

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 67—HARRY SHEEHY of Court

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

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IN a previous article in this series, I dealt with the career of Jim Sheehy and his prowess on the athletic field, particularly in his favourite event—the one mile flat. We also discovered in Jim a fine hurler, horseman and swimmer and an enthusiastic legislator in the cause of the Gael—being County Board Secretary from 1889 to 1893. Amongst many fine sporting trophies won by Jim Sheehy is a historic silver salver, presented to the old L.A.A. and B.C. in 1879, and won outright by the Court athlete in 1886.

Standing beside this old piece of cherished silver plate on the sideboard in Court House, is another fine trophy—the "Limerick Leader" Cup, presented to the old City Harrier Club for the four mile club handicap by Mr. E. B. Duggan, on behalf of the "Limerick Leader," in January, 1900.

This prized old cup was first competed for at the Markets Field, on the 3rd February, 1901, and was won by M. McNamara from a field of twelve. The Cup was presented to him at a dinner given by the Harrier Club that evening in the Commercial Hotel.

The cup was fought for regularly for a number of years and then fell into disuse and was almost forgotten. However, when the famed old Harrier Club was revived under Limerick Athletic Club auspices, some time in the middle twenties, the cup was resurrected once more and was competed for until Harry Sheehy won it out in 1936.

SHONE IN SAME SPORTS AS DID HIS FATHER.

Harry Sheehy was, of course, a son of the late Jim Sheehy and it is something of a coincidence that he shone in the same sports at which his father excelled.

Perhaps the most popular of all foot races is the mile, and its Olympic counterpart, the 1,500 metres, which is about 120 yards less than the classical mile. At these distances the Sheehys were always prominent and many of their trophies were won when they mastered "the field" in such events.

Many of my readers are no doubt inclined to associate anything like record figures in the mile and the larger events with the Scandinavian countries, and the name of Paavo Nurmi comes immediately to mind as the man whose success and example inspired the great Scandinavians since his time to become world beaters.

We must not forget, however, that Ireland, too, produced some great milers, and the famous Tommy Conneff, the "Eride of Kildare," held the world's record and also the 1,500 metres record from 1895 to 1908—the mile at 4 mins. 15.6 secs., and the 1,500 metres at 3 mins. 59 secs.

This 5 ft. 5 in. phenomenon created the sensation of his day, when, in 1886, at the exposition Grounds in Manchester, he beat such cracks as F. Mills of Coventry and the Anglo-American wonder runner E. C. Carter, in an unforgettable two mile race.

MOMENTOUS DUEL.

Carter sought another match—over four miles this time—and in August, 1887, there were twenty-thousand people at Ballsbridge to see the greatest race of all time in this island, the momentous Carter-Conneff duel. That memorable day a blanket could cover the pair as they raced neck and neck. Three yards clear at the bend, Carter burst up the straight for the tape, assured of victory. But as if he got wind from the wind, Conneff sallied up to the now rolling American and slipped by like the movement of a swallow to win in record time—19 mins. 44 3/5 secs.—never since surpassed in this country.

Shortly afterwards the Kildare man crossed the Atlantic, joined the Manhattan Club, and actually competed against the G.A.A. Invasion team of 1888. In the U.S.A. he set up a series of phenomenal figures—1/2 mile, 1 mile 1 1/2 miles, 3 1/2

miles—figures that stood until the great Alfred Shrub came decades later and his 3 mile record defied the world's best amateurs for quarter of a century, until Ladoumague of France appeared.

TRADITION THE SHEEHYS INHERITED.

This is the tradition the Sheehys inherited, and it can be said that right well did they uphold it. Harry followed in the footsteps of a noble father, and first came into prominence when helping Limerick C.B.S. to victory in the Dr. Hartly Cup final of 1932—incidentally the last occasion "Christians" won a trophy that they held so often in earlier years.

John Mackey was a team mate of his on that occasion and both figured with the Munster team that beat Leinster in the All-Ireland Colleges final at Thurles.

That same season Harry won the mile at the school sports, and so well did he perform that he was selected on the Munster team for the All-Ireland Athletic Championships.

Helping Kildimo to win the county junior hurling final in 1933 and a member of the selection that contested the 1934 and 1935 county senior hurling finals with Ahane, Harry kept his hurling "eye" so well that despite his absence from Ireland for a long spell he was selected for the Limerick junior hurling team that won Munster Championship honours in 1948, only to go down before Meath at Port Laoise in the All-Ireland (home) final.

