

No. 165—TOM MCGARRY of St. Munchin's

(By Seamus O'Ceallaigh)

FOR care-free health and fun, there is nothing to beat an Irish ball-alley, a few kindred souls for company, a ball or two, and the sun shining.

As a healthful and exhilarating exercise, there is no game extant more to be recommended for all-round physical development than handball. It calls into play every muscle of the body; it imparts quickness and precision to the eye, while the running and struggling after the little flying sphere is of the greatest good to the respiratory organs. In short, there is no class of athlete, or even ordinary individual, that would not be benefited by a little indulgence in this invigorating pastime.

'Tis a long call from John Lawlor, the Dublin jarvey and witty raconteur, world's champion handballer of 1885, to our present day stalwarts, and there is a long gallery of great Irish players between—from the ambidextrous man of the 'eighties, who tossed the old solid sheepskin ball from a wall flag on the earthen floor, to the bouncing rubber ball and roofed-in, four walled palaces of to-day.

TRADITIONS OF EXCITING RUBBERS.

Like most other games, handball, oldest of all, has changed exceedingly. Matches for heavy wagers were common in Ireland a century ago and there are traditions of exciting rubbers in a score of counties. Irish emigrants took the game with them to America and international interest was roused when Phil Casey built his luxurious covered court in Brooklyn, with its back wall of plate glass, its wooden floor and spacious galleries.

Between Alderman Jim Dunne—fearless all round sportsman, backer of his fancy from pitch and toss to a main of cocks; and Phil Casey—the famous Casey Court of Brooklyn attracted all the highlights of American sports more than sixty years ago. 'Twas there the great John L. Sullivan himself trained, and so effective a medium did handball become, that Gentleman Jim Corbett, the highbrow Californian banker, had to build a court of his own in the days of his affluence and fashion.

THE GREAT JOHN LAWLOR.

Exactly thirty years ago next Easter I met the great John Lawlor at the All-Ireland G.A.A. Handball Congress in Dublin. President of the Dublin Cab-Owners' Association, member of the Dublin Corporation, Vice-President of the Trades Council, he was a well known figure and man of civic pride. Born in America of Wicklow parents, he was back in Dublin before he could walk and playing outstanding handball before he was fourteen. In 1887 he won the Championship of Ireland for the first time, his closest rival proving David Browning of Limerick, with whom he had a great pair of rubbers. Later world's champion, Lawlor was forty years when beaten by another great handballer—James Fitzgerald of Tralee.

GREAT GAEL AND SCHOLAR.

Father Tom Jones was considered by those competent to judge as the greatest ball player of all time. His speed and stamina were phenomenal. A symmetrically built, athletic youth of 5ft. 9 ins., he could reach impossible balls and was a law unto himself in a handball court. I had the great pleasure of his acquaintance over many years and treasure a letter I received from the great Gael and scholar a short time before his death, in the course of which he wrote: "I never deserved half the praise I got but it is cheering now that the sere and yellow leaf has overpowered me. I wish you every blessing, and now that I am on the verge of my departure from this wayward world I beg your prayers. Hoping that your Limerick handballers are making steady progress at the grand old game."

That was written half-a-dozen years ago, and I know that had Fr. Tom lived he would be indeed gratified at the progress made by

his native Kerry, and by Limerick, in the handball arena during recent years.

TOM MCGARRY.

In 1955, for the first time in the history of Gaelic games in the county, a Limerick representative won two All-Ireland medals the same year. This is an outstanding achievement, and in order to carry its story I depart from the usual practice of dealing with past masters in this series, and give this week the opening of a career that I feel confident can be tagged "To be continued," for Tom McGarry is only on the threshold of what his admirers hope will prove a brilliant spell on playing fields and ballcourts.

For the inspiration that put handball in Limerick back in the limelight after nearly thirty years in the wilderness, we must thank Paddy Hackett and Jim Moynihan, who won the 1954 All-Ireland junior doubles crown. Let me refresh your memory on their victorious march. In the opening round of the Munster championships, they beat Kerry at Tralee, overcame a stiff Cork challenge at the same venue, and won the Munster title by beating Tipperary in the Ballcourt at St. Mary's Park. For the All-Ireland semi-final, against a strongly fancied Kilkenny pair, they had the honour of opening the Ballypatrick Ballcourt and in the final, against Jim Fleming and Mick Doherty of Mayo, they triumphed at Croke Park.

ONE OF "BROTHER DOODY'S TEAM"

To first meet Tom McGarry we must visit "Fourth Class" in the old St. Munchin's C.B. Schools, the year 1948. There we encounter a youth of twelve, one of the stars of "Brother Doody's team"—the lads who swept all before them on hurling and football fields that season, including the prized "Limerick Leader," Spillane and Olo Cup trophies. And Tom recalls that one of the most prominent of the Sexton Street lads that season was Ralph Prendergast.

As a member of the Treaty-Sarsfields Club, Tom McGarry played in the county juvenile hurling and football championships, and last year figured in the county minor hurling final, which Kilmallock won, and in the county senior football final, which Claughaun won. He was also a member of the club senior hurling team, beaten by the eventual champions, Ahane. Tom was honoured by selection on both Limerick minor teams—hurling and football—in 1955.

A few seasons ago, he helped Limerick C.B.S. win the Dean Ryan Cup, and last year was on the side beaten in the Dr. Harty cup final, and on the football team narrowly and unluckily defeated in the Munster Colleges Cup competition.

