

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 72—JOHN J. MORRISON of Doon

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

IN the course of this series we have met Limerickmen who were prominent in almost every branch of athletics, and this week we add another event to the long list when we consider the career of John J. Morrison of Doon, who won such renown across the Irish Sea at the popular sport of tug-o-war.

Although "J. J." left Ireland as a youth he can look back on a colourful career, not the least interesting of which is the successful effort he made to launch hurling in Manchester in the early years of the century.

Born at Gurtinaguard, Doon, he has memories yet of his days at Gurtavalla School, where the Principal Teacher then was Mick Ryan ("Miller"). But I think he has an even more vivid remembrance of his school days at Cappamore, where the master was John Bradshaw, "and couldn't he hammer you with the ash plant" says John, adding: "but I suppose I deserved it many a time."

At fifteen John opened his hurling career as a member of the Blackboy Rovers' Club. Recalling those days, he told me of the good sport they enjoyed in the local games, particularly with the Long Lane Skelpers of Cappamore, who were great rivals of theirs.

He tells of an occasion when they tramped to Rearcross and played against a team from Hollyford. Blackboy won, and on the return journey Dan O'Shea and John Morrison went to a dance at Lackamore, despite the fact that they were facing a hard day in the bog. When they got home they got "a dressing down," with the warning that "hurling and dancing would shorten their days."

LOAF IN ONE HAND AND HURLEY IN THE OTHER.

Their next trip was to Murroe, where they beat the locals. Afterwards they triumphed over Cappamore at the Blackboy, but in a return game Cappamore won well. When they travelled to Old Pallas to play Pallas the game ended with honours even. This match was played late in the evening and the Blackboy lads were, as John put it, "staggering with the hunger." Anyway, they bought all the bread they could get in Pallas and tramped the road home with a loaf in one hand and the hurley in the other.

John tells how they all had nicknames. Johnny Donoghue from the Lime Kiln was called "Officer"; J. McGrath, "Pig Knuckle"; Ned McGrath, "Suck"; Jim Redfern, "Chuck Chuck"; Dan O'Shea, "Canny" and himself "Sunny."

At the age of eighteen, John went for a holiday to Manchester to see his two brothers. It turned out a long holiday for he is still there. Meeting two brothers from Nenagh—Jack and Jim Boucher—they became real pals, with hurling and athletics their main topic of conversation. John wrote to Limerick for a half-dozen hurleys and he believes they were the first camans ever to enter England.

With the two Bouchers, he went to a farmer's field with a ball made by a Doon man in Manchester—Mick Crowe. When the farmer saw them pucking the ball about in his field he attempted to catch the sliotar and take it from them but he might as well be trying to catch the moon so he gave up the chase.

HOW THEY GOT A TEAM.

Anxious to get a hurling team going in Manchester the pals conceived the idea of standing outside St. Patrick's Church one Sunday morning after Mass with their hurleys under their arms. A big crowd collected in a few minutes and they soon had a team, drawn from Tipperary, Limerick, Cork, Kilkenny and Clare. Actually players rolled in from every county and within a month they had a team fit to challenge the best of the home county sides. The membership increased to such an extent that it was not long before they were able to run two teams—the Manchester Martyrs and the Sarsfields. Shortly afterwards the cult of the caman spread to Liverpool, St. Helen's, Wigan, and several places all over England, London in a short time coming to the fore with some great teams.

John tells of the occasion their team travelled to Liverpool to play the Young Irelanders at Greenwich Park. They got off the train at a station in the Liverpool suburbs, and on the way to the Park met a procession of Orangemen, led by two bands. The marchers passed some nasty remarks about the hurlers, who immediately got stuck in them and with the aid of their hurleys made short work of the procession. "We made them remember '98 and the Walls of Limerick," he said. "We expected to be all locked up as a result of the row but never heard any more about it."

They always got a good reception from the Liverpool Gaels—a nice tea, plenty to drink and a pleasant dance afterwards, the same as they gave the visiting sides to Manchester, where the Shamrock Hall was the scene of many enjoyable gatherings.

PLAYED THE LONDON IRISH.
The Manchester Martyrs won the championship of the Northern

Counties, and had to travel and play the London Irish for the British title. It was a great day, with the teams level a minute from the end. London won by a point from a free in almost the last stroke of the match. The Londoners later picked four of the "Martyrs" players to help them in the All-Ireland final at Jones's Road, Dublin, against Cork. John Morrison was one of this quartette, but was unfortunate to develop tonsillitis a few days before the match, and had to cry off. London created one of the greatest of hurling sensations by beating Cork 1-5 to 0-4, thus capturing the only All-Ireland title ever to rest outside the Emerald Isle.

