

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 28)—Jack McNamara of Shelbourne

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

**E**VEN before the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association, the City of Limerick boasted a stout athletic tradition, and, in the old famous Limerick Amateur Athletic and Bicycle Club had a combination that for years worked wonders in fanning the embers and keeping in active life a Celtic prowess that dates back to the very dawn of history.

The subject of my article this week was one of the highlights of that grand Club, now, alas, no more—a Club that gave us many brilliant athletes, and many memorable athletic meetings.

In a quick swing back the golden arches of the years, let us in memory find ourselves again in the dear old Markets Field, with the terrible bang of Bruce Murray's pistol re-echoing to remind us that another great L.A.A. and B.C. Sports was in progress. And what great men are gathered facing that starter! Let us mention just a few—James Mitchell, of Emly; W. Tisdall, of Bantry; H. Hickey, Newmarket; M. Connery, Kilfinane; John Purcell, Dublin; Jim Sheehy, of Court; Larry Roche, of Dromin; John Flanagan, of Kilmallock, and Dr. J. C. Daly.

### WHERE TITLES WERE LOST AND WON.

At this popular venue many Irish titles were lost and won, and not a few world records went smash. Did not Dan Shanahan in his favourite event, the running hop, step and jump, cover 50 feet and a half inch there on August 6th, 1888, when T. Barry, the same day, cleared 12 ft. 5½ ins. in the standing long jump. Ten years later, another great athlete, J. J. Chandler, rose 4 ft. 11½ ins. in the standing high jump, and our own Paddy Leahy crossed the bar in his own wonderful style at 6 ft. 5½ ins. without as much as grazing the lath. Tom Kiely pitched the 16 lbs. hammer 152 ft. 9½ ins. there on July 24th, 1898, and Willie Real, also a world's record holder a few times over, won many a championship there.

The Press introduction to the report of the L.A.A. and B.C. meeting held on June 23rd, 1886, will be read with interest:

"This important annual festival was celebrated in an exceptionally successful manner on last Wednesday, the venue, as heretofore, being the spacious Markets Field on the outskirts of the city. The energetic promoters eclipsed all their previous exertions in organising the meeting under notice and Messrs. W. Stokes, Bruce Murray, John McNamara, A. J. Eakins, B. Plumer, W. de Courcy, C. Gubbins and E. J. Meade, with the popular call steward and lap keeper, Andrew Murray, were well recompensed for their arduous labours by sports which, in justice, must be described as among the best ever held in any part of this sporting nation.

### BRILLIANT ASSEMBLAGE.

"The weather was singularly propitious and enabled a numerous and brilliant assemblage of the gentler sex to appear on the scene decked out in the faultlessly graceful fashion which is needed to do justice to the surpassing natural endowments for which the fair women of the historic city on the Shannon enjoy such a world-wide fame. The noble animal himself was almost profuse in his

patronage, so that in point of attendance there was no need for cavilling. The decision of the programme was productive of magnificent contests, for which large fields turned out in almost every instance, while the intervals only furnished fresh enjoyment in the delightful music discoursed by the band."

I must now hand my readers over to the very capable care of my good friend, the late P. J. Rea, himself an old athlete, who will give as it were, an eye witness account of the career of the late Jack McNamara, of Shelbourne.

At the back of the old Workhouse is a field measured carefully 120 yards by 70 yards in area, and with an old scythe in hand, poor old "Shelbourne" was to be seen on a lovely May evening in 1878, cutting closely a track, leaving 4½ laps to the mile. His visitors were very few in number, all told, three—M. J. Hayes, Dan Madigan and John Moore—and ever and anon, Tom Lynch, Union Teacher, for his 120 yards hurdles.

### HOW GROUND WAS KEPT PRIVATE!

To keep the ground private Jack McNamara kept a pedigree bull in the adjoining field, and left a hedge open at one end and "Noli Mei Tangere" was the motto. Within this limited compass dear John McNamara strove strenuously to specialise upon one limit, one athletic unit of value, the open half mile. His modus operandi was simplicity and physical reserve, and with short sprints and a degree of "ramping" for Michael Hayes, who was also in training for the three miles walk. McNamara managed, by leaps and bounds, to acquire a speed and style all his own.

He used his forearms like a railway signal, and his feet, from his knees, worked automatically on the waxwork principle. He would find time to admonish Hayes and insist upon the athlete rising his hips and thighs more, thereby giving rest and quietude to the upper part of the body. This counsel Hayes would take brotherly, after which McNamara would make another frog-leap and run half the circuit in bounds like a kangaroo, then pull up shortly, sit down beneath a lovely white-thorn hedge, and with an old towel and flesh glove, insist upon any visitor present to pay the price of entrance by rubbing him all over, and woe betide the attendant if he failed to perform his duty, by showing any sign of awkwardness.

This exercise also applied to Michael J. Hayes for any person present—and there were very few allowed near the track—had to perform the ablutions and the towelings with the ability of an experienced old coach.