HIS FIRST INTEREST IN HANDBALL.

Two years ago this month, Tom first displayed an interest in handball and quickly made his mark, winning the county minor soft ball singles title for his club, St. Munchin's, that season, beating Hogan of Ballingarry in the final at Limerick.

In the minor doubles he sustained one of his only championship defeats. With his partner, Pat Costelloe, he met and defeated Martin Mullins and partner, of Prospect, in the semi-final, and played the decider immediately afterwards, only to be beaten by clubmates Jimmy Keyes and Sonny Walsh. St. Munchin's won four county crowns that year, losing only in junior doubles, which was awarded to Hospital, following a disputed final.

Donning the county handball singlet last year, Tom won every game in which he played and had the unique distinction of not conceding a game in any rubber—club or county.

In the minor singles, his opening success was against Kirby of Clare, at Limerick. In the semi-final he beat a very good player in Downey (Waterford) at Dungarvan. The final was played at Killeely, the home court, and O'Sullivan, of Kerry, was overcome.

BIG GAMES

A journey of 140 miles had to be undertaken for the All-Ireland semi-final, against Mayo, at Hollymount, and then the trip to Croke Park and All-Ireland honours, Coughlan, of Offaly, going down 21-4, 21-6.

In the minor doubles, partnered by Martin Mullins, the initial win was against Clare, at Tuamgraney. The semi-final was the occasion of the opening of the new court, with its glass back-wall, at Clogheen, the second time Tom figured in an "opening" last year, for his match in Dungarvan was also a "first timer" there. The Limerick pair beat Cork 21-1, 21-3 at Clogheen, and triumphed over Kerry, at Killeely, the same day as Tom won his Munster singles title. In the All-Ireland semi-final, Galway were overcome at Horse and Jockey, and Tom's second All-Ireland Celtic Cross came at Ballypatrick, where Offaly were the victims.

The minor doubles handball titles also came to Limerick in 1955—Jimmy Keyes (St. Munchin's) and Pat O'Neill (Hospital) proving successful. Pat Costelloe helped in the defeat of Cork in the first round at Horse and Jockey, but it was Keyes and O'Neill who beat Ryan and Doherty (Tipperary) in the provincial final at Horse and Jockey and later won the "All-Ireland" from Kilkenny at Croke Park. Doherty afterwards won the singles crown for Tipperary.

ST. MUNCHIN'S CLUB'S GREAT RECORD

St. Munchin's Club won all five County titles last season, emphasising their superiority by not conceding a game in any rubber. And Tom McGarry was in the winning of three of these. In the minor singles final he beat Pat O'Neill, of Hospital, 21-0, 21-4, at Ballingarry; and in the minor doubles final at the same venue and on the same day, beat a Ballingarry pair. He was partnered by Eddie O'Neill in the latter rubber.

Tom's third County medal of 1955 came in the Junior County doubles final when partnered by Jim Keogh, he helped to defeat Hospital, at Ballingarry.

He might have made it four only for having to play a colleges hurling game the day he was fixed for the junior singles semi-final. His opponent took a walk-over, but Sonny Walsh regained the title for St. Munchin's, with a 21-1, 21-4 success in the county final.

St. Munchin's fifth county success was achieved by Paddy Hackett, who beat Jim Moynihan of Prospect in the senior singles final.

An interesting fact is that three All-Ireland medal winners—Paddy Hackett, Jim Keyes and Tom McGarry—are close neighbours, as all live in O'Callaghan Avenue, not far from the site of the famous old Quilty's Ballcourt, where the peerless John Joe Bowles learned the rudiments of the game.

A BRAINY HANDBALLER

Now 18 years and 4 months of age, Tom McGarry stands 6 ft. 0½ in. and weighs 12st. 8lbs. Well and sturdily built, he is a brainy ballplayer, with a great crack of a ball. Deceiving to study at play, his long strides help him to take what often seem impossible shots. He sometimes gives the impression of being slow, but actually boasts remarkable speed and agility for his avordupois, as many an opponent has learned to his cost.

Some of Tom McGarry's treasured possessions are the letters of congratulation he received from His Worship the Mayor, Ald. Russell, on his All-Ireland successes.

Ald. Russell has always taken a keen interest in handball and helped materially in the erection of the Municipal Courts, for which City Engineer, Mr. Charles Stenson, must also get some of the credit. Limerick pioneered this work, now paying off a rich dividend, not only in the return of the County to the All-Ireland limelight but in the help it renders in giving the youth of the city a healthy outlet and "a place to play."

INVALUABLE HELP

The interest and encouragement of old players like Very Rev. W. J. Canon Carroll (Rathkeale), Jimmy Kirby and Paddy Hackett, have proved invaluable, and the latter must take pardonable pride in the great achievements of the St. Munchin's lads because it is mainly due to his interest and advice the Club has progressed to its present proud position.

Paddy Hackett believes in getting his players young. He starts them off in juvenile competitions in the smaller courts at Killeely, ensures that they are trained to take a ball from either side, and by his own interest and leadership assists materially in engendering the enthusiasm necessary to attain the perfection required to win high honours. Incidentally, Paddy is uncle of the lad that won his All-Ireland medal in 1954, and is, himself a well known handball referee, last season having officiated at most of the All-Ireland finals in which Limerick were not engaged.

And a last fact concerning St. Munchin's—of their twenty-four playing members, twenty-three do not drink or smoke.