

(No. 52)—James O'Connor of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O'CALLAIGH)

JAMES O'CONNOR, or "Jim" as he was more popularly known, was one of seven brothers who brought honour and fame to Limerick in different spheres of sport. Jack, Thade, Jim and Joe were all sprinters of renown who, with the other brothers—Charlie, Maurice and Bryan—were a glory to their native city.

All the O'Connor boys distinguished themselves on the playing fields of the South. Their first love was rugby, and as members of the famous Garryowen Club they figured in many stirring battles for the highest laurels of that arena.

Joe was the most promising of the brothers with the oval ball and represented his province on many occasions, culminating in his selection to play for Ireland in 1909, on which occasion he gave a marvellous display, and looked set for a brilliant international career. Fate, however, decreed otherwise, and his much regretted death at the early age of twenty-eight was a big loss to the code.

At rowing, too, the O'Connors were expert, and proved staunch stalwarts of the Athlunkard Boat Club—a couple of them, I think, being founder members of that great organisation.

Rowing and rugby left all too little time for athletics, and more's the pity, for the O'Connors specialised in the sprints, and had they stuck to the track there is no doubt they would have won many more laurels for Limerick at events in which too few of our Shannonside athletes shone.

JIM'S BEST YEAR IN ATHLETICS

Jim's best year in athletics was 1907, when he won two All-Ireland titles at the twenty-second annual G.A.A. Championship meeting held at Thurles, a gathering remarkable for the wonderful display of sons of Sarsfield County, who were to the fore in nearly every event. Some extracts from the Press report of that meeting will be read with interest:

"Although the programme contained a greater number of championship events than the G.A.A. has featured at a meeting for some years, there were not a great number of dual winners. The most successful of the competitors was T. J. Ahearne, of Athea, who won the long jump and the hop, step and jump, and tied with M. J. Creede, of Elton, in the high jump, and J. Fahey, of Galbally, won the two standing jump events. Jim O'Connor, of Limerick, won the sprint and the furlong, and T. F. Kiely secured the hurdles and the throwing the 56 lbs. with unlimited run and follow.

"The 28 lbs. was perhaps the best performance of the day, and was won by M. Heelan of Caherelly, Limerick, at 34 ft. 3 ins. The manner in which Kiely retains his form despite advancing years, is one of the things I never cease to wonder at. It is fifteen years since he won his first hurdle championship under the auspices of the G.A.A., and although it would be absurd to suggest that he is as good at the game as he once was, he is by no means done with, as his 16 4-5 secs. for the journey show.

"Taking the events in the order of distance I may say that Jim O'Connor had a very easy journey in the sprint. He won by a yard from J. J. McEnerney, of Emly, in 10 2-5 secs. and, I think, could easily have made the distance more. In the "220" S. F. Lynch, of Clonsilla, divided O'Connor from McEnerney, and the time was 23 4-5 secs."

EVENTS IN WHICH LIMERICK MEN SHONE

Events in which Limerickmen figured prominently that day were:

100 Yards Championship of Ireland—Jim O'Connor, 1; J. J. McEnerney, 2; S. F. Lynch, 3; P. J. Dodd, Dublin, 4. Won by one yard. Time 10 2-5th secs.

220 Yards Championship of Ireland—Jim O'Connor, 1; S. F. Lynch, 2; J. J. McEnerney, 3; T. F. Wall, Rathluirc, 4. Won by 5 yds. Time, 23 4/5 secs.

120 Yards Hurdle—T. F. Kiely, 1; Joe Leahy, Cregane, 2. Also competed—R. A. Kent, Castlelyons; P. Kirwan, Kilmacthomas.

High Jump Championship—M. J. Creede, Elton, and T. Ahearne, Direen, Athea, tied at 5ft. 11ins.; Joe Leahy third.

Long Jump Championship—T. Ahearne, 23ft. 2ins., 1; P. Kirwan, 2. Also competed—J. J. McEnerney, P. D. Mehigan ("Carbery"), M. J. Creede.

Hop, Step and Jump—T. J. Aherne, 48 ft. 4 ins., 1; M. J. Creede, 46 ft. 3ins., 2.

Three Jumps (Standing) — J. J. Fahey, Galbally, 35ft. 2ins., 1; M. Creede, Cork, 34ft. 6ins., 2.

