

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 61)—MALACHI O'BRIEN of Limerick Commercials

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

ON August 2nd, 1953, in St. Nesson's Hospital, Croom, there passed to his eternal reward the last of an old glory line of Limerick footballers—none other than Malachi O'Brien, who was the pride and joy of Limerick Gaeldom in long gone days, the growing gap having outdistanced all but the very few of those who were even children that memorable April evening sixty-five golden years ago when the boys of Limerick took him out of the train at the Railway Station and carried him on their shoulders through the city and to the hotel for the first reception ever accorded a winning All-Ireland team.

"THE LITTLE WONDER."
Malachi's nickname was "The Little Wonder"—a title that he certainly earned, for no man of his size or weight put more into Gaelic football than he did. Only quite recently I was talking to an old veteran who saw the first great football final, and although he has witnessed most of the big games in the intervening years, he still holds that the smallest man of the forty-two in that memorable first-timer of football Blue Ribands was the best footballer he ever saw. And he even goes as far as to assert that he was the greatest player he witnessed in any code, and that small man was none other than our subject this week—Malachi O'Brien.

It was a coincidence that the grand, far-seeing Gael—Dan. H. Ryan—who brought into existence the famous Limerick Commercials Club a few years even before the G.A.A. was established, and who saw his team win the first All-Ireland Senior Football Championship, should lie still in death in his native Thurles the day the fiftieth great battle for the football crown was being waged at Croke Park, the contestants, Kerry and Cavan.

A PROUD DAY.
It was a proud day, indeed, for Dan when Commercials inscribed their name on the virgin championship roll following one of the grandest of Gaelic decisions. Second only to the 1887 thrill must have been his feelings when Commercials came back to triumph again in the 1896 championship. In the intervening years the Club that he watched over from infancy garnered honours galore, and it speaks volumes for the solid foundations then laid that the famous Club is still to the fore, and last season, besides winning the "Kerryman" Cup, they captured the City Championship and were only beaten on a replay by St. Senan's in a great fight for the county crown.

Daniel H. Ryan was a farmer's son who hailed from Park, Rossmore, Thurles. He was educated at St. Jarlath's College, Tuam, where it was intended that he should study for a professional career. He had a taste, however, for commercial life, and entered the drapery business at Messrs. Cannock's in Limerick, where he remained for a number of years before transferring to Dublin. And it was from Cannock's he recruited young Malachi O'Brien, then an apprentice there, to make him one of the best Gaelic players of all time.

DRIVING FORCE BEHIND G.A.A. MOVEMENT.
Ryan was a versatile athlete, champion oarsman and step-dancer, and proved the driving force behind the Gaelic Athletic Movement in its early days in Limerick. He arranged many great contests between the Commercials and, amongst others, the Lees of Cork, Arravale Rovers, Killorglin Laune Rangers, Rosannas and Bohercrowe. In Dublin he was also very active in Gaelic ranks and reorganised the famous Kickhams Club. An ardent nationalist, he later returned to his native district and for a number of years carried on a very successful drapery business in Thurles. Many are the enjoyable chats I had there with Dan on days that are dead—and what great ones of the Gaelic arena met under his roof, where deeds of do and daring were recounted a thousand times over—events that illumine the early pages of Gaelic story.

And to another great old Gaelic pioneer, the late P. J. Corbett, I am indebted for the story of the early years of the Commercials Club itself. It will surprise many of my readers to learn that the origin of the Commercials, like a few other famed Limerick combinations, dates back prior to the actual foundation of the Gaelic Athletic Association in 1884. When the present great organisation was as yet unborn, the Commercials, under Dan Ryan and Tom O'Connor, were trying hard to spread the light, and in 1883 they played their first challenge match against the Limerick Butchers in the old Ballinacurra Racecourse. The game ended in a win for Commercials. Their opponents were a powerful body of men but not so expert, and had to go under.

