

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 46)—JAMES SHEEHY of Court

(By SEAMUS O. CEALLAIGH)

IN Court House, near Kildimo, the home of the Sheehy family, there are many trophies won on the athletic field.

Two stand out above the rest and immediately catch the eye. They are the historic silver salver, presented by R. Fry to the old Limerick Amateur Athletic and Bicycle Club in 1879, and won outright by James Sheehy in 1886, and the "Limerick Leader" Cup, presented to the City Harrier Club in 1900, and won outright by Harry Sheehy, a son of our subject this week, in 1936.

James Sheehy's paternal grandmother was Martha, daughter of Gerald Fitzgerald of New Park, a member of the great Geraldine family. James, son of John Francis Sheehy of Court House, was born in 1864, and died on 12th March, 1926, being then only sixty-two years of age.

James planned to be an engineer, and with this end in view studied at Blackrock College, Dublin, and at St. Charles' College, Notting Hill. The death of his father, however, altered matters, and he was recalled home to the management of one of the biggest estates in the county, comprising six farms all told.

In Blackrock, he was a member of the first rugby team during the years 1881-2, and in this connection it is interesting to note that the captain of this particular team was the late Robert Cussen, of Newcastle West—father of the well-known athletes—Denis and Bertie Cussen.

At Notting Hill we find first evidence of the coming athletic star, and a great victory of his in the one mile flat event there, in 1883, is duly recorded on the splendid silver cup which he brought home with him from St. Charles'.

The silver salver, already mentioned, tells the story of the one mile flat club handicap from its inauguration in 1879. Run under the auspices of the L.A.A. and B.C. at their annual June meeting, we read on that historic plate the names of the winners: 1879, Bruce Murray; 1880, Charles H. Gubbins; 1881, Donald Blue; 1882, John McNamara; 1883, William Beaumont; 1884, W. E. Frost; 1885, James Sheehy; 1886, James Sheehy.

Sheehy secured ownership of the prized trophy by his second successive win, in 1886. Of the first victory, in 1885, very little is recorded but an old cutting in my possession has this to say: "These famed meetings introduced such noted figures for the distance events as Larry Feore, Willie Frost, Jim Sheehy, of Court; Alby Enright, Burgess, of Kilfinane, and Tom O'Sullivan, of Kilmallock—all big guns, and the old silver plate with all the names engraved is a trophy worth securing. With Charley Gubbins as Secretary, and poor Mac Adam as lapkeeper, and under the terrible bang of Bruce Murray's pistol, that old piece of plate went to Munster's popular old sport, to wit, James Sheehy, of Court."

SALVER AND GOLD MEDALS.

In the Press report of the 1886 meeting, held at the Markets Field on June 16th, the return for the one mile flat L.A.A. and B.C. Championship reads: James Sheehy (scratch) holder, 5 mins. 0 3/5 secs., first; J. F. Barry (70 yards), second; W. E. Frost (scratch), third. The officials of the club that year were: President, A. W. Shaw; Vice-President, Archibald Murray; Treasurer, W. L. Stokes; Hon. Secretary, C. H. Gubbins.

In addition to the salver, James Sheehy got two magnificent gold medals, suitably engraved. Exactly alike, and of great value, they are unique in design—a beautiful representation of the arms of the city, encircled by an oval band, with the inscription "Limerick Athletic Sports" and the year.

These old meetings were very popular and always attracted large crowds. A peculiar feature at the time was the presence of bookmakers, who "made a book" on the results. This naturally heightened interest in the events but was open

to a lot of abuse, with the result that betting was eventually prohibited in connection with athletics.

With the passage of time the meeting fell through, and before leaving this period in Limerick athletic history, an extract from a notice which appeared some years later when a revival was attempted, will be of interest: "Our many friends will be glad to learn that the L.A.A. & B.C. Sports which fell through some years ago are to be revived. There was no more popular meeting than that organised by the "Dark and Light Blues" and a grand athletic gala day was often witnessed by thousands of persons who always appreciated the endeavours of the committee. It is but fair to say, too, that the closest competitions were invariably brought under the heavy horse pistol of Bruce Murray, and the old salver with the names of all the cracks endorsed on its frontispiece attracted more lovers of genuine sport than the pots of the country put together. Whether the good old shout of "another lap" from Andrew Murray of Todd and Co., or the numbering of the various athletes by Jack McNamara, of Shelbourne, caused endless amusement, or whether the lusty cheers of the excited field of spectators as Jim Sheehy, of Court, cantered in by a foot from Bill Plumber or Willie Frost, there was one thing certain that no meeting for hilarity, honest sport and general amusement could come near the old gathering generally fixed for early June by the time honoured Limerick Club."

It is unfortunate that such few records of early athletic days are available, and no reports are to be found in the newspapers of the period of the many meetings where James Sheehy gathered the trophies that are still to be seen in his old home.

ENTHUSIASTIC GAEL.

In addition to his athletic activities, the national pastime of hurling was very strong in the Kildimo of his day. Two senior hurling teams actually existed in the parish—the Faugh a Ballaghs and the Sarsfields, and Jim Sheehy played with the former for a number of years.

Also keenly interested in the administrative side of G.A.A. affairs, James Sheehy was elected Secretary of the County Board at the annual convention held at the Town Hall, Limerick, on October 30th, 1889, at which thirty clubs were represented. Mr. Paddy O'Brien ("Twenty") presided, and other officers elected were: Chairman, Thomas O'Gorman; Treasurer, John Crowe; representative on Central Council and official handicapper, Frank B. Dinneen. Delegates to Annual Congress: P. O'Brien, P. Cleary, T. O'Donnell, M. D. Trehy, P. Hassett, Michael Griffin, F. B. Dinneen and A. Mackey.

