

No. 202—MATT WALSH of Ballylanders

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE Ballylanders Shamrock Football Club came into existence just half a century ago—they celebrate the golden jubilee of their foundation some time this year. Under the captaincy of Con Kiely they took a very active part in Limerick football ranks, but were probably one of the most unlucky teams ever to come to the front in Limerick. The team which won for them a County Junior Football crown in 1911, when they beat CastleMahon, 3-3 to 0-3, at the Markets Field (played on April 28th, 1912), was one of the best combinations ever to win the title. Organisation in Limerick, however, was at a wobb about this period and football was the main sufferer. In fact, if the matter was carefully analysed the decline of Limerick football might be traced from the early years of the present century, and the blame laid on the officers and members of the then County Board for their shameful neglect of the game.

ONLY TWO FINALS IN TWENTY YEARS!

This is well illustrated by the fact that in the years from 1900 to 1925—a full quarter century, the Junior Football Championship was only brought to a successful conclusion on five occasions. In the twenty years, from 1905, only two finals were played and Ballylanders were victorious in both although full decade separated their wins which were recorded in the 1911 and 1920 Championships. The final of the latter was not played until the 1st, 1924, at Knockana, where Ballylanders beat Cloughaun, 1-5 to 0.

When one considers that Ballylanders had eleven members of their own team on the Limerick side which drew with Dublin in

the 1916 All Ireland Junior Football Final, but lost the replay, it is easy to recognise the worth of the side and concede the claim that they would have won a whole hatful of county crowns were they given the opportunity.

SOBRY READING

The football history of their glory spell makes sorry reading—the game was practically ignored by the powers that were and the great work Limerick Commercial's accomplished in the early G.A.A. days all went for nought, as neglect and something worse than indifference stifled the gallant efforts of the great football stars of Ballylanders, who would have blazed a trail maybe every bit as brilliant as the Commercial's were they given half a chance.

Most discouraging feature of the whole set up at the time was the perennial resolutions passed expressing interest and encouragement for football, the commencement of competitions, and then the cessation of almost all effort until disillusionment came twelve or eighteen months later with the decision to abandon the competition, even after several games might have been played, accompanied by the passing of another pious resolution promising a fresh start, which so monotonously followed the pattern of the previous occasion.

FIRST MUNSTER JUNIOR CHAMPIONSHIPS

The first Munster Junior Championships were established in 1910, and Limerick's entry into this new competition provided the opportunity of some recognition for the men of Ballylanders, and a chance to prove their football worth, which was denied them on local fields through lack of proper organised competition.

Six Ballylanders players figured on Limerick's first junior football

pick. They were: Mick Osborne, goalkeeper (who has the great record of having figured with his Club for 33 years, from 1904 to 1937); Con Kiely, Captain (also a great athlete); M. Davern, P. O'Donnell, J. Crowley, and D. Condon. They played Kerry, at Listowel, the "Kingdom" lads winning after a splendid exhibition.

MATTY WALSH

When Ballylanders won their first county crown in 1911, they had a photograph taken to commemorate the occasion. In that group was a schoolboy destined later to become one of the greatest footballers of them all. He was Matty Walsh, the subject of this sketch, and to another fine footballer of the period, Willie Crawford, I am indebted for much of the data concerning him.

With Matty in that now historic 1911 photo were the following footballers: E. Noonan, P. Bourke, J. Doherty, W. Dalton, M. Osborne, E. Ryan, C. Hannan, R. Casey, J. Kiely, J. A. Crowley, J. O'Sullivan, C. Kiely, B. J. O'Donnell (captain), J. F. Crowley, M. Doherty, M. Connors, D. B. Condon, Matt Hayes and M. Davern.

On May 18th, 1912, at the Markets Field, a Ballylanders selection lined out against Waterford in the opening round of that year's Munster Junior Football Championship, and won a great game, 2-2 to 1-2. The Limerick players on that occasion were: P. Crowley (captain); P. O'Donnell, C. Kiely, T. Ryan, J. Liston, F. Crawford, M. Davern, W. Dalton, J. Crowley, M. Osborne, J. Histon, D. Mangan, D. Condon, M. O'Sullivan, R. Casey, J. McMahon, C. Kelly, J. J. O'Keefe.

