

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 24)—JACK O'GRADY of Ballybricken

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THIS week I come to deal with the career of a very dear friend and one with whom I was associated, in athletic work, for many years—the late Jack O'Grady, whose death, at the early age of 42 years, took place towards the end of 1934.

Jack was treasurer of the Limerick Athletic Club during my period as secretary of that body, and many an evening we spent together and it was from him that I learned much of the athletic greatness of his native county.

A man of powerful physique, well over six feet in height, to those of us who knew him intimately the character of the man was as high and strong as his stature. Genial, even boyish, ever forgetful of his athletic prowess, all his instincts were native, generous and forbearing.

He had high intellectual gifts, and shared the light he had in him unstintingly with those around him.

CHARM OF A SUNNY NATURE.

Undoubtedly he won the hearts of all sorts and conditions of men by the charm of a bright, genial and sunny nature. If character was life inspired and dominated by lofty principles, Jack O'Grady was par excellence a really great character as well as a great athlete. His was a personality at once arresting, attractive and fascinating, whilst his sallies of wit and flashes of humour held you spellbound, and his buoyant and sanguine temperament delighted and refreshed you like a sun bath.

There was no more buoyant, spirited or entertaining companion than Jack O'Grady. He was unassuming, but few, I venture to say, would dare to humiliate him. Athletics, the putting of weights, and sports generally were no exotic cult to him. It was in his blood, and a contest was no more occasion for fuss than any other natural and pleasant event.

ONLY ONE WEIGHT ELUDED HIS MASTERY.

Only one weight that is now thrown from the shoulder eluded his mastery. With the 16 lb. shot alone had he to take rank behind the great ones of the world stadia. However, the glamour of three world records did not disturb his equanimity or exhaust his power. No man of his prowess took rivalry or renown so easily. By times we have wished he could be roused to the Fianna "fury of conflict," and then, indeed, all we have now to record, great as it is, would recede into the commonplace before the splendour of new deeds. After all, maybe his philosophy was the better one. Victories also cannot make up the sum of life; and tranquillity is too rare and precious a possession to be sacrificed in the throes of a pastime. It was enough for him, and us, to know that he had kept the athletic fame of the O'Grady clan amongst the foremost in the chronicles of Irish athletics.

EIGHTEEN STONE OF BONE AND BRAWN.

Now, let us discover what type of mind and manhood our champion was. Standing some inches over six feet, it was only when he came into the company of men above normal height that one could properly appreciate his inches. His massive proportions dwarfed his stature, for he carried eighteen stone of bone and brawn, and carried it with an ease and grace which increased the deception.

When he won his first Gaelic Championship he was but a youth. The late Frank Dinneen, writing about him in "Sport" on July 31st, 1915, said: "I was glad to see O'Grady in great form. His first appearance at a championship meeting was only two years ago, and I said great things about him. Until last Sunday I was disappointed at his progress, though in the meantime he had made a world's record (38 ft. 6½ ins.) with the 28 lbs. He has developed from an awkward, overgrown boy into a handsome athlete of good strength, and it is rather a pity that he will not train for all-round weight throwing. Some fine day he will throw the 28 lbs. over forty feet. I have great confidence in him."

WOULD MAKE RECORDS BY THE DOZEN.

And again in the same publication a fortnight later: "The outstanding feature at the Dungarvan meeting was the weight throwing of J. O'Grady. The weather, or, to be more particular, the ground as a consequence of the wet weather, was against records, but O'Grady went within inches of the world's records with the 28 lbs., and 56 off his shoulder. He won the weight-throwing championship,

J. J. Bresnihan being second. The County Limerick giant has only to be seen to be admired, and in conversation he is most interesting. It is a great pity that the weather is so wretched. A good hot summer and O'Grady would make world's records by the dozen."

These were some of the best reviews poor Dinneen wrote. He who had seen all the championships from the '80's onwards had planned to write an authoritative survey later. Alas for the futility of human projects, he died suddenly in the following year. A rare epitome of Irish athletic deeds, and an invaluable analysis of the men who performed them were for ever lost to us by his untimely demise.

THREW 28 LBS. OVER 40 FEET.

O'Grady only once put the 28 lbs. beyond forty feet, at least in competition. His world's record is less than three inches off that mark. That he did not oftener realise Dinneen's prediction is due solely to one circumstance—lack of stimulating opposition. Even with the most generous handicaps, there were few men in Ireland who could press O'Grady in pushing the two stone weight; and even the best performance abroad, accomplished in 1905 by John Flanagan, is inches behind his best put.

