

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 48)—Jack McCarthy of Kilfinane

(By SEAMUS O'CALLAIGH)

FOR Ireland, the pioneer of field and track athletics, and for so long the home of unsurpassable athletes, it is a sad reflection that, with all the progress made in other spheres, we have no athletes capable of measuring up to the stature of the men that graced the arena when the G.A.A. was in its infancy.

And what is true of the nation as a whole can be applied in a very particular sense to our parishes, and none more notably than the one we visit for this little sketch of another of the great Kilfinane men of a grand era—Jack McCarthy.

For years I have diligently studied the doings of our athletes and can claim to be familiar with the deeds of many of the best men that Ireland or the world has produced—the Davins, the Kielys, the Leahys, Denis Horgan, Martin Sheridan, Matt McGrath, John Flanagan, Paddy Ryan, Willie Real, Dr. Daly, Jim Fahey, the O'Grady's, and numerous others who have left ineffable imprints on the course of Ireland's and the world's athletic history.

No need to stress that we are not what we were in athletics. It is thirty years since control of athletics passed from the G.A.A. and, despite many big efforts to improve the position, it must be admitted that we are not making the desired progress.

IMPORTANCE OF PARISH RIVALRY.

We sought and secured international "recognition" and lost it again, because of British jealousy, 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 that the G.A.A., in its early days, brought Irish athletics to the forefront by encouraging the parish rivalry. There were not any visits by foreign athletes then. Sports 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 those unforgettable days the annual sports meeting was eagerly looked forward to and was one of the big events of the calendar in any self-respecting parish. Weeks of careful planning and organisation preceded the great day. Then the bustle and excitement, the crowded roads, the thronged sports field, and all the fun of the fair. This was long before the mechanical age, as motor cars were few and far between then.

In the old Markets Field on many occasions world's records went by the board, and the athletes that broke them were born and reared in County Limerick. Similarly at other venues in the county, and on its borders, Great Limerickmen crashed their way to international recognition by sheer athletic merit and gained a niche that the most powerful organisation in the world cannot deprive them of.

A few years ago we were told 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 athletic powers so long a heritage of the race.

THE ENVY OF THE WORLD.

In the halcyon days one patch of the Southern Province was capable of producing men of sufficient athletic worth as to make them the envy of the world. From the Devil's Bit, near Templemore, to Sally Island, below Carrick-on-Suir, and over across to South and East Limerick, the territory of the Golden Vale found athletic talent as thick as the rich grass for which the district is famed.

Great hurlers and footballers could be got in every parish in this grand stretch of ground, and athletes of world fame, muscular giants of great renown, whose names and records would more than fill an entire issue of this paper.

We have little use dwelling on the past unless we are going to profit from the doing. We have fallen off sadly and decisively, and the revival of the old spirit is the only hope for Irish athletics.

Unless we revive the Parish Sports, and incorporate all the old Irish events in weight-throwing and jumping, we cannot look back on the past with anything approaching a clear conscience.

For long years Irish athletes 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. This was not apparent to the men of the early endeavours, due, no doubt, to the high standard set in the home arena, but the G.A.A. "Invasion" of 1888 demonstrated the wealth of talent Ireland boasted, and it is a glowing commentary on the healthy state of the body athletic then that we could afford to lose the greater portion of the "Invaders," including the subject of our sketch, Jack McCarthy, and yet leave home glory undimmed.

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.

GREAT ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PAST.

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 in the broad realm of athletics.

In days when sterner preoccupations 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.

Under native rule Tailteann was revived, and for a time gave every hope of restoring the long lost glories of athletic Ireland. That the games were allowed to lapse following the 1932 gathering, must rest on the shoulders of a Government who refused the modest grant that would have ensured their continuance. It was a deplorable and regrettable mistake. But if we were right in our approach to "An Tostal" and really intended it to be what its name implies, we would concentrate more on the simple pleasures of the past and treat our visitors to a revival of that fine sense of local pride in the athletic feat, which formerly was the very warp and woof of our tradition, and enabled us to hold our own and at length to triumph against mighty odds. We just want the right approach—the restoring of the parish rivalry and we surely will again emphasise to the world our readiness to make giant strides once more towards the athletic supremacy that was once really ours—and ours alone.

SCENE OF WONDERFUL ATHLETIC DEEDS.

All these thoughts come into my mind as we re-visit the scene of such wonderful athletic deeds of the past—dear old Kilfinane—for a glimpse at the career of another of its sons—the last in this series of a generation that made the welkin ring in historic ground, when the G.A.A. was very young indeed.

Jack McCarthy was born at Ballinanima, Kilfinane, and can date the commencement of his athletic career with the formation of a hurling club in his native district a few months after the G.A.A. was founded that historic November day of 1884 at Thurles.

So numerous were the applications for membership of the hurling club, it was necessary to hold trial matches, from which two teams of twenty-one apiece were selected, both of which played many games even before regular championships were inaugurated.

