

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 26)—MICK O'BRIEN of Bulgaden

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

WE in this country have the honour of being credited as the world's greatest exponents with the weights. And that weight throwing is predominantly an Irish event is exemplified by the records of the past seventy years. Then, just a quick run through the list of national champions reveals the undisputed fact that Limerickmen have played a remarkable part in the setting and maintenance of world renown.

Mention of such famed figures as Dr. J. C. Daly of Dromin; Larry Roche from the same district; Ned and Jack O'Grady of Caherconlish; Pat Ryan of Pallas; John J. Flanagan of Kilmallock; Denis Carey of Kilfinane; Willie Real of Pallas; E. J. Treacy of Oola; M. Heelan, Con Ryan and Mick O'Brien bring to memory some of the greatest athletes the world has known.

The Gaelic Athletic Association was primarily founded to promote athletics proper—as a revolt against a narrow clique which, while excluding the people, professed to represent the nation.

### PROGRAMME OF G.A.A.

The programme of the G.A.A. was modelled upon that of the ancient arena. At one time or another since its inception, Ireland has produced men, *facile princeps* in tests embracing each of the three recognised sections of pure athletics—running, jumping and weight-throwing.

Within reasonable limits, it would be impossible to pay tribute to a tithe of the men who have won renown for Ireland in the modern arena. Any such attempt would certainly be incomplete and, quite possibly, invidious.

Still there were some men in the native stadia during the past half century or so whose names may be recalled and without provoking envy and who possessed and vindicated that catholicity of taste and prowess which is the proudest attribute of the true exponent of Celtic vigour and agility.

At the outset of the new athletic movement—the renaissance of native athleticism—our men led the world in almost every branch of personal accomplishments, and undeniably at least in all round contests and field events. It were as if the remnants of the old Fianna, hovering in once-familiar haunts, had heard the call and, re-embodied, responded to the summons.

### LAND THROGGED WITH SPLENDID ATHLETES.

The land throgged with splendid athletes. The spirit of contest was dominant, and its enthusiasm conceived the bold idea of meeting the champions of the United States upon their own ground—and so the "Gaelic Invasion"—of which I have already written in this series.

Limerick men were prominent in that venture and figured in many a subsequent record-breaking event in the Land of the Stars and Stripes. Their names are linked in our earliest records with many of the best performances of the epoch. Their feats have found a lasting place in the chronicles of Irish athletics, especially in the field events, where many of the performances remained unequalled for years, and where some of them seem destined to remain undisturbed.

In some of the old popular Irish weight events the chance of the records being improved upon is becoming every year more and more remote, for these grand exercises are gradually being discarded by our athletic bodies like many more typical Irish events.

We hear a lot of talk nowadays about international recognition and such like things. When we can produce men again like some of those I have written of, our worries in this regard will be at an end. Performances in the active arena are the only real test—deeds count above words—and when world records crash at our Irish sports meetings, as they did in the early days of the G.A.A., then only can we snap our fingers at all and

every Federation. We will have forced recognition in the only worth while way. We must get back, though, first to our old native items to bring out the best in our youth.

### COMPETED AGAINST JACK O'GRADY.

In dealing with the athletic career of my dear friend, the late Jack O'Grady, a few weeks ago, I think I pointed out that when the Ballybricken giant commenced his attacks upon existing records in the heavy weights he had at least one consistent rival—Mick O'Brien, of Bulgaden, who accompanied him far on the path towards new standards of achievement. But, unfortunately, the Bulgaden man retired after a few seasons in "active service," and Jack was deprived of that stimulating opposition so necessary to bring out the best in him, for there were few men in Ireland after, who, even with the most generous handicaps, could pass O'Grady in pushing the two stone weight.

I can only find trace of Mick O'Brien during two seasons—1912 and 1913, but his performances then were enough to establish renown, whilst I have it on the authority of no less a judge than the famed Larry Roche, himself a great athlete, that "the great feats performed by this giant (Michael O'Brien) in putting heavy weights, in public and private, have scarcely ever been equalled," while the late J. J. Flanagan often said that O'Brien lost the opportunity of making for himself a big name in the athletic world through the fact that he never trained for any meeting, and also through his all too early retirement.

### SPLENDID ACHIEVEMENT.

Details of Mick O'Brien's career in his initial year are like the meals of the poor, "scanty and uncertain." However, I understand that his first venture was at Kilmallock sports, where he slung 56 lbs. between the legs, a distance of 28 ft. 8 ins.—a splendid achievement.