When we recollect that the record of that wonderful athlete, who hailed from near O'Grady's native place, the late Willie Real, remained undisturbed at 35 ft. 1 in. from 1889, until O'Grady displaced it, we can realise the worth of this champion who moved so unpretentiously amongst us. The chance of any other man driving the record further is becoming every year more and more remote, for this event, once so popular, is being discarded, like many more typical Irish features.

REMARKABLE FEATS.

When O'Grady commenced his attack upon existing records in the heavy weights, he had at least one constant rival, O'Brien of Bulgaden, who accompanied him far on the path towards new standards of achievements. We would be sorry to think that they were the last of a great race of mighty men who made the historic territory of Thomond so famous for deeds of strength and endurance. If the cult and vigour inherited from his equally renowned relative, big Ned O'Grady of the '70's is utterly lost, where and how can the tradition be revived?

The triumph which the most experienced and discerning of modern athletic experts foretold for O'Grady have been more than accomplished by him. I doubt even if Dinneen conceived that Real's great record in pushing the 56 lbs. from the shoulder would have been raised beyond 25 feet by O'Grady. Yet this O'Grady did.

At Cratloe sports in 1920 he heaved that mass 25 ft. 4 ins., thus beating for the second time the Pallasgreen man's 1888 distance of 23 ft. 9½ ins. Nor did anyone think that the "awkward looking, overgrown boy" of 1913 would in the sheer zest of abundant vigour attack Ned O'Grady's old records with the unfamiliar three stones (42 lbs.) weight. Yet such a feat he accomplished, beating Real's push of 28 ft. 0½ ins. and Ned O'Grady's earlier lift of 27 ft. 10 ins. with a magnificent effort of 30 ft. 4 ins.—his third world's best. This record has been the exclusive monopoly of the East Limerick area—historic ground, redolent of great deeds, every acre of it. Here is its progress of improvement: 1875, 26 ft. 1 in., Ned O'Grady, Caherconlish; 1878, 27 ft. 10 ins., Ned O'Grady, Caherconlish; 1888, 28 ft. 0½ in., W. Real, Pallasgreen; 1922, 30 ft. 4 ins., J. O'Grady, Ballybricken.

OUTSTANDING PERFORMANCES.

It would be impossible in the space at my disposal to give anything like an exhaustive list of Jack O'Grady's successes during a score of years' active connection with Irish athletics. However, in bare justice, I must record the following outstanding performances of his:

World's Records—Putting 28 lbs.

weight, Tailteann Games, Croke Park, Dublin, 1924, 39 ft. 9½ ins.; putting 42 lbs. weight, The Curragh (Kildare) Garda Sports, Sept. 24th, 1923, 30 ft. 4 ins.; putting 56 lbs. weight, Cratloe Sports, 20th September, 1920, 25 ft. 4 ins. Tailteann Records—Putting 16 lbs shot, Croke Park, 1928, 44 ft. 7½ ins.; slinging 56 lbs. over bar, Croke Park, 1928, 15 ft.

Irish Championships—Putting 28 lbs., 1913, 35 ft. 1in.; 1914, 35 ft. 6 ins.; 1915, 35 ft. 10 ins.; 1916, 37 ft. 9½ ins.; 1917, 36 ft. 6 ins.; 1918, 37 ft. 4 ins.

Slinging 56 lbs. (without follow), 1917, 25 ft. 2 ins.; 1918, 24 ft. 4½ ins.; 1924, 25 ft.

Putting 56 lbs. weight, 1917, 24 ft.

Slinging 56 lbs. over bar, 1924, 14 ft. 6 ins.

Putting 16 lbs. shot, 1914, 38 ft. 6 ins.; 1916, 42 ft. 6½ ins.; 1924, 43 ft. 2½ ins.; 1925, 45 ft. 6½ ins.

International Triangular Victories—1920 shot, 40 ft. 8 ins.; 1925, shot, 43 ft. 5 ins.

OTHER SUCCESSES.

Other outstanding successes: Putting 28 lbs., 40 ft. 3 ins., at Monaghan Garda Sports, 1923; 39 ft. 10½ ins., at Limerick, 1924.

