

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 44)—JOE LEAHY of Cregane

(By SEAMUS O'CALLAIGH)

When I remember all the friends so linked together, I've seen around me fall, like leaves in wintry weather, I feel like one who threads alone, some banquet hall deserted, Whose lights are fled, whose garlands dead, And all but he departed.

THE above lines come to mind, as I put together these few thoughts, this week, on the last of the Leahy's to come under notice in this series. I have already dealt with Con, Paddy, Tom, Mick and Tim. Jack took more kindly to horses and farming than to athletics, although he was regarded by many sound judges as good, every bit, as the most famous of his brothers. However, he could not be induced to compete, and with this review of Joe's career we ring down the curtain on the greatest athletic family the world has known.

FAMED HOUSE IN IRISH ATHLETICS.

The most famous house in Irish athletic history is, without doubt, the home of the renowned Leahy brothers—that grand family of athletes respected the world over, where feats of strength, speed, endurance and all the splendid qualities that go to make up many men are honoured.

You can search the pages of the record books in vain in an effort to discover six such men anywhere else in the world. The Leahys were just supreme—as a family of stars they never had an equal, not to seek a peer, and Limerick has just reason to be proud of them.

Proud, too, of the race from whence they sprung, saturated with a great love of country and cradled in an atmosphere that was intensely Irish of the Irish.

In the grand home at Cregane these lads developed a clean mind and a healthy body that grew in grace and strength until the day came to each of a half dozen wonderful brothers, in turn, to enter the athletic arena and win immortality.

ALWAYS A LEAHY AT THE TOP.

For long years they stood at the peak of Irish and world athletics, in the golden era of the Gael, and when other great ones had come, conquered and passed away, there was still a Leahy at the top, performing feats that are hardly to be equalled even in the pages of mythical lore, and adding fresh laurels until the name became a byword denoting great athletic achievement—a name, too, that was honoured and recalled all over the globe, as proof of what the Irish were capable of doing in the spacious field of athletics.

A generation has come and gone since the last of the Leahys took off his togs to don them no more. More tragic and painful still, five of the seven brothers from that happy Gregane family circle of the great years at the turn of the century, have passed from this Valley of Tears.

The Leahys opened an account with Ireland more than half a century ago. When it closed it had a credit balance on which a multi-millionaire might look with real envy.

IMPERISHABLE MEMORIES.

The enthusiasm with which the famous brothers were greeted at the zenith of their power still holds, with all who knew them, and I have met hundreds who cherish imperishable memories of Paddy, Con, Tim, Mick, Jack, Tom, Joe—seven men each with a niche of his own in the affection of Gaelic sportsmen, no matter in what part of the world the scattered Celt has made a home.

Fifty years ago, the loved house at Cregane was the great meeting place of some of the grandest figures Ireland or any other country ever put into athletic garb. I was denied the pleasure of meeting all seven men of this remarkable and world renowned family. But I have had vivid descriptions, from friends who were there, of the many nights spent in care-free enjoyment of true Irish hospitality under the Leahy roof.

The kindly welcome made the visitor immediately at his ease, and as the grand company talked and talked, and the hours flew, the deeds of all the great Irish athletes of the day were discussed with pride. The highlights of the many athletic gatherings all over the country were recalled and praise meted out to the well-known figures of that time.

NEVER BOASTED.

As to the deeds of the Leahy lads themselves there was never a boasting word, and rarely could

they be induced to mention one of their own performances, for they shrank from anything that could be regarded as self-praise. Nevertheless, the proud "woman of the house"—mother of such well loved figures—often betrayed a glow of pride in her dark eyes when some exceptional performance by Paddy, Con or Tim was mentioned.

The Leahy girls were athletes, too, as I think I mentioned in an earlier article, but on occasions like this they were content to sit and listen to the talk of the men until tea was served. Then usually followed some music and a few songs—and they were in their element, a happy, friendly company in the best sense of the word.

To reflect on those nights of golden memory, the merry-making and the happy hours in the company of such true nobility of the Gael brings thoughts that are so pleasant, but yet so sad. Pleasant in the recollection of a glory-packed athletic mastery that is dying out in Ireland, as the old times are dying, as the old ways are dying. Sad is the realisation that the central figures of those memorable gatherings have, many of them, passed away.

We are burying a generation that gave us an athletic past of which any nation might be more than proud, and it would too bad if, when the last of the old stalwarts is carried in his oaken coffin to sleep with his forefathers, there were none to uphold the honour and prestige of Limerick in the athletic world, as the Leahys and their associates so nobly did in days that will not come again.

