

No. III—PAT McGRATH of Lackendarra

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BY the fireside, at the cross-roads, or in the tavern no tales are listened to with greater interest than those dealing with the athletic feats of some great men of the district in the long ago. A love of athletics and admiration for manly achievements—feelings closely akin—have been characteristic of our people down through the centuries.

In those dim and distant ages, when our island ancestors cleared our forests, tilled our fields by methods long and outdated, hunted for red deer and elk, the well-being of the household depended on the bread-winner's physical prowess and skill. When the Celts first committed their thoughts to parchment their heroes were all great athletes, from Finn down.

Tradition dies hard. Before organised athletics became popular in Europe, contests in weight-throwing and jumping were widespread in Ireland—at the pattern, cross-road, and fair, men tried their strength and agility. So it was no wonder that when organised athletics were revived in Ireland over seventy years ago, giants and lithe-limbed men flocked to the playing fields and quickly established the name of the athletic Irishmen.

THE DAVIN BROTHERS.

The first remarkable Irish athletes to enter the international arena of modern athletics were the brothers Maurice and Pat Davin, of Carrick-on-Suir. Maurice far outshone all his compeers as a weight-thrower, as did Pat Davin as a jumper, runner and hurdle-racer. Both won many English championships and hundreds of medals and prizes against the cream of English, Scottish and American athletes of their time. With the establishment of the Gaelic Athletic Association, rural Ireland athletic talent was tapped for the first time and Munster responded by providing the bulk of the champions in the jumps, weights and long distance events.

Mitchell, O'Sullivan, Real, Daly, Purcell, Shanahan, Leahy, Phibbs, O'Donovan, J. M. Ryan, Power, O'Brien, O'Neill, Conway, O'Mahoney, Mooney, Malone, Kelly, Delaney, Wood, Barry, Fraher, Fahey, Wall, Courtney and Morrissey were some of a wonderful bunch of athletes in the late 'eighties and early 'nineties. In this grand company we find the subject of our sketch this week—Pat McGrath of Lackendarra, Anglesboro, who was a competitor at the first All-Ireland Athletic championship meeting organised by the G.A.A., the summer following its establishment, and brought the first two Irish athletic championship titles to Sarsfield's County.

Roused by the fine performances of their neighbours, relatives, and friends, the peasantry rallied to the sports meetings with increasing enthusiasm, and soon a widespread school of athletic devotion was established in Munster.

EARLY DAYS OF THE G.A.A.

The G.A.A. was not established without considerable opposition from what might be termed, for want of a better word, the "foreign faction" in Ireland. They held a big meeting in Dublin in January, 1885, and decided on the formation of the Irish Amateur Athletic Association in an effort to counter the activities of the G.A.A. Commenting on this meeting the "Freeman's Journal" said: "We do not know that the G.A.A. seeks to interfere with any body, but if these people imagine that they are going to quash the Archbishop of Cashel, Mr. Parnell, and Mr. Davitt, because these gentlemen desire to promote Irish athletics, and to secure a due recognition in athletic programmes of those manly exercises in which Irishmen have from time immemorial excelled, we take the liberty of telling them that they are very much mistaken."

A stern fight developed between the two organisations but the common people of Ireland rallied to the G.A.A. and soon we find Dr. Croke, Archbishop of Cashel, penning these lines: "I am much pleased to see that the G.A.A. is bounding ahead fast, and that our national sports, so long neglected, are once more patronised by the rising manhood of Ireland. Of course, it has met with opposition, as everything genuinely Irish has to expect, but I learn almost daily the gladdening intelligence that it is spreading its affiliations far and wide, and that ere long it

will have a commanding influence in its way and within its legitimate sphere throughout the country."