TRIAL RUNS IN LIMERICK.

Harry was only fifteen years of age when another athlete and hurler of the Kildimo district—Jack Kirby—sensed his worth and induced him to travel to Limerick for a few trial runs with the Limerick City Harriers.

Jack Kirby, Harry and his brother, Joe, cycled to Limerick every Sunday morning; togged in the old Boardroom of the City Home, and circled the course by Deimege's and the "Bleach" to Meelick Church. The return journey was along by the stream, almost to Lansdowne Bridge, and then hugging the Ennis Road until turning in near the point where the Gaelic Grounds are now, to finish with a run around the old Grocers' Field, which is the present Lansdowne Park.

The crowd that participated in these early morning runs included Ned McMahon, son of another old timer, Tady McMahon; J. J. O'Connor, Christy O'Connor, Jim Crowe, Mick Houlihan, Paddy Frost, Mick Ryan, the veteran Dan Gleeson, and many others of a grand bunch that kept the sport going for several seasons.

Harry Sheehy was assisted in training by Michael O'Brien, of Court, and both helped Kildimo to victory in the Junior and Senior Cross-Country Championships of Limerick, Harry gaining the individual honours in the senior event.

AN ALL-IRELAND WIN FROM 235 RUNNERS.

At sixteen, Harry ran into twentieth place in the Junior All-Ireland Cross-Country Championship at Greenpark, and a few years later, in 1939, at the same venue, won the individual All-Ireland title from a field of 235 runners.

The "Limerick Leader" report of the event said: "The competitors got away to a perfect start and for the first mile individuals were indistinguishable, so bunched was the field. Entering the second lap, L. Loughnane (Feakle) was in the lead, with Corrigan (Army Metro), Sheehy (Limerick Harriers) and Hackett (Killenaule) following in that order. When the field passed the stand next time around the race had developed into a three-man struggle between Corrigan, Sheehy and Hackett. Starting on the last lap Corrigan was thirty yards ahead of Sheehy, with Hackett a similar distance behind, third. Five hundred yards from

home Sheehy put on an electrifying spurt. Yard by yard he overhauled the leaders to gain the lead as they entered the home stretch. Corrigan spurred but Sheehy had the race well in hands and went on to win by twenty yards in the excellent time of 32 mins. 8 secs."

N.A.C.A. CHAMPIONSHIPS

Limerick athletes were well to the fore at the All-Ireland N.A.C.A. championships, held at Killarney on July 11th, 1937, and Press reports spoke in glowing terms of a meeting described as one of the most successful in the whole history of Irish athletics. The "Irish Press" said: "A splendid crowd and great enthusiasm; keen competition; a high all-round standard of performance and a host of most promising young athletic talent and new champions—these were the big features of a meeting which marks a new era in athletics here. Killarney last Sunday gave the disruptionists a most emphatic answer by making it clear that the whole country is solidly behind the N.A.C.A. and that the N.A.C.A. is abounding in athletic talent.

"Young S. de Lacy of Limerick is a very worthy successor to Moran as 100 yards champion and he "clocked" exactly the same time as Moran in winning the event last year—10 secs. dead.

"H. Sheehy, of Limerick, promises to be a better four miles man than ever the former champion, J. J. O'Connor, was. He simply flew away from the rest of the field, finishing fresh as paint. He almost lapped the national ten miles champion. Earlier this season Sheehy won the three miles championship of Ireland and a four miles handicap race and is full of promise.

"In the pole vault T. P. Murphy brought the third title to Limerick with a vault of 11 feet, but he failed in a bid to beat the native record of 11 feet 3 inches."

ANOTHER RED-LETTER DAY.

February 1st, 1938, was another red letter day in Harry Sheehy's athletic career. Let "Carberry" tell the story:

"As a demonstration of real athletic courage and tenacity last week's deed of young Harry Sheehy, who hails from that vilaged territory between the Maigue and the Shannon, is worth recording. The makings of a great distance runner two years ago he ran well at Greenpark as an untrained novice. Last season he blossomed forth as a class man over distances from two miles to four. In five successive outings he won the four mile flat at Limerick Gaelic Sports; the three miles Irish championship at Feakle; the four miles at the National championships in Killarney, the three miles Army championship, and the four miles championship of Munster at Cahir.

