

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 25)—JAMES LYONS of Lahamologga

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THIS week I must bring my readers back in spirit to the years before the establishment of the G.A.A. to meet some of the men who paved the way for the great athletic revival that marked the closing years of the last century and heralded the new era of the "twenties" with deeds that will for ever be remembered in Ireland.

The black period of 1846-47 left Ireland a carnal pit, with two millions of starved corpses in famine graves, and the subsequent exodus almost swept the Gael and his games from the soil of his native land.

But the end was not yet, and those who looked with pleasant expectancy for the last chapter in the career of the Irish Celt were disappointed. Though broken, scattered and proscribed, the national spirit, with all its inspiring tradition and custom, lived on. Truly, indeed, what is understood as Irish nationality is no mere transient sentiment. For hundreds of years it has been to our plundered and suffering race the stimulus and light of hope that the Holy Grail was to Sir Galahad and the Knights of Arthur's Round Table, as it is as heartening and potent a factor in the preservation of the race to-day.

"Many years ago," wrote that grand old man of athleticism, P. J. Rea, "after the famine had left its watermark upon the survivors of the saints and the scholars, two brothers bearing the honest name of Fitzgerald decorated the hill of Ardpatrick with three standing jumps—flat monuments to their prowess, dexterity and physical fitness.

A PERIOD OF DEPRESSION.

"There were few athletes in that far-off period of depression and despondency, and it was rare to get specialists. The Fitzgeralds were equally fond of farming pursuits, and in their spare moments found time to follow the hounds or carry a 'drag,' and throw a sledge over high walls and temporary constructed battlements. They vied with each other in throwing a 'sliotar,' a species of handmade ball, into the cool, calm evening air, and were pretty equal in all friendly rivalries, and, like the celebrated Maddens of Rathkeale and Glenbrohann they competed against 'each other' and 'one another,' and this was enlivened by the age limit between them—one year and three months—not much to be spoken of in the spacious field of athletics. But they made good on the hill of the National Apostle, and defied the powers that then existed.

"It was in 1859 that a young man heard of the wonderful feat of the Fitz's, and he being of the fibre that good men are made of—moral stamina, physical structure, with component parts suitably administered to his avoirdupois weight—made up his mind to study the jumps and try them. It is with pleasure I refer to that fine specimen of humanity, William Whyte O'Dwyer of Fahanasoodry. Young Willie was attending Kilmartin's School in Glenbrohane or higher mathematics, for it was fashionable to travel distances for the classics and "maths." As, for example, Charley McCarthy of Rathluirc; William Mullin of Galbally; Henry Brady of Ronane, or Michael Cusack of Dublin, specialists in the fine art of higher education.

"THE FAHA."

"The 'Faha,' as he was nicknamed, in addition to his studies, found time for a jump or a wrestle or a cross-country spin 'o'er hill and dale,' with the Maddens, the Wallaces, the Howards and the Duggans. On a lovely Sunday afternoon a horse-drawn landau

saw William at the hill of the Saints, and with a cut pants and a bawneen, made several unsuccessful attempts to lower the immortal records of the Fitzgeralds.

"It was about this time he came in touch with Tom Howard of Ballyntubber and Jim Connell of Ardpatrick. The justly celebrated John Moore of Derragh, who attempted the jumping of the bridge, joined up with the triumvirate of giants, and for the first time Harry Tracey was discovered with Mick Ryan, the Pindar, all herculean young men who lived up to the requirements of the old headline—a healthy body with a mind at ease. They were augmented by the 'Buck' Fentons, a fierce forceful and formidable pair of men, who could use the bouthane or saddle stirrup with the cultural ability of an old Cromwellian trooper.

"And thusly began the famous battles of the 'Coarse Fields,' the 'Well at Malica,' and the 'Cross of The Tree.' O'Dwyer rallied all Ballylanders, Ballyfaskin and Barna; the Maddens brought up Genbrohane, Mountain Foot, Cnoc Brac and Ballybruito; the Fentons had Keal, Glenroe and Garryarthur, with Henry Tracey and Ryan Pinder holding sway over Kilfinane aboo.

POWERFUL BODY OF MEN.

"The most acute critic could not wish to see a grander or a more powerful body of men. They ran, jumped and played for their club colours of the honour of their respective parishes, and as long as the coveted prize was won on its honest merits the defeated entrant was pleased, inasmuch as he took his defeat like a man. I think it was in the 'Last of the Mohicans' I saw where the 'monarch rates not with the slave'; this maybe true in the worlds of commerce, politics and economics, but in the spacious field of athletics the patrician mixed with the pleb, and in many cases broke bread with him as happily as he broke records.

"Up to 1864 the United Parishes worked for the general welfare of the youth of the country and they had the loyal support of the Church, the gentry and the classes. But the general public favoured the appearance of a new element in the grand organisation of things, and the political cloud hung low over the fair fields of a fair land. It came about in this way. American pioneers after the Civil War came back to Ireland and began recruiting for the Irish Fenian Brotherhood. The ball was locked up for a while, and the ardour of the spaiach wielder was speedily changed and damped, and in its stead came the rifle and the cartridge. Athletics were ignored between 1865 and 1873, and the country became so disturbed that migration was a 'fixed star.' The year 1875 saw a big change for the better, and soon the old shelves were ransacked for the jersey and the running shoe. The principal towns and townlands saw the notable revival of football and hurling, and the followers of Raphael and Tobias jumped once more into the heart of the country.