F. B. DINNEEN OF BALLYLANDERS.

Blarney was the first big athletic meeting held under G.A.A. rules, and resulted in strengthening the position of the new organisation throughout Munster. Referring to the meeting the "Cork Examiner" said: "The G.A.A. can claim to having under its banner the best hundred yards man in Ireland, F. B. Dinneen of Ballylanders. An attempt was made by those opposed to the G.A.A. to get him not to run but, like the true man he is, he scorned such meddlesomeness and boldly stuck to his resolution to throw in his lot with the Nationalist athletes of Ireland." Frank won both the high jump and one hundred yards flat event, at that meeting.

The next meeting was held at the Mardyke Grounds, Cork. Amongst those who presented prizes were Dr. Tanner, Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin and the performances included the breaking of a record by J. S. Mitchell of Emly. Pat McGrath competed at this meeting and won the running hop, step and jump event at 44 feet 3 ins. He was second in the running high jump to J. J. Manning (Sixmilebridge) with a 5 ft. 6½ ins. effort, F. B. Dinneen filling the third place. Another Limerick athlete figuring at this meeting was Larry Feore of Kilmallock, who was second to J. J. Manning in both the 440 yards and 880 yards flat events. Highlight of the meeting was the great race between T. J. O'Mahony, "the Roscarbery Steam Engine," and F. B. Dinneen for the 100 yards trophy. The Ballylanders man, conceding two yards to his opponent, made a great race of it but was beaten two inches for the tape in a most exciting finish.

RIVAL FIXTURES.

The first big clash between the G.A.A. and the I.A.A. occurred at Tralee on Wednesday, 17th June, 1885, and resulted in a decisive victory for the popularly governed organisation. The Co. Kerry Athletic and Cricket Club organised the meeting under I.A.A. Rules and supporters of the G.A.A. decided on holding a G.A.A. Sports the same day. The Athletic and Cricket Club fixture was almost completely boycotted whilst the G.A.A. event attracted over ten thousand people to the Rathone Paddock. Very Rev. Fr. McMahon, P.P., Boherbuoy, delivered a stirring speech in favour of the G.A.A., and said that such a splendid concourse of people had not assembled in Tralee since O'Connell's great meeting in 1845. Altogether there were over four hundred entries for the meeting.

FIRST G.A.A. CHAMPIONSHIP MEETING.

The first championship meeting of the G.A.A. was held in Tramore on 6th October, 1885. The winner in each event got a gold medal and a prize value for £3. For the 16 lb. hammer competition the trophy was a splendid silver cup, the gift of Most Rev. Dr. Croke. Limerick men figured prominently at that gathering—both Pat McGrath of Lackendarra and Thomas Ryan of Murroe securing Championship doubles. The full results will be read with interest: Slingsing 56 lbs.—J. S. Mitchell, Emly, first, 29 ft. 4½ ins.; Thomas Ryan, Murroe, second, 29 ft. 4 ins. Long jump—Pat McGrath, Lackendarra, first, 21 ft. 6 ins. 100 yards flat—P. S. Kenny, Carrick-on-Suir, first, Putting 16 lbs.—Thomas Ryan, Murroe, 37 ft. 0½ ins., first; J. S. Mitchell, Emly, 36 ft. 10½ ins., second. 440 yards flat—T. J. O'Mahony, Roscarbery, first. Throwing 14 lbs.—J. S. Mitchell, Emly, 106 ft. 6 ins., first; Thomas Ryan, Murroe, 51 ft. 10½ ins., second; 120 yards hurdles—P. S. Kenny, Carrick-on-Suir, first. Throwing 16 lbs. hammer (Dr. Croke Cup)—J. S. Mitchell, Emly, 10 ft. 6 ins., first; James Slattery, 104 ft. 2 ins., second. One mile flat—J. J. Manning, Sixmilebridge, 5 mins. 8 secs., first; J. Carroll, Aherlow, second. Three miles walk—J. Hennessy, Cork, 23 mins. 38 secs., first; J. Hynes, Dublin, second. Standing hop, step and jump—Dan Fraher, Dungarvan, 31 ft. 8½ ins., first; Thomas Barry, Dungarvan, 30 ft. 6½ ins., second. Running high jump—Pat McGrath (Lackendarra), 5 ft. 4 ins., first. Putting 28 lbs. shot—Thomas Ryan, Murroe, 33 ft. 6½ ins., first; J. S. Mitchell, Emly, 32 ft 11 ins., second.