GLORIES WHICH CAN'T RETURN.

A visit to Gregane, that home of such nostalgic athletic memories, is still a very pleasant affair, for Joe Leahy, in the best traditions



The famous Joe Leahy.

of his noble line, ensures that. But all the hospitality in the world cannot make up for the sense of loss, aggravated all the more when one sees all round such telling evidence of the glories that can never return.

The late Denis Horgan often said that Joe Leahy could be the best weight thrower of his time if he specialised. And we have it on the authority of "Carbery," who knew the Leahys well, that: "best all rounder of all the Leahys was Joe, who still manages the home farm at Cregane. Joe Leahy, though a stalwart man, was able to clear six feet any day of the week, and cleared 6ft. 2ins. more than once. He was a grand hurdle racer and tip-top weightsman—Joe often brought six prizes from a single meeting—deadly marksman, too, behind a game-dog on a river margin—the Mague flats were favourite haunts of wild duck and geese in winter time, and the Leahys devoted much of their leisure to dog and gun."

Probably the only all-round man to follow the great Tom Kiely part of the way, it is certain that had Joe Leahy specialised in any event, say, the hurdles or the weights, he would have gone a long way towards depriving the famous Tipperary man of some of his laurels. Considering that he regularly won at eight events—High, long and pole jumps, 28 lb., 56 lb and 16 lb. shot, 100 yards flat and 120 yards hurdles, and that he often found

himself in opposition to one or two of his famous brothers, his top class successes were very numerous indeed, whilst it is reckoned that he collected more second and third prizes than any other athlete in the country.

IN HEYDAY FOR TEN YEARS.

For the first ten years of the century he was in his heyday and attended athletic meetings all over the country, "collecting" a galaxy of trophies that made him the envy of the less fortunate. Then an accident in the straining of a muscle put him off the track for a considerable time, and when, at last, he was able to renew his acquaintance with the active arena he discovered that he was unable to regain his old form. However, he turned his hand to the coaching of his brother, Tim, whom he helped very considerably on the road to renown.

Joe, a ciotog, and very strong, could life his brother Jack and pitch him about with his left hand. Still a powerful figure of a man, the last time I met him in Limerick we had a long chat on athletics and the great men of his time.

The Limerick star of fifty golden years ago thinks the G.A.A. made a big mistake when they parted with the control of athletics. Munster men like Frank Dinneen, of Limerick, and Andy Hart, of Tipperary, he regards as two of the best workers in the athletic cause that Ireland produced.

HIGHLIGHTS OF ACTIVE YEARS.

With his sister, Joe still manages the home farm, the comfortable house packed from floor to ceiling with a wonderful array of athletic trophies. Joe contributed more than his share to the display, but space permits reference only to some of the occasions when "firsts" were recorded. In brief, we recall the highlights of his active years:

1901—Bruff: Pole Jump, 9 ft. 3 ins.; High Jump, 5 ft. 8 ins.; Limerick City: 28 lbs., 30 ft. Cork City: High Jump, 5 ft. 6 ins. Croom: High Jump, 5 ft. 8 ins.; Pole Jump, 9 ft. 11 ins. Dublin (G.A.A. Championships): 56 lbs., 25 ft. 3 ins.; High Jump, 5 ft. 10½ ins. Nenagh: 120 yards Hurdles.

1902—Rathluirc: Pole Jump, 9 ft. 3½ ins. Ennis: Long Jump, 20 ft. 3½ ins.; High Jump, 5 ft. 9½ ins.; 120 Yards Hurdles. Limerick City: High Jump, 5 ft. 9 ins.; 120 Yards Hurdles.

1903—Blarney: High Jump, 5 ft. 3½ ins.; 16 Shot, 34 ft. 7½ ins. Kilrush: High Jump, 5 ft. 7 ins.; Cork Presentation College: High Jump, 5 ft. 8 ins.; Long Jump, 20 ft. 2½ ins.

1904—Galway: High Jump, 5 ft. 7 ins. Munster Championship. High Jump, 5 ft. 8½ ins. Limerick City: Pole Jump, 8 ft. 8 ins.; 16 lb. Shot, 30 ft. 9 ins. Kilkenny: Long Jump, 20 ft. 11 ins.; High Jump, 5 ft. 5 ins.; G.A.A. Championships: 56 lbs. with follow, 25 ft. 3 ins. (second); High Jump, 5 ft. 8½ ins. (second).

