

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 89—JOHN O'BRIEN of South Liberties

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

GAELS of the old school will have pleasant memories of one of the star forwards of the famous South Liberties "sweeping twenty-one" of the infant days of the G.A.A. in Limerick John O'Brien, of Derrybeg, Rosbrien.

Survivors of those pioneering days are, unfortunately, growing fewer and fewer with each succeeding year, and not many now remain to recall cherished memories of the good old days in the far off 'eighties, when followers of the game got such pleasure from the exciting contests which took place between the renowned "Liberties" and their many opponents, who made the welkin ring in unforgettable days that laid the sound foundations on which the greatness of the Gaelic Athletic Association was built.

John O'Brien was wielding the caman in Limerick before the meeting at Thurles, on November 1st, 1884, which founded the G.A.A. He was one of the first members of the "South Liberties," and figured with distinction in all the great games, that famous combination participated in during the introductory period when the people of Limerick flocked to see them play exciting contests with some of the other great teams that sprang up everywhere as the clarion call went out for the revival of the old native hurling game.

GRAND OLD CLUB.

Prominent as they were in the initial efforts to revive interest in the code, it was only natural that South Liberties should play a leading role in the earliest battles for the hurling honours of Limerick. In thrill-packed exchanges they set the tradition that has kept the game to the fore by Shannonside all down the seventy years of our Gaelic story, and the fact that we had representatives of that grand old Club shining with the Limerick junior side that won Munster hurling renown a few Sundays ago, is guarantee enough of the continuity of the work that proved such a labour of love for John O'Brien and his enthusiastic associates in far-off days when the obstacles they had to overcome were ones that would daunt less stern stuff. These "Liberty" lads, however, were built of the right mettle as they proved on many a hard fought field, gathering honours as they went along that illumine the pages of Limerick Gaelic history and mark their grand old club for special honour on the part it played in those happy days of long ago.

I have already dealt in this series with the early renown of this Club and its winning of the senior hurling county title three years running, 1888, 1889, and 1890—a period that shaped the destiny of Limerick hurling in no uncertain fashion. The G.A.A. in the County was experiencing the "growing pains" associated with the progress of any great organisation, and it is to the credit of the "Liberties" that they stood by the Executive despite the many efforts made to disrupt the march of the G.A.A. to the success that later came in such generous measure.

SPEED AND GREAT STRENGTH.

John O'Brien invariably played as a forward, where his speed and great strength contributed in no small degree to the many brilliant victories achieved. Strength, particularly in those days, was as important a factor as speed is now, owing to the congestion in a field of forty-two players with none of the billiard table like pitches, such a feature of the modern scene. In the olden arena, you had heavier men, much heavier hurleys and a ball that must have been about twice the weight of the present one.

When the ball offered between two antagonists, the pair first tried conclusions with a shoulder, and when experience taught one of the two that it would be looking for trouble to renew this type of acquaintance, only then did he give attention to the ball, always provided, of course, that he was

able to win a smooth passage from his opponent.

Shouldering was instrumental in registering more victories in the early days than could be imagined by any of our present exponents, and John O'Brien was one of those who excelled in this part of the play. It may not be fully appreciated by many of my readers that the earlier rules of the G.A.A. made it permissible for two opponents to wrestle for possession of the ball. It can be understood, however, how such a rule was often interpreted and it is not surprising that it had to be revised before long as it was found beyond the control of all concerned to confine such clashes within the purview of sport.

TRIBUTE BY LATE J. P. RAHILLY.

I have had on previous occasions in the course of this series to acknowledge my indebtedness to the late James P. Rahilly for data in connection with the old "Liberties" and its leading figures, and I draw on him again for some stories of the career of my subject this week. Here is what he had to say concerning John O'Brien:

"In society his charm of manner, good humour, and jovial disposition made his presence most endearing, and one would imagine that he specialised in the art of performing most amusing feats, some of which were quite mischievous but delightfully entertaining to all except his victims. Yet it was no use the victims trying to perpetuate their embarrassment, for directly they again came in contact with his pleasing smile or hearty laugh they were compelled to forget the past.

"I knew him to create a clash between two inseparable old pals under circumstances that not alone founded an extraordinary achievement, but, most pleasing of all, made the pugilistic antagonists better friends than ever.

"All concerned were associated with the old South Liberties Hurling Club. It happened to be that a certain occasion arose which brought quite a crowd of old veterans together. It was of course, an occasion for making merry, and by the time the perfect day was drawing to a close our dear old friend, John O'Brien, had completed his arrangements for the memorable achievement.

TYING UP PIECE OF CORD.

"The host and his family, where the happy party had had their reunion, were much surprised to find John gathering, tying together, and making into a ball, all the pieces of cord he could lay hands on. The obvious conclusion one would come to was that John was going in for kite flying, but that theory would not fit in with the age limit. So all had to wait and see.

"Amongst the jubilant party were the two bosom friends referred to—one of them, an old star backman, and the other, one of the most popular figures in the district. It was well known that those two dear old friends always brought the day's outing to a close by dissociating themselves from the remainder of the crowd. So Mick and Con., as we will call them, were first out of the place of entertainment and when all were on the road for home the two pals were some 20 yards ahead of the remainder. Con being unaware that John had fastened the end of the ball of twine to the tail of his coat, and that he was just getting enough rope.

"Mick and Con were strolling along side by side, freshly cementing their old friendships by a heart to heart talk, when suddenly the tail of Con's coat got a pull and nobody else being present he stood and looked at Mick, who, of course, didn't know anything about the incident. On they walked again, Con giving more thought to the dragging of his coat tail than to Mick's conversation.

"The pair had gone some twenty-five yards further when Con was startled to find the tail

of his coat being pulled more vigorously than before, and getting rather angered he stood out from Mick and warned him not to repeat his aggravating conduct. Even now Mick didn't know what Con was talking about, and he came to the conclusion that, probably, Con had taken "one" too many and was suffering from delusions.

"Mick renewed the conversation and the pair began to again wind their way along the homeward journey. Con's feelings being so agitated that he failed to even acknowledge Mick's best efforts. The crowd, amongst whom was John and the ball of twine, were still twenty yards to the rear, and, it being dark, no one, save John, knew anything of the drama that was being enacted.

OUTBURST OF HOSTILITIES.

"Suddenly the whole crowd became startled at the sensational outburst of hostilities which broke out in front, for when John this time nearly pulled the tail off Con's coat the latter drew out and had Mick 'floored' before he knew where he was, and Mick's retaliation put the fight in progress. When the whole crowd rushed forward to investigate the unexpected clash between two such old comrades, and try to separate them, John made it his business to be last coming on the scene, so that when the whole lot were in a bunch he was able, by keeping on the move around the crowd, to use the ball of twine to such advantage that he had the whole party tangled in a knot and the scene resembled a rugby scrum in which no one could break away, and if one wanted to fight he didn't know with whom to fight, nor could he very well do so while so shackled.

"Eventually physical force and the slenderness of the twine enabled the little mob to get released, and as no one could attempt a solution or unravel the mystery, the time of the night and the condition of the victims helped towards the acceptance of the theory that the place was haunted. The result was that peace was not alone established there and then but the friendship between the two combatants became warmer than ever and John was praised on all sides for the 'services' he rendered that night where such 'extraordinary' happenings took place, but when, later on, the truth became known, it behoved John, on certain occasions to keep clear of Mick and Con."

In simple pleasures like this the great men of our athletic past spent their days. Good fellows all, boon companions, souls of wit and merriment, and simplicity personified, many of them, including the subject of this little sketch, have passed away. May God be with them all.
No. 90—Tom Culhane of Glin.