The same officers were re-elected at the 1890 convention, at which a committee, comprised of the following, were also appointed—J. Murphy, T. Crowe, L. Roche, J. Real, P. Guiry, J. Guerin, Thomas O'Donnell and George Dillon.

The "Parnell Split" upset things Gaelic during the following years but Jim Sheehy remained at the helm, and although clubs in the county dwindled from 79 to 16, and only 3 counties were represented at the 1893 Annual Congress of the Association, he remained a member of the National Executive and only retired when the games were back in a strong position once more.

James Sheehy, in addition to his athletic and hurling ability, was a splendid swimmer and a great horseman.

A feat of his still spoken of by old timers was a remarkable swim in the River Maigue, from Adare Railway Station to the Ferrybridge, a distance of six miles. A regular swimmer at Ringmoylan and Killee, a favourite exercise of his was to dive off the middle arch of the Ferrybridge. On one occasion he actually dived off the High Wall at Ringmoylan into three feet of water—a depth that was afterwards confirmed.

Only a few nights ago I saw a parchment certificate awarded him for life saving by the Royal Humane Society. The inscription reads: "Awarded at a meeting of the Society at 4 Trafalgar Square, London, on 15th August, 1895—That James Sheehy is justly entitled to the Honorary Testimonial of this Society inscribed on Vellum, which is hereby awarded him for having on the 21st July, 1895, gone to the rescue of Michael Walsh, who was in imminent danger of drowning at Foynes, Co. Limerick, and whose life he gallantly assisted in saving."

INTREPID HORSEMAN.

On another occasion, when following the Co. Hounds, the fox crossed the Maigue, James Sheehy jumped his horse into the stream and swam with it across the river, continuing with the hounds, leaving the rest of the field at the other side of the river bank.

He rode with the Co. Hounds for long years, and, in addition had a pack of his own staghounds in Court.

A fine horseman, it is still recalled in the district that when bringing in the hay to the haggard it was his practice to get two men to hold the shafts of the "tumbling butt," and then he would jump his horse on to the box car and double out of it again—an extraordinary performance typical of the man.

And from "Irishman's Diary" in the "Irish Times" we get this story: "Mention of the Limerick Horse Show in our columns will probably recall to many old-timers a remarkable equestrian feat at the local venue some forty odd years ago. That famous rider, Jim Sheehy of Court House, was then in his hey-day in the saddle, and also in its prime was one of his horses called O.D.C., which was renowned for its remarkable jumping. The visitors to the Show included the then Lord Lieutenant; and the local sporting bloods, anxious to display something out of the ordinary, suggested to the intrepid Jim that he should attempt to clear the double bank without, as they say in sporting circles, putting an iron on it. The feat, as the rider was well aware, entailed disqualification, but, as local history records, it was duly accomplished to the amazement of those present. I do not think that such a jump has been achieved before or since—at all events in public."

James Sheehy looked for perfection in everything, and he had a pony that regularly covered the eight miles from Court to Limerick City in the short space of twenty minutes, and that same animal took his master to Dublin on more than one occasion, with just one break, an overnight rest at Monasterevan.

QUENCHED THEIR THIRST.

Keenly interested in athletics all his life, James Sheehy was one of the big figures behind the sending of Mick O'Neill of Kilbreedy to England for his great race with Fred Bacon for a world's crown. Bob Walker, a hotel owner, of Derbyshire, helped in the preparation of O'Neill. The venue for the race was near a big English mining centre, and it is on record that following the victory of the Adare man, James Sheehy stood a

round of drink to over a thousand miners.

Keenly interested in coursing, James Sheehy was one of the founders of the Irish Cup, when it originated as an open coursing meeting with Ferrybridge as the starting point. Bob Walker was also a coursing enthusiast and Sheehy invited him to Court House for the next Irish Cup meeting. The Englishman accepted, and with a party attended, ensuring a lively interest in the event by entering a dog, which, appropriately enough was named "Bacon's Pride."

Also a fine oarsman, James Sheehy was a member of Shannon Rowing Club, his straw hat and crest finding an honoured place with his athletic trophies for many seasons.

We will be paying another visit to Court House on a later occasion to deal with Harry's "Leader" Cup successes, and the achievements of the members of another generation of the Sheehys, but before leaving the career of James, I must refer to the fact that he was first Chairman of the Limerick Co. Council, a position he held for three months, until he was unseated on a petition for a re-count by Lord Emly, who then gained the position by a solitary vote. Tim Healy, M.P., fought the case for Lord Emly in the Courts, and the proceedings aroused great local interest, a ballad of the period displaying popular feeling on the matter in the words: "We'll turn our coats and we'll cast our votes for the Lord of sweet Tervoe."

THE POPULAR JIM.

And I cannot do better than conclude with an extract from one of the local papers dealing with that election: "We wish our friends and enemies likewise to know—for we have enemies—that our reasons for taking sides in the Emly versus Sheehy election are very sound ones. We want men of spirit to support us as well as the constituents, and we think after four years fighting for the cause of the labourer, we are entitled to be at least considered in the contracts. We never got his lordship's vote in any one case, and apart from that we support on principle not patricians but plebians. James Sheehy deserves our best endeavours, he is virtually one of ourselves and means what he says. His promises are genuine, and if he gives his word the thing is as good as done. The Baron of Tervoe had a good run of councillorship, and we want new blood, good blood, and true blood, and we have that in Jim Sheehy, of Court. Men of the division rally in your thousands and vote like true men for the man of the people, the democrat of Kildimo, the poor man's friend, honest and candid James Sheehy."

No. 47—Maurice Hourigan, of Ballingarry.