

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 95—JACK FITZGIBBON of Knockacraig

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE value of a parish field was demonstrated this year at Dromcollogher, where the opening of the new Gaelic Grounds paved the way for the revival of the local inter-school sports, a feature in other days of the efforts to put athletics back on the map in Limerick.

Actively associated with the running of these sports were some of the old time athletic stars of the district, including the subject of our little notice this week, Jack Fitzgibbon, of Knockacraig, whom I was glad to see in such form at Limerick Gaelic Grounds last Sunday watching his son hurling for Dromcollogher in the County Senior Hurling Semi-final, reminding us of the fact that Jack himself was one of the pioneers of hurling in the district, and with other well known athletes of the place—Paddy Moloney (who captained the team); Mick and Dick O'Brien—helped materially in putting the caman game in the proud place it has since occupied in the parish.

The very pleasant day spent recently at the revived schools meeting helped Jack to recall many happy memories of his old schooldays. In the course of conversation on that occasion he stressed the fact that athletics were an important feature of country life in his day and expressed the pride he felt in seeing the keen interest taken in the revival of such healthy, manly pastimes in a locality that had in the past produced many great figures of the arena, some of them even world famous.

INTERESTING STORY.

The story of his active athletic days as unfolded by Jack Fitzgibbon that evening makes interesting reading and should serve as an inducement to some of the schoolboy athletes to continue their interest in the sport and endeavour to maintain the name and fame of Dromcollogher in manly work on the field. Here is what he said:—

"As I looked around at the crowd of spectators and competitors in the beautiful surroundings of the new Gaelic Grounds, I thought of the contrast to our boyhood days when, to hold similar fixtures, we poached on local farmers and risked their wrath in laying out our arena.

"Many of those companions of boyhood days have passed away, others have long since emigrated to lands far across the seas but some remain to glad the retrospective eye, including Paddy Moloney, brother of Very Rev. Mons. Moloney, P.P. St. Munchin's; Denis Broderick, Jack McCarthy, father of Irish and Munster full-forward, Derry McCarthy; John Gleeson, Ben Sullivan and the O'Brien brothers, Mick and Dick.

FRIENDLY RIVALRY.

"There was much friendly rivalry in those days, and it was a feature of many Sunday afternoons to hold local competitions at varying venues, mainly promoted by the late Jeremiah Egan, who died in America.

"We were fortunate at the time in Dromcollogher to have in our midst Jim Burke, an athlete who afterwards became world famous; and Jim, seeing that I had greater capabilities than the local contests catered for, encouraged me to travel further afield. So, for my first public appearance in the wider arena I travelled to the Pattern Day at the Cross of the Lane (Milford). Pattern Days at that time were numerous and the day was never complete without various athletic contests. I competed in the mile flat and had to be content with second place, being beaten on the tape by Jack O'Connell, who was then a very well-known long distance runner.

"After this day Jim Burke advised me to concentrate more on the hurdles and jumps. We practised many times together and this led to several future successes for me in these events.

"Some time afterwards we held an open sports meeting at Dromcollogher and I was one of the team that won the relay race; the other members being my brother, Gerald (R.I.P.) and the O'Brien brothers.

LATER SUCCESSES.

"My next outing was to the Open Sports at Feohanagh and I consider this meeting one of the outstanding successes of my athletic career. That day I won the 120 yards hurdles, the high jump and the long jump, was second in the 100 yards flat, the 220 and the 440 yards and was also one of the winning relay team.

"My next outing was to Newcastle West, where I won the high jump, the long jump, the 120 yards hurdles, and the relay race. At this venue I was successful for four years in succession in the high and long jumps, and took either first or

second in the hurdles. We lost the relay on one occasion here to a strong team from the city running in the blue and gold colours of the Young Irelands.

"Another favourite venue was Foynes, where honours came to me in the high and long jumps, the hurdles and the relay. At this centre I was successful for three years in the same events, and at Rathkeale I won the high and the long jumps two years in succession.

TIM LEAHY'S GREAT JUMP.

Crossing the Shannon to Clonlara I won a splendid prize there when I beat Mick Leahy, of Cregane, in the high jump. A few weeks later I visited the Limerick Markets Field for a great meeting under the auspices of the County Board, G.A.A., and won a thrilling long jump from ten competitors, with only half an inch to spare over M. O'Brien, of Galbally, my best effort being 22 ft. 3 ins. I also won the hurdles that day, made memorable by a 6 ft. 5 ins. performance by Tim Leahy in the high jump—the greatest since his brother Paddy made another remarkable jump there some ten years earlier, an occasion when the late Spencer Lyons, of Croom Castle, the tallest man in the county, walked under the bar without touching it.

"Then over to Kilmallock, where I won the hurdles, and shortly afterwards I competed at Kanturk against the athletes of Dunhallow, including Dan O'Leary and McCarthy, and secured second place in the hop, step and jump.

"A jump of 21 ft. 9 ins. got me second place at Listowel in the long jump, and another second prize was secured there on a later visit, this time in the hurdles. On one of my visits to Tralee I had to be content with a pair of thirds—J. J. Walsh, of Kilfinane (22 ft. 1 in.) winning the long jump, with F. Roche, of Bandon, second; and another Kilfinane man, M. F. Murphy, taking honours in the "high," with 6 ft. 0½ ins., T. P. Cotter, of Knockbrack, being second.

"My wanderings next brought me to Cork City for the popular drapers' meeting by the banks of the Lee. I competed in one event here, the high jump, and was beaten for first place by Dan Burke, a brother of the famous Jim, whom I have already mentioned.

AT MALLOW.