To the brothers Downes must be given the honour of the organisation, ably assisted by the brothers Michael and Tom Finn, father and uncle, respectively, of the two All-Ireland players—Mick and Jack Finn. Patrick Thornhill, merchant, gave much financial aid, as in later years did Thomas P. McCarthy, father of another great Limerick All-Ireland hurling star—Tommy McCarthy. The old "twenty-ones," as we call them, played and won many great tournament games in South Limerick and North Cork before gaining county championship honours, and following up with the wonderful victory of championship and Croke Cup in All-Ireland competition in the great year of 1897.

TUTORED BY EARLY PIONEER

Jack McCarthy had as near neighbours such fine athletic figures as J. J. Flanagan, Michael and Jack Connery, and these, with Dan Shanahan, were tutored by an old athlete, John McDonnell, who was one of the early pioneers of the athletic sports in the days before the G.A.A. and had few equals at the standing jumps from 1877 to 1880. A farmer, McDonnell, was credited with 31 ft. in the three jumps and often covered 22 feet in the long jump, and before he died, in the fullness of years, he had a long life to look back upon, and an unbroken connection with the G.A.A. and with athletics.

In the early days, at every cross roads the youths of the district gathered to indulge in running, jumping and weight-throwing, and

in the crowd at Ballinanima Bridge, the Connerys, Flanagan, Shanahan and McCarthy were the leaders and asserted their supremacy at the few local sports meetings held at the time.

WON SEVEN PRIZES ONE DAY.

Jack McCarthy left his own house one day in a donkey and cart, and went to a sports at Nenagh where he won seven prizes. It took him three days to get back home.

After that he attended any meeting he could reach and very often returned laden with victories. The wide range of his successes are well reflected in the few reports of his performances that I have been able to trace in the newspapers of his time.

His first recorded win was at Kilmallock on August 15th, 1887, when he was successful at putting the 28 lbs. with a distance of 30 ft. 2 ins.

At the Limerick G.A.A. Sports, at the Markets Field, on September 11th, 1887, he was second in both the long jump (20 ft. 7 ins.) and 16 lbs. shot (34 ft.).

At Emly on November 3th he won at putting the 42 lbs. with a distance of 24 ft. 10 ins. and was second in both the 440 yards and 880 yards flat events.

At the All-Ireland Athletic Championships, held at the Markets Field, Limerick, on August 5th, 1888, the last great gathering of all the big figures of a glorious epoch, prior to the American "Invasion," and the last occasion many of them performed on Irish soil, the returns were of exceptional worth in most events. Dan Shanahan's 50 ft. 0½ in. in the running hop, step and jump has only once been approached—in 1904, when J. J. Bresnahan covered 49 ft. 8½ ins., and other outstanding items of that memorable day include the winning by J. S. Mitchell, of Emly, of no less than five titles—slinging 56 lbs. (30 ft. 1 in.), putting 16 lb. shot (39 ft. 3 ins.), throwing the 16 lb. hammer (136 ft. 1½ ins.), 7 lb. weight (90 ft. 2 ins.) and 14 lb. weight (59 ft. 5½ ins.). It was the third and fourth year running, in many instances as far as the Emly man was concerned, and all conceded that Jack McCarthy did very well to secure second place to him in the 7 lb. and 14 lb. weight events.

ANOTHER GREAT PERFORMER

The Kilfinane man was also unlucky in meeting another great performer—D. D. Bulger in the "Hundred" and "Two-Twenty." Bulger won the former the five years from 1886 to 1888, and the latter three times in a row, 1886 to 1888. McCarthy finished third in the "Hundred," but the race of the evening was the "220," which Bulger won from Jack, with only a yard to spare. Bulger "called it a day" by also winning the long jump (21' 11") and the 120 yards hurdles.

Willie Real won two events: pushing 28 lbs. (33 ft. 4½ ins.) and pushing 56 lbs. (23 ft. 9½ ins.), whilst other well known figures in winning lists that evening were T. J. O'Mahony, (the "Roscarbery steam engine") who secured the "440"; W. Phibbs, victorious in the "880" and P. M. Nunan, winner of the pole jump.

Jack McCarthy was selected as a member of the Irish team for the "Invasion" of America, where, with many of his comrades, he remained.

WON OVER 300 PRIZES IN U.S.A.

Joining the New York Police, McCarthy found himself in congenial company, and was soon making a name on the athletic fields of the land of his adoption, securing over 300 prizes as a runner and weight thrower, and up to the late 90's was a prominent figure in American athletics.

He retired from the track and, in time, from the police, but he never lost his interest in athletics, and one of his greatest pleasures was to show any friends that visited his comfortable home the trophies he won on many a hard-fought field, all of which he had carefully preserved in a magnificent glasscase, packed full of memories dating back the avenue of time to happy, care-free days in old Kilfinane.

No. 49—David M. O'Connell of Ardpatrick.