WORKED LIKE TROJANS.
This victory fired the players so much that they became really enthusiastic and worked like trojans to make the game a success. In 1884 they played their next big match, this time against Meelick. They had an easy victory over the giants by the Shannon, where often in later years a good Gael and true soldier was raised. Soon after they met St. Patrick's, another Club that was in existence before the G.A.A. itself, and who were led by Captain Gough, who was a grand

Gael. This game was played in the Canal fields and once more Commercials had a well-deserved victory.

Up to this time, the Club was more or less a private one, being mainly composed of young men drawn from the drapery houses and a few other shop assistants. Tom O'Connor was captain; John McNamara, of happy memory, was president, with Dan Ryan "in charge of the books." Much to the credit of Dan he saw that there was a great future before the then just recently launched Gaelic Athletic Association and the Commercials. He summoned a special general meeting of his Club for the purpose of extending operations, and through his foresight the move was successful. All the commercial athletic young men of the city were invited to become members and immediately the ranks were filled up by the best athletes of what was a great area in athletics then. At the first subsequent meeting of the committee Dan Ryan well said:—"I have now an army of athletes that would do honour to any county, and the G.A.A. must go ahead." By this time "D.H." was captain.

DREAM OF HIS LIFE REALISED.

Limerick at this period was a Rugby stronghold, and Dan's language was looked upon as very outspoken surely. However, the dream of his life was realised for the Commercials proved successful beyond the wildest hopes of the other members and associates of the great Dan. With a strong team, matches were arranged against St. Michael's, St. John's and St. Patrick's, all of whom met defeat. Much could be written of these games and the rivalry that existed between the various city teams, but I must await another opportunity to recall the many great Gaels that blazed an early trail in the Treaty City.

Dan Ryan then fixed up matches with every team in the county, winning as he went along. By 1886 clubs had sprung up everywhere. Tipperary and Cork were very active and going famously. A match was arranged on Good Friday with the "Lees" of Cork, later one of the big clubs of the G.A.A., and still very much to the fore. Following a stubborn contest the Commercials emerged successful with a good margin to spare. Immediately after they travelled to Kilmacow by special steamer—a trip full of pleasure and delightful scenery that but few of the younger generation have enjoyed—and defeated the local footballers, who, a few years ago, proved the continuance of a tradition by again securing the Clare Championship title.

The next big fixture was at Bansa where they played a pair of matches—against Bansa and the Tipperary "Rosannas"—two slashing teams—again coming out victors. On that occasion the first special train over the old Waterford and Limerick railroad was organised for a Gaelic match, and had to be guaranteed on behalf of the Association by Dan Ryan and Maurice Fitzgibbon. Later in 1886 they travelled to the Limerick Junction to meet the famous Bohercrowe team, and defeated them after a fast match. Towards the close of a great season they again defeated the Lees, at Cork, and Kilmacduane, at Kilmacow, besides several teams through the neighbouring counties.

MEMORABLE YEAR.
Now we come to the ever memorable year of 1887. Just as the first championships were announced, Commercials met an early disappointment in the loss of their captain, D. H. Ryan, whose Commercial pursuits called him to Dublin. This was a severe blow, as nobody was left to take his place. He was a born organiser. However, the best had to be done, and, strange to say, the choice fell on a non-player, poor Pat Treacy, long since gone to his reward.

It may not be generally known to-day that Limerick then had two

Boards, as they were called and over which the late Paddy O'Brien ("Twenty") presided. In strength of numbers the Boards were fairly evenly balanced and struggled hard for supremacy and recognition at headquarters. The Commercials even at the loss of numbers stood by the "old" Board, who were the founders, believing they were right in the interests of the G.A.A. The Fr. Sheehy Board carried away many of the leading clubs and they played out for the championship. Under the "old" Board the Commercials won out in easy fashion and were partnered by the South Liberties in hurling. Now stood two rival champions, and no decision from the Central Council as to which was the legally constituted one.

DECIDED THEY SHOULD PLAY OFF.

