to allow putting on his shoes, and the maddest day of Tom's athletic career was at its apex.

WON HEAT AND FINAL.

He duly won the heat, and afterwards the final of the "hundred," following up by winning the 220, 440, and was second in the high jump, long jump, hop, step and jump, and the 120 yards hurdles—a remarkable performance, surely.

But he had no time to wait for the congratulations that were sure to shower on him from all quarters, for gathering up his clothes, he again mounted the waiting car, leaving his brothers to collect his prizes, and raced back to Craughwell just in time to connect with the Limerick train, and enjoy his breakfast at 11.30 that night at No. 10 Cecil St.

Retiring from active competition at a comparatively early age, Tom afterwards did great work for sport as an organiser and keen worker in the Athletes' Protective Association.

No. 8. — John Blackburn of Gally.