

# Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 31)—P. J. REA  
of Kilfinane.

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THIS week I come to deal with the career of a dear departed friend, to whom I owe much of the credit for a lot of the details concerning many of the old-time athletic figures of early G.A.A. days, and even before the founding of the Association.

Born at Kilfinane ninety-eight years ago, during a period when that district was famous as a nursery of grand athletic figures, P. J. Rea grew to manhood in splendid company, nurtured in the highest traditions of athletic greatness.

He started life as a teacher in Limerick city, but lost his job arising out of the part he played in the famous "Bruff Dispute" of 1896.

This early reverse, however, only helped to demonstrate the courage and high principle of the Kilfinane man. With only as much capital "as would sod a skylark," as he put it himself, he started out as a resident tutor and family "grinder."

With the goodwill and help of many who sympathised with him in his somewhat unearned predicament, he "took to the roads," trudging long distances to various homes in the discharge of his vocation.

Eventually, he established himself sufficiently to justify the opening of a civil service and commercial academy in Henry Street, which flourished for long years.

## MAN OF WIDE CULTURE.

A man of wide culture, he had the highest principles of honour and integrity. One of his outstanding achievements was as organiser of the Munster-Connacht Exhibition, which was visited by quarter of a million patrons. Secretary to that great enterprise was Mr. R. T. Hartigan of the Royal George Hotel.

Of a literary and patriotic turn of mind, P. J. Rea devoted much of his leisure to writing for the Press. He also wrote three plays—all successfully produced and well received: "The Well of St. Malo," "Kilclooney" and "Brennan on the Moor."

One of his sons became parish priest of St. Albans, England, whilst a daughter became a nun, in the Order of the Sisters of Nazareth.

## ATHLETE OF A HIGH ORDER.

P. J. Rea was, in his early life an athlete of a high order, distinguishing himself particularly in running and walking contests. Let him now tell, in his own words, something of his athletic days and the men he met in the active arena:—

"We had no walkists," said that eminent man of law and letters, the paternal champion of champions, Pat Davin, of Carrick. The "American Invasion" did not by any means come up to the expectations of all Ireland, but was virtually redeemed by Gallagher's band of athletes, with Michael Hayes as the phenomenal "bipedol."

The colours and mantle of Jefferson and Irvine now fell upon the manly shoulders of the Holy-cross hero, and if common honesty and moral decency be a criterion of the essentials for a walkist, then Hayes, of Cannocks, stood head and shoulders above the mushroom growth of potlifters who entered the arena as Hayes was bidding the old grass track "good-bye."

The four men responsible for the continuation of this classic calisthenic race walking after the dual invasion to America were Valentine Dunbar, P. B. Sutton, J. F. O'Crowley and Denis Power, and as the judges of walking were selected from the centre of the respective sports meetings, they could not well interfere with the defaulting competitors.

## TEST OF GOOD JUDGE IN WALKING RACE.

To be admonished for foul walking is to discredit the honour of the entrant, and to be "twisted" or disqualified is to bring shame upon the club or the townland that gave you birth. Now the conscience of a good judge in a walking race is very often put to a severe test, since in desperate finishes, you have "lifters," "wobblers," or clumsy walkists, and a firm judge who has no axe to grind should disqualify and yet it seems brutal to do so.

In the five years that followed the farewell of Hayes, All-Ireland champion, 1885 to 1889, one judge stood out in bold relief for the honest "heel and toe" walkist, Robert Coll, of Maidstown Castle. He knew the science of walking, he gauged the art of the straight knee and hips motion, and he acted accordingly—in defence and defiance.

Southern Ireland had now only Paddy Hogan left, after Willie Beaumont had made his impression at the old Skating Rink—the 100 miles in 15 hours 22 minutes. True

enough, Larry Connors was still intact but ageing, and Jack Wall held the Bansha side, the classic land where the "Peeler and the Goat" got into handgrips with the humour of the "Member for Tipp"—the genial soul-spirited John Cullinane.