At last it was decided that both champions should play off, and the winners be recognised. The rival Boards were called together and the venue was arranged for Croom, with Central Council officials in charge. Relations were strained and the contests were expected to be very hot. The eyes of Munster were fixed on the Limerick Gaels—in fact all Gaelic Ireland was interested. The Commercials and South Liberties decided to travel by train, and it came to their turn to get the first "special" for the G.A.A. over the old G.S. and W.R. system. After great pressure and a guarantee they succeeded, but on this occasion it took six trains to accommodate the living freight for Croom, so high did feeling run and so strong was the Association. These were all a Commercial and Liberty following, as the others travelled by coaches. It was a hectic day in Croom, and after a vigorous match of fast, robust play the Commercials won easily from St. Michael's. It was a desperate struggle of rapid, furious play, in which South Liberties overcame the Murroe challenge, thus putting the "old" Board in the ascendant.

After this the Commercials won through Munster and later met Dowdstown (Meath) at Elm Park, Dublin. In a nice, scientific game they were victorious by 3-2 to 0-2. In this game Malachi O'Brien kicked a goal from centre-field, a then unheard of feat, and gave an all round brilliant display, on the strength of which he was invited to lunch with Lord de French, in whose Park the game was played.

THE NEXT ROUND.
For the next round Commercials again had to travel to Dublin, their opponents being Kilmacow (Kilkenny) and after a desperate struggle the game ended in a draw of 1-10 each. That day blew a storm and scientific play was out of the question. Three weeks later they were again asked to try conclusions and Bansa was fixed as the venue. In bright sunshine, in a beautifully equipped meadow field right in the wake of the Glen of Aherlow, the teams toed the line. For a while the well-nigh invincible Kilmacow seemed to be winning, but once the Commercials settled down there was no stopping them; their ground work and rushes carried everything, so the "brave rolling blades" had to submit to defeat by a goodly margin. Kilmacow had earlier defeated Lees, four points to nil. This Limerick-Kilkenny meeting was the semi-final, and Commercials next met Louth, "Dundalk Young Irelands," in the final.

Louth had disposed of Ballyduff Lower (Waterford), 1-8 to 0-3, and Castlebridge (Wexford), seven points to two. The final was played at Clonskeagh (Dublin) on the 29th April, 1888. It proved a wonderfully fast game, scientific and clever, but the "old reliables" stayed out better and won a sensational match with something to spare.

"DIN" CORBETT.
A Press report of that great final will read with interest: "To 'Din' Corbett, the Commercials owe a good deal for Sunday's victory, as his splendid play in goal, together with his admirable generalship, contributed largely towards it. Where everyone worked so well it is almost a pity to mention any particular names; but I think that not one of the team will feel aggrieved by my picking out two, who beyond doubt distinguished themselves in no small way.

One of these two is W. Spain, who blinded the Dundalk goal-keeper and backs in such an extraordinary manner when he scored the goal, and the other is no less a personage than that football wonder, Malachi O'Brien, whose name is a household word in the South of Ireland. Though Malachi is not yet seventeen years of age he has played with the Commercials and distinguished himself in every important match for the past two years. He is a sunny faced, quiet, unassuming youth, of medium size, with nothing great in his stature beyond that he is very well proportioned. He is always in the thick of the fight, and the tougher and fiercer the match the more at home is Malachi, who is now so inseparably connected with the Commercials and their victories that were they to take the field without him they would feel incomplete and without confidence."

FINE SPORTING SPIRIT.
The contest was fought in a fine sporting spirit. Louth did a good deal of clever hard work and the Limerick play was characterised by a fine defence and spirited rushes. The half-time score was: Dundalk, 0-3; Commercials, 0-1, and the final tally: Commercials, 1-4; Dundalk, 0-3. John Cullinane (afterwards M.P.) refereed. The following were the Commercials players who took part in the final and the games leading up to it: Denis Corbett, captain and cul baire; Patrick Reeves, James Mulqueen, Michael Slattery, Thomas McNamara, Timothy Fitzgibbon, Patrick Kelly, Patrick J. Corbett, Timothy Kennedy, Ned Nicholas, John Hyland, Malachi O'Brien, Ned Casey, Robert Normoyle, Thomas Keating, William J. Spain, Jeremiah R. Kennedy, William Gunning, Phil Keating, William Cleary, Richard O'Brien, Michael O'Loughlin, Pat Treacy, Thomas Lynch and James Purcell.