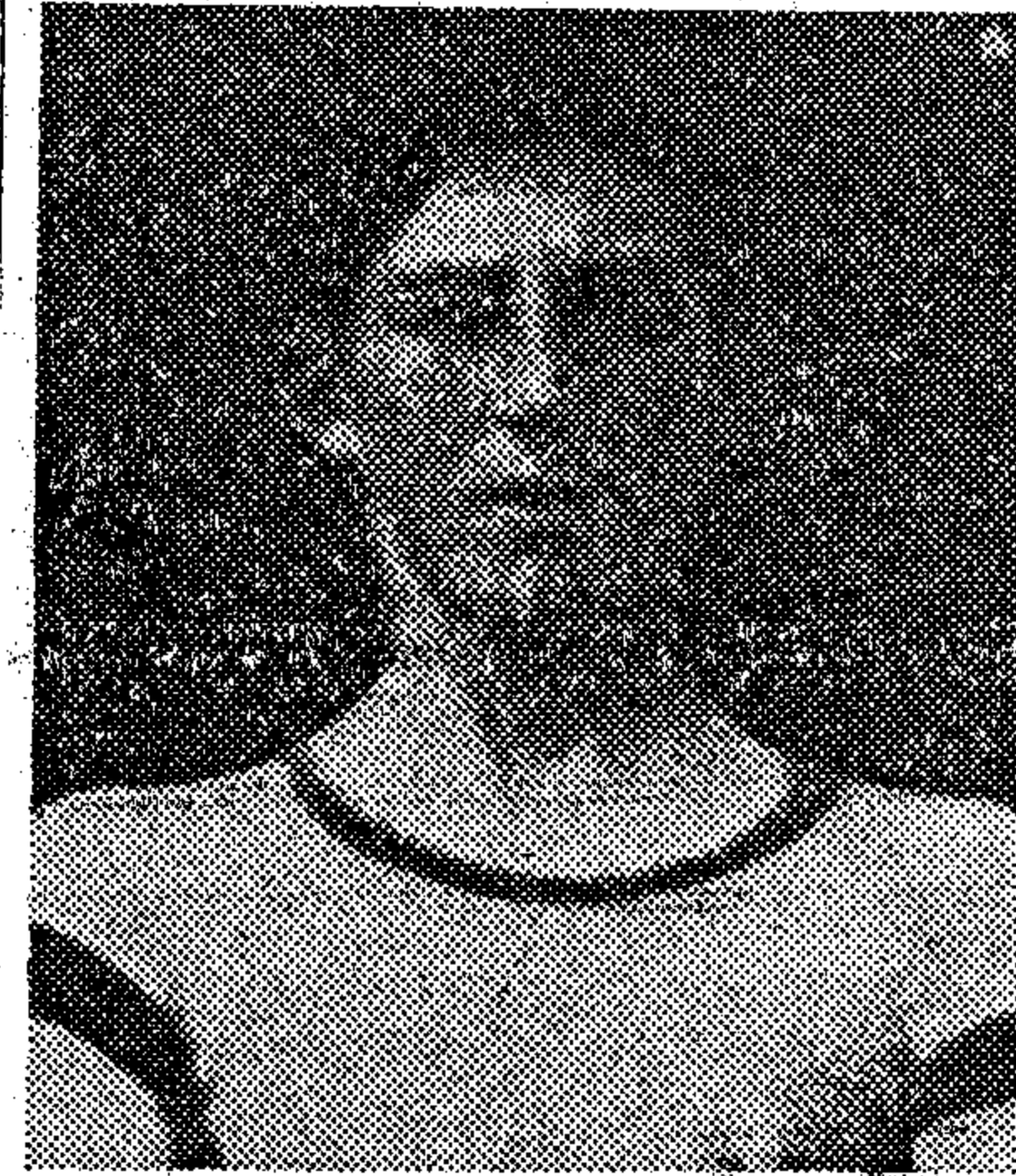
"I remember Harry Sheehy's father, Jim Sheehy, a powerful runner from back marks about the border centuries—comfortable farmer, sportsman, fearless rider to hounds. Our new four mile champion takes after him. Last Saturday he was asked to lead the Army team in the Dublin Senior Cross-Country Championship. When I met him in the dressing room on the picturesque Leopardstown Racecourse beneath the Dublin mountains, he did not look at all fit. 'I shouldn't be running at all,' said the Volunteer. 'I never ran eight miles in my life; I won't stay half the distance.'

TREMENDOUS RACE

It was a tremendous race between thirty-six useful distance men, of whom Michael O'Dowd, of Dublin City Harriers, winner of a score of titles, from novice to senior, had the highest credentials. The pair left the field far behind in the sixth mile. Then Sheehy burst away, only for the tenacious and light running O'Dowd to pick him up again and race shoulder to shoulder with the Kildimo lad at the bell.

