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SIX BROTHERS WHO WON ATHLETIC FAME

Story Of The Leahys Of Cregane

GREATEST HIGH JUMPING FAMILY IN IRISH HISTORY

(By DAVE GUINEY)

IRELAND has had a long and famous line of high jumpers from the time when Pat Davin jumped the first 6 ft. in this country right down to the present day, but surely the greatest high jumping family of all time must be the six Leahy brothers of Cregane, Co. Limerick. Coming into their prime during the golden days of athletics, they outshone even our greatest weightmen, and when they passed from the arena, they left a gap which was never again filled.

Though Lester Steers has now jumped the startling height of 6 ft. 11 ins., and 6 ft. 6 ins. is only regarded as an ordinary occurrence, we must not forget that these marks have been accomplished with the aid of expert coaching and perfect take-off grounds, vastly different from some of the places where the Leahys jumped their record figures. It has been claimed that George Horine of the United States was the first man to discover the secret of roll jumping, but I think myself that he was only taking the style of the Leahys a small bit farther, and I have heard many old-timers who watched the Leahys in their hey-day claim that their style was the forerunner of the modern era in jumping.

ELDEST OF THE FAMILY.

Con Leahy was the eldest of the family, and while not attaining the heights of his younger brother Pat, was by far and away a sounder performer and competed with greater fame outside these shores. His first big jump was recorded at Banteer, Co. Cork, one of the finest meetings in the South of Ireland. Here in the summer of 1899 he cleared 6 ft. 1½ ins., and later on that year he travelled to Mallow, where he got over 6 ft. 2 ins.

Surprisingly enough the following year his form was disappointing, and he recorded only one jump of over 6 ft., but 1901 saw him produce great figures.

In September of that year he competed at Erril, Co. Leix, and, having eliminated the opposition before the six foot mark had been reached, he went on to clear an unprecedented 6 ft. 4½ ins. The bar was lifted to 6 ft. 6 ins., just over the world's record standing in the name of Kerry-born Mike Sweeney. Con made three great efforts to break this record, but on each occasion he toppled the bar with only the slightest touch.

In the teeming rain which fell on the occasion of the championships in Limerick a few weeks later, he defeated Michael Creed, of Elton, at a height of 5 ft. 11 ins., which was a great effort, considering that the ground was similar to a quagmire.

Travelling to England the following year to contest the British Championships, Con jumped 6 ft. 1 in., but had to be content with third place behind Jones of the U.S.A., and Peter O'Connor, of long jumping fame. However, he had some consolation later in the year by sharing first place in the international match against Scotland with his brother Pat.

FINE JUMPING CONTEST IN LIMERICK.

1902 saw Con's conqueror of 1901, Jones, in Ireland, and he came to Limerick, where one of the finest jumping contests of that time was seen. Con and Pat were the American's biggest opposition, and the three of them all crossed 6 ft. at the first effort.

The bar was then set at 6 ft. 1½ ins., and again the three athletes cleared it in effortless style. Raising the bar another inch, proved too much for Pat, but Jones cleared it on his first jump. Con failed on his first effort, but in the hush that fell over the whole ground, he skinned over the lathe on his second attempt. Although the bar was raised another inch, neither of them cleared it, so Con, who was in receipt of 2 ins. handicap from the American was declared the winner. 1903 brought further laurels to Con, who won the international high jump, as well as taking the Irish title with a fine effort of 6 ft. 2½ ins.

As year followed year, the Crean man seemed to be improving with each outing, and after winning the international high jump with a mark of 6 ft. 1 in. in 1904, as well as doing 6 ft. 2½ ins. here in Ireland, he realised one of his greatest ambitions by taking the British title in London in 1905, as well as retaining the international high jump. In this year he excelled himself by clearing 6 ft. 4 ins. in Westport, and also cleared 6 ft. 2 ins. on at least seven occasions.

AT OLYMPIC GAMES IN ATHENS.

In the following year the Olympic Games were held in Athens, and Con travelled there in company with Peter O'Connor, and a small band of Irishmen.

The high jump started around midday and continued on for hours. In order to please some of the Greek competitors, the judging commenced at 4 ft. 6 ins., and the bar was raised a fraction of an inch at a time. After a long drawn out struggle between Leahy, Gonczy, of Hungary; Diakides, of Greece, and Kerrigan, of the U.S.A., the Cregane man finally emerged as the victor with a jump of 5 ft. 9½ ins. It is also worth recording that Con was a very close runner-up to Peter O'Connor in the hop-

step and jump.

Hardly had Con returned home from Athens, than he was off again to London where he took the British crown. Back at home he took the Irish championship, and just to make his collection complete, he retained the high jump in the International. Thus, in one year, he had taken every major title in the high jump, excluding the American title, although he declined this the following year.

Crossing to the States in 1907, he took the American championship, with 6 ft. 1 in., and before his return to Ireland cleared 6 ft. 2 ins. in New York. London, 1908, was the scene of another Olympiad, and Con was ready to defend his title.

