

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 93—PADDY O'CONNELL of Mount Pleasant

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

PERHAPS few districts of similar size anywhere have produced such a host of sporting men as the quiet, picturesque little parish of Mount Pleasant. Though it has given many sons to the various spheres of athletics, yet the day of its prestige and glory are long since gone. It was in the infancy of the G.A.A. the Mount Pleasant men were to the fore. In those far off days, whether in public life, on the playing pitch, in the athletic field, on the water or at amusements, the great figures of that locality were sure to shine.

Local hurling tournaments were frequent then, often times the fine long evenings were whiled away with joyous open-air dancing, and on other occasions a crowd would congregate at the cross-roads, where the cream of the local men would participate in a brief but usually thrilling athletic contest. The programme of the latter would simply consist of a few sprints, throwing the 56 lbs. weight, some short exhibitions of long jumping and the flight for height, and then, maybe, the long puck and the long kick. Prizes were provided for the winners, but the simple nature of these can be judged from the fact that they usually consisted of such items as a packet of cigarettes, an ounce of tobacco, or some other like small commodities. In those days a bit of tobacco or a few cigarettes was all some men sought, and many a great evening's sport was provided with very little outlay, yet the rivalry was as keen as often experienced at more pretentious venues with big cups and elaborate medals at stake.

Mount Pleasant certainly contributed much to the athletic prestige of our county for in those happy days of yore it housed a nest of athletes of which any other parish in Ireland might be virtually proud. Foremost amongst those was the subject of this little sketch, Paddy O'Connell, or "Paddy Connell the jumper," as he was universally known.

BRIEF BUT COLOURFUL ATHLETIC CAREER.

Paddy was born on a snug rich farmstead situated among the picturesque little hills and glens of Upper Mount Pleasant, eight-five years ago. A man of quiet disposition, whose name is almost unknown outside West Limerick, the north-east corner of the "Kingdom" and that south-west portion of Corca Bascinn stretching along the Shannon. Paddy has many fine performances to his credit, for at the zenith of his power he had few equals at the high jumping and the pushing of the heavy-weights. Of course the weights used in those days were of a different species from those of to-day. They were the conical ones with the small ring, commonly used in the shop and farm.

That he has not a much longer list of honours to his credit is due mainly to the fact that he never trained but worked hard on his farm, and in addition, he had many other interests in the days he should have devoted to athletics. Thus his career was fairly brief but colourful, with most of his best performances achieved at sports meetings in and around his own area; for like many other of our Irish athletes, he was fully satisfied with the honours he proudly won amongst his own people and within his own native sphere. Consequently you will not find his name among the title holders or in any records, for O'Connell had no mind for such renown. Whenever a meeting was held within a convenient radius he just went along, mostly on foot, and competed. That was as far as his athletic ambitions took him.

SCANTY DETAILS.

Unfortunately very few records of his doings have survived the passage of time. He competed in an era when many of our sports meetings were rarely mentioned in the Press, with the result that details of his career and performances are very scanty. However, we know that he opened his athletic story by competing at a sports meeting held at Borigone, near his native place, and that he also figured prominently at such venues as Askeaton, Foynes, Shanagolden, Glin, Ballyhahill, Carrickerry, Ardagh, Rathkeale, Newcastle West, Adare and other places around West Limerick where annual sports gatherings were the rule at the time. And from Clare we learn of his successful participation at meetings in Kilrush

Killimer, Labasheeda, Kildysart and other nearby centres.

On one occasion, at a sports meeting in Shanagolden, he beat the great Tim Ahearne of Athea in the high jump contest. This was a particularly brilliant piece of work by him as he had been reaping corn with a scythe for long hours the previous day.

His admirers dubbed him one of the grandest figures ever to grace a sportsfield, and he won the admiration of all who watched his brilliant performances, particularly his fine skill and ease at weight-throwing and his typical spring that made him the grand leaper he was.

WAS VERY VERSATILE.

Five feet eleven inches was easily within Paddy's compass, but had he taken a more serious view of training and enjoyed the conditions which modern jumpers regard as a matter of course, there is no doubt he would have added four or five inches to his best effort. Like the great Tim Leahy of Cregane, he was tall enough to carry himself over a jump of almost seven feet. However, he was keenly interested in hurling and the call of the caman prevented him specialising in the high jump and in the weights, in both of which he gave such rich promise. He was also good at the pole jump, hop, step and jump and was a more than useful sprinter. The slinging of the 56 lbs. over the bar was a very popular item in his hey-day, and at that event Paddy had few equals.

Although he never trained, never dieted nor departed from his ordinary daily work routine, still he was always in the pink of condition and looked as fresh as a daisy when he appeared on the sportsfield. After spending long, tough days digging, ploughing, mowing or reaping he would on a Sunday stroll along to some convenient sports meeting and give a few really creditable performances, never returning from a meeting empty handed.

Besides his notable career on the track, Paddy was also credited with many other remarkable feats, including the jumping of many difficult walls and gates in his locality. And coupled with his sporting activities he enjoyed a splendid reputation as a skilled farmer. He had no master at ploughing and mowing with a scythe, a reputation he still held at the age of 83.