LIMERICK'S DOUBLE ENGAGEMENT AT WATERFORD

On September 1st, 1912, Limerick had a double engagement at Waterford Sports Field in Munster semi-finals in senior hurling and junior football. The senior hurling game, which was commenced by the "Poet Priest of Gaeldom," the late Fr. Dollard ("Slievenamon") was one of the toughest ever waged for Munster honours. Limerick had a slight advantage all through the second half, and with a single point lead, with a minute to go, were fighting desperately for a further score when a Cork clearance caused a sensational turn, the leather being battered to the Limerick net with the last stroke of the game, which Cork won, 2-2 to 1-3.

The Junior Football game was also an exciting affair and followed closely the pattern of the hurling, Cork winning, 1-2 to 0-3. The Limerick players that evening were: C. Kiely (Captain); W. B. Dalton, T. Ryan, D. O'Connor, M. F. O'Sullivan, J. F. Crowley, P. O'Donnell, B. Cassidy, D. Ward, D. Condon, J. Curtin, M. Davern, J. Doody, M. Osborne (goal), A. Kelly, B. Crawford, J. Liston.

Their last engagement of the year was at Hospital on November 17th, where Ballylanders drew with Pallas, 1-0 each, in the Senior Football Championship.

NOTABLE EVENTS OF 1913

Notable events of 1913 were the reduction of the number of players from seventeen to fifteen, and the decision of the Limerick County Convention that the colours to be worn by Limerick in future inter-county contests would be green and white.

At Kilmallock, on April 13th, Ballylanders beat the locals, 0-2 to 0-1, in the senior football championship, after a very exciting and hard-fought struggle.

On July 6th, at the Markets Field, Ballylanders had a sound victory over CastleMahon, 0-2 to 0-1 in the Senior Football Championship, but later lost to Commercial's in the semi final, after a hard game, decided at Kilmallock.

Ballylanders brought a selection to Fethard on August 10th to play Tipperary in a senior football tournament, which the home side won.

LIMERICK REVERSE A DECISION

Limerick reversed the verdict of the previous year when defeating Cork, 2-2 to 1-3, in the Munster Junior Football Championship at Thurles, but on October 26th, at Cork Athletic Grounds the Ballylanders "pick" went down in glory before Kerry, 1-3 to 1-2, after a thrilling exhibition of the code.

A matter of much interest to Ballylanders people was the purchase by the G.A.A. of the Sports Grounds at Jones's Road, Dublin, which was completed on December 22nd, 1913. The Grounds had been owned by Mr. Frank B. Dineen, a native of Ballylanders, who held the positions of Secretary and President of the Central Council G.A.A. in the formative years of the Association. The purchase price was £3,641 8s. 5d.

Disorganisation within the county left Limerick poorly represented in the Munster Junior Football ties for 1914 and 1915. 1916, however, proved a bumper year and with Matty Walsh coming well to the fore that season, the story of the fight for Munster and All Ireland honours will be related next week.

No. 202—MATT WALSH of Ballylanders
(Continued)

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

LIMERICK took the first step on the road to Munster football renown on July 16, 1916, when they beat Clare, at Thurles, 0-7 to 0-2, in the first round of the junior provincial championship.

The final was played at Clonmel on September 3 and after a very close and exciting contest Cork beat Limerick, 1-0 to 0-2. The Cork team was subsequently declared illegal by the Munster Council and Limerick were awarded the title.

It was a little over twelve months later when Limerick lined out against the Stars of Erin, Dublin, Selection at Croke Park (on September 16, 1917, to be precise) for the All-Ireland junior football final. After one of the best games seen in the metropolis, the game ended in a draw, at 1 goal and 2 points each, both teams serving a splendid exhibition of Gaelic football. Over three thousand spectators saw the match.

THE GAME

Ballylanders had eleven players from their own club on this team, with four outsiders, including the renowned Dan Breen, of Commercials, who was forced to retire after twenty-five minutes play with a fractured elbow. Breen's loss was keenly felt and it was the general opinion that Limerick would have won well had he been on for the full hour. As it was, the Shannonsiders lost a golden chance of victory. Limerick were all over the Liffesiders in the final stages of the game, but lost many great scoring chances. Three minutes from time, the Limerick full forward, with the goal at his mercy, took a drop shot ten yards out and missed the objective. The All-Ireland title went with that wide ball, for Limerick lost the re-play.