Pushing 56 lbs., 25 ft. 11½ ins., at Monaghan Garda Sports, 1923; 26 ft. 5½ ins., at Castleiney, 1927; 25 ft. 4½ ins., at Kilmallock, 1931

56 lbs. between legs, with follow, 29 ft. 10½ ins., at D.M.G. Sports, Croke Park, Dublin 1923; 31 ft. 3½ ins., Cappamore, 1927; 30 ft. 6 ins., at Limerick, 1928.

56 lbs. between legs, without follow, 26 ft. 5½ ins., at Limerick, 1924; 26 ft. 7½ ins., at Limerick, 1929. (Ground and weight certified).

AN APPRECIATION.

Some extracts from an appreciation by a colleague of his which appeared at the time of his untimely passing will be read with interest.

"I met Jack O'Grady for the first time in the summer of 1924. It was during the Irish championships held under the newly-organised N.A. and C.A. I will never forget the impression he then created in my mind. I can still see him as he strode into the arena and down the track. He looked a fine specimen of humanity and his size and proportions were heightened by the white singlet and shorts he wore. He walked with a rolling, swinging gait, and, like most athletes, seemed to spring off his instep. His carriage was erect and, with his head held high he looked every inch the world beater he was. As he went he had a cheery nod and a genial smile for old friends and athletic rivals scattered about. He had some minutes to spare before his event, and I could see him chaffing and displaying all the mettlesomeness of a highly-trained steed. I do not think he achieved remarkable figures on that occasion, but he won every weight-throwing event on the programme. He gave the impression, when throwing weights, no matter how heavy, of great reserves of strength and power, withal accompanied by an ease and a grace that made weight-throwing look like child's play.

"I was privileged to meet Jack O'Grady often afterwards. I found him to be simple and unassuming, almost unobtrusive, as quiet and retiring in manner as he was outstanding and redoubtable in the sport, arena. He was eager to talk about athletes and to discuss athletic records and performances, but not a word could be got out of him about his own prowess. Whenever I tried to get him talking about himself, he just smiled, shook his head and started off on some other subject. His happiest hours were spent in the company of old athletes, like Bill Shanahan and other kindred spirits. There the old days were lived over again, and doughty deeds were related with loving emphasis."

THE LAST EVENING IN HIS COMPANY.

I had the last evening in dear Jack's company the day Limerick won the Jubilee All-Ireland Hurling Championship re-play against Dublin, at Croke Park. That was just two short months before his death. Athletics were scarcely mentioned, save only in one characteristic connection. He had secured some data for me about the performance of his famous kinsman of earlier athletic fame, Ned O'Grady, and told of the difficulties he encountered in getting anything near a complete record. It was difficult to get him to speak of aught else that evening but the triumph of Limerick, for he rarely missed a hurling game and was certainly delighted at seeing the men he knew so well bear off the All-Ireland crown.

Jack O'Grady's passing was a severe blow to his legion friends, as well as a big loss to the Irish-Ireland movement. He left us all too soon to join those famous Irish athletes of yore about whom he loved to talk—a brilliant band surely, and enriched a thousandfold by dear Jack's presence.

Here on earth his greatness is written deep in the hearts of those that knew him, and a monument to his memory, erected by his friends in his beloved Limerick, will ever keep his name green, even amongst generations of Gaels yet unborn.

In the quiet little churchyard at Kilmurry, which I re-visited recently, the inscription over his grave simply says:

"Jack O'Grady, born at Ballybricken, 17th February, 1892; died at Limerick, 26th November, 1934. He worthily upheld Ireland's athletic prestige and endeared himself to all by his loving character and simple bearing."

As we breathe a prayer for his noble soul, I can only add that for his intimate friends the recollection of his friendship will lighten many a day in the years ahead.

No. 25—James Lyons, of Labanologga.



THE LATE JACK O'GRADY.

(weight and ground certified).

Putting 16 lbs. shot, 40 ft. 7 ins., at Limerick G.A.A. Sports, 1918; 45 ft. 5 ins., at Clonliffe Harriers Sports, Croke Park, Dublin, 1923; 46 ft. 7 ins., at Tailteann and Olympic Trials, Dublin, 1924, 47 ft. 3 ins., at Monaghan Garda Sports, 1924.

Slinging 56 lbs. Over Bar, 15 ft. 3 ins., at Clonliffe Harriers Sports, Croke Park, Dublin, 1923; 15 ft. 3½ ins., at Limerick, 1928; 15 ft. 10 ins., at Newport, 1928—a world's record, which, however, failed to gain official recognition.