"Shortly afterwards I travelled to Mallow to compete in the All-Ireland championships, the date, August 20th, 1916. My usual method of reaching a sports meeting was to travel by cycle or horse and trap either direct or to the nearest railway station to catch a suitable train. On this occasion I cycled to Charleville but when the train for Mallow reached there it was already packed. However, I was allowed travel in the Guard's Van but had to stand as it was also crowded. The long cycle followed by the equally long standing upset me and when I ran in the hurdles I had the galling experience of seeing W. Britton (later Irish champion) just grab the tape to beat me by the narrowest ever margin in our heat. I was second in the hop, step and jump, the winner being the famous Frank Roche of Bandon, his distance, 45 ft. 9½ ins.; mine, 45 ft. 3½ ins.

DISAPPOINTING DAY.

"One of the most disappointing days I can recall during my athletic career was when chosen to represent Limerick at Killarney in a great inter-county contest, my foot, which I had injured in training, came against me when competing in the high jump and forced me to retire.

"I had won something like one hundred and fifty prizes at this stage and was at the height of my career when the Anglo-Irish War intensified and put all thought of athletic sports out of the question. The sports fields were deserted for the more serious game of winning Irish freedom and I did not compete again for almost a decade of years. I confined my activities then to local sports fixtures where I again won many prizes.

"During my young days in Dromcollogher it was all football we played and although my youth kept me from figuring in many of their matches I was one of the seventeen that played for Dromcollogher against Milford in a great tournament fixture at Charleville, which the North Cork lads won by a single point. Good Dromcollogher footballers of the time that I recall include the captain, Jack O'Brien, Jack Egan, Mick O'Brien, Patie Mike Savage and Tom Noonan.

MEMBER OF "DROMS" FIRST HURLING TEAM.

"I am proud of the fact that I was one of those that helped

to introduce hurling to Dromcollogher and a member of the first hurling team in the parish. There has always been a hurling club since and those that remain of the old pioneers are happy to look back the years and claim they laid the foundations for the many great hurlers Dromcollogher has since produced. I am glad to recall the names:—Paddy Moloney, our captain; Jack Farrell, Dan Broughton (R.I.P.), Michael Sheehy, Tom Kiely, Jack McCarthy, Dan Strafford, Ben O'Sullivan, my brother, Gerald (R.I.P.); John Gleeson, P. M. Aherne; Mick and Dick O'Brien, John Costelloe, Tom Noonan, Peter Madigan, Lar O'Halloran (R.I.P.), Tim O'Connell (R.I.P.), and the Barrett brothers, Ned and Jack, who have also passed away. This team was under the presidency of the late James Fitzgerald, and we defeated Patrickswell by a solitary point in the County Championship Semi-final of 1916, but the final was never played, owing to the troubled times.

"At this time, too, there was great rivalry between Dromcollogher and our neighbours, Broadford, and there was many a hard battle fought between the two teams. The outstanding men of the Broadford team were Jim Naughton, the Foley brothers, James Geary, Murt Duggan, who lost his life in the fight for Irish freedom; his brother, Paddy; and John Noonan. Outstanding hurlers at this time, too, were Jack Fitzgibbon, of Killila, and Davy O'Callaghan, now residing in Milford.

HANDBALL.

"It is a great pity that the game of handball has died out in Dromcollogher, because I can recall as a boy some wonderful bouts in Pat Cahill's ball alley. At that time, of course, there were no championships, but it was customary for Lisearroll and neighbouring teams to challenge the men of Dromcollogher. "Drom" produced famous handballers, too, all since gone to their eternal reward, including Thady Moloney, Dan O'Shea, Jim Kirwan, Tom Buckley, N.T.; Daniel O'Callaghan, N.T.; Jim ("Spinner") Barry, of Tullylease. Broadford gave us wonderful handballers in the persons of Jim Heffernan, Paddy Enright and Denis Connell.

"In my own time there were great duels between those visiting teams and ourselves, the prominent handballers in Dromcollogher being Jack McCarthy, Denis and Ben O'Sullivan, Dick Savage (R.I.P.), Rev. J. Moloney, C.C., then a curate in the parish, who was later closely associated with the careers of two world-beaters—the peerless J. J. Bowles in the ball-court and the equally renowned and lovable Jack O'Grady, the champion weight-thrower; Patrick M. Savage, John Broderick who died in U.S.A., and the late Mick Gleeson, who, unfortunately, lost his left hand in an accident but was, nevertheless a treat to watch with his right hand. The outstanding playing visitors at that time were the O'Mahony brothers from Ashford—Moss, Jack and Patrick, the latter afterwards becoming a teacher in Dromcollogher, retiring a couple of years ago.

"During my active athletic career I met many figures famous on the sportsfields of Ireland at the time, including our present revered Bishop, Most Rev. Dr. O'Neill, who was good at the long jump and a champion at the hurdles, and whom I competed against in Rathkeale, Castleconnell and Clonlara; Paddy Moloney, our hurling skipper who was also prominent at local sports, particularly in the high jump; the late Jack Murphy of Tullylease, who was good for 46 ft. in the hop, step and jump; the renowned Leahys of Cregane—Tom, Joe, Tim and Mick; the O'Callaghans of Banteer; the Burkes, the O'Brien brothers of "Drom"; Beasley of Upton, Cunniffe of Duhallow, and Davy O'Connell of Ardpatrick.

"I had another great interest, too—a love for horses, and I spent many pleasant days hunting with the local Harrier Club and the Duhallow Hounds.

"And a last word! I would like to see a greater love for athletics in my native parish and would be very happy to do all I could to foster such manly pursuits amongst our youth."