A GREAT FEAT

It was a great feat on the part of Ballylanders—a village of two hundred population—to put eleven players on the green sward of Croke Park for an All-Ireland final. They set a headline on that occasion for the small villages and towns that, it is to be hoped, some other Limerick parish will emulate. Ballylanders proved what interest and enthusiasm can accomplish.

Mr. P. D. Breen, of Wexford, who was afterwards President of the G.A.A., refereed that great drawn game.

In preparation for the re-play the Ballylanders fifteen engaged a county selection in a trial contest and emerged victorious.

THE RE-PLAY

Four thousand people were at Croke Park on November 18, 1917, for the second meeting of the teams. Limerick were unfortunate in having to line out with only eight of the Ballylanders men of the drawn game and were more unfortunate when their best player, Micky Davern, had to go off injured before half time.

The Shannon representatives never produced anything like their form of the first occasion; the brilliant play was missing and they looked a disjointed side. Dublin won readily, 6-4 to 0-3.

Mr. A. Rodgers (Dundalk) refereed, and the Limerick players were: Con Kiely (captain), Mick Osborne (goal), P. O'Donnell, M. Walsh, M. Davern, D. Casey, J. Crowley, J. Donovan, D. O'Grady, J. J. O'Keefe, M. McGrath, J. Butler, J. Lyons, G. Dalton, D. O'Connell.

The following year Limerick beat Cork at Thurles in the opening round of the Munster Championship, 2-4 to 1-3. In the final they met Kerry at Cork Athletic Grounds and were beaten after a terrific tussle, 1-3 to 1-2. Kerry fielded senior players, and a re-play was ordered for Fermoy, which the "Kingdom" men won, after a stubborn game.

THE LIMERICK PLAYERS

The Limerick players on that occasion were: M. Davern, P. O'Donnell, M. Walsh, J. Lyons, C. Kiely,

G. Dalton, D. O'Connell, J. Sheehan, B. Tansey, James Ryan, J. Ryan, J. Leonard, M. McGrath, E. Kelly, J. Moloney.

Old Ballylanders football fans maintain the best fifteen they ever fielded was against Commercials at Kilmallock in 1915, when they beat the famed city combination 3-4 to 0-1. Commercials on that occasion included such noted players as Albie Quillinan, Maurice McGrath and Dan Ryan, both Tipperarymen; Purcell, and the champion 220 yards runner, Charlie McGill. The latter, holder of the All-Ireland title at the time, was run off his feet by little Matty Hayes, who was only 5ft. 5ins., but fast as a deer. Charlie was so impressed with the speed of his opponent that he sought him after the game and had a good laugh when he found him with a chum in the snug of Jack Hayes's public house doing full justice to a loaf of bread and a pint.

ANOTHER NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENT

Another notable achievement by Ballylanders was the occasion they played a draw at Mitchelstown against Fermoy, then one of Cork's leading senior football combinations, and won the re-play after a right tough hour and much to the surprise of the Cork "fans" for seven of the Fermoy players had a few years previously figured in the winning of All-Ireland honours for Cork, when Antrim were beaten in the Blue Riband decider. The side that beat Fermoy was:

Con Kiely, captain; Mick Osborne, goal; P. O'Donnell, Matt Hayes, Jack Ronan, Jack Crowley, Joe Crowley, Tom Murphy, Tom Donoghue, Jack Manahan, Dave Conlon, Garrett Dalton, Willie Dalton, Tom Lyssett, Joe Crowley, Micky Davern, Thomas Crawford.

The two games at Mitchelstown were for a set of silver medals, and in aid of the Christian Brothers' Schools there.

LIST OF PLAYERS.

I am indebted to that grand old Gael, Mick Osborne, for the names of the Ballylanders players and subs. that played the great Kilmallock game against Commercials, already referred to: Con Kiely (captain), Mick Osborne (goal), Paddy O'Donnell, Davy Condon, Matty Hayes, Micky Davern, Jack Crowley, Willie Dalton, Garrett Dalton, Tom Crawford, Michael Leonard, Paddy Lyons, Richard Casey, Matty Walsh, J. Meade, Tom Murphy, Joe Crowley, Jim Crowley. In Mick's opinion this was the best team ever to wear the Ballylanders jersey.

