

## Then &amp; Now

Tom Aherne



# Early champion remembered

## Hurling great Bob McConkey's legacy looms large in Limerick

**B**OB MCCONKEY was the third man to captain a Limerick hurling team to All-Ireland honours, and the first to receive the Liam MacCarthy Cup in 1923. He joined an exclusive group of Denis Grimes, Willie Hough, Timmy Ryan, Mick Mackey twice, Eamon Grimes, and Declan Hannon, to do so. In previous columns we have written about Denis Grimes, Willie Hough, and Mick Mackey so this week we look at Bob Mc Conkey.

He was born on January 11, 1895 in Killaloe, and he was a carpenter by profession. Saint Patrick's was his first club and later Young Irelands club. He won five Limerick Championship medals with his club in 1920, 1922, 1928, 1930, 1932. Four Munster Senior Championship medals in 1918, 1921 (C), 1923, 1934. Three All Ireland Senior Hurling Championship medals in 1918, 1921, and 1934, and a Railway Cup medal with Munster in 1928. He died on January 5, 1961 (aged 66) at O'Connell Avenue Limerick.

The Young Ireland's club won the Limerick County senior hurling championship of 1920 when they defeated Newcastle West by 5-4 to 0-1. That victory led the way for Bob to captain Limerick in the All Ireland championship campaign of 1921. It was an era of political upheaval and unrest as it was played through those difficult days and wasn't completed until 1923. The key political events of those times included: War of Independence, truce called on July 11, 1921. Anglo Irish Treaty signed December 6, 1921. Civil War followed on June 28, 1922 and ended officially on May 24, 1923.

Bob made his debut in the Limerick jersey in 1918, and in his time, he was one of the best forwards in the game. His performances at full forward enabled him to stake a claim to rank with the great players who adorned that position. Bob was fast, elusive and clever and he could whip on a ground ball from any angle and find the net, and he would double overhead with equal effectiveness.

The Limerick 1921 All-Ireland campaign was as follows: The Munster final was played at Thurles on May 28 between Limerick and Cork who were All Ireland champions in 1919. It was the only game of the 1921 championship played in the province, and Limerick won by 5-2 to 1-2. The All Ireland semi-final against Galway was played at the Market's Field Limerick on June 25, 1922. The game was a personal triumph for Bob Mc

Conkey who scored four goals in Limerick's 6-0 to 2-2 win.

Because of the Civil War the final against Dublin at Croke Park did not take place until March 4, 1923. Dublin reigning All Ireland champions came through in Leinster after a great provincial final against Kilkenny. Dublin fielded a dozen of the victorious players who won the All Ireland in 1920 and they were favourites to win the game. They included Mick Neville from Limerick and other top-class players from the top hurling counties. The attendance was over 18,000 who paid gate receipts of £1080. Admission to the ground was 1/- (one shilling) and 2/- (two shillings) for adults and 6p (six pence) for schoolboys. It was a cold spring day and Willie Walsh of Waterford was the referee. James O'Mara of the O'Mara Opera Company, a native of Limerick, threw in the ball.

The game opened at a hectic pace and play swung from end to end as players first timed the sliotar on the ground and stood hip to hip in the physical exchanges. Gradually, however Limerick asserted themselves and the defence was rock solid, and the midfielders were on top. The attack had the measure of their men, and Bob Mc Conkey, in particular, was causing all kinds of problems for the Dublin rearguard and his three goals in the first half gave Limerick an 11-point lead at the break on the score of 4-1 to 0-2.

The pattern of the second half was the same and Bob McConkey added his fourth goal and endeared himself to the Limerick fans. Limerick's superiority stripped the game of the tension and excitement associated with a close encounter, and at the final whistle the score stood at Limerick 8-5 Dublin 3-2. For the first time in the hurling championship the Liam Mc Carthy Cup was presented to the winning captain. It was a very proud moment for Bob Mc Conkey who, in the unavoidable absence of the donor, was presented with the cup by Dan McCarthy of Dublin, President of the GAA. It gave Bob a special place in GAA history.

The Cup described by the Irish Independent as of "racy and costly design" was donated by Liam Mc Carthy, born in England in 1853 of Irish emigrant parents. His father, Eoghan, hailed from Ballygarvan in Cork and his mother Bridget Dineen from Bruff in Limerick. It was from his mother Liam that he received his love of Irish games, customs, and traditions. The new trophy replaced the Great Southern Cup which was last won by Dublin

in 1920, and as such they now became the outright owners of it.

Bob had many outstanding and skilful hurling men under his command and ten of them had played on the victorious 1918 team. The halfback line of Jack Keane, Willie Hough, and Dinny Lanigan was famous for its defensive brilliance and was known as "The Hindenburg Line". Paddy Mc Inerney of Young Irelands at corner back had few equals. He emigrated to America and cherished his hurling days up to his passing in 1983 at 88 years. Garrett Howard of Croom, who won five All Ireland medals -three with his native Limerick (1921, 1934, 1936) and two with his adopted Dublin (1924 and 1927), and Railway Cup medals with Leinster and Munster.

The Limerick team was Mick Murphy Young Irelands, Tom Mangan Croom, Dave Murnane

Fedamore, Paddy Mc Inerney Young Irelands, Jack Keane Castleconnell, Willie Hough Newcastle West 0-1, Denny Lanigan Young Ireland, Willie Gleeson Fedamore 2-2, Jimmy Humphries Cappamore, Willie Ryan Cappamore, Garrett Howard Croom 0-1, Mick Mullane Croom, Christy Ryan Pallas, Bob Mc Conkey Young Irelands 4-0, Tom Mc Grath Cloughaun 2-1,

Bob was still going strong in 1934 and in the All Ireland semi-final against Galway was called into action when Jackie O'Connell tore a cartilage and ligaments as he turned to whip on a fast ball close to half-time. Bob rose to the occasion in admirable fashion, drawing on all his experience and giving a display of flair and flamboyance, in what was a tough and, at times over-robust contest. Bob played in the drawn All Ireland final of 1934 and was replaced by Jackie

O'Connell in the last quarter. In the replay he was among the substitutes. Limerick won an epic contest by five points, and Bob Mc Conkey collected his third All Ireland medal.

Bob's association with Limerick's success didn't end there. In 1947 he trained the Limerick team that defeated Kilkenny by 3-6 to 1-7 in a replayed National League final which was played on March 8, 1948. When Jim Young, a Cork hurling star of the forties picked his best fifteen for one of the national newspapers, he placed Bob Mc Conkey at full forward. Paddy "Fox" Collins, a Cork star of the thirties, suggested to Jim that he had never seen Bob play and wondered about his choice. Jim's reply to "Fox" Collins was a classic-"You don't have to see a man to know he was the best-did you ever see Jesus Christ?"



Bob McConkey captained the 1921 Limerick side which won the county its third All-Ireland title