

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 4)—PADDY LEAHY of Cregane

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

NEARLY thirty years ago I first visited a happy little home just off the main Limerick-Cork road, near Rath Luirc, the abode of probably the grandest family of athletes the world has known—the Leahys of Cregane.

Hailing almost within the proverbial stone's throw of the North Cork Gaelic outpost, they have often been claimed as Cork men; but Limerick owns them and it was in Limerick colours they competed.

Of that fact there is not a shadow of doubt. Nevertheless, none will begrudge the Rath Luirc people claiming close affinity with them. It is also well to remember that it was in the famous Deerpark enclosure that some of their best performances were achieved.

### WONDERFUL FAMILY OF ATHLETES.

The Leahys were a wonderful family of athletes. Six brothers—Paddy, Con, Joe, Tom, Mick and Tim—could hold their own with the best, and must go down as the most versatile performers in the history of athletics, whilst a seventh brother, Jack, though devoting the bulk of his time to horses and the show ring, also won prizes in the athletic arena.

More remarkable still, they had a sister, who, it is said, could beat the best of them even when world honours rested in the little home at Cregane.

It was a never to be forgotten treat to visit the little field close by and see the famous family in training—a scene for which no parallel could be drawn anywhere.

Many visitors came there to feast their eyes on the athletic prowess of the far-famed Leahys. Amongst them an English gentleman of some athletic pretensions, and to his amazement and delight Miss Leahy performed with the brothers.

The English friend became so charmed with the young lady that ere long he proposed marriage to her. Although a fine type, and of good social position, Miss Leahy refused the offer, as she preferred to refrain from mixing the true Celtic blood with that of the Sassenach.

### FIRST APPEARANCE AS A COMPETITOR.

Paddy Leahy first appeared as a competitor in 1895, and to reach the sports ground had to tramp seven good Irish miles.

To say that he won prizes galore during his active career is putting it mildly. At nineteen meetings in 1898 he had forty-three firsts in competition with Ireland's greatest athletes. Between the famous brothers, they could stock a shop that would grace Dublin's famous Grafton Street by its contents alone.

Paddy Leahy was just the ideal cut for an athlete. Standing 5 ft. 9 ins. and weighing whilst in training just twelve stone, he was magnificently proportioned, having tremendous leg strength, whilst his calf and thigh development

was remarkable. At once his lithe figure proclaimed him as a sterling performer, reminding one of the ever to be remembered frame of, perhaps, the best athlete ever seen in Ireland—Pat Davin.

Paddy Leahy was a born jumper whose capabilities were as easily recognised when he hopped five feet as when he cleared inches over fathom height. Strong enough in frame and muscle to have been a vigorous hurler or a useful light-weight putter, he had the ductile sinewy limbs, great knees and shapely calves of all models of speed and agility.

### WHAT HE COULD DO UNDER MODERN TRAINING.

Brilliant and impressive as were his championship achievements, they did not fully reveal his real capabilities. Nevertheless they help to demonstrate what he could and did accomplish under the most rigid conditions of contemporary competition.

Before his untimely and much lamented death in Chicago, Paddy Leahy had ample opportunities to study the methods and training of jumpers in the United States who have surpassed his record. It was revealed to him how restricted his experience and training were when he was astonishing all at home by his magnificent leaping.

Sound critics who saw him in his earlier career assert that with the advantages modern jumpers enjoy, he could have excelled them all. It is confidently averred that, jumping like Osborne and his rivals, Paddy Leahy would have reached an altitude little, if anything short of seven feet. This, of course, may be debated. It cannot be tested now. But enough is known of his accredited performances to give the claim probability.

His accepted world's record was 6 ft. 4½ ins., jumped at Millstreet, in 1898. That height, as we shall see, gave him the minimum of credit and, by implication, did him a grave injustice.

### THE GRACE AND EASE OF A BIRD.

He was in great form that day at Millstreet. The huge crowd stood almost awe-stricken as Paddy cleared the lath inch by inch with the grace and ease of a bird until the elevation was 6 feet 4½ inches. Could he do it? Well, he was game to try. Taking the run characteristic of his style, which was beautiful, he ran directly for his leap. He took off almost in a perpendicular line with the ground, with his arms outstretched, and his legs were suddenly telescoped, as it were, knees to chin. His move-

ments almost machine like, he flew up, up, over the bar. When above the lath his body turned until he was facing the take-off, and so he landed amidst an outburst of cheering that almost shook the ground—a world's record holder for the high jump at 6 feet 4½ inches—a record, too, that held good for many years. It was a wonderful performance, performed by a wonderful athlete.