We next find him at the Irish championships, held at Fermoy, on July 14th, 1912, and here he was successful at putting the 28 lbs., recording a distance of 35 ft. 1 in., thus equalling the Irish record set by Willie Real of Pallas away back in 1889, at Kilkenny. It is of interest to note that this was the first occasion that Real's cast was approached, but was afterwards improved by O'Grady to 37 feet 6½ inches in 1915, and to the present figure of 38 feet 10 ins., also by O'Grady, at Kildare, in 1922.

At Fermoy, the same day, O'Brien was second in slinging the 56 lbs. between the legs, without follow, to the holder, T. Ludgate of Mallow, who won with a throw of 26 feet 1 inch. The Bulgaden man's effort reached 25 ft. In passing I must mention that a fellow Limerickman, M. Heelan, was

second at 32 ft. 4 ins. to O'Brien in the event he won—his first championship honour.

### A BUMPER SEASON

1913 was a bumper season for the South Limerick athlete. Starting off with the All-Ireland championships, held this time at Mallow, on July 20th, he won at slinging the 56 lbs. between the legs, putting up a figure of 26 ft. 9 ins., J. K. Beasley being second at 25 ft. 8 ins.

He parted, however, with his title in the 28 lbs., losing to Jack O'Grady by the narrow margin of a half inch, the figures being:—O'Grady 35 ft. 1 in.; O'Brien 35 ft. 0½ in. In the 16 lb. shot O'Brien also filled second place, P. Keane, Dublin, winning at 43 ft. 3 ins., and O'Brien recording 42 ft. 9 ins.

O'Brien's next outing was at the Munster Championships held in Dungarvan on August 10th. Here he won the 56 lbs. without follow at 25 ft. 7 ins., and the 28 lbs. at 35 ft. 1 in., T. Ludgate being second in both events at 24 ft. 10 ins., and 29 ft. 5 ins. respectively. O'Brien was second in the hammer at 128 ft. to Ludgate who won with 134 ft. 8 ins., and that despite the fact that it was the Limerick man's first effort with this missile. O'Brien also won at putting the 56 lbs. (23 ft. 10 ins.) to collect three gold medals and a silver one, plus a special prize for securing the most points at the meeting.

### INTER-COUNTY CONTESTS.

In the inter-county contests held at Killarney four days later, O'Brien won at slinging the 56 lbs. over the bar, his height being 13 ft. 4 ins. Driscoll of Cork was second and another Leesider, F. Daly, third. At putting the 28 lbs., O'Grady won with 35 ft. 5 ins., O'Brien was second, and J. J. Foley of Kerry third. The day ended in Cork's favour, the Rebel County securing 36 points against 31 for Limerick and 11 for Kerry.

At Kilmallock sports on September 7th, Jack O'Grady and Mick O'Brien tied at 23 ft. 11 ins. for first place at pushing the 56 lbs. weight, both breaking the record of 23 ft. 9 ins. set by Willie Real at Limerick on August 6th, 1888. The ground was fully certified by an engineer and John Flanagan and Larry Roche were the judges. In this connection it is well to recall that O'Grady subsequently brought the figure to 24 ft. 8½ ins., at Dungarvan in 1915, and further, to the present record of 25 ft. 4 ins. at Cratloe in 1920. At the same Kilmallock meeting, Mick O'Brien won at throwing the 56 lbs. over the bar with a height of 13 ft. 8 ins.

The Bulgaden man was a visitor to Cork on a few occasions and won twice there. One of the events was slinging the 56 lbs. between the legs and the distance was over twenty-five feet, and the other event was a throw of 13 ft. 6 ins. over the bar.

### EXHIBITION THROW

The cross lath was put to the top of the uprights and O'Brien gave an exhibition throw for Rev. Father Thomas, and put the weight well above the cross bar.

"Carbery" wrote concerning that meeting the following: "With the lath on the top of the uprights the spectators crowded round to enjoy a rare trial of strength between Beasley and O'Brien. Here Beasley barely failed and the Golden Vein representative got a lusty cheer when he sent the big weight hurtling far above the bar."

Mick O'Brien did not compete in 1914, and we find Jack O'Grady getting a walk over at the championships in the 16 lb. shot at 38 ft. 3 ins., whilst T. Ludgate regained the 56 lbs. title with a heave of 27 ft. 10½ ins.

So passed from the Gaelic athletic stage one of its greatest figures after a very short but really brilliant career.

No. 27 — Jim Keyes, of Pallas-green.