London Irish travelled to Manchester for a return game with the "Martyrs" and were beaten 5-0 to 2-1. In a gold medal competition that followed, the "Martyrs" beat St. Helen's, Young Irelanders, Liverpool, and qualified for the final against another Manchester team named Eire Og. This match was a draw, 2-1 each, but the "Martyrs" won the re-play, 4-1 to 2-2.

The two Manchester teams marched every year in the Manchester Martyrs procession, carrying their hurleys, and always upheld the national cause. Soldiers wearing the red jacket of England would not be allowed at any of their games, and if they wanted to see the match they had to attend in civilian dress.

There were three Limerick men on the "Martyrs" team—Tom O'Malley, Dromsally, Cappamore; Mick Burns of the City, and John Morrison. The scatter came when work in England became scarce. A lot of the lads left for America, and with few Irish lads coming to fill the gaps it was impossible to keep even one team going. But the games are flourishing again now there.

The day London Irish beat the "Martyrs" by a point in the British final, John Morrison was a forward and playing on none other than the great Sean Og Hanley, of Kilfinane. What a time they gave each other, bump for bump, and it was only when the game was over they discovered they both came from Shannonside. He was a fine fellow and they had a royal evening together.

TOOK TO ATHLETICS.

When the hurling finished, John took to athletics. He won four first

prizes and two seconds with the 16 lbs. shot. The only two occasions he saw the 56 lbs. without follow on the programme of any sports meeting in England he won the event. In the 100 yards he won two first and three third prizes, whilst in the quarter mile he collected two seconds. Getting interested in the tug-o-war he found that it did not mix well with sprinting or weight throwing, so he gave them up to concentrate on the rope. When I say that he won well over two hundred first prizes alone at this event it will be readily understood the impossibility of giving anything like a comprehensive review of the many memorable engagements in which he participated.

John Morrison worked at Oldham Roads Goods Station on the old Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway and has as colleagues a number of other Irish lads. In 1911, during the big railway strike, the Irishmen entered a tug-o-war team for a sports at Belle Vue, Manchester, and, without any training, worked through an entry of fifteen to the decider, in which they were beaten two pulls to one after a terrible struggle by a class team called Thompson McKays.

PULLING AGAINST AN ELEPHANT!

Later that same evening the railway men pulled twenty men against Daisy, the Belle Vue elephant, deriving great fun from seeing the elephant tugging away at them.

The upshot of it was that interest heightened in tug-o-war and they went into training, proving the worth of it when they beat Thompson McKays next time they met, two pulls to nil.

Three weeks later, at Salford, they were beaten 2 pulls to one in the final by the Dock Police to whom they were conceding 17 stone. A month afterwards, at Bradford, they beat the local "giants" two pulls to nil, to win the Utley Challenge Cup and a splendid set of gold medals.

Beating Manchester City Police at both Dislay and Paynton, they continued the winning way by defeating St. Edmonds at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Sports. Four further victories followed, against Huskinson Dock at Newton Heath Locomotive Sports; over Canada Docks at Warrington meeting; over Liverpool Police at their own sports, and Canada Docks once more at Liverpool Dock Sports.

They got a halt at Lancaster, where Manchester Docks Police beat them but resumed a winning way at Wigan by beating Bury Police, going on to Leeds and Burnley and beating the local police teams in both centres. At

Rantinstal Police Sports they had a success over the Manchester Police, to complete a run of victories that induced them enter for the Championship Sports at Wembley.

BEAT 105 TEAMS.

In this they had a wonderful victory. 105 teams competed but the Irishmen won every pull right through the competition, beating Birmingham two pulls to nil, in the final. That was 1919, and they won the championship for the following four seasons in every bit as impressive fashion. For these victories they got some splendid prizes—a cup and gold medals, silver tea pots, and cutlery of the best quality.

Meeting and beating the Gisburn Grass Hoppers at home, they followed with one of their most decisive wins. It was for a shield and silver teapots, presented by Mr. J. H. Thomas, M.P., and thirty teams competed. They beat Birmingham two pulls to nil in that final. Betting on that occasion was forty to one on the Irish lads, so strongly were they favoured.

The only unpleasant incidents of their long competitive career from 1911 to 1945 occurred at Skipton Railway Sports, where efforts were made to upset the team by every possible means. But eight loyal Irishmen were not to be outdone and came through despite everything, defeating Leeds Police easily in the final. The Irishmen took their own revenge later that evening, and the A.A.A. barred the committee from organising any further sports because of their conduct.

After beating the local police in the final at Sheffield Sports, the Irish lads were beaten on Whit Monday, 1926, at Mold, Wales, by the Liverpool Police, two pulls to one. Sickness and holidays left the team short four of their best that day, with the result that when the full team returned to Mold on August Bank Holiday to again try conclusions with Liverpool the Irishmen were very confident. Surprised to see the bookmakers offering three to one against them, they put everything they had on the team and won comfortably by two pulls to nil. The Welsh "bookies" were very sore over the victory, as they thought it was a squared affair, not knowing that the Irishmen were so handi-capped the first day.