To the Ballylanders veteran, I am likewise grateful for the names of the men from his club who figured in the drawn game against Dublin in the 1916 All-Ireland junior football final. They were: Con Kiely (captain), Mick Osborne (goal), Matty Walsh, Michael Davern, John Crowley, Pat O'Donnell, Tom Crawford, Dave Condon, Garrett Dalton and Dick Casey. Jack Meade came into the game when Dan Breen was injured.

AT THEIR ZENITH

The Ballylanders lads were at their zenith during the early days of the War of Independence and it was the intensification of that fight which caused the first break in one of the best football teams of a great era.

Many of the Ballylanders lads suffered from British aggression and the brothers Dalton, Sean Meade, the Crawford and Crowley brothers and Davern were interned in foreign jails. Two others—Murphy and Tobin—paid the supreme sacrifice in January, 1921.

Next week, I will conclude the story with a special appreciation by Willie Crawford, of the football career of Matty Walsh.

GREAT LIMERICK SPORTSMEN

No. 202—MATT WALSH of Ballylanders
(Concluded)

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE intensification of the struggle against the British coincided with the second great period of Ballylanders football supremacy, and the best illustration of the lengthy interruption suffered in the running of the county championships is forthcoming in the case of the 1920 Junior Football Championship, which commenced early that year, but did not reach a conclusion until June 1st, 1924—a little over four years later.

Limerick was under Martial Law from August 15th, 1920, and curfew was enforced in the city. The G.A.A. was declared an unlawful association by the British occupying authorities, and with many leading Gaels "on the run" and figuring with the Flying Columns, the playing fields had "performance to be deserted."

This condition of affairs continued until after the Truce of July 11th, 1921, but as the County Convention was not held until September 10th that year little championship activity was possible.

CIVIL STRIFE.

When eventually the prisoners were released and the British left, activity was just swinging into full force once more when the unfortunate civil strife broke out. Operations were again held up and no games were played between June and October, 1922.

The G.A.A., however, was not idle and to the Association must go a lot of the credit for healing the wounds of the most bitter struggle a people may endure. By fidelity to its rule that political differences are barred on its playing pitches and at its councils it was not only able itself to persist unbroken, but it became a major agency for ending the disunion. Through their association with one another on boards and teams, Irishmen, who, in the civil conflict had been pitted against one another were able to sink their bitternesses, and forgetting all else, play side by side for the honour of their club or county.

The Civil War rent Ireland more deeply than anything that had happened for a century. It could have crippled us for a generation. That it did not, and that memories of that awful conflict have all but died away except as examples of heroism and glorious self-sacrifice, is not the least of the achievements in which the G.A.A. played a great part.

Ballylanders could have hit the football high spots during those fateful years in Irish history, but national events dictated otherwise.

THE OVERDUE 1920 JUNIOR
The longest drawn out of all our championships was eventually theirs, when they beat Cloughaun, 1-5 to nil at Knockane, to take the overdue 1920 Junior Football crown.

Denied the opportunity of participating in senior ranks whilst at their zenith, they had a great game with Commercials, at Kilmallock, for 1924 premier honours, and suffered a two point defeat after a splendid exhibition of the code.

The following season they fought their way to the County Senior final, playing a particularly attractive game against a strong army selection at Hospital and winning 1-0 to 1-1. The army

lads pressed for long spells on that occasion but met terrific opposition, Matty Walsh, in the full back berth, and the old reliable, Mick Osborne, in goal, repulsing every onslaught with almost uncanny persistency.

In the County Final, played at Hospital on April 11th, 1926 (for the 1925 Senior title) Oola took the laurels after a magnificent tussle, 2-0 to 1-1.

Emigration, the retiral of many of the old players, and other

factors, resulted in the decline of Ballylanders following this game, and it was a long spell indeed before they again hit football prominence. Matty Walsh and his team mates, however, set a grand tradition, and we can hope that in the not too distant future another team of great footballers will emerge from the old stronghold to add further glory to the name and fame of a great football parish.

FINE APPRECIATION

I conclude with a fine appreciation by Willie Crawford, who was himself a great exponent of the game:—

"Matt Walsh of Ballylanders, 5 ft. 8ins. in height and twelve stone of supercharged, jet-propelled manhood, stands out in Gaelic football as a full back as great as, if not greater than, Joe Keohane of Kerry or Paddy O'Brien of Meath.

