

No. 115—WILLIAM O'SHEA of Ballingaddy

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

THE quarter-mile was a popular event at Irish sports gatherings from the earliest times and usually attracted fine entries—these being generally drawn from two kinds of runners—the sprinters and the half milers.

We have many instances of men from both categories "making good" at the four-forty yards, and most followers of athletics will immediately recall Father Joe Kelly, the former Cork All-Ireland hurler and Irish champion sprinter, who, in 1947, won all three Irish N.A.A. championships—the 100 yards, 220 yards and 440 yards, at times very near to the existing national records.

William O'Shea, the subject of our sketch this week, was another example of this versatility, and had hundreds of prizes to show for his prowess over the three distances from the "hundred" to the "four-forty."

THE "FOUR-FORTY" THEN MUCH IN VOGUE.

Born at Ballingaddy, in the year 1863, he grew up a man of powerful physique and over six feet in height. The "four-forty" was very much the vogue as William grew to manhood, and Tom Malone of Miltown-Malbay further popularised the event in Munster by his splendid performances over the distance, best exemplified by his great effort in 1879, when with a fifty-one seconds return, he set up the first Irish quarter-mile record.

There was, also, the phenomenal American runner—L. E. Myres, who, in 1880, broke all United States records for every flat event from the 100 yards to the mile—a feat that had no parallel until the appearance of the great Nurmi nearly half a century later.

At the age of sixteen, William O'Shea was "out with the men" and soon became a well-known performer over the shorter distances, meeting many figures of note and doing remarkably well against even the best of them.

Reports are very scanty of athletic happenings in the early 'eighties, and except for the meetings held under the auspices of the exclusive Irish Championship Athletic Club, the others got little publicity.

THE "UPPER TEN."

Local meets, however, were growing in popularity for almost a decade before the G.A.A. was formed, but the championship events were largely confined to the Colleges, Universities and the "upper ten," with no attempt made to tap the wide rural areas where the cream of Irish athletic talent was to be found. Any man who had to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow was not welcome at the championship gatherings, and there are numerous instances of some exceptional men being refused entry because they did not live up to the "old school tie" conception of the then rulers of Irish athletics.

We, know, however, that O'Shea specialised in the 100 yards, 220 yards and 440 yards, and that he was so prominent at each of these distances that he was quickly relegated to the scratch mark—demonstrating his ability in striking manner, particularly when one remembers that the great men of that time included the astonishing Clareman, Tom Malone, already mentioned, and that magnificent figure, Pat Davin of Carrick-on-Suir, who won scores of titles, at home and across the seas.

ORAVING FOR THE TRACK.

The Ballingaddy man travelled far and competed in nearly all the Munster counties with considerable success. Amateur meetings were not frequent enough for O'Shea, and it was soon discovered that he was trying to satisfy his craving for the track by competing at meetings such as Blarney, Waterloo, Foynes, etc., where he carried off a succession of money prizes. This soon reached the ears of

the "powers that be," and when he went to the Mitchelstown sports in 1883, the handicapper, Mr. Dunbar, ruled that he had suffered 12 months disqualification.

Things athletic, however, were moving rapidly around this period, and O'Shea's suspension was only over when the idea that had been blossoming in the fertile brain of the strong-minded Clareman, Michael Cusack, came to full fruition with the formation of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

VIGOROUSLY NATIONAL.

The new body was vigorously national and its birth was not welcomed by the Irish Championship Athletic Club. Great efforts were made to kill the G.A.A. but the new Association swept the country like a prairie fire. The standard of competition improved beyond all recognition within a few years, and the attendances at G.A.A. sports meetings all over the country ran from thousands to tens of thousands as the athletic vogue gripped the youth of Ireland. Truly it can be said that the twenty years that followed the founding of the G.A.A. were, indeed, the halcyon years of Irish athletics.

O'Shea's first win at a meeting under G.A.A. laws was at Knockaney on September 19th, 1885, and he took the top prize in his favourite "Four-forty" with W. Fitzgerald second; another notable success coming at Emly on November 6th, where he won the 100 yards from J. Connery, but could only finish third in the "Two-twenty"—J. C. Donworth of Knockaney, to whom he was conceding six yards, winning the event, and another man off the same six yards mark—J. McCarthy, being second.

