

No. 199—DAN O'CONNELL of Ballyagran

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BALLYAGRAN and its surrounding countryside—in fact the area within easy cycling distance, even in these days when the humble bicycle is no longer the vehicle for anything in the nature of an ambitious journey when in mileage—holds an undisputedly high reckoned place in Irish athletic history. We have only to call in evidence the near proximity of the birthplaces of such famed figures as the greatest athletic family of all time—the far famed Leahys of Cregane; the equally famous J. J. Bresnihan; John Flanagan of Kilmallock and the great bunch of other world beaters that included such names as Dan Shanahan, Paddy Ryan, Willie Real and Jack O'Grady, without delving any deeper into the storehouse of memory where we find enshrined a collection of names that ensured Limerick an athletic mastery in their day that would require almost an Olympic Games to rival now.

GREAT ALL-ROUNDER.

J. J. Bresnihan, the great all-rounder, first breathed God's pure country air at Gortroe, a few furlongs from the picturesque little village of Castletown, about the year 1883. Around the same period and in the same neighbourhood was born the subject of our sketch this week—Dan O'Connell.

Both grew to manhood together and during their school-going days, when the athletic heritage handed down to J. J. Bresnihan, by his father, Con, a great weight thrower of the olden arena, and on his mother's side from the equally well known Kielys of Cullen, was beginning to blossom in the young John Joe the latter had as companion in his earlier incursions into the realms of athletics the youthful Dan O'Connell, who took particular pleasure when some of his schoolfellows chided him with being called after the great Liberator himself.

Under the able guidance of two athletes of the old school—Willie Cuthbert and John Ronan—the pair were making commendable progress and displayed much promise. Bresnihan, having decided on teaching as a profession, left for training around the turn of the century, after which Dan never followed his athletic bent seriously.

He might have persevered and climbed some of the heights eventually attained by his neighbour and school companion but for the fact that hurling came very much to the fore in Ballyagran about this period.

GREAT LOVE FOR THE CAMAN.

Dan soon showed a great love for the caman and it was not very long before he proved himself an adept at the game. Under the captaincy of Mick Clifford, still happily with us and now one of the most respected of the old guard of Limerick Gaeldom, the Ballyagran lads went from success to success and it was not long before their prowess earned for the leading players of the fine combination a place with the best in the county.

Dan O'Connell was one of those picked to represent Limerick in many a hard fought Munster match, and he had as team mates a quartette of Ballyagran men, including Mick Clifford, Larry Roche (who helped Limerick Commercials win 1896 All-Ireland senior football honours and could have won dual laurels if luck had favoured him the following year when Kilfinane won the hurling laurels), M. Barry and E. Gibbons.

We first encounter the Ballyagran lads on March 2nd, 1902, at Broadford where they figured in a great game with Monegay, and were beaten narrowly, 2-2 to 1-2. Mr. T. D. O'Brien refereed.

THEIR FIRST WIN.

Ballyagran's first win came in decisive fashion when they visited Bruree and beat the local lads, 6-7 to 0-6.

They travelled to Newcastle West on June 29th, 1902, and the result was a sound trouncing from Monegay, 6-8 to 1-0. That might have proved discouraging but for the fact that the Western lads shortly afterwards fought their way to the County final, in which they were narrowly beaten by Young Irelands, after a terrific struggle.

The Ballyagran lads really hit the high spots on September 21st, 1902, when in the final of the Liscarroll senior hurling tournament, they beat a great Cork side—Ballyhea—1-3 to 1-2, after a magnificent game of fast, exciting hurling.

THE WINNING PLAYERS.

Mr. D. Fitzgibbon, of Liscarroll, refereed, and the winning players were: M. Clifford (captain), P. O'Leary, E. Watson, W. O'Keeffe, P. O'Keeffe, M. Barry, M. Fitzgibbon, M. O'Donovan, D. Connell, J. J. Leahy, P. Sullivan, M. Bresnihan, J. McCarthy, E. Clifford, J. Burke, P. Burns, M. Casey.

The officers of the Ballyagran Club at the period were: P. J. Kelly, Chairman; Thomas Chawke, Treasurer; and J. Kelly, N.T., Secretary.

Mick Clifford's boys opened 1903 in sterling fashion by defeating Croom, 2-10 to 1-3, in the Bruff Tournament. They followed this up with a defeat of Dromkeen, 3-10 to 0-3, in the same competition, only to go down before Caherline, 3-8 to 0-2 in the semi-final.

When Limerick lined out against Clare in the 1904 Munster Championship at the Markets Field, the Ballyagran lads representing their County for the first time were M. Clifford and E. Gibbons. Limerick won, 2-9 to 1-1.

EXHIBITION IN LONDON.

A short time later, when Limerick selected a group of hurlers and athletes to give a Whit Monday exhibition in London, the Ballyagran representation had grown to four—M. Barry and Dan O'Connell joining the pair already mentioned.

The Shannonside lads arrived in the London Metropolis on Sunday morning and remained there until Tuesday night, being lavishly entertained by Liam McCarthy, President of the London County Board, and the members of the Irish National Club. It will be remembered that Liam McCarthy nearly twenty years later presented the great challenge Cup that is now the trophy for the All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship, and of which Limerick were the first holders in 1921.

Ballyagran worked their way to the semi-final of the Ballygarry Hurling Tournament, in which they were defeated by Rathkeale, 3-5 to 1-4. Mr. M. Roche, of Castle-mahon, refereed.

A TOWER OF STRENGTH.

The genial, popular, good humoured Dan was a tower of strength to the Ballyagran lads. A most dependable back, he had a peculiar but very successful way of outwitting an opponent. His usual assault on an incoming ball was to snap out his right hand for a quick catch overhead, then a sharp turn and a beautiful long drive from the left. The speed of the movement often irritated his opposite number, but Dan's genial smile then came to the rescue. It was irresistible and soon righted matters.

Undoubtedly, the most exciting games that great Ballyagran team played were against Ballyhea, one of Cork's best teams. The see-saw of victory and defeat worked out very even in the long run, and some long lasting friendships were cemented between the players.

One of the big disappointments Dan suffered was when he was unable to help Ballyagran in the 1907 County Senior Hurling Championship Final played at Markets Field on February 16th, 1908, and which Caherline won 3-8 to 0-1.

THE BALLYAGRAN TEAM.

The Ballyagran team on that occasion was:—

M. Clifford (Capt.), P. O'Leary, T. Murphy, C. Madigan, O'Donovan, M. Bresnihan, J. Shanahan, J. Cagney, D. Geary, J. Blake, M. Barry, M. Griffin, J. Burns, P. Naughton, J. McCarthy, M. Ryan.

Hurling in Ballyagran declined following that defeat and suffered a further blow sometime later when Dan left for Australia, where he settled in Concord, Sydney, and soon proved an outstanding success. He did not forget the hurling, and for many further seasons he proved his worth on many a hard fought field. He played for New South Wales against Victoria in many hectic struggles for State supremacy, and in 1924 realised a cherished ambition when he got a hurling club actually going in Concord, of which he became first captain, subsequently being appointed organiser, a post he held for very many years.

When Dan died the Irish colony in Australia paid well deserved tribute to one who had served his country and its games in sterling manner.