Many of the above afterwards left their native land. W. J. Spain, before emigrating to America, carved a special niche for himself in the hall of fame by becoming the first ever to win All-Ireland medals in football and hurling. His success in the latter code was scored with Dublin in 1889.

Slattery made his home in Australia; Purcell carried a Gaelic championship medal to the Philippines; whilst Malachi O'Brien, Fitzgibbon, Casey and Denis Corbett all went to the land of the Stars and Stripes. Congratulations poured in from all sides on the manly way in which they fought out the championship and won with undisputed merit the first and one of the greatest championships of the G.A.A.

MALACHI O'BRIEN'S CAREER.

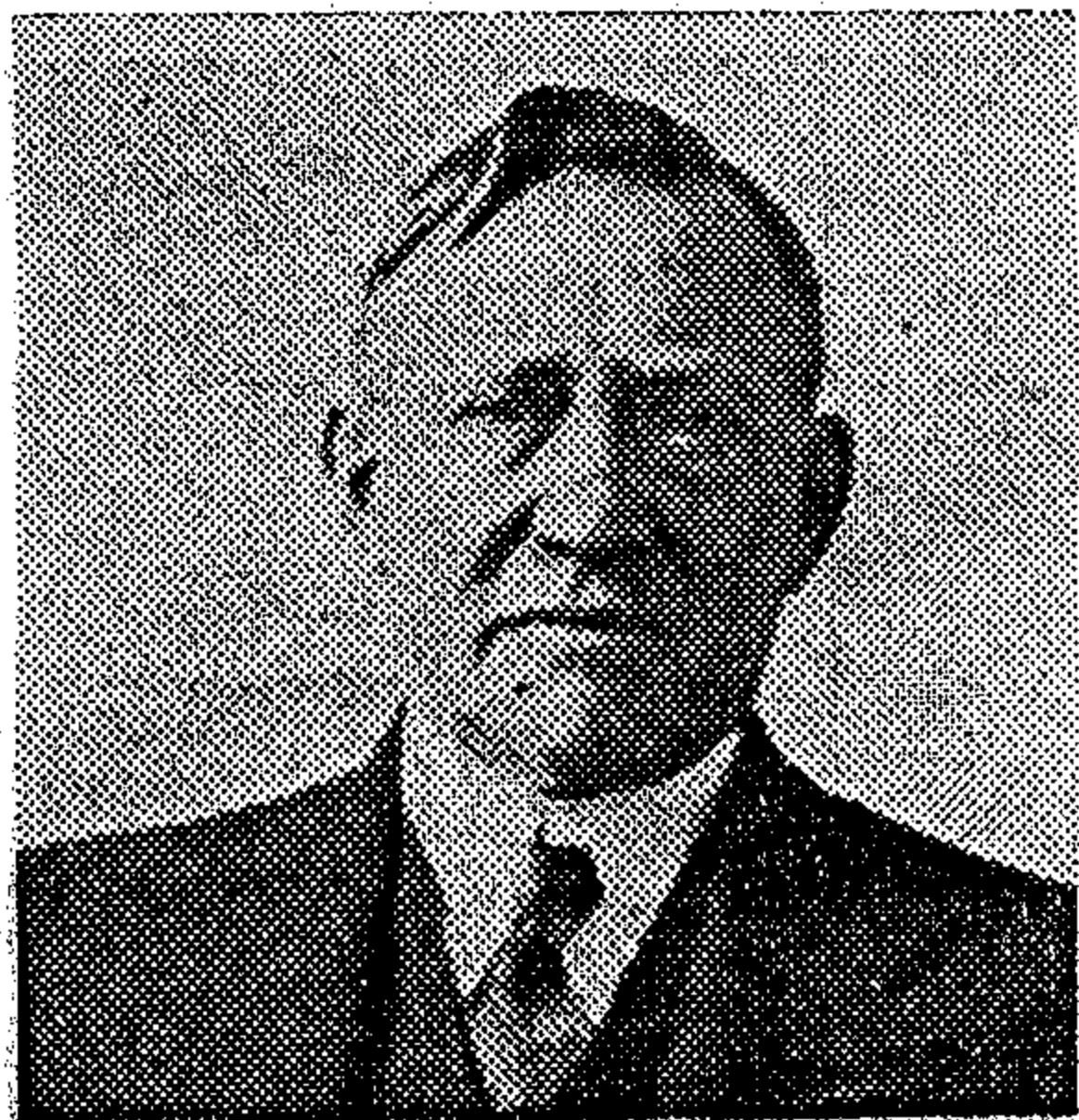
Malachi O'Brien was born in Ballinvrina, Emly, where he lived until he was fourteen years of age, when through the good offices of the late Pat Hartigan, of the Royal George Hotel, he secured the appointment in Cannock's, where he worked for half a dozen years. Then he transferred to Dublin, and spent a short time at Clerly's, before leaving for America, where he remained thirty-two years. Coming home for a holiday in 1926, he returned for good, three years later, and settled in his native Ballinvrina. His niece, Mrs. May Dundon, of Ballininch, Knocklong, to whom I am grateful for much help in the compilation of this article, still holds the All-Ireland medal Malachi won that far-off day at Clonskeagh, a then famous venue by the banks of the Dodder, now a market garden, partly occupied by Browne and Nolan's Printing Works.

