

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 41)—John Kelly of Ballyagran.

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

JOHN KELLY made his athletic debut at a sports meeting held at Kilmallock, then, and for long after, the great centre for athletics in the South. The year was 1888, and he won the quarter mile from a big field.

We have only to look at the names that graced the athletic programmes in that year to appreciate the grand company into which he entered that memorable evening.

We find famous Limerick men like Dr. J. C. Daly, Dromin; J. Fitzgerald, Bruff; P. Hayes, Hospital; the Connerys, of Kilfinane; S. McAdam and Blakeney Gubbins, of Limerick city; Dan Shanahan, Willie Real, Jack McCarthy, M. O'Callaghan and P. M. Quinlan, all hitting the headlines, and Frank Dinneen, of Ballylanders, the leading handicapper of the county.

The Ballyagran man's introduction to athletics was a worthy one, and the only regret there is concerning his early period arises from the fact that, due to his absence whilst training for his career as a teacher, he rarely competed except at meetings held during the summer holidays.

The "440" was his best event, but, in 1893 being then in Dublin, he won a very fast 100 yards. Later that same season he won two great races at Ballyagran Sports, beating the famous Larry Roche in the "100" and "220", but was himself beaten in his beloved "440," N. Simcox, of Bruree, gaining a narrow win from him in this event.

OLD LIMERICK HARRIERS CLUB.

Though a sprinter, he was in at the foundation of the old Limerick Harriers Club, and was one of those selected to represent the Club in the many contests in which it participated.

Writing of this Club some years ago, the late P. J. Rea said: "The original city team of the 'nineties was paced by that grand old Gael, John Kelly. Had he not gone for his training to Drumcondra for his teachership, the Limerick Club would be a foremost one, for it won at Cobh, and got third at Clonskeagh. The members were a fine old crush, genial and jovial, and Charley Lord as Captain, with his tin whistle playing the Club to the field, was enjoyable. Poor Thady McMahon, Blakeney Gubbins, Willie Woodhouse, Ned Finucane, Stan MacAdams, Mick Roche, Jos. Guinane, Alby Enright, the brothers Dick and E. A. Smyth, Bertie Cummins, Jack Coll, Coleman O'Connell, Willie Collopy, Jack O'Sullivan, Andy Egan, Manager Duggan, and as a visitor, honest Bob Hughes. The evening runs were over the Castlepark course, roughly six miles, and with Kelly on the pace, was fast and fierce. Dear old 'Duggie' and poor Bob would retire early and await the issue in Sarsfield Street. 'The humours of Bandon' were as nothing compared to the jokings and jarrings of that eventful gang, and with social 'Jack Mac' as starter, the grand alliance was complete. The fines for 'funking' the jumps were inflicted by the 'pace,' John Kelly, and in a few instances the backsliders were ducked in the Caherdavin river as a gentle reminder that all jumps should be negotiated. Good fellows all, boon companions, souls of wit and merriment, and simplicity personified, many of the old 'crush' have passed away. May God be with them all."

IN HIS NATIVE PARISH.

Leaving Limerick after some time, and going back to Castletown, in his native parish, John Kelly took a deep interest in athletics there, and became President of the Ballyagran Hurling Club, which was then very much to the fore in senior ranks.

He pioneered the organisation of school sports and it is interesting to note that J. J. Bresnihan, the famous "all rounder," began his

professional career in the Castle-town School, under him, in 1895.

About 1910, he transferred to Ballingarry, to take charge of the local school, and he was soon prominent in the councils of the local hurling club, taking a very keen interest in the affairs of the hurlers and helping in no small measure to fit the lads to such a degree that they succeeded in winning the county senior championship title the following year.

As a result of the suspension of the Limerick County Board for failing to field a team to meet Kilkenny in the 1911 All-Ireland senior hurling final, a special convention was held at the Gaelic League Rooms, Thomas Street, on August 14th, 1912, for the purpose of forming a new Board.

Ald. Jim Nowlan, President of the G.A.A., was in the chair, and the attendance also included Luke J. O'Toole, Sec. Central Council, and Pat McGrath, Secretary of the Munster Council. There was a large number of delegates present.

ELECTED COUNTY BOARD CHAIRMAN.

John Kelly was elected County Board Chairman, beating Councillor Paddy Farrell by 25 votes to 16. Ned Jackson of Kilmallock became treasurer; Mick Feely of Croom the Secretary, with Pat Heavey, assistant secretary. The chairman with Ned Treacy of Fedamore were appointed the Limerick representatives on the Munster Council.

Stepping into the breach at a crucial time in the affairs of the Association in Limerick, John Kelly was to experience even more trying times during the early years of the fight for national independence.

Only those who lived through the difficult days when the G.A.A. was fighting for its actual existence against influences very strong in Irish life at the time, can appreciate the sacrifices John Kelly made in the cause of the Gael.

