

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THE subject of our article this week—Tom Walsh of Caherline, celebrated his coming of age as an athlete—twenty-one years on the track—by winning five Limerick championships titles last season. The year before he captured the six miles flat championship of Ireland—a great performance at an age when most track men would have hung up their shoes for good. But Tom has no shoes to hang up! Known as "the bare-footed runner," it is a remarkable fact that through his long career he has never put on a pair of spiked shoes.

Born at Caherline in 1918, Tom Walsh was just fourteen years of age when he turned out at a sports meeting in Caherconlish and got third prize in a 220 yards flat boys' race. Some months later he ran in a race over the same distance for boys under sixteen years at Boher sports, and was winner by some twenty yards. This success encouraged him and he set about preparing earnestly for a career on the track. Day to day he trained hard, and running ever since he can lay claim to having won over two hundred races. But what is more surprising still is the fact that these honours have been gained in every sort of race from 100 yards novice to an All-Ireland title fight over the cross-country nine miles.

BEAT THE CHAMPION.

His best mile race was at Kilmallock Sports in 1941, in which he beat the Irish champion miler of that year, Tom Healy, of Coolcree, in the wonderful time of 4 minutes 13 3-5 seconds, the Irish record then held by J. S. Doyle standing at 4 minutes 19 seconds. He was unfortunate, however, in that the distance when measured was a yard short, with the result that a record could not be claimed.

Competing under A.U.E. rules from 1943 to 1949, Tom Walsh won many All-Ireland titles in the championships run under the auspices of this Association. They included the two miles flat in 1943; and one and three miles in 1944; the All-Ireland Junior Cross-Country team race with O'Callaghan's Mills in the same season, being runner-up to S. McCooke, of East Antrim, for the individual honours.

In 1945 he won the All-Ireland Senior Cross-Country individual title, the fancied S. McCooke being beaten to fifth place due to cramp. This year, he also repeated his track successes of 1944, when he won the one and three mile flat events. His big 1946 achievement was the winning of the Irish Mile Flat title, in the time of 4 minutes 26 seconds, which was considered excellent in the circumstances prevailing on that occasion.

1947 appears to have been a blank season as far as championship successes were concerned, but we find him running into second place as a member of the famous Coolcree Cross-Country team in the 1948 senior title run. They won the team event that year, and repeated the success twelve months later.

SCOTLAND AND FRANCE.

Tom tells of the many places he visited whilst running with the A.U.E. Cross-Country team. This is what he said to me: "I ran in Scotland, and also in France, where the track was in the Saint Cloud Racecourse. A very funny thing happened in France before the cross-country race. Mr. Fred Moran, of Moran's Hotel, Dublin, was our team manager. About mid-day he asked all the members of our team what type of a meal we would have before competing. Myself and seven other runners said we would like plain tea, because it would be light. But one member of the party said he was having an eight course dinner if he could get it. I was amazed, and said to him that he was no sportsman. He answered that he found greater sport in filling his belly with good things than running nine miles hungry. Only fools do that sort of thing, he said. Anyway, we had our tea and he had his big dinner.

"We started our race, and the runner with the eight-course dinner fell out after half a lap. I asked him afterwards what happened to him that he ran so bad, and his answer was that he could not get enough of spuds. So you meet all sorts of people on athletic fields.

"Whilst on the subject of suitable food for athletes," Tom went on "all my life I believed in light food a few days before a race. No athlete can give his best effort if he eats too much heavy food. Athletes should also try to avoid smoking and drinking, shun the dance halls and late nights out, as all this type of living tends to weaken the morale of the athlete.

"I will be pardoned for reminding athletes that they need some sort of relaxation before races and while competing at sports. They should avoid all those people with a tendency to excite them too much, and take no notice of the stories concerning the capabilities of fellow competitors or regarding this or that notable in the crowd.

GOOD ADVICE.

"My personal advice to all athletes," said Tom, "is to take up the sport for the good of athletics, not for any false fame but for the real love of competing at meetings and making as many friends as possible on the athletic field. For my part, I would prefer one shake

hands from the runner I competed against successfully than all the prizes in the world. It is from a spirit of true sportsmanship. An occasional athlete attempts to secure honours by trickery and deceit, but it is a well known fact that such do not last long. Give fair play to all is the best motto, a remark that should be borne in mind by some handicappers, too, for over-doing this aspect has ruined some promising athletes."

The Caherline man was reinstated to the N.A.C.A. a few years ago, and, in 1952, he won the six miles Flat Championship of Ireland, after being runner-up the previous year. He made a pair of bids, too, for the five miles flat Irish title, but had to be content with the runner-up position in both 1952 and 1953.

The winner of something like thirty-two Limerick titles all told, he won five of them last season—4,000 metres, 5,000 metres, 1,500 metres, one mile flat, three miles flat, besides filling second place in the race for the 880 yards flat crown. On two occasions he had the distinction of winning a triple championship success at a meeting. At Askeaton he took the 880 yards, the one mile and the four mile, whilst at Bruff his successes were secured in the 800 metres, 1,500 metres and three miles flat.