The medal was not presented for many years after, and the letter Malachi wrote from America concerning the matter is still preserved. It was addressed to the then Secretary of the Commercials—Mr. P. Gleeson, William St., to whose memory the present City trophy, the Gleeson Cup, is dedicated, and was as follows: "Dear Mr. Gleeson, I had a letter from my brother informing me I was to receive one of the medals for the 1887 Football Championship; indeed I assure you it was one of the surprises of my life after so many years. I had completely forgotten, but as a member of that famous old team I will treasure it as a reminder of bygone days and those loyal, true and trusted comrades, who I believe, would be hard to duplicate. Quite a few of them have gone to their reward in happier realms, I hope. Others are scattered all over the world and hard to locate, I guess. To any of the old brigade who may still be in Limerick please give my kindest regards and best wishes. I give you full authority to give the medal to my brother. You can be perfectly satisfied he will send it to me. He is as good as gold. However, if you do not like doing that my New York address is 220 West, 22nd St. I have come to live here at 90 Colorado Avenue, Bridgeport, Conn., for the summer months to avoid the heat of New York. I will be here 'till September. Thanking you in advance, and hoping all the old friends are well. I remain, yours sincerely, Malachi O'Brien."

UNIQUE HONOUR.
Malachi, who never played with any other team but the Commercials, had the unique honour of being shouldered off the field by the opposing team for his great football on one of the occasions the Commercials played Kilmacow. Another great game of his was at Lough Gur and at Limerick Junction he gave a display that was talked of for years in the district. After that game he walked home to Ballinvrina, accompanied by his brother and the late Very Rev. John Slattery, D.D., P.P., Lattin, and danced all night in his own house, returning to Limerick next morning.

Malachi played no games in America, although he took a keen interest in athletics and was a strong admirer and supporter of the mighty James Mitchell, of Emly, one of the greatest athletes of all time, who won 26 American, 17 Irish, 14 Canadian and 5 British titles.

The last of the old Commercials now sleeps his long sleep in the little Churchyard at Emly, but his deeds will be recounted for generations yet to come, round happy firesides here at home or wherever fortune has scattered our compeers throughout the world.



The late Malachi O'Brien

Co. Boards, following a split at the County Convention. No Limerick team took part in the first All-Ireland hurling championship. The rival Board was formed by the famous Rev. Fr. Sheehy, brother of D. Sheehy, M.P. against the "old"