A MORE THAN USEFUL HURLER.

Paddy, who was a tall, powerfully built man, standing six foot three, and weighing thirteen stone, was also a more than useful hurler and was a prominent member of the far famed Mount Pleasant "Liberators" team of the early '90's. Long after his retirement from the active arena he continued to take a deep interest in the activities of the youth of his native district. He was one of the patrons of the Borigone school hurling team during its existence, along with the former Club-mate, the late Mick Conway. And Paddy's youngest son and namesake kept goal for the victorious Borigone school team of the glory days of 1928.

They had many famous figures in the Mount Pleasant of Paddy's day. It is not generally known that the late John Neville was a noted runner, who, in his youth, competed successfully at many sports fixtures. John Houlihan jumped from one pier to the other at the gateway of Robertstown Parish Church. The piers, still standing nine feet high and ten feet apart, are the very same now as on the occasion the daring feat was accomplished. The gate was closed at the time, and it is on record that the crowd gathered there were struck with awe at the audacity of the effort, especially from one who was the least boastful and quietest of them all. The same John Houlihan was also a good swimmer, and more than useful footballer.

ANOTHER REMARKABLE FEAT.

One Sunday after Mass, another Mount Pleasant man, the late Tom Stack, performed the dangerous and remarkable feat of jumping over the spiked railings opposite Askeaton Parish Church. Another neighbour of the aforementioned, Paddy O'Connor of Toomdeely, was a famous walkist, and could walk at distances up to fifteen miles at the age of 73.

Like Sneem in Kerry, some Co. Limerick districts were noted for strong men, particularly the Dro-

min area. Mount Pleasant, too, had its outstanding figure in this category, for Maurice O'Connor, one of its famed boatmen, who died just five years ago at the age of 75, was reputed in his prime to be the strongest man in Ireland.

Mount Pleasant is also the birthplace of M. T. Culhane, a crack sprinter, who, for a few years brought off a treble in the 100, 220 and 440 yards at Knockanure Annual Pattern Sports. He also gave some brilliant displays at Loughill Tarbert, and Knock (Co. Clare). On one occasion at a sports meeting near Glin he beat the famed Dan Ahearne, of Athea, in a hundred yards contest. Besides his brilliancy as a sprinter, he was also a useful footballer, and a good jumper—and this despite the fact that he never practised much, being content with an occasional run around the fields.

Other useful athletes around this period and district were "Cock" Liston (Athea), T. M. Culhane (Glin) and John Sheehan (Foynes). They were also good footballers—Culhane being a member of the great Glin side of 1908, and Sheehan was on the victorious Foynes "Smith O'Briens" combination of the previous season.

MICK FUERY OF GLIN.

Perhaps one of the foremost athletes in Ireland of his time was Mick Fuery of Glin. Like Paddy O'Connell and the great Mick Heelan of Caherelly, Fuery had no designs on the championship meets and consequently you will not find his name among the title holders. He was fully satisfied with the honours he won close to his native place, and with the high esteem in which he was held by his own people. A powerfully built man, standing five feet ten and weighing twelve and a half stone, Mick was equally good at the sprints, the high and broad jumps, the weights, and was a first-class exponent with the football. He was also a talented musician and a fine step dancer. Never a great hand to train, still he oftentimes won most of the events at the meetings he attended. He had a large collection of prizes, of which the brightest athletic lights would be virtually proud. And many sound critics assert that had he trained properly he would certainly have broken sprint records. He was particularly noted for his quick panther-like start and his great dash at the end. His passing in early middle life was much lamented.

Among the many other prominent athletes during Fuery's hey-day were the Berminghams of Killimer (Clare), Patrick later winning much fame in America, particularly around Chicago. Another useful competitor at parish sports then was Jim Wrenn of Tarmons, who was a member of the 1905 Kerry team that reached the All-Ireland final. Both Fuery and Wrenn played on the great Glin football side of 1900.

THE GLORIOUS DAYS ARE GONE.

Alas, like that of many other great Limerick parishes, the glorious days of the athletic prestige of Mount Pleasant are long past. The playing pitch and athletic fields are deserted now. No more the clash of the ash is heard, and the local sports fixtures are almost forgotten performances. The open air dances, too, are no more, while the little quays that were once all a bustle, are as deserted as the playing fields. No more the shouts of the hardy boatmen are heard, the boats are all gone. So for the once sporting district that holds such memories for the old timers.

However, a succession of footballers and hurlers of merit have come from the district in after years, throwing in their lot with neighbouring teams and giving them yeoman service. Most prominent, maybe, was John Stack, brother of hurler and athlete, Tom, mentioned earlier. John played with Askeaton football team for a few seasons and is reckoned by many sound judges as the best defender they ever fielded, and that despite the fact that it is almost half a century since he played.

Some athletes of note have come out of the Mount Pleasant district in later years, and a few promising ones are springing up in the locality still, who, old admirers hope, will go on to much higher things, thus adding fresh lustre to a grand district made famous by their fore-fathers.

No. 94—Garrett Howard, of Croom.