FOURTH SUCCESSIVE BRITISH TITLE.

He had already taken his fourth successive British title, and was jumping consistently over the classic six foot mark. In the high jump at the 1908 Games was the greatest galaxy of high jumping stars in the world at that time, including Porter of the United States, Georges Andre of France, and Somogyi of Hungary. These four fought out a bitter contest right up to the 6 ft. 2 in. mark, which all cleared in their first jumps. When the bar was raised to 6 ft. 3 in. Porter was the only one to clear it, although Con made one gallant effort, only to tip the bar slightly and knock it off.

Returning home to Limerick he showed even finer form when he competed at Adare. Here he crossed 6 ft. 5 ins., and which, when measured in the centre, showed great marks of Pat Leahy, who was always capable of jumping 6 ft. 4½ ins. Although this would have been a new Irish record, for

Joe Leahy was joint Munster high

Although Pat cleared quite a number of 6 ft. 5 ins. here in Ireland, he was never able to reproduce these performances abroad, and we can only surmise that he lacked the big competition spirit of his brother Con.

Pat also emigrated with Con, and although having been out of competition for over ten years, he made an astonishing come-back in 1916, when he set a new American record for the standing hop step and jump, no mean feat, when one considers that this record had withstood the attempts of the great Ray Ewry, winner of so many American and Olympic titles in the standing jumps.

THE OTHER BROTHERS.

Tim Leahy, while not attaining to the great heights of his brothers, won four Irish titles, and was a very sound man over 6 ft. At Bruff in 1910 he jumped 6 ft. 3 ins., and later that same year won at Dunmanway sports with 6 ft. 2½ inches.

In 1913, he was credited with a superb 6 ft. 5 ins. at the Limerick County Sports, which was not accepted as an Irish record. Still in that very same year Tim Carroll went down to Kinsale, where he jumped a 6 ft. 5 ins., later ratified as an Irish record, despite the fact that he had never before this time, or for that matter never after, jumped within two inches of his figure.

I have heard some of our greatest athletes say that Carroll's figures should never have been accepted, in preference to the great marks of Pat Leahy, who was always capable of jumping 6 ft. 4½ ins. Although this would have been a new Irish record, for

Joe Leahy was joint Munster high



P. J. Leahy, the most colourful of the famous jumpers.

some reason, or other, it was never accepted.

Con Leahy emigrated in 1909, and although making one or two appearances in the States, he apparently retired from competition shortly afterwards.

PAT A MORE COLOURFUL COMPETITOR.

Pat Leahy was a far more colourful competitor than his eldest brother, but while not being as consistent, was undoubtedly a greater jumper. He jumped with a beautiful lay-out and I have heard many men who saw him jump, state that he had a perfect style, which was an absolute joy to watch.

On a wet ground at Limerick in 1898, he cleared the astonishing height of 6 ft. 5 ins., which was just short of the world's record. This was a new Irish record, but was not accepted, although it was said to have been one of the fairest jumps of all time.

Tom Leahy, although better known as a sprinter, was also a fairly good jumper, and, with his brother Michael, could always be depended upon to get somewhere in the vicinity of 5 ft. 10 ins.

SISTER WAS ALSO A USEFUL JUMPER.

There was one other member of the family who achieved fame, although not in open competition.

The famous Leahys had a sister who was quite capable of clearing 5 ft. at any time, and who probably became proficient as a high jumper from training with her renowned brothers.

Although we have had great performers in the high jump in Ireland since the days of the Leahys, we have no family to equal these great performers. One must remember that during their best jumping years they had to work at home and could only devote a little of their time to training. It is unknown what heights the Leahys would have reached, and it is quite possible that the Irish record of today would still be standing to one or other of the family. I saw Dick Phillips, of Brown University, clear 6 ft. 6½ ins. in Lansdowne Road in 1949, but he had the advantage of years of good coaching behind him, as well as jumping with the new straddle style. Even Patterson, who held the record up to that, stood nearly six feet six inches, whereas not one of the Leahys was up to the six foot mark, and in fact Pat, was only five feet eight inches.

FAMILY WON 33 IRISH CHAMPIONSHIPS.

How great the Leahys were can

be realised from the fact that in the ensuing years we have had no Irishmen to touch their great performances, and, although some may have cleared up and over 6 ft. 2 ins., none of them can claim to have stayed in the first flight of jumpers over such a long period. Between them, the Leahys won 33 Irish titles.

IN PARIS FOR OLYMPIC GAMES.

The following year saw him in Paris for the Olympic Games, where he finished second to the American, I. K. Baxter.

Pat travelled to the British Championships in 1898 and 1899, and won on both occasions, although he was unable to clear

jump champion in 1904, and shortly afterwards followed his brothers over the 6 ft. mark, and while not being consistent at this figure was usually good for 5 ft. 10 ins.

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