### STRINGENT AND PERFECT METHODS.

It is but just to say that the methods employed by McNamara were as stringent and as perfect

as one could get at any of the established colleges. In 1879 he tried a few short canters of no account, nor did he care at all to compete at small meetings, for he reserved himself purposefully for the June gatherings of the L.A.A. and B.C. at the Field of the Markets.

There were two outstanding men of whose ability he heard, namely, James Canty of Hospital and Joseph Gubbins of Tipperary. Both men were acknowledged sprinters, embracing the 100, 220 and 440 yards, and although McNamara was reasoned with to try conclusions with them, he refused to depart from the rigid half mile.

And the day came at last, August, 1881, at Tobin's field, below the town of Kilfinane, when four parishes sent in their bravest and best to meet John McNamara, of Limerick. It was a great day for Duggan, of Cush; Condon, of Rapela; Ned Tobin, of Bohereen Cruig; Willie Cronin, of Aherlow, and O'Donovan, of Kilmallock, who were all booked for the half-mile

### A GREAT RACE.

It was the sixth event on the programme, and "Jim" Condon, the good old call steward, rang the bell. The competitors entered the arena like old Roman gladiators, and last, in dark and light blue, came Jack McNamara, of Shelbourne. The men lined up. Frank Dineen held the shot, and after a few brief words of admonition—bang! Cronin led the way at a nice rate, and the quartette surrounded the place, McNamara on the outside using "Casey's cuts" in geometry for a get between.

Two and a half laps had to be negotiated, and now Duggan took off, followed by Tobin and Condon, Cronin dropping out behind O'Donovan. McNamara still kept well on the outside, and at half the distance got in edgeways between Condon and Duggan, leaving Tobin outside, and at the old gateway, where a stiff pinch was in evidence, McNamara tackled Condon, and then the race! Breast to breast, the two craksmen disputed every foot of grass, and up went the fog signals—a sure sign that McNamara was on the reserve list—and with one of his bounds, sprang forward with the tape in his mouth. It was a great race, and although I saw him in many of his events, it was one of his best.

The half mile was entirely in McNamara's hands for having defeated O'Donoghue, Cronin, Burgess, Bennett, Nunan (Aherlow), Morrissey and O'Callaghan, he turned his attention to the 300 and 400 yards. In these events he specialised at the Limerick "meets," securing the honours after most delightful competitions.

**BEST EVENT OF HIS CAREER.** Personally, I consider the best event of his career was his winning of the "half" at Kilfinane in 1884. He had pitted against him the cracks from the four provinces, and the odds were against him up to the moment of starting. Frank

Dinneen held the old horse pistol, and at three o'clock precisely, seven of the finest athletes Ireland could produce then or now, toed the line. The field (Red Mick Tobin's) was in good condition, and three and a half rounds had to be negotiated for the half mile. The prize was a clock in scene, presented by that venerable old athlete, J. F. O'Crowley, of Cork, and it was the "Derby" event, for it was quite known to the average man in the field that the event was to be won by a recognised localist.

The shot sent the bevy on the warpath, and Cooney led for the first lap, changing his venue with Cronin, who after a spasmodic effort, gave way to Fitzgerald. This position was well maintained for just three-fourths of the journey, when the Bruff colours were challenged by "dark and light blue," McNamara taking up the ribbons on the straight and giving battle for 75 yards to Morrissey and Fitzgerald. "Old Shelbourne" rushed for the front and won Ireland's best race by four yards.

### WHAT HANDICAPPERS THOUGHT.

I met several handicappers in after years, notably Denis Power, Dunbar, Paddy Sutton, and poor old Frank, and they universally admitted it was the finest feat of the period. The mile, too, often fell to the popular "Jack" but he preferred the 880, although he gave "clean heels" to such stalwarts as Moore, O'Regan and Wall from Bansa.

Ireland had no better man, no more reliable athlete, and, even in 1889, at Ballsbridge, when he faced the Castleisland warrior, Ned Morrissey, he had to admit he only ran a decently trained half-mile. He kept on the track for well nigh nine years, but really you can only last a few years at the outside, and although he polished off such fliers as Plumer, Enright, Frost, of Willowbank; Feore, of Kilmallock, and Sheehy, of Kildimo, in the 600 yards in 1886, his speed was failing and his training nil.

In the "half" he won everywhere, and like all great conquerors met his Waterloo before the Kerryman, good old Ned Morrissey, who, after the warmest race in his career, to use his homely expression, against "Misther Mack," after which both men never again put on a running shoe.

### A GENTLEMAN TO THE FINGER TIPS.

John McNamara was a born athlete, and to his finger tips a gentleman. Whenever and wherever he met an old confederate, rich and poor alike, in his estimation one touch of nature made the whole world kin.

He played "wing half" for the old county and helped the Limerick Harriers by every available means. He lent his field to the general public for sports and pastimes and his purse was always open for a subscription to any classic event.

He judged the one mile challenge race between Willie Frost and James Sheehy, and his brother, Tom McNamara, of Clondrinagh, who had to run off the mile, gave pride of place to Coll, although McNamara won the race. Had he trained in later life as he did in the early 'eighties, he would have been unbeatable. May God give him his repose.

No. 29—Mick Leahy, of Cregane.