1905—Co. Clare: 120 yards Hurdles. Dublin Tramways: High Jump, 5 ft. 9 ins.; 120 yards Hurdles. Limerick Postal: Long Jump, 20 ft. 1½ ins.; 120 yards Hurdles. Tipperary: High Jump, 5 ft. 1½ ins. Westport: Long Jump, 20 ft. 0 ins. Thurles: 16 lb Shot, 37 ft. 9 ins. Castlebar: 120 yards Hurdles. Crosshaven: 120 yards Hurdles.

1906—Queen's College, Cork: High Jump, 5 ft. 4½ ins. Limerick City: High Jump, 5 ft. 5 ins. Nenagh, High Jump, 5 ft. 7 ins.; 120 yards Hurd-

les. Adare: Long Jump, 21 ft. 9 ins.; High Jump, 5 ft. 6 ins. Callan: Long Jump, 20 ft. 4 ins. Rath Luirc: High Jump, 5 ft. 7 ins.; 16lbs., 37 ft. 5 ins.; Putting 16lb. Shot, 37 ft. 7 ins. Ennis: 120 yards Hurdles. Limerick: Pole Jump, 9 ft. 0 ins. Knockavilla: Long Jump.

1907—Ballinasloe: 56 lbs., 120 yards Hurdles, 16 lb. Shot, Ennis: 16 lb. Shot, Skerries: 120 yds. Hurdles, High Jump, 5 ft. 8½ ins.; Pole Jump, Feohenagh: High Jump, Knockavilla: 16 lb. Shot, High Jump, 120 yds. Hurdles, Gort: 100 yards Flat, High Jump, Long Jump, 56 lbs. without follow. Templemore: High Jump, 56 lbs., Long Jump, Macroom: High Jump, 5 ft. 8 ins. Cobh: 56 lbs. with follow, 26 ft. 10 ins.; 120 yards Hurdles. Rath Luirc: 16 lb. Shot, 40 ft. 4 ins.; 120 yards Hurdles. Dromcollogher: 100 yards Flat, Pole Jump.

1908—Nenagh: 120 yards Hurdles, High Jump, 5 ft. 3 ins.; Pole Jump. Blarney: 120 yards Hurdles, High Jump, 5 ft. 7 ins. Cork A.A. Club: 120 yards Hurdles. Knockavilla: 120 yards Hurdles. Newcastle West: 120 yards Hurdles. Bandon: 120 yards Hurdles, 56 lbs., 22 ft. 2 ins. Rath Luirc: 120 yards Hurdles.

1909—Ballinasloe: 56 lbs.

1910—Ballinasloe: 120 yards Hurdles, Ennis: 16 lbs. Shot; Rathluirc: High Jump, 5 ft. 3 ins.; 120 Yards Hurdles, Cobh: 120 yds. Hurdles. Dromcollogher: 56 lbs. Limerick City: 120 yards Hurdles.

1911—Ballinasloe: 56 lbs. Macroom: 56 lbs. Listowel: 16 lb. Shot. Rath Luirc: 16 lb. Shot, 41 ft. 3 ins.; 56 lbs. without follow, 23 ft. 6 ins. Cobh: 56 lbs. without follow, 22 ft. 8 ins.

POPULAR FIGURE AND GREAT FAVOURITE.

Joe Leahy was a great favourite on Irish athletic fields and his feats always attracted much interest. A popular figure anywhere he went, he had a clear conception of what Irish athletics stood for—that development of the many qualities of the race which would, if properly handled and injected with strong patriotic fervour, enable the Irish athletic school to become world famous once more.

As I prepare to lay down my pen, I feel that there is much more that deserves mention in the lives of the great Gregane family. To do full justice to the athletic capabilities of the Leahys would require a volume. They come of a race of fine athletic renown, and were each of them adepts in all many games with which our race is familiar—facile with caman, hurdlers, weight-throwers, runners and jumpers in excelsis. Within their own family circle they constituted a cross section of Irish physical virility, and proved grand representatives of racial endowments for which, we fear, familiarity, the modern craze for dancing, and later fashions, may breed a discreditable athletic indifference in Ireland.

But deep in the hearts of the great men and women who thrilled to the call of the athletic field when the G.A.A. was in its youth, lies a fount of love and devotion which must ever remain the prerogative of the famous family from Cregane.

Their memory shall be ever cherished, but so that the name be enshrined for ever, would it not be a gracious act to raise a worthy stadium, or other suitable memorial, in grateful remembrance of the unsurpassable Leahys of Cregane.

Thus shall memory often in dreams sublime
Catch a glimpse of the days that are over.
Thus, sighing, look through the waves of time
For the long faded glories they cover.

No. 45—Charles H. Davis, of Limerick City.