

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 75—MICK OSBORNE of Ballylanders

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

NEVER did a more colourful and popular figure in G.A.A. and sports circles generally grace and honour a county more than Mick Osborne of Ballylanders.

Great men have come from the town and district — athletes and footballers of renown; noble soldiers who were prepared to give everything for their native land.

The deeds of the former we are trying to perpetuate in these articles, whilst the people of Ballylanders are raising their own memorial to the memory of their gallant sons who gave their young, vigorous lives for mother Eire.

The unveiling of the Ballylanders memorial in the near future will be an occasion for a great hosting including many men who togged out for Limerick on the Gaelic Field, represented Sarsfield's County in various forms of sport and handled the rifle when their Motherland called. No area in Ireland gave better men to sport and patriotism than the men who sleep the deed and satisfied sleep of the brave in the little churchyards that nestle in the shade of Galteemore.

It will recall memories, too, of days that are gone for ever, days we would like to recall and hold because of their association with a glorious past.

LONG ASSOCIATION WITH FOOTBALL.

Into this picture steps seventy-three years old Mick Osborne, who since the days of his childhood has been especially associated with the "Big Ball" game in his native Ballylanders, for not alone was he one of the greatest of net minders from 1911 to 1935 but a bulwark of sincerity and aid behind every effort, let it be club, county or provincial.

He was for many years, in turn, Treasurer, Chairman and Secretary of the Shamrocks Football Club and his best performance in those capacities were demonstrated through the lean periods of G.A.A. history. Let it suffice to say that at times his own money often bought a football.

I did not see Mick in his heyday, but I remember a great occasion at Hospital Old Park in 1925, when Ballylanders played a selection from the Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick. Such notable footballers as the late Dave Condon and Bill Donovan gave a great exhibition that day of days, but Mick Osborne in goal was the man of the match. When Mickie "Dabbler" Davern, now of Limerick City, put over in his own stylish way the last two winning points for Ballylanders, Mick Osborne was the first man to be congratulated by the Captain of the Army team and the officer in charge of the Battalion. And a ginger haired forward named Fitzpatrick, from Carrick-on-Suir, a member of the Army side, and one of the fastest and hardest hitting forwards ever to grace the Limerick football scene had this comment: "Osborne was unpenetrable."

THEIR GREATEST VICTORY.

When I asked Mick his opinion on the best fifteen ever fielded by the great football nursery of his nativity he answered without hesitation the period from 1917 to 1921, and went further by naming a game against Commercials at Kilmallock as their greatest ever victory.

That Commercials team included some splendid footballers — Ailbe Quillinan, Maurice McGrath (son of Munster Council Secretary, Pat McGrath), Dan Ryan, another Tipperary man of note; Charlie McGill champion runner. The Ballylanders lads won, 3-4 to 0-1, and the late Con Fitzgerald, who was present, said they were a top rate team of whom much would surely be heard.

Later that season ten of the Ballylanders lads lined out for Limerick in the All-Ireland junior football final at Croke Park, and another came on as a substitute at half time. They held the Dublin stars of Erin to a draw after a terrific tussle—1-2 each.

And Mick is not boastful when he says: "That will take some beating—eleven players in an All-Ireland final from a village of two hundred population." It sure was a great achievement of which Ballylanders can justly be proud, and a record that may hold for all time, Mick, in true sporting spirit added: "I only hope some other parish will do the same, but I think it will never again be attempted."

THE PLAYERS.

The Ballylanders lads who played at Croke Park that memorable evening deserve to be recorded: Con Kiely (Captain), Mick Osborne (goal), Matty Walsh, Mickie Davern, the late Jack Crowley, Paddy O'Donnell, Tom Crawford,

the late Dave Condon, Garrett Dalton and Dick Casey. Jack Meade played substitute when Dan Breen (Commercials) had to retire injured just before the interval.

Other men figuring with the home team in the local championship were: Matty Hayes, the late Willie Dalton, Michael Leonard, Paddy Lyons, the late Tom Murphy, Joe and Jim Crowley.

To prove his point that this particular team was the best Ballylanders fielded, Mick instanced an occasion when they drew, at Mitchelstown, with a Fermoy team, seven of whose members had figured on the Cork Lees selection that beat Antrim for All-Ireland Senior Championship honours.

The tournament was one for a set of silver medals, and was in aid of the Mitchelstown Christian Brothers Schools, and much to the surprise of all North Cork, the Ballylanders lads won the re-play, 1-3 to 0-2. In addition to those already mentioned, players who participated in these games included: Jack Ronan, Tom Donoghue, Jack Manahan, Tom Lipsett and Thomas Crawford.

Another notable day in the history of Ballylanders was the occasion they beat the West Limerick champions, Castlemahon, twelve points to three, at the Markets Field, and the same day played the famed Commercials and also beat them, on the score: Ballylanders, 0-4; Commercials, 0-2.

A GREAT RECORD.

As mentioned already, Mick Osborne played from 1911 to 1935, and during that period won one Senior and three Junior County Championship medals; several divisional and tournament trophies and a Munster Championship souvenir. And there is no doubt about the fact that his championship successes would have been more numerous but the Co. Board found it impossible to play out the football ties during a number of years when Ballylanders were at their zenith—an unfortunate happening as far as the great South Limerick side was concerned.

From his first appearance with his club Mick was labelled a football star, and was selected to play that same year for Limerick against Kerry, at Listowel, in the Munster Championship, the "Kingdom" lads winning after a splendid exhibition.

