

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 102—JOHN O'KELLY-LYNCH of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

ALTHOUGH born in Clarecastle, the subject of our article this week was a Limerickman through residence in the city for many years and deserves a remembrance in our gallery of famous athletes because of the great work he did for the sport as Chairman of the Limerick County Board, and of the Munster Council, for almost a decade of years. And in Limerick—in Mount St. Lawrence—he sleeps his last long sleep, may God be with him there.

Interested in athletics from his very early days, he was handicapped in his schooldays and youth by the fact that he got little opportunity of indulging in his favourite events, and it was not until he went to Cork City, on being called to the Banking Service, that he began to make his presence felt on the track, without, however, anything spectacular in the line of success. A few years before he died he gave me the story of his early life. This gives interesting details of his many games in football and hurling while he was resident in Cork City and in other parts of the country.

HIS ATHLETIC DAYS.

Coming to his athletic days, Mr. O'Kelly-Lynch's story goes on:—

"Training on a path sixty yards long, the air of Dunmanway enabled me, in May, 1898, to win the I.A.A.A. Championship of Munster, the first of a long string of successes on the athletic track that brought me a grand collection of prizes won in the 100 and 220 yards, as well as 440 yards, hurdles, long jump, high jump and hop, step and jump. And I retain ever happy memories of the many fine fellows I met on the athletic and football fields of Ireland—grand companions all, men whose friendship will be treasured by me all the days of my life.

"The All-Ireland medal I missed in football came on the double to me in athletics. The first, I won at Cork Park on August 14th, 1898, it was in the 220 yards flat and my time was 23 seconds, equalling the previous best of J. J. Nolan in 1890. It was ten years later when this figure was again recorded, by T. J. Kelly, of Limerick, and was not bettered until 1911 when another Limerickman, now Very Rev. Patrick J. Finn, P.P., Kilmeedy, who was a native of Ballinacoma, Killfinane, covered the distance in 22 4/5 seconds.

LIMERICK SUCCESSES BY THE LEE.

"I well remember that August day by the banks of the Lee and recall the great jumping of Paddy Leahy to win the high jump at 6ft. 3ins. and the hop, step and jump at 48ft. 8ins. Another Limerick success that evening was in the five mile flat, which Mick O'Neill won in the fine time of

27mins. 19 4/5 secs., whilst Joe Halpin, still happily with us, kept the Shannonside name on top in Irish dancing by winning the Irish jig and hornpipe.

"At Thurles, on September 17th, 1899, I won my second 'All-Ireland,' this time for the 100 yards, my time, 10 3/5 secs. That same season I also won the I.A.A.A. Championship of Munster in the 220 yards flat.

"I remember the revival of the Olympic Games in 1896, when a wealthy American re-built the stadium. It is on record that the first English Championships were held under the auspices of the American Athletic Association in 1866. There was no governing body in Ireland until 1885, but from '73 to '84 Irish championships were held under Irish Championship Athletic Club rules. On November 1st, 1884, the G.A.A. was founded and held their first Athletic Championships the following year.

VIVID MEMORIES

"I have vivid memories still of Michael Cusack, the founder, and well remember his militant nationalism. I can recall an occasion in 1899 when the Englishman, Sergt. Chandler, stationed in Limerick, broke an Irish jumping record and was receiving the congratulations of all around him when Cusack broke in on the party and, addressing Chandler, said: 'You Saxon dog! It was the air of Ireland and the soil of Ireland that made a man of you.'

"In May, 1885, the I.A.A.A. was founded and held its first championships that year. The G.A.A. and I.A.A.A. worked together in harmony for many years and athletes could compete under both. One of the best athletic gatherings ever held was organised by the old Limerick Amateur Athletic and Bicycle Club at the Markets Field in 1899. It was a memorable meeting. We may say that in 1885 athletics 'took the floor' in Ireland, but not until ten years later did it get such a grip on the public as to hold enthusiasm red hot for a decade and a half.

IN CONTACT WITH THE ATHLETIC STARS.

"Practising athletics enabled me to come in contact with the numerous athletic stars of the time, but first and, perhaps, the highest, in my esteem is the handicapper, Denny Power, of Ballywalter who is still going strong. Denny was a member of the Irish 'invasion' team of 1888 to America. He was a great handicapper, an excellent starter, kept a strong hand over the 'boys' and gave fair play to everybody. He encouraged the youngsters and was always ready to give them advice.

"To my mind, the greatest athlete Ireland has produced is T. F. Kiely, of Carrick-on-Suir. So much

has been written and recorded about his performances that I will not venture to enumerate them here. His beautifully moulded up-standing body, the handsome head, held gracefully over the fearless, flashing eyes, the shapely legs and feet, and the determination not to be beaten, made up a combination of mind and body that was Tom Kiely.

WORLD'S GREATEST FAMILY OF JUMPERS.

"Then we had the Leahys of Cregane, the greatest family of jumpers the world has seen. It would be impossible to tell how many championships they won—Irish and English—as well as internationals against Scotland, besides innumerable other prizes. They were also top-notchers at running, weight-throwing and over the hurdles. Paddy Leahy's graceful high jumping was the poetry of motion.

"Peter O'Connor whom I carried shoulder high at Ballsbridge when he jumped 24 feet 11 1/2 inches, a world's record for twenty-four years, and still an Irish record, won several Olympic honours and can be seen to-day at Waterford as he was almost half a century ago, and giving sound legal advice.

"Peter O'Connor and Con Leahy won at the Olympic Games in 1906 and created a sensation when they produced a green flag with gold harp and climbed up the official flagstaff to wave it, thus denoting the nationality, following the refusal of the athletic authorities to fly anything but the Union Jack in token of their victory. The incident was widely commented on at the time.

OTHER GREAT MEN.

"Of course, there are many other great Irishmen I should mention—Denny Horgan of Banteer; J. J. Buckley of Cork; Tim and Tom Garde, Castlemartyr, and Jim Condon of Lough Gur, cyclist. But I must pass on. It is not possible to recall all the names of the great athletes of Munster at the end of the last century. It was my pleasure and privilege to meet them all, and the varied activities of after years never succeeded in supplanting in my memory the grand storehouse of athletic thoughts that I know I will cherish for ever. It was consequently a happy duty to help athletics every way I could in after years and any little I did as sports official, County Board or Munster Council Chairman, were but very inadequate instalments towards reducing a debt that can never be repaid. One last word in conclusion. I must mention the present parish priest of Murroe—home of the late Archbishop Harty, Patron of the G.A.A., and of Rev. Fr. Hayes, founder of Muintir na Tire—Rev. Father Kennedy, a great athlete, who literally 'ran away' from the greatest trackman England could produce at the time."