Last year he won two Limerick titles—the 1,500 metres and the three miles flat at Knockouna sports. At twenty-four he won his first Limerick championship in the mile flat, a success he repeated 12 months ago, at the age of thirty-five. However, it is Tom's idea that if an athlete can keep fit age does not harm too much.

COMPLETE RELAXATION

Tom deplores the outlook of many at the present day concerning athletics. As an illustration he tells of a neighbour, an easy going labouring man, who said to him the day after winning a spate of county titles last year: "After all, what do you gain by all this running?" Tom's answer was: "Complete peace of mind; in other words, complete relaxation."

A Council worker for years, Tom was engaged at Ballyadam Quarry the day following his winning of the six miles flat championship of Ireland, which was decided at Upperchurch, County Tipperary. Tired after cycling from his home in Caherline, a distance of some forty miles, Tom mentioned to one of his workmates that he had won the Irish Six Miles Flat race, thinking he would be delighted. But to his surprise the answer he received was: "The six miles race is only a fool's race, and you were the biggest fool when you came in first." That, said Tom, is what working people think of athletics. Their mentality is clouded as far as the good of athletics is concerned.

The Walsh family were all useful athletes, and several of Tom's brothers were to the fore on the track or playing fields. Jackie was a fairly good runner in his day, winning many races at sports meetings under novice N.A.C.A. rules. Paddy, whose untimely death, following an accident, removed Tom's dearest friend on and off the athletic field, was a valued adviser, who worked hard to make it easy for Tom to shine on the track. But Paddy was Five Mile Flat champion of Limerick in his own right, and was a member of the Caherline team that won the Senior Cross-Country Championship of Limerick, with Tom taking individual honours. Paddy was also a good hurler, and loved the game. Bill, too, was useful with the caman, and often figured to advantage in defence. Bill was, in Tom's opinion, too impetuous to make a great hurler. Tom often said to him: "Play the game, Bill, for the sake of the sport you get out of it," but Bill's answer was: "You are too soft, Tom, for the lads you meet in a hurling field that's the reason you are not good at hurling." Tom confessed: "To tell the truth I was a bad hurler, but, I suppose, you find different sorts of sportsmen in every family."

KEEN ON HUNTING.

Tom is very keen on hunting and loves to follow the Black and Tan Hounds in the winter months. He tells that, how encouraged by Mr. John Power of Caherconlish, he would go off and keep close up with the famous pack. Anyway, Tom has pleasant memories of happy days spent after the Hunt.

His plan for training, he told me, was to run every evening possible some weeks before a sports, but near the actual date he would ease off a bit and then turn to walking. He always managed to keep a hound for hunting hares. "I think it a great form of exercise," he said. "The excitement of hunting rouses the spirit and helps to calm the nerves before some important races. I love to roam the fields before big sports meetings. It gives me time to plan out my methods for particular races."

"Every athlete has his own form of tactics," went on Tom, "and, of course, the same plan will not work against all athletes. I remember well in Belfast I was running against Charlie McCooke, the Irish three miles flat champion. I was Irish one mile champion at the time. Willie Morton warned me for- get about the mile flat. Try, he said

"The real danger with some athletes is that they ignore the fundamental good of the game by not knowing or seeking that valuable relaxation that can only be derived to beat McCooke, who has the reputation of never meeting defeat over three miles. It was hard for me, at short notice, to tackle a good man like McCooke, but I had heard that the Antrim man had one falling—he like to have a big lead in the last three laps of the three miles, so I decided to try tactics to counteract this, and to suit myself. I ran behind him for two miles, but at the shortest notice possible I passed him like a sprinter. The crowd shouted this is not the last lap, but they never knew my trick. To the amazement of all present, the famous three miler fell out then, and I eased off. I had my race won by the tactics I planned for that particular occasion."

HIS MOST EXCITING RACE.

Asked to name the most exciting race of his career, Tom said it was at College Park, Dublin, where he beat Taylor, of Queen's University, Belfast, by two yards, in the Irish Mile Flat championship final. Tom was leading twenty yards, a hundred yards from the tape, but his opponent almost wiped it out in a terrific finish. The winning time that day was 4 minutes 26 3-5 seconds.