FIRST ALL-IRELAND G.A.A. CONGRESS.

Pat McGrath was present as a delegate at the first annual All-Ireland Congress of the G.A.A. held at Hayes's Hotel, Thurles, on 31st of October, 1885, just a day short of twelve months after the foundation of the Association, and at the adjourned meeting of same, at Thurles on 27th February, 1886, Mr. Dan H. Ryan, the Founder of Limerick Commercial Football Club, also attended the latter meeting.

At sports meetings during 1886 we find Thomas Ryan, of Murroe, prominent at the North Tipperary G.A.A. meeting on 9th August when he won at putting 28 lbs. with follow, 34ft. 9ins. and three days later, at Portarlington, where he was successful at putting 16 lbs. (38ft. 4ins.) and throwing the hammer.

At Clonmel, on 21st August, we find Pat McGrath second in the 56 lbs. to J. S. Mitchel, who won by half an inch at 26ft. 5ins. at Dunleary, on 12th September. Pat McGrath won two events—the running hop, step and jump (43ft. 10ins.) and the running long jump (21ft. 3½ins.). He had another win in the "Hop, Step," at Bray Sports on 14th September, his distance on this occasion being 45ft. 2½ins.

AT SECOND ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONSHIPS.

Both McGrath and Ryan were again in winning lists at the second G.A.A. Athletic All-Ireland Championship meeting, which was held at Ballsbridge on 11th September, 1886. Another Limerickman, Dan Shanahan, coming into winning lists also here. Mitchel broke two records, in the 56 lbs., which he threw 34 feet 1 inch to beat Dr. J. C. Daly's (of Dromin) previous best of 33 feet 11 inches, and in the hammer, which he sent three inches beyond Maurice Davin's record of 131 feet 6 inches. Dan Shanahan won the long jump (21 feet 7½ inches) and the running hop, step and jump (46 feet 11 inches), whilst Pat McGrath held on to his high jump title with an effort of 5 feet 9½ inches. Thomas Ryan won at pushing 28 lbs. (33 feet 10½ inches) and throwing the 16 lb. weight (51 feet 10½ inches) and was second at putting 16 lbs. weight (38 feet 1½ inches); slingsing 56 lbs., unlimited run and follow (38 feet 11 inches); throwing 16 lbs. hammer, 3 feet 6 inches, handle, unlimited run and follow (124 feet 3 inches) and at throwing 7 lbs. hammer.

UNDER I.A.A. RULES.

Thomas Ryan also competed at the championships held under the I.A.A. Rules in 1886 and 1887 and won at throwing the 16 lbs. hammer (9 feet circle) at both, his figures being—106 feet 7½ inches and 109 feet 6½ inches, respectively.

Pat McGrath, who went to reside in Dublin about this time, did not compete as far as can be ascertained again until 1891, when we find him winning with the 14 lbs. and 15 lbs. at Dungarvan sports. Twelve months later his last win is recorded—the date, 1st August; the venue, Clonmel, where he won the 56 lbs. with follow at 24 feet 2 inches.

It was a pity that McGrath missed the few vital seasons between 1886 and 1891, for he would almost certainly have participated in the great athletic "invasion" of America, which event took place towards the end of 1888, and left a remarkable impress on the American athletic scene.

WELCOME LETTER.

Only a few days ago I had a most welcome letter from that grand Limerick athlete of other days, Jim Fahey, of Galbally, for long years now living in far away Chicago. Jim sends through the "Limerick Leader" Christmas