THEY SCORED THE PLAINS.

"Kerry saw the Husseys in action, supported by Morrissey of

Castleisland and O'Mahony of Roscarbery. Carrick-on-Suir brought out the famous brothers—Maurice, Pat and Tom Davin. Camilla-like they scored the plains and soon followed the subject of this sketch—James Lyons of Lahamologga."

Before going into details of the new decade of notable athletes, my readers might like to get an idea of the circuitous ambit of the course for the old order of united parishes star competition. Begin at Mullins Cross, pass on by Ballybeg and Geothune to the Cross of Black, then get to your right hand by the Mount Cote Demesne, and proceed by Well of Malua, Gibbonstown, Dromin, to the Cross of the Tree, and on to the Pinker's Cross; turn to your right by Cush, Kilmurry, and direct to that ancient town of Kilfinane and back again to Mullins Cross.

Surely a spacious plain worthy of our gallant sires of solidarity, who for the honour of Ireland preserved in stormy times the national and idealistic games of the country, and yet, strange as it may appear, one very small field of nine acres in the heart of Tiermoore—the homestead of Tom Leahy, one of the late 'seventies high and long jumpers—held the ball for five hours until the referee, Marks Cleary, shouted: "Hats off, boys, there's the bog bell," and let it be written in letters of gold, at the very sound of the Angelus all heads were uncovered. Then age was honourable, and the respect due to and given with pride of place to the referee, was something our later day enthusiasts could be proud of.

The very old southern athletes are all divided in their opinions respecting the relative merits of the big guns of the 'seventies and early 'eighties. Very few writers have touched the classic ground work of the giants, when the Davins stripped against Bob Coll, of Maidstone Castle, and when Dr. Daly, Willie Real, Ned O'Grady and James Mitchell were slinging weights with the force of freedom of the feathered cock and shuttlecock.

JIM LYONS.

Jim Lyons was one of the greatest men that graced the athletic arena during his period of activity. The high and long jumps were his chief events, and for a considerable time he had no superior. He was also good at the hop, step and jump and the pushing of heavy weights.

Contemporaries of his in the active arena are those mentioned above—famous athletes all. Jim Lyons' first public performance was at the Knockraha (Cork) annual athletic sports on August 7th, 1877, when he won the high jump, J. M. Murphy of Cork being second. His next victory in the high jump was a fortnight later at the picturesque spot, Inniscarra, on the banks of the Lee, where he won from a big field, J. Bourke being second. The day after he won first in the high jump at Kanturk, from Sherlock and Kelly, and was second in the hop, step and jump to D. Rooney.

In 1878 his first appearance was at Queen's College (Cork) sports against W. A. Kelly (Queen's College) and T. M. Malone (Clare) and

as Lyons wore spiked shoes for the first time he failed to come up to his usual mark.

His next and most successful day was at Kilfinane on the 15th August, 1878, where he secured first prize in the 56 lbs. off the shoulder; also first in the high jump and in the running hop, step and jump, and tied with Bob Coll in the long jump, in which sixteen competed.

Lyons and Coll tied in the first round at 22 feet each, off grass, and in jumping off the tie Coll improved his jump by six inches. Coll could do more but he stood back from the take-off mark.

Two years later, also at Kilfinane, Lyons rose 5 ft. 9½ ins. in the high jump to secure first place, beating this at Kildorrery a little later the same year with a jump of 5 ft. 11 ins., which also brought him first prize.

HIS JUMPING FEATS.

Very few records of the doings in those early days are now available, but we know that in addition to his successes in public Lyons has done many remarkable feats in jumping. It was no trouble to him to jump a horse any height. He often jumped over one while tackled under a common car, with straddle and britchen and all on, on the hard road. And on the field he could clearly jump over a horse with a man fourteen stone weight lying on the animal's back. He leaped all the graveyard stiles in the Mitchelstown Union district in 1877 and 1878 after building them, and he leaped over a wall at the turn of the avenue to the lodge of Edward O'Brien, J.P., Mitchelstown, which stood six feet high, plus a shovel on top. This wall he jumped in from the road and out also, which was considered one of the most remarkable of his many noteworthy feats.

After his retirement from the active arena he continued to take a deep and abiding interest in the doings in the athletic arena, and followed with pride the careers of many of the greatest figures of after years. He lived for a long time in Henry Street, Tipperary, hard by Dobbyn's Hotel, and loved to talk of the old days. Many an interesting chat he had with the big figures of after years. He could tell them many a good story of the vintage age of Irish athletics, and his death in 1925, at the ripe old age of seventy-five years severed a great link with days that used to be before ever Dr. Croke's clarion call rallied the young men of Ireland to the banner of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

No. 26.—Mick O'Brien of Bulgaden.