LOST HIS AMATEUR STATUS.

After a few more successes at the multiplicity of meetings that dotted the countryside in the early stages of G.A.A. control, William O'Shea moved further afield once more and competing for cash prizes in Dublin, Belfast and other centres he finally lost his amateur status.

About twenty years ago I had the pleasure of a meeting with the old veteran of lively athletic days and he recalled the principal participants at the great meetings of his youth, although time had dimmed the remembrance of many of the places and performances that once made his name and fame ring around the countryside. But as living evidence he could show many of the prizes won fifty years and more back although it was then hard to get him accurately recall when he won them. The trophies, however, were the remainder of stirring times in Irish athletic history and the part men like William O'Shea played in the making of a new era.

The grand old man passed away in early May, 1943, having then reached the ripe old age of eighty years. Solus De leis.

LETTERS FROM OLD FRIENDS IN ATHLETIC WORLD.

I had many letters during the Christmas season from old friends in the athletic world and a few extracts from some of them will be read with interest.

The first was from an old follower of Limerick athletics, long resident in Cork City, who can claim to have seen most of the famous Limerickmen of the great days in action. He says: "I think there will never again be such a hosting of 'world beaters' within a radius of twenty miles of Bruff as there was during the first years of this century. I dare say you know that Jim Fahey of Galbally left for America when he was about forty years of age and when his best days as an athlete were regarded as over. Yet four years

later he broke the world's record and it was said that this was due to the training he received in America. I have always regarded the material here as the best in the world but also that our methods of training were also the worst in the world. It may also interest you to know that the morning Jim Fahey was going to America he crossed from platform to platform

at Emly Station in two standing jumps."

FROM JIM FAHEY HIMSELF.

And from the great Jim Fahey, himself, from far-away Chicago, came another of those ever welcome letters that recall so many of the great figures of his day. Jim mentions having recently met in Chicago a daughter of the late John Blackburn, a nun who was on her way to Notre Dame from Texas. Jim says that both John Blackburn and Mick Creede were great men for their height and goes on to tell how he slept with poor Creede one night in November, 1908, after he competed in Old Gaelic Park on Thanksgiving Day. On that occasion the snow fell heavily, the ground was frozen hard and the temperature below zero, yet a great crowd saw the Elton man jump 6 feet 2 inches without knocking a bar. On the same occasion Jim Fahey won the two leaps and the standing hop. Creede insisted that his Galbally friend should give an exhibition in the running hop. "I was just warmed up," Jim said, "there were about fifteen others competing but it was the neatest and best running hop I ever gave."

Continuing, Jim tells how on the following Saturday Mick Creede competed at the first indoor meet of that season. It was organised by the Chicago G.A.A. and Creede again jumped 6ft. 2 ins. without disturbing a bar, whilst Fahey took the standing high jump honours.

GEORGE GARDINER.

With regret Jim tells of the passing of the last of his old friends of the great days—George Gardiner of Lisdoonvarna, who fought Jack Johnson twenty rounds also. Jim goes on: "I was speaking to him a week before he died. He never missed a track meet in the old, old days when Paddy Leahy, Dan Ahearne, Sergeant Pat Birmingham and myself would be competing. May the Heavens be poor George Gardiner's bed. I will always pray for him. A grand man he was and I am the only old one left now. The great Limerick athletes series is grand reading and cheering for our old fellows. At wakes and funerals here it is the topic and the great 'Limerick Leader' is recalled many times before the funeral goes out. It is our one great link with home and we all want to thank you from the bottom of our hearts for bringing back such memories of the many dear friends of other days. My old hand is shaky now but I could go on and on. Mick Creede's brothers, nephews and cousins were here in the Chicago police and we had a party every night while Mick was here. Poor Paddy Leahy would surely enjoy reading the 'History of the Limerick G.A.A.' book, and all about the great athletes on the 'Limerick Leader.' He was a wonderful fellow every way. Thanks again. Will now say good-bye, your old-time friend, Jim Fahey." Bean-nacht O Dhia ort go brath, a Sheamus!