And then, as if by invitation, Willie Quinlan "stepped" forth from his chrysalis in Knockaney to overhaul Hogan, and to check-mate Wall and Connors.

About this period I was learning that "the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields at Eton," and that Tim Quinlan was slinging an old sledge over the castle of the vicinity with the same ease as the Gobahn Saor flung the limestones on the turrets of Mullaghmast, and with the same facility as Jim Lyons lifted the "slabs" upon the historic walls of New Tipperary.

## TO TRY CONCLUSIONS WITH HOGAN.

I had youth, vigour and faction blood in my composite parts, and having been clinic to such a hero as Hayes, I made up my mind to try conclusions with Hogan in the open, and to renew my acquaintance with Bruff and Quinlan.

At this time Cork and its Constituent College had a popular "walkist" who, according to the "Irish Cyclist" of the period, was getting over all the "meets" in the two miles walk in rattling good time, 14½ minutes, and as O'Crowley was not longer extant he had it all his own way unless for a sergeant in the Barracks named Chalmers, who was often fancied as the fixed star!

The old cricket field in the Mardyke was an ideal centre, and on the 11th of May, 1886, I went down to meet young Dr. Hennessy for the first time. The event was timed for three o'clock, and at the call of the bell I walked to my scratch mark, framed by Dunbar.

If I remember correctly, I conceded forty-five yards to the four entries, and after the curt admonition of the starter proceeded on my Via Dolorosa, wiping out in three laps the "also rans," and challenging Hennessy and Chalmers on the seventh lap. It was a brief struggle for pride of place, for I passed the young "sawbones," and almost caught the winner at the tape.

## PROUD OF FIRST ATTEMPT.

I felt very proud of my first attempt and received a case of fish carvers, a real beauty prize. I followed this up by tackling the Knockaney "pedometer" at Bruff the very next month, and polished off Cowhey, Connors and Browning in the fourth lap, and then faced Quinlan in the beginning of the second mile. We were really neck and neck for fully three-quarters of the weary way, until Dr. MacNamara struck the bell for the lap from home, and then the party spirit ran high—"Up Quinlan"—and he being sorely pressed bent the knees very slightly, yet sufficiently helped him to "wobble" to the tape before me by exactly one yard.

He got a "Gladstone Bag" and I got what I badly needed, a three jewelled lever watch, presented to the Sports' Committee by that grand old Gael, Michal O'Shaughnessy.

And now to Kilmallock, where nine men stripped for the "Two Miles Walk," and only for the fixed determination of Bob Coll it would have been a "go-as-you please" discredit to the young men who aspired to the race walking. At four precisely the starter got us all off, and for the open three laps honesty reigned supreme.

I was scratch man and ploughed my weary way, shaking off by degrees, four "wobblers," and attacking in good order, Cooney, Cowhey and O'Donoghue. The seventh lap gave me my modicum, and I shot out like a tangent, and for the full last lap "let my men retreat in good order" until I faced Cooney and beat him on the tape.

I owe this victory to dear old champion Coll, who with several members of the committee complimented me on my style as a walkist, principally that prince of athletes, Larry Roche. A lovely cut glass butter cooler, with solid silver cover was my recompense for being true to my club colours, blue and white.

## TO CHARLEVILLE.

To Charleville, late in September,

back this here dawg." At sunset they return with the dead "dawg" in a wheelbarrow, and the nigger consoles the populace by telling the crowds "he would have won only for the other dawg." We could all have won only for the other fellow, yet I got my share in the few short years of my existence.

It was a shame the way walking was treated by men and judges who should know better, and it was just time to wipe it off the programme. Michael J. Hayes, Willie Beaumont, Larry Connors, of Waterford; A. W. Dowling, Tullamore, were honest walkists, the same with Mike Hickey, of Newmarket-on-Fergus, and to-day I give the olive branch to honest Paddy Frost, of Garryowen, who has studied the art of walking.