"Why did fifteen thousand people, Tipperary followers as well as Limerick, stand up as one person in Dungarvan in the Senior Football Championship of Munster in 1926 and applaud the stocky-built full back for Limerick, time and time again? It was not Matt's fault that Limerick lost after a glorious game. Only one other player on this memorable day came near the ovation that Walsh got. That was Micky Cross in the senior hurling game which followed.

"What had Ireland's greatest hurler to say? After a football thriller in Paddy Donegan's field in Pallasgreen, when Ballylanders' 'ten stone wonders' played havoc with men like Mick and John Mackey, Timmy Ryan, Jackie Power and Stanley Hollis, Mick Mackey said that Walsh was the best footballer he ever saw or met. Mick, with thirteen stone of quick silver, could not get through for a score while twelve stone 'Rocket' Walsh was there.

"It is a well known fact that Matt could go up for a high ball far beyond the reach of men who were five inches taller, grab the leather, curl himself into a twisting, teasing tornado, and then it was a splendid clearance or a free out.

PLAYED SENIOR FOOTBALL AT 15½

"Matt Walsh was only 15½ years when he played senior football with Ballylanders against Pallasgreen, and a very able and clever excuse was invented to get him home for the day from Rockwell College, where he was a student.

"Incidentally, speaking about Rockwell, it was Matt Walsh, McDonnell of Toomevara, O'Brien of Boherlahan, the late Dick Slattery of Ballinvreena, Kilfinane, and two Kilkenny boys, who first introduced Gaelic football and hurling to Rockwell in 1912. In passing, it might be mentioned that Matt Walsh was a first class cricketer and played for his College against the Gentlemen of Ireland. He was also capped inter-provincial twice in another football code and would have done honours to the green jersey in fields across the ocean but for a knee injury.

"Matt played for his Club, county and province from 1913 to 1938, and was a gentleman on the playing field. Many will recall the splendid exhibition he gave against a fine army selection in the Pump Field, Hospital, when Ballylanders showed the large attendance how football should be played and won a great game from a top rate army side.

"This 'Pocket Hercules' of football was only a child when he played in the All Ireland Junior Football Final in Croke Park against the Metropolitans. The pair drew the first day, an occasion when the Ballylanders selection were most unfortunate in not

capturing the honours. Misfortune dogged their every footsteps to the replay and deprived the gallant and patriotic village of bringing the honours to Limerick.

FIRST CLASS HANDBALLER

"Matt was not alone satisfied with the games already mentioned. A first class handballer, he was one of a foursome which included the peerless John Joe Bowles to open the Old Mill Ballcourt at Kilfinane. Matt could take on the best at this game, and on a summer's evening in Ballylanders, Father Andy Crawford, Mickie ('Dabblers') Davern, Mickie Walsh and himself could be seen 'hammering' the gable end of Mrs. Burke's house with a cock standard black ball.

"Matt Walsh was an all round sports enthusiast. Treasurer of the local coursing club for years, he was a member of the Sliabh Ríogh Gun Club, follower of the Scar-teen 'Black and Tan' foxhounds, and no mean exponent of hurling.

"His father, the late John Walsh, was a prince of sportsmen. He was one of the founders of the local Shamrock Football Club, which he often personally financed. Besides, he was one of the first in the county to course a greyhound away back in 1895, well over sixty years ago, and he owned such first class animals as 'Dattie,' 'Irish Volunteer' and 'Galtee Boy.'

"When the sport of bowling was introduced to Ballylanders by Ned Cotter, over thirty years ago, Matt was the outstanding exponent and could 'loft the lead' over most bends and take on any of the Cork champions.

"Mat has a son, John, now playing the Gaelic code. A fine, upstanding, distinguished player, he has yet to reach the heights achieved by his father.

"Like many another great sportsman, Matt was gay and there was nothing he enjoyed more than a sing-song around a homely hearth after a game.

GREAT STAMINA

"The stamina of the man is best illustrated by the occasion when he played a game of bowls to Galbally, figured in a football game against Knockane, played a few sets of handball afterwards, and then had another game of bowls on the way home.

"At all times the local lads were quite happy when Matt played. He gave inspiration and encouragement to the other fourteen players by his magnificent displays and nothing ever daunted him. The late Dominic O'Grady, Chris Ryan and Dinny Lanigan always had a terrific respect for Matt, and one and all agreed he never met his equal. Long may he flourish!"