The following season they played Waterford and beat them, 2-3 to 1-2, in the opening round of the Munster Championship, at the Markets Field, but lost to Cork in the semi-final, played at Waterford, 1-2 to 0-4.

In 1916, the year they won Munster honours, Clare were beaten, 1-4 to 0-2 at Thurles, and Cork went down before the Limerick lads in the final at Clonmel.

The following season, Limerick repeated their success over Cork, at Thurles, winning 2-4 to 1-3, but lost in the final to Kerry, at Fermoy, 1-3 to 1-2.

THE CALL OF THE RIFLE.

The call of the rifle kept the playing fields empty for the next few years, and the men that distinguished themselves in the football arena played no small part in the greater fight, some even paying the supreme sacrifice in the cause of National Independence.

Mick Osborne continued in active service long after many of his old comrades had hung up their football boots, and so forms a valuable link with at least two great cycles in the football lore of his native district.

With him when they figured again with success on the County Championship stage were such splendid footballers as Willie Crawford; to whom I owe so much for valuable material on Mick Osborne and the other Ballylanders men of Gaelic action; Jerry McGrath, Maurice Maunsell, Dan Kelly, Tom Mullane, Ned Kiely, Michael Noonan, Jim Mullane and David Cleary, all of whom were often seen to fine advantage.

Mick Osborne always maintained that Matty Walsh, one of Ireland's leading full-backs, was the safest man ever for a goal-keeper, for Matt left the high balls and dangerous ones to Mick and kept the intruding forwards well at bay.

Mick says that the most thrilling game of his career was in 1930 when Galbally contested championship honours with Ballylanders. Galbally put up three goals against Mick in the first quarter and it certainly looked "curtains" for Ballylanders. A good sportsman and friend from Galbally said: "Ye're beaten Mick." Mick's reply was to reach for his coat, take out £2, and ask for it to be "covered." This sportsman took up the bet and lost, for Ballylanders eclipsed the three goals and won by two points. Mick Osborne had great antici-

pation, of forward play and generally knew in what direction a ball was coming. This was probably the secret of his great success "between the sticks."

PLAYED EVERY SUMMER EVENING.

Every summer evening the village lads and country boys would gather in Mick's acre of ground. Mick used generally be in goal. Six stalwart backs were picked and six nimble and fast forwards opposing. There was football that evening in Ballylanders and the exhortations, cheers and roars of encouragement could be heard from the Sliabh Ríogh hills in the West to Galtee Mor in the East.

Mick relates that his most enjoyable outing was in 1934, when Ballylanders beat Ahane, 2-3 to 0-1, in Paddy Donegan's field in Old Pallas, in the County junior football final. To appreciate fully the value of that win we must remember that Ahane entered senior ranks the following season and won five County football titles in a row.

The big attendance, when they saw the light striplings from Ballylanders enter the field against Mick Mackey, Mick Hickey, Timmy Ryan, Stanley Hollis, Anthony Mackey, John Mackey and company, had little hope for the young Shamrock team. But Jerry McGrath, captain of the Ballylanders fifteen, said: "Don't be frightened lads — catch and kick and we'll win."

The enjoyable evening that followed will go down in the annals of old Pallas history. After the game both teams and followers met at the late Mrs. Dwane's in Pallas. An accordion was found and fun and laughter filled the air for a few hours as the Ahane boys "tripped lightly through the jig," with the good-looking and handsome girls from Ballylanders.

VERSATILE IN AMUSEMENT AND GAMES.

Mick Osborne was versatile in amusement and games. As well as being a great net minder, Mick, 5 ft. 11 ins. in height and 13 stone avoirdupois, could throw the 56 lbs. remarkably well. And, be it whispered, he could toss a pair of pennies slithering in the air at a local "school". And at the pitch, if your penny was against the "Kittie" you could look out for "squalls" when Mick pitched his two.

There was a big Feis in Mitchelstown one summer's day and Mick competed in a whistling competition — and won it. His sweet, vibrant whistling of the "Blackbird" and the "Coulin" will go down in memory.

Often at nights when Mick was alone at his fire, he'd take down the accordion and the old village street would ring to the echoes of the "Campbells are Coming" or "Danny Boy." One by one the locals would gather around, and when the house was full Mick would put away his accordion and hurling, football, coursing, racing, boxing, pitch and toss and all innocent gossip would be the order for the night.

There is a very amusing incident told concerning one such occasion. Mick was one night explaining how he stopped a certain goal and to demonstrate his efforts he brought out from the crowd two old men to act as goal-posts. Mick went "between the sticks" and bade Mickie Noonan, a lovely football forward, throw the ball along the ground. Noonan did so and the next moment, football, a pan of water and a large pane of glass went out the back window—that was how Mick saved the goal!

HANDBALLER AND BOWL THROWER.

Mick was also a grand handballer and bowl thrower. He often "buted" one against the gable end of his own house, and got 250 yards out of a twenty-eight ounce bowl.

Residents of the village and the surrounding neighbourhoods would not have a peaceful sleep unless they paid a nightly visit to "Osborne's." Everything was thrashed out there, but in all the long years anything "dirty" or obscene was not tolerated by this clean living and genuine sportsman.

Tricks and games were played there alright, and often of a summer's evening, when a heated discussion was going ahead outside the door, Mick would quietly slip upstairs, open the window and cool the boys below with a little "shower bath."

Mick is a popular and well loved figure at all matches, meetings and conventions of the G.A.A. and our earnest wish is that he will be spared to give many more long years to the cause he loves so well and for which he always worked so earnestly.

No. 76—Mick Neville, of Kilfinny.