

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 80—JAMES HEFFERNAN of Dromkeen

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

FOR Ireland, the pioneer of field and track athletics, and for so long the home of unsurpassable athletes, it is a sad reflection that we have not now a man capable of commanding world notice.

For years I have studied the doings of our athletes, and can claim to be fairly familiar with the deeds of most of the best men that Ireland produced—the Davins, the Kieleys, the Leany's, Denis Horgan, Marun Sheridan, Matt McGrath, John Flanagan, Willie Real, Paddy Ryan, Jim Fahey, Jack O'Grady and many others who have left indelible imprints on the course of Ireland's and the world's athletic history.

Truly, we are not what we were in athletics, and despite strenuous efforts to revive the interest and spirit of the past we must admit that it is difficult to claim any satisfactory results or even much material above mediocre class.

The formation of the N.A. and C.A. some thirty years ago promised great things and the athletic horizon lit up in some magnificence during the first and greatest of the revived Tailteann Games.

VALUE OF PARISH RIVALRY.

We sought and secured international "recognition," and lost it again, and by now should have learned that there is only one real way to get back on the world athletic map. It is the way the G.A.A. brought Irish athletics to the forefront by encouraging the parish rivalry. There were not any visits by foreign athletes sixty or seventy years ago. Athletic meetings were usually confined to those that could reach the venue by the then simple modes of transport in vogue. And what great gatherings they were! In the Limerick Markets Field on many occasions world's records went by the board, and the athletes that broke them were born and reared in Limerick County. Similarly, at other venues, the Leahys, Real, the Ryans, Daly, Flanagan, O'Grady, Aherne, Shanahan, Fahey and many other Limerick men crashed their way to international recognition by sheer athletic merit and gained a niche that the most powerful organisation in the world cannot now deprive them of.

I have heard it said that the unprecedented emigration was telling heavily against the physique and muscular stamina of the old country and was very unpleasantly reflecting itself in the undeniable decline of the very distinctive athletic powers so long a heritage of the race.

LIMERICK MEN'S PROWESS ABROAD.

But when we lost our best blood in the past they rose up in other lands a credit to the Gaelic way of life and a model to the world. Only recently, amongst some cuttings I received from my dear friend, Jim Fahey of Galbally, long years in Chicago, was a description of a gala athletic day in Chicago on Independence Day, July 4th, 1920. In the course of the report we read: "At the jumping feature, champion Dan Aherne, P. J. Leahy, James Fahey and Patrick Birmingham were the stars. James Fahey, world's champion in the three standing jumps, and who holds the world's record at 38ft. 11ins., went the remarkable distance of 37ft. 5ins. last Sunday. This is a very fine jump, in view of the fact that the best expected at the Lake Front meet is about 35 feet. Jim Fahey is the most modest of athletes and his many friends and admirers were delighted to see him do so well. He is still the best in the world in this event."

Remarkable thing about the above is the fact that three of the quartette mentioned were Limerick men, and the fourth, Birmingham, hailed from the Banner County.

WHEN GREAT ATHLETES WERE PLENTIFUL.

In the early G.A.A. years, which were surely the halcyon days of Irish athletics, one patch of the province of Munster made unforgettable athletic history and was the envy of the world. From the Devil's Bit near Templemore to Sally Island below Carrick-on-Suir and over across to County Limerick—the Golden Vale—athletic talent was, to use a local phrase, "as thick as the rich grass."

Great hurlers and football players could be got in every parish in this stretch of territory, and athletes of world fame were plentiful then. Other counties like Cork, Kerry and Waterford were also prolific of much first-rate material, but alas—where are they now? We have fallen off sadly and decisively. But G.A.A. clubs could do much to revive the old spirit. Many areas have their own parish fields now and it should be a point of honour

to organise at least one sports meeting in each of these annually. If we have again the parish sports as of old and if all our G.A.A. clubs organised a meeting in their respective districts what a great step forward it would be. Then, they should incorporate all the old Irish events in weight throwing and jumping and confine the competitors to a radius of say five to ten miles. By leaving the competition amongst their own and neighbouring parishes it will help in reviving much of the old spirit that is so badly needed in rural Ireland today.

A PROUD RECORD.

Ireland has a proud record in the athletic world, although in considering it one must remember that for long years Irish athletics were allowed to achieve, unseen by the outer world, triumphs which in many cases would make the records of to-day seem very tame, indeed.

In the days before the organisation of world championships almost every Irish townland had its champion, who upon many a well-fought field bravely upheld the local pride in his achievements in jumping, running, weight-throwing, wrestling and even boxing. To this day memories linger in little villages and in remote nooks behind the folds of many fields of men whose athletic prowess survived as a proud tradition. In no other form of achievement is a more direct honour upon manhood conferred, and so old men's memories are longest when they dwell upon these things—the great achievements of the past and the side of the small performances of to-day.

THE FAMOUS DAVIN BROTHERS.