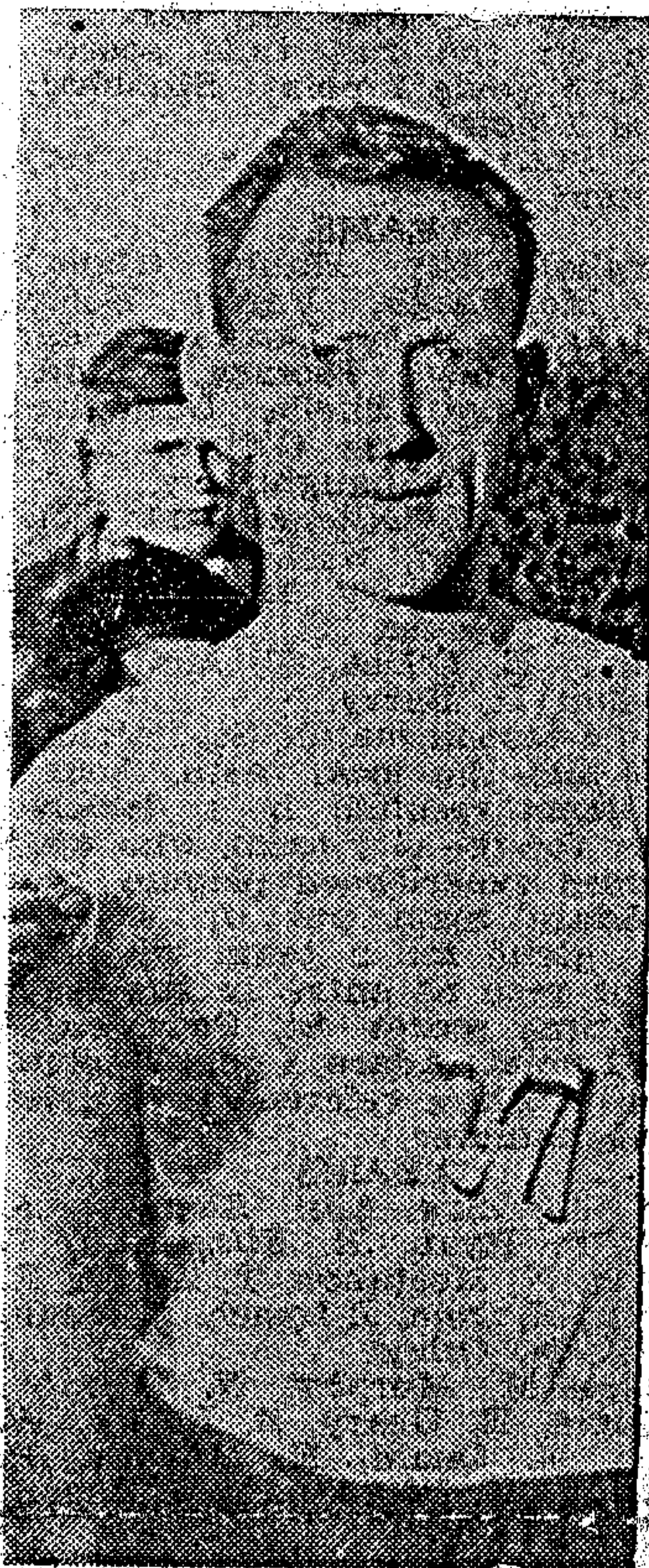
He rates Martin Egan of Gort the best athlete he met on the track, a great runner and a splendid sportsman. To S. McCooke of East Antrim he gives the palm as the best cross country runner of all time. "Always out to win his race, taking no chances."

Tom feels that one of the handicaps Limerick athletes labour under at present is the lack of early training due to the absence of worth while sports meetings at the commencement of the season. Another difficulty he points out is lack of transport facilities to

1940. The other members of this team deserve mention: 24 stone Tom McNamara, Mick Murnane, Bill Cussen, Jim Ryan (Newton), Pat Fitzgerald, Mick Leonard, John O'Grady, Bill Griffin, Ryan ("Darby") and Denis Kennedy (Newton).

In conclusion, Tom appeals for a greater interest in athletics and every possible assistance and encouragement to the promising athletes in the County. "The ordinary man in the street," he says, "does not realise the important part athletic play in the fundamental foundation of the personality of the individual. It helps to train the youth to self control, it also helps them to live a pure and clear life, for all must realise that no athlete will ever reach the top ladder of success by wrong living. I suggest that all young people should play games of some sort. It makes it easier for them in after life to make friends and cherish the memory of happy bygone days."

No. 85 — Patrick O'Donnell, of Bulgaden.



T. WALSH, CAHERLINE.

meetings, and he considers that some real effort should be made to help the athletes at the various centres where meetings are listed, as worth while competition is the first essential in any earnest effort at a revival of interest.

That the material is in the county was proved a few weeks ago at Nenagh, where James Cregan, of Athlone, won the three miles flat championship of Ireland, beating the famous Mick Cleary of Moneygall by thirty yards. This youth, Tom is confident, will break records yet. He also thinks Tony Nolan a promising sprinter with E. O'Connor and Brosnan of Pedamore good prospects for the pole jump.

Tom wishes to place on record the great help he always got from Mr. Tim Riordan, Ballyvourneen, who at all times placed his land at his disposal for training, and to whom he is deeply grateful.

FAMED CAHERLINE.

Paying tribute to Caherline as a good centre for athletics, Tom recalls such figures as Paddy Ryan, of Dunyullen, known as the "Old Miler," who was marathon 26 miles champion of Ireland twice, and his next door neighbour and close friend, Jimmy O'Connell, who won the All-Army cross-country title some years ago. Then there were the Leonard brothers—Dickie, who was four miles flat Limerick champion and novice mile flat title holder some years ago; Paddy, three miles flat champion of Limerick and well-known hurler.

And finally a word of praise for the Caherline tug-o-war team, winners of Munster Championships for the past two years, led by Paddy O'Connell, who was the mile flat champion of Limerick in 1940. The other members of this