DEMAND FOR ANOTHER PULL.

Having beaten an Air Force team in a final at Cannon's Quay, they were back in the dressing tent half dressed when word arrived that Lord Bandon, who was in charge of the Air Force side, was demanding a re-pull. Mick Cunningham, the Irish captain, went to him and said: "What do you want us to do? Pull your lads into the River Dee?" Anyway, for peace sake, they agreed on another pull, and the Irishmen heaved so determinedly that they nearly broke their opponents' necks. That pull was enough for them and they refused another chance.

Their most memorable encounter was at Blackley, Manchester, against Manchester Dock Police. The first pull, won by the Railway men, lasted 35 minutes and 11 seconds. The Dock men won the next after a pull of 25 minutes and 15 seconds, and Ireland took number three in 15 minutes 9 seconds. Their opponents were 16 stone a heavier team on that occasion. The prizes were the "Daily Herald" Shield and gold medals.

After beating Burton Brewery at Salford they lost to Manchester City Police at home, but resumed the winning way when they beat Salford Goods Station in the Railway Sports at Bellevue.

Travelling to Crystal Palace, London, they competed in the 100 stone, eight men, against ten teams, and in the catch weight, for which eight entries were received. They won both with the same team. That was one of their most tiring days ever, and with two hundred miles to travel home they faced the journey in great spirit. They enjoyed themselves on that train.

Jim Cunningham sang the "Gal-ant Tipperary Boys"; Tom Hickey rendered the "Bells of Shandon"; Mick Cunningham gave the "Boys Of The West" and John Morrison did not forget old Limerick in his contribution. That finished the concert, however, as they were all so tired that they slept for "the balance of the journey."

GREAT DISAPPOINTMENT.

One of their greatest disappointments was an occasion when they entered for a sports in Dublin and landed by the Liffey on a Saturday morning only to find it raining so hard that the meeting had to be postponed. However, a visit to Guinness's Brewery, which they thoroughly enjoyed, provided some compensation. Returning to Manchester, Mick Cunningham had a

pig's head. Jim O'Mara pinched it and with the help of one of the firement on the boat had it soon boiled. Cut up for sandwiches, all on board had a taste and everyone enjoyed it. The only complaint came from Mick, who said it was a bit tough and too salty. Little did he know at the time that it was his own poor old pig's snout he was trying to chew.

These lads played many a trick on each other but it was all taken in a good old Irish spirit and they were the most happy lot of sportsmen one could find anywhere, with the height of respect for one another, which unity was surely the secret of their great success. They trained very hard for their engagements. They all belonged to the same parish, St. Patrick's—four of them, including John Morrison, lived in the same street, and the parish clergy were with them at all the nearby meetings.

OUTSTANDING OCCASIONS.

Space does not permit reference to all their victories but a few outstanding occasions demand mention. They had won the Utley Challenge Cup at Bradford, when a Police Inspector approached their boss, Mr. Lightbown, and told him the Oldham Road Goods Station, Manchester, was on fire. His answer was: "It doesn't matter a devil, we have won the Cup."

At Bolton Civic Week Sports they competed at an army tattoo and pulled under flood lights, winning a fine set of gold medals. At Rainhill Catholic Sports, Manchester, they beat Manchester City Police in the final, after the latter had knocked out a Guinness team from Dublin in the semi-final.

Their last bid for championship honours saw them at London where 14 teams competed. They won their way to the final but lost to Knighton, a team from the pick of Wales, by two pulls to one. Of course they were getting on in years then and decided to retire.

Two years later, Mr. Lightbown induced them re-enter the arena for a Railway Sports at Bellevue. They agreed and the old invincibles got a great ovation as they marched on to the pitch, which was repeated with interest when they were declared winners for the last time.

NAMES OF THE TEAM.

The names of the team will be read with interest. They were: Charley Wilson, Arva, captain; J. J. Morrison, Doon; John Hunston, Laoighis; Tom Hickey, Cork; Mick Cunningham, Roscommon; Jim Cunningham, Tipperary; Jim O'Mara, Kilkenny; Mick Crowley, Cork; Tom Boucher, Tipperary; Bob Mooney, Cork. The trainer was Fred Lawrenson. Others who participated on occasions were: Hugh O'Donoghue, Kerry; Jim O'Rourke, Manchester Irish; Jack Quigley, Tipperary; Joe McCormack and John Haughey, Roscommon. Sad to relate, Mick Crowley, Bob Mooney, John Hunston and Tom Boucher have since passed away. All kept the athletic fame of Ireland to the fore, and to those that survive we send good wishes coupled with the hope that they will enjoy many further long years to recall golden memories of days that can come no more.

No. 73 — Thomas Sheedy, of Flemingstown.