He kept the G.A.A. flag flying in Limerick, and acted as Co. Board Chairman during a period when it was neither fashionable nor safe to have anything to do with the Gaelic Athletic Association let alone act as one of its bosses.

As illustration of this, some reference to events subsequent to the Insurrection of 1916 will not be out of place. Many well known Gaels took a prominent part in the Rising, and Gaelic games were prohibited until the 10th June, when the ban was raised.

Later that year, on the 12th November to be exact, the then Secretary of the Co. Board, James Ryan, was arrested for refusing to admit members of the R.I.C., with out payment, to the semi-final of the Senior Hurling Championship between Cloughaun and Bruff, at Pallasgreen.

PROSECUTION FOLLOWED.

A prosecution followed. Mr. Ryan was defended by Mr. Hugh O'Brien Moran, solicitor, who produced at the trial confidential documents circulated amongst members of the R.I.C. The magistrates dismissed the case, but Messrs. Ryan and Moran were then arrested and charged before a British court-martial in connection with the documents. Mr. Moran refused to disclose where he obtained these secret papers and was sentenced to six months imprisonment. Mr. Ryan got three months.

In June, 1918, the British Government issued a proclamation prohibiting all G.A.A. games except under permit from the R.I.C.

The Central Council, of which John Kelly was now a member, met

to consider the position. Their answer was defiance. They instructed that permits be not applied for in any circumstances; they proclaimed August 4th a Gaelic Sunday, and ordered that fixtures without permits be arranged all over Ireland for that day. Fifteen hundred such contests were announced—Limerick having fourteen, at all of which large crowds were present. There was no interference from the authorities at any venue, and it was quite apparent that the ban had failed.

Prominent Gaels and members of the County Board were under constant observation, and for marching at the memorable funeral of a young man who was brutally murdered by the Black and Tans, a number of them, with the president and Mr. Denny Lanigan, were arrested and badly beaten.

John Kelly's term as county chairman also saw the formation of a body rival to the G.A.A.—named the National Association of Gaelic Athletic Clubs; and Fedamore, suspended from the G.A.A. for their refusal to play the 1915 county final, competed under the auspices of this Association, and won their "All-Ireland" title, by defeating Castlebridge, at Wexford Park on 10th December, 1916.

The success of Fedamore gained for the rival Association certain adherents in Limerick, but through the good offices of Very Rev. S. Connolly, then Adm. of St. John's Cathedral and an ardent Gael, all of them a little later decided on renewing their allegiance to the G.A.A.

ALL-IRELAND HURLING FINAL OF 1918.

No record of John Kelly's occupancy of the county chair would be complete without some reference to the All-Ireland success of the Newcastle West selection in the Blue Riband decider of 1918. Limerick had waited since 1897 for a hurling crown, and Willie Hough and his gallant comrades were popular heroes that memorable January day in 1919, when they beat Wexford, at Croke Park, 9-5 to 1-3.

John Kelly retired from the county chair a few months later, after seven years in charge of Gaelic affairs. But the heavy weight of G.A.A. responsibility from his shoulders did not lighten the burden a lot, for he felt that there was still plenty of work for willing hands and he threw himself heart and soul into an effort to restore some of the lost athletic glories of his native county.

The formation of the N.A. & C.A. as a result of the amalgamation of the G.A.A. Athletic Council and the old I.A.A.A., brought new hope of a big athletic revival, followed by the great Aonach Tailteann of 1924 and its rich athletic promise.

From then, to the day of his death, John Kelly's prevailing love was athletics, and he played a part that must never be forgotten in keeping the flame alive in Limerick.

No meeting was complete without his presence, and his advice and judgment were eagerly sought, and freely given always. And I know, from personal experience, that no man worked as hard as he did prior to a sports to ensure its success.

He superintended all the details as regards laying the track, preparing the jumps, etc., and saw to it that nothing was overlooked. His example and enthusiasm were infectious, and helped many an inexperienced committee to a wonderful success, whilst the originator and silent worker remained in

the background, far from the plaudits of the crowd.

RUBBED SHOULDERS WITH GREAT ATHLETES.

I venture to say that John Kelly had personal contact with more famous figures in the athletic life of Ireland than any other man of his generation.

He rubbed shoulders with the great right from his school days.

He saw the uprise of the Leahys, and others of like renown, in the golden era of Limerick athletics, and was still there when O'Grady was breaking world's records.

And when the great John of Ballybricken had passed to a premature grave, John Kelly was one of the originators of the project to honour his memory by the erection of the memorial that now stands at the junction of the Pallasgreen and Kilmallock roads.

John Kelly moved to Monaleen in 1914, where he reared a big family, six of his sons playing a prominent part in Limerick G.A.A. affairs, as members of the Young Ireland Club, in the heyday of that famous combination.

Limerick athletic renown is closely allied with the deeds of some great figures of the native arena, but I venture to say that, when giving all men their due, the name of John Kelly must get an honoured place in the annals of his time.

No. 42—John Fitzgerald of Bruff.