I have before me another excellent judge at sports, the late Dr. W. P. Lee of Kilfinane, who feared no man when his judgment was called upon. I would also like to compliment Denis Power, of Ballywalter, on his general verdicts as well as that fine old specimen of an Irish walkist, the late J. F. O'Crowley, of Cork; he was all that could be desired.

As a last word, I would like to see the honest name of Pat Gleeson of "Leamy's" honoured, for dear Patrick threw the 56 lbs. at Cratloe in 1889 the goodly distance of twenty-two feet.

And now, for all the poor old warriors fast asleep, let me implore "The passing tribute of a sigh"—Amen!

No. 32—Michael O'Neill, of Kilbreedy.

to meet for the first time Frank Dinneen, who cemented the honour of our alliance by giving Connors fully 100 yards in a two mile walk, Cooney 70 yards and Callaghan 45. From scratch I had to speed up, but I rigidly gave an exhibition of race walking before a large and appreciative concourse. "Oh! had I the wings of a bird," would be an appropriate marching tune, but I proceeded and caught two of the four and left them, then faced Callaghan and after a brief "set to" passed him and "now for the bloody deed," to gain on the 100 yards man, Cooney. This I did with fine judgment and celerity by 87 yards and then surrendered. I got from the Committee a very pretty solid silver Maltese cross.

And now "home to our mountains" for the "Boru" sports on the Fair Green, where I met Hogan, Hickey, Collopy and O'Connell—the grand finale of the season. It was a big gathering, and the "walk" was clocked for four to the minute. The stewards were from the immediate vicinity, the City High Constable, James Forrester, acting as call steward and Thomas Leonard, commercial traveller, a judge for the field events. Jack O'Sullivan, old full back, was "walk" judge, and with two exceptions we toed the line. Michael Hickey was just out for the second time and he was a fine specimen of the Gael, as honest and as faultless as a good Irishman should be, and as swift and forceful.

Poor old "Paddy" was stale, and on the wane, and more the pity of it. I was trained to a nicety and Sullivan put us on the road without an admonition—there was no need—we loved the pastime, we revered the respect due to the Gaelic Athletic Association.

## A FAST PACE.

Hickey led in a fast pace, and Hogan at his side quickly caught up the handicapped duet, and I followed, "dusty to vanguard." During the four laps of the first mile there was no change in this position, until Hogan now went out, with Hickey a yard behind. I then made a move and led for a lap, and two-twenty yards from home excitement ran high and "up Pennywell" was the war-cry from the ring. An umbrella would now cover us for we walked abreast, and on the entrance to the straight the crowds forced the enclosure, and we were pitchforked on the tape. The public could not be blamed, for Hogan was as popular as a decent old pork-butcher should be, and it was his last walk—poor old "sailor."

It was unanimously considered a dead-heat, so we got a prize each; my silver tea pot was worth the worry. Both my rivals are, "after life's fitful fever, sleeping well," and they were two just men. The walking was now abolished, and so I rested on my oars, and relegated my togs to the archives.

The opening season of 1887 produced no contests, for the art of race walking was abused. Only one meeting worthy of note, at Riverstown, a few miles below Cork city, and the fifth event was a "two mile walk open handicap." Seven men all told stripped for the event, and again I was scratchman. Five were strangers and looked novices, for they did not know how to walk; the sixth was Hennessy, and I got on my mark.

I was fit! All I needed was an upright judge, "who feared no foe in shining armour," and in this I was loyally supported by Charley Holland and the brothers James and Michael Trehy of Limerick. I had the people, too, at my back, for from various angles arose "well walked Limerick," but at the close of the second last lap the "dog trot" began and yet I walked into the winner to within four yards.

## HOT ARGUMENT.

Michael Trehy at once objected, and a very hot argument arose when a re-walk was demanded, but which was refused. After a brief consultation, the decent committee, at the request of the brothers Trehy and good old Holland, secured for me a special gold medal, which I look upon as one of my fancy prizes.

In the walking races, I am reminded of a nigger dog fight where a bull dog is facing the arena, and where his owner shouts to the populace: "'Tis pickin' up money to