Hop, Step and Jump (Standing)—J. Fahey, 31ft. 4ins., 1; M. Creede, 30ft. 10ins., 2. Also competed—J. J. McEnerney, T. Ahearne, Joe Leahy, P. Kirwan, P. Mehigan.

16 lbs. Hammer (Circle)—P. Ryan, Pallasgreen, 150ft. 6ins., 1; R. R. Kent, 2. Also competed—J. J. Foley, Listowel; W. Ryan, Pallasgreen.

28lbs.—M. Heelan, Caherelly, 34 ft. 3ins., 1; P. Ryan, 33ft. 4ins., 2; T. Phelan, Mullinahone, 32ft. 1in. 3. Also competed—W. Ryan, Joe Leahy, T. Ludgate, Mallow; C. Coleman, Nenagh; P. Keane, Dublin; M. E. Crean, Wexford.

56 lbs. (Unlimited)—T. F. Kiely, 34ft. 5ins., 1; R. Ryan, Pallasgreen, 32ft. 8ins., 2.

56lbs., Between Legs, with follow—T. Phelan, 29ft. 7ins., 1; T. Ludgate, 28ft. 7ins., 2; P. Ryan and M. E. Crean, Wexford, tied at 24ft. 4ins. for third.

The report concluded:—"It is no exaggeration to say that the meeting was the most successful held under the auspices of the G.A.A. for several years. Competitors were numerous for all the events, and, as a result competition was keen, and almost all the performances exceeded those of last year."

FIRST OF FAMILY TO HIT ATHLETIC HEADLINES

First of the O'Connors to hit the athletic headlines was Jack, who won the 100 yards (confined) and was second in the "440" at the L.A.A. and B.C. Sports held at the Markets Field on 14th June, 1893. At Nenagh, on 3rd August, he won the "hundred" and the "440" and, in a second visit to Nenagh, on 29th August, he was second in the "440" and in the mile flat—the only record I can find of any of the brothers over the longer distance. Jack completed the year at Adare, on 14th September, where he won the quarter and half mile and was third in the 100 yards.

Thade came into the picture at the L.A.A. and B.C. meeting of 6th June, 1894, winning the 100 yards, and being second in the 440 yards. The brothers fought it out together at the next three recorded meetings, Thade winning from Jack at the Limerick R.I.C. Sports on 10th July, 1894, in the "440"; at the L.A.A. and B.C. meeting in June, 1895, in the same event; and a few days later, at the Garryowen Fete Sports, in the "100."

Thade won the I.A.A. Championship of Munster in the 440 yards flat, at the Markets Field, in 1895, his time, 54 1-5 secs. On the same occasion he was also successful in the 100 yards open handicap event. At Nenagh Sports, on 17th July, 1895, he won the "440" and was second in the "100," both from the scratch mark. The only mention I can find of him in 1896 is at the Limerick Commercial Sports on 23rd August, when he finished second in the "440."

JIM'S MANY SUCCESSES

We must turn the pages of our scrapbook to 24th July, 1904, before contacting Jim O'Connor. At Kilmallock, that day, he won the 220 yards flat, and was second to J. F. McNamara in the "440." The only other second we meet of him in 1904, was when he finished second in the 440 yards at the Limerick Co. Board G.A.A. Sports on 18th September.

His first appearance the following year was at the Limerick Post Office Sports, at which he won the 100 yards and was second in the "440." At the Limerick G.A.A. Sports on August 17th he won the "hundred," his brother, Joe, filling third place, a position the latter also secured in the 220 yards.

Other successes of Jim that season were: 20th August, at Kilmallock, won the 220 yards, second in 440 yards. 3rd September, at Bruff, second in 100 yards. 24th September, Limerick County Board G.A.A. meeting, won the 440 yards.

Jim opened 1906 by winning the 100 yards from P. J. Roche at Queen's College (Cork) Sports on 2nd June. Roche exacted revenge in the "220," Jim O'Connor being second.

WON THREE EVENTS AT ONE MEETING

His next outing was on June 14th and the local Press described it thus: "The L.A.A. and B.S. sports, revived after a lapse of five years, more than justified the expectations of the promoters. The outstanding feature of the day was the splendid running of Jim O'Connor in the sprints, and seldom have we seen a runner to show so much improvement in a year. He has put on a lot of weight and seems much stronger in all points, so it would seem there is a big future before him as an athlete, as it is only a few years ago since he was taking part in boys' races. His record on Thursday last will take some beating, as he made a clean sweep of the 100, 220 and 440 yards events. We attach most credit to his 220 yards victory, as he started off virtually from scratch and beat a good class field."