The real worth of this leap is greater even than would appear from the measurement. The bar was "pegged out" at 6 ft. 6½ inches, but the sag amounted to two ins.—an unusual and unfortunate depression for Leahy.

### DID BETTER THE SAME YEAR

It was not his best "flight," however, for Paddy jumped 6 ft. 5½ ins. at a sports in Limerick Markets Field that same year. For some occult reason that jump was never accepted, else it would be our Irish record still; and a proud one, for it was accomplished in the old, unequivocal, upright style.

The Press reports of the day thus described it: "The record came in the high jump, when the lithe footed Leahy of Cregane cleared the bar at 6 ft. 5½ ins. without as much as grazing the lath. The jump was done slightly up against a hill, as was proved by an expert who was called upon to decide by the use of a spirit level."

The greatest Irish athletic expert, perhaps, of all time, the late F. B. Dinneen, declared it the most genuine record ever made. Yet he was officially denied credit for this marvellous leap.

In 1898, Paddy Leahy won almost everywhere and many elsewhere, and at the same time was an active competitor in other branches of athletics. So inherent was his ability in the high jump, which above all others is affected by inimical conditions, that adverse circumstances rarely stayed his progress under six feet. Actually, he exceeded this height on a sticky, puddle-dotted Brickfield ground in November, 1896, at Belfast, whether he had travelled from Munster with Tom Kieley to aid in the revival there of native games.

### DID 25 FT. 3 INS. IN LONG JUMP.

At Rath Luirc sports he jumped 6 ft. 4½ ins., and also won the broad jump at 25 ft. 3 ins. and the hop, step and jump with 50 ft. 1 in.—the latter both records in their day.

Later still in the same year he won the Munster championships with 6 feet 3 ins. in the high jump and 48 feet in the hop, step and

jump. The next day he was at Milltown, County Kerry, and his performances were:—High, 6 feet 1½ inches; hop, step and jump, 49 feet 2 inches; long jump, 23 feet.

Throughout 1899 his victorious progress was unchecked, as the following selection from his performances will show:—

Limerick—Broad jump, 23 ft. 5 ins.; high jump, 6 ft. 3 ins.;

Mallow—Broad jump, 23 ft. 10½ ins.; high jump, 6 ft. 5 ins.;

Youghal—Broad jump, 24 ft. 8 ins.; hop, step and jump, 49 ft.;

Macroom—24 ft. and 50 ft. 10 ins. for the same events.

As in the case of another hop, step and jump record, there was no official recognition.

In this year he won the English high jump championship with a height of 5 feet 10½ ins. in a swamp at Wolverhampton. Towards the close of the season he covered 50 ft. 2 ins. at Blarney, and 50 ft. 4 ins. at Bandon, in the hop, step and jump.

In 1900, at Buttevant, Paddy once more covered 25 ft. 3 ins. in the broad jump, which would have been another world's record, anticipating by many years. E. Gourdin's leap, which displaced Peter O'Connor's best in 1921.

His performances in 1901 included jumps of 6 ft. 4½ ins. at Rath Luirc, and 6 ft. 3½ ins. at Waterville.

### AT CORK EXHIBITION SPORTS

At sports in connection with the Cork Exhibition held in 1902 he won all the jumping events, including the three standing jumps with 38 ft. 3 ins., which was identical with Courtney's Irish record, made at Killarney in the same year. His friend and fellow Limerick man, James Fahey, of Galbally, later added two feet to that distance. In the absence of dumbbells, Leahy used two bricks for weights in accordance with the Irish custom.

Leahy went to the United States in 1909 and three years later he again entered the arena for the standing jumps. He did 12 ft. 2 ins. in the broad jump, 24 ft. 2 ins. in the double jump, and 37 ft. 6 ins. in a triple leap.

### UNPARALLELED ACHIEVEMENT AT AGE OF 40.

At the Irish Games in Chicago, in May, 1915, when he was forty years of age, Paddy jumped 5 ft. 0½ ins. in the standing high jump, 11 ft. 10 ins. in the standing long jump, and 35 ft. 9 ins. in the three standing jumps—an unparalleled achievement for a man in his fortieth year.

Paddy Leahy stood 5 ft. 9 ins. Compare this with his jumping and wonder!

Now, as I lay down my pen I am all too conscious that I have given but scant justice to one of the grandest of a grand galaxy of our Limerick athletes, and I only hope that on some future occasion I will get another opportunity of recounting more of the superb deeds which Paddy Leahy accomplished.

No. 5—Dr. Ned Walsh, of Betterville.