

Paddy Kelly Of Ballybricken

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

HURLING lore in the parish of Ballybricken extends deep back into the misty past and the traditions of the game were sound and secure in the area many years before the foundation of the G.A.A. brought the order and discipline that marshalled the parishes and then the counties into the great organisation we know to-day—one of the mightiest amateur sporting bodies to be found anywhere.

The first kind of hurling played in the parish, as in most of the other parishes where the game was practiced in ancient times, was known as "bhaile." That was the spelling of the word, as far as can be gathered from the manner of its pronunciation by the old timers. It was a shortening of the Irish word "abhaile," meaning home, and was apparently derived from the manner of playing the game.

It was the object of each team to carry the ball as far as they could into their own parish. There is a townland in the parish known as "Sean Abhaile," which is situated more or less on the boundary of Ballybricken and Fedamore parishes. Evidently on this spot took place some of those rather strenuous contests.

Within the memory of the old timers, however, those matches were usually set going in a field known as Gort na Muc, a borderline field on the bounds of Fedamore, Knockea and Ballybricken parishes.

Some well-known bhaile men in the parish and surrounding districts included the Hinchys, Lancys, Walshes and O'Grady brothers; also Tom Barry and Mick Fitzgerald.

When the G.A.A. got going, organised matches quickly superceded the old parish to parish contests. Ballybricken rallied immediately to the new call and the parish were amongst the first to affiliate to the infant association.

FIRST MATCHES UNDER G.A.A. RULES.

On the Sunday following August 15, 1885, the first hurling matches played under G.A.A. Rules in that part of Limerick took place at Brown's Field, in Ballyneety. The contesting teams were South Liberties v. St. Michael's and Shamrocks v. Crecora.

There were large crowds drawn from the whole surrounding countryside to see those games, which made a big impression on both players and spectators.

They were played, of course, under the very earliest G.A.A. Rules. Each team consisted of 21 players. There were no points over the bar as in the present-day game, but every time the ball was driven over the back line a point was allowed. Another curious feature of the game at the time was that when the ball was being pucked out from goal the whole team took up positions on the back line, and then when the ball was hit the whole crowd of them made a dash after it.

BIG NED O'GRADY.

The referee was big Ned O'Grady, of Ballybricken, who was the far famed weight thrower of his time, and in those particular matches the respect for his authority was very great. This could not be written as a regular feature of games at the period, but Ned O'Grady was an exceptional man and few would dare to cross his path.

Some true stories of his prowess will best illustrate my point. He beat back single-handed an attack by a large body of police on a crowd at the Herbertstown evictions in 1887. The police charged the crowd, who scattered; Ned refused to yield and assaulted the police with a heavy ash plant, the latter retreating before him. On another occasion Ned met an emergency man attempting to serve an eviction notice. He stripped him of his legal documents and authority and threw him into a dyke. On the matter being reported a posse of 12 police were sent to arrest him. Ned was informed of their coming and advanced down the road to meet them. When they recognised him making in their direction they turned up a bye road and allowed him pass unmolested—so great was his reputation as regards his physical abilities.

Returning to the games at Ballyneety, it is well to record that the spirit amongst the teams was exceptionally good and South Liberties won the cup offered for the competition, which was played to a conclusion that evening.

OUTSTANDING MEN.

Outstanding men on the occasion were: Jack Malone, capt.; Kirby, Woods, Ryan ("of the stream"), Bryan, Hayes, Rahilly ("from the New Street"), Coll (the mile runner) and Leonard (of South Liberties); William and Richard Gleeson, Michael Joyce (afterwards M.P.), of St. Michaels; Jim Fitzgerald (Shamrocks) and Dundon, McNamara and O'Shea (Crecora).

After these matches, teams sprang up all round the area and great enthusiasm prevailed. The Ballybricken lads got seriously down to training and when their first team appeared it consisted of 19 Skule men and two from Ballybricken. The latter, however, held the important posts—Paddy Kelly, the team captain, and Willie O'Dwyer, the club Secretary. The outstanding men from Skule included the O'Dwyers, John Hayes and Jack Hartigan.

This team played its first match at Knockea, with Crecora providing the opposition. Crecora won a great game by a point. The referee was P. J. Cleary, N.T., of Inch St. Lawrence.

A VERY ACTIVE CAPTAIN.

Paddy Kelly proved a very active captain and he entered his team for every competition within reasonable distance. He believed in keeping his men active Sunday after Sunday and he succeeded in this to such an extent that during the long summer months they were seldom idle.

They won their first trophy when they beat Boher (and a mixture of Murroe) by three points in a tremendous match played at Sheehan's Cross for the final of a cup tournament. Outstanding figures on the Boher side were: Ryan ("Farmer"), Healy and Denis O'Malley. The referee was James Kelly of Ballybricken, and the game was played in a fine sporting spirit.

The easiest win they had during this period was against Gormans-town, at Bruff, when the margin in their favour at the end of a lively hour was four goals.

They had a very exciting game with the star city team of the period, Treaty, who shortly afterwards won the County Senior crown. Played at Ballysheedy, with Mr. Matt Griffin as referee, the match resulted in a scoreless draw.

UNFORTUNATE HAPPENING.

An unfortunate happening resulted in Treaty getting a walk-over in the replay. The latter notifying Ballybricken of the fixture got lost in the post and the city men found nobody to oppose them when they got to the venue.

Ballybricken sought a re-fixture but were refused, and as a result they went out of existence for a period.

Paddy Kelly, however, rallied the forces again and a new team was formed. Paddy was again elected captain, and Eddie Fitzgerald was the Secretary this time. Outstanding players included the four Barry brothers, the Heelans and Kennedys.

This team played many important matches and had some fine successes to their name. A match they lost, however, must always remain the unforgettable one of that period.

It was a senior hurling championship tie against Cappamore, played at Hospital, with John O'Neill, of Hospital, the referee.

Ballybricken were leading by two points in the closing seconds when Cappamore, in a terrific assault, got through for a goal which the Ballybricken lads hotly disputed, maintaining that it did not go between the posts but a few inches outside and at an angle. The score was allowed, however, and Cappamore got the verdict by a solitary point.

Ballybricken lodged an objection with the County Board, but the latter upheld the referee's decision and gave Cappamore the game.

A CHALLENGE.

The Ballybricken lads, smarting under this decision, inserted an advertisement in the Limerick Leader challenging the Cappamore team to a match in either Kilmallock or Limerick. This challenge was not accepted.

The year was 1897 and Cappamore were subsequently beaten by Kilfinane by a solitary point in the County Final, Kilfinane going on to win the Munster and All-Ireland titles.

The following year Ballybricken met Ardpatrick, which team contained a number of the Kilfinane players, at Elton. The Ardpatrick lads won.

During the second half, when Ardpatrick had a strong wind to their backs, their ball was some ounces light. This fact was detected by Eddie Fitzgerald, who captured the ball at the end of the match.

RE-PLAY ORDERED.

A visit to the Post Office with the referee, Tommie Landon (afterwards M.P.), followed. There the ball was put on the official scales and found not to be the required weight. A replay was ordered, which took place at Bruff, and which Ballybricken won easily.

There was considerable delay in playing the next round of the championship, and unfortunately for Ballybricken a large number of their players emigrated and the team fell to pieces—a bad blow at a time when they showed such great promise. It was a big disappointment, too, for Paddy Kelly, now reaching the veteran stage, to see the fruits of his unremitting toil crumble at the very time when they showed such promise of achieving the great ambition of every parish—a Gaelic championship crown.