"There was a circuit of two

miles to go and the pace was hot now. They went away into the trees and when they re-appeared in the lower stretch, O'Dowd was thirty yards ahead, running fast and light. Sheehy looked well beaten, and was fifty yards behind over the water jump, threequarters



H. Sheehy after winning the "Limerick Leader" Cup.

of a mile from home. The Dublin followers were cheering their man home; with fine courage Sheehy ran on, though labouring a lot. As they swung around the bends O'Dowd was still fifty yards ahead. Then an Army man shouted: 'Sheehy is coming!' and come he did in a most gallant way.

"Stride after stride he narrowed the gap up the rise of ground into the straight. Running on with fine courage, he caught his man 150 yards from home, and though palpably distressed, ran clean away to win by 45 yards after a gruelling race. Should Sheehy pay careful attention to training he will reach the top flight and may set up new figures. His style is beautiful, his body light, limbs straight and long. Who knows but he may emulate the feats of the great Mick O'Neill of Adare; crack four miler of the 'nineties, who beat them all at home and across Channel—a master of style and technique."

OTHER ACHIEVEMENTS.

Lack of space prevents me dealing more fully with many items of his eventful career but I must record his winning of the Leinster Cross-Country Championship, over a distance of nine miles, and the All-Army Cross-Country title. In securing the Three Miles Flat Army Championship he set up record figures of 15 mins. 11 secs., that have not been surpassed since.

A prized possession is a valuable silver plate which he won at Askeaton Sports for the mile, whilst another unusual trophy is a splendid medal, depicting the magnificent entrance to Wye Stadium, which he secured by winning the 3,000 Metres Palestine Championship in the grand time of 9.80/5 mins.

An extract from the "Palestine Post" of November, 1942, will be read with interest: "The annual open track and field championships at the Stadium recently attracted one of the biggest and most representative entries for years. The meeting was featured by the splendid running in the 3,000 metres of the Emerald Isle representative—a wonder athlete named Harry Sheehy. Despite the strong nature of the competition, Sheehy won by nearly 100 metres to finish as cool as he started and to break the track record by 16 secs. Sheehy was in a class of his own."

In 1937, Harry received an invitation from America to take part in a series of athletic meetings in New York but owing to a misunderstanding he was unable to make the trip in time to allow sufficient preparation for the first meeting.

Also a powerful swimmer, Harry, who now works on the staff of B.O.A.C. at London Airport, secured possession of the fine "Limerick Leader" Cup by winning it two years in succession, in races run under sealed handicap.

TWO OTHER MEMBERS OF THE SHEEHY FAMILY.

I cannot close this article without a brief reference to two other members of the Sheehy family.

Joe, who helped Kildimo win the 1933 Co. junior hurling title, and was a member of the Western teams that contested the Co. finals of 1934 and 1935, with the great Ahane, then in their heyday, helped Limerick to victory in the All-Ireland Junior Hurling Championship series in 1941. In addition he won two Western Junior Football Championship medals with Ballvteene.

Still going strong with the hurley, Joe, a first-class referee, is also a Gaelic legislator of note who

has given long years of service to his club and county.

In athletic fields he won the Pole Vault Championship of the County and the Junior and Senior Cross-Country Championship. In all he holds 55 medals, won in hurling, athletics, long puck, boxing, etc.

Last year, at Kildimo Carnival, Joe won a cup for the long distance hurling puck Championship of Limerick and later in the season figured against Mental Hospital in the Divisional Championship final—twenty-eight years after playing his first junior match.

Timmy inherited his father's passionate love for horses, and is well known as a rider of worth at point-to-point and other like meetings. He helped in the making of the film "Henry V" at Lord Powerscourt's Estate nearly a dozen years ago, and treasures a letter received afterwards from the Director, Laurence Olivier in the course of which he wrote: "I am so pleased to take this opportunity of thanking you most gratefully for your fine work for 'Henry V'! It has been a great joy to me to work with such fine men, and such grand sportsmen as you and indeed all the horsemen have been. I do hope that the future may hold in store for you all that you most wish for in life. I hope, too, that we shall have a chance of meeting and perhaps working together again one day. Please accept my best wishes, my grateful thanks and my kindest thoughts."

And so we leave the Sheehy family, full of good wishes for their future.

No. 68—William P. Clifford, of Boher.