In days when sternar pre-occupations and the forgetfulness which had fallen upon the Gaelic past made almost unthinkable any hope of a revival of the Tailteann Games and a direct linking up of undeveloped athletic possibilities with the glories of the past, an enthusiasm for sports survived. Three or four great athletes who appear to have been directly in the tradition of the doughty champions of the Irish countryside were the famous brothers Davin from Carrick-on-Suir, who covered themselves in their day with world honours. They were not only great in their time of active participation, but by virtue of their splendid achievements are still a source of inspiration. When one considers the methods of their days with our up-to-date ways and means for the training of athletes, and that the old time records were made by sheer muscular ability that knew nothing of the facilities under which modern performances are achieved, one's admiration for the old timers is all the greater.

"JIMMY THE RUNNER."

Born at Cappamore in 1884, the year in which the Gaelic Athletic Association was founded, was the subject of our little sketch this week—James Heffernan, who now resides at Dromkeen, and who is his heyday gained such renown at the local meetings that he was universally known as "Jimmy the Runner."

From a very early age Jimmie was interested in athletics and every opportunity he got he competed in boys events at the many meetings then a regular feature of the Co. Limerick countryside. In the majority of cases he won, gathering the laurels from shortly after his tenth birthday, with the short sprints his favourite.

A remarkable feature about his career was that he could win prizes at both short and long distance events the same day, and even before his schooldays ended we find him successful in the 220 yards and the mile at a sports in Cappamore.

His first long distance win in adult company was a road race from Cappamore to Doon, whilst a short time afterwards he took second place in the 220 yards at Elton sports, besides winning the mile from a field of thirteen, getting the verdict in an exciting finish by two yards. For the latter success he got a set of carving knives, while the runner-up prize in the "220" was a shaving set.

WON MANY TROPHIES.

They were his first important trophies but in the course of his athletic career he was to win many more including no less than fifteen clocks, a silver watch, four suits of clothes, two Irish tweed overcoats and smaller prizes in wide variety.

His most disappointing day was the occasion he competed outside London and won a silver cup but was afterwards disqualified for crossing another competitor. He still feels he got a raw deal there

and blames the fact that he was the only Irish competitor against half a dozen English lads, for he certainly ran an honest race and won on merit alone.

Jimmie's memories of his years on the track are more concerned with the men he saw competing in his active days than with any of his own performances. He has happy recollections of such figures as James Keays of Brittas, J. J. Ryan, D. T. Power, the Leahys and Paddy Ryan, the champion weight thrower, now a near neighbour; P. Fogarty and a host of others.

He competed at nearly every meeting within measurable distance for seven years, made two appearances at Newbridge sports whilst working in the vicinity, and also made the English effort already mentioned during a spell when he was employed in that country.

HIS HOME SUCCESSES.

Most of his home successes were secured at places like Caherconlish, Cappamore, Elton, Kilmallock, Hospital, Doon, Bruff, Kilfinane and Pallas. Asked how he got there he explained that for the really long distances the usual procedure was to hire a jarvey car and leave the day before. Anything within a radius of five or so miles, however, was covered by "shank's mare," whilst longer runs meant an early morning start on his faithful jennet. Jimmy explained that he had one of the very early type of bicycle but it was never very reliable and a trip on it generally meant that he rode a bit, then had a breakdown, and he walked the rest.

When at school he did a share of hurling and was fairly good at the game. Later he figured successfully in some local matches but athletics soon claimed an increasing share of his time with the result that the caman was laid aside. Also a keen handballer, he played several worth while rubbers in this code besides figuring successfully at skittles on a number of occasions.

For training he rarely neglected some suitable early morning exercises and usually was to be found in the fields at evening time with a number of comrades at practice. For the rest he worked hard all day tending and milking an average of twenty-four cows.

Jimmy got plenty of pleasure out of his visits to the various meetings, and he confesses that he thoroughly enjoyed the many side shows that were so often associated with a sports in the good old days. He says that he often took a shot at the man in the barrell, and the Ducking Hole also gave him an amount of good, honest amusement of an evening when the important races were over.

HERO OF PLUCKY RESCUE.

He was the hero of a plucky rescue at one such gathering. A number of lads were firing at the bulls eye when a horse took fright and careered madly towards a crowd in another portion of the field. Jimmy short-cutted him and brought the animal to a standstill before he did any damage.

He still regards his three miles run from Cappamore to Doon as the best of his career. Eight participated and he left them all well behind, beating his nearest opponent by almost a quarter mile.

His most exciting finish was at Newbridge, Co. Kildare. Six competed in the "220," and Jimmie kept behind for three-quarters of the journey. With about fifty yards to go he made his burst but was strongly challenged, just managing to breast the tape inches in front of a gallant opponent.

He still feels that Limerick could rear good athletes if the youth laid down their mind to proper preparation. His advice is no smoking; no drinking or at most an occasional bottle of stout; early morning exercises; light food when competing in a race; raw eggs and milk to build sturdy limbs in a sound body.

That Jimmie Heffernan is still hale and hearty can be judged from the fact that he has offered to challenge anyone of his own age or even ten years younger over the mile distance for a substantial side bet. He is proud of the fact that Willie Hanley, of Cappamore, is doing so well at the Curragh in hurling and athletics, and is confident that men like P. Carmody, of Cappamore, and T. Walsh, of Caherline, have it in them to lead an athletic revival that is so eagerly awaited by the Shannon and in all the other old centres where Irishmen gained world renown in days of undying fame.

No. 81—Paddy Flatherty, of Ratkeale.