At the Nenagh Literary Institute sports on June 24th, he won the 220 and the 440 yards, C. McGill being second in the former and T. A. Leahy third. In the "hundred," Leahy won, McGill was second and O'Connor third.

Results at Tipperary on July 15th were: 100 yards, C. McGill second; J. O'Connor, third; 220 yds. D. M. O'Connell won, J. O'Connor second; 440 yards, J. O'Connor won, M. Lynch second, and F. Short third. At Rathkeale on July 22nd, Jim won the 100 yards and Joe was third in the "220."

ANOTHER TREBLE

Jim had a treble at the L.A.A. and B.C. sports on June 6th, 1907. The report reads: "The Garryowen three-quarter was in good form,

and after easily disposing of his only opponent in his heat for the 100 yards, won a grand race in the final in the excellent time of 10 seconds off the seven yards mark. Later in the day he won the 220 and 440 yards rather easily."

At Queen's College (Cork) sports two days later, he won the 440 yds. Championship of Munster, was second in the 100 yds. Championship of Munster, and won the 220 yds. open handicap. His time for the Championship success was 54 secs.

At Ennis, on June 16th, he won the 440 yards, and was second in the "hundred" and the "220." At Feohanagh, he won the 440 yards G.A.A. Championship of Munster.

MEDAL INCIDENT

In connection with his participation in the All-Ireland G.A.A. Championship meeting at Thurles, already dealt with, some objection was made to the fact that he had won a championship title under I.A.A.A. rules, at Cork, earlier in the season. He surrendered his Cork medal in order to compete at Thurles, and that trophy was never returned to him. His son is most anxious to recover it, and should any of my readers know of its whereabouts he would be very glad to hear from them.

I can only find reference to a pair of athletic appearances by Jim O'Connor the following season, his last on the track. At



The Late Jim O'Connor.

Queen's College (Cork) Sports on May 30th, he won the 440 yards and was third in the "220," and in the I.A.A.A. Championships at Ballsbridge, on June 6th, he finished third in both the "hundred" and the "440."

At the Cork meeting, Jim O'Connor, Charlie McGill and C. Cogger turned out to represent Garryowen in a relay race for rugby football clubs and were rewarded with a very easy victory from a Cork club selection.

FORTUNATE ESCAPE FROM SERIOUS INJURY

Jim O'Connor had a very fortunate escape from serious injury on one occasion. He formed one of a group of young men who were practising on the grounds of Athlunkard Boat Club with the 16 lb. shot, when, in some unaccountable way, the weight, which was thrown by another member of the party, landed right on the crown of his head, rendering him unconscious for a time. He was rushed home, where he soon rallied, and completely recovered in a short time.

Many prizes and medals graced the sideboards of the O'Connor clan, and Jim's "collection" commenced when he was only seven years of age—a lovely Dresden china clock, the prize for a great sprint success, the clock still a treasured possession of the O'Connor household.

REMARKABLE FAMILY RECORD

The O'Connors had a remarkable record of service with Garryowen, and it was a boast of theirs that for quarter of a century a Garryowen fifteen never lined out in a Munster Cup tie without a member of the family.

The Munster Cup, with the names of the winning teams engraved upon it, forms an encyclopaedia of Munster rugby, and the O'Connor family has the names of all seven brothers on the trophy: Jack, 10 times; Thade, 8; Bryan, 6; Joe, 4; Jim, 3; Maurice, 3, and Charlie, 1, a total of thirty-five medals, which must be a record for any one family.

In rowing, too, the O'Connors gave years of service to Athlunkard, and Thade was a member of the crew who won the first race—the Quin Cup—for the A.B.C.

Popular sports, successful business men, proud citizens of their native Limerick, there is much that one would like to tell of this great family, so much that one could not hope to encompass it in an article of this kind.

ONLY TWO OF SEVEN STILL WITH US

Like another great family of which I have written in this series, the Leahys of Cregane, it is sad, indeed, to record that of the seven great O'Connor boys, only two—Jack and Bryan—are still with us. They have the affectionate remembrance of their legion friends and admirers in many places far removed from their native Limerick, and as I prepare to lay down my pen this All Souls night, might I crave the passing memory of a prayer for those that have gone, not only of the O'Connor clan but all the great departed figures of a glorious past. May God be good to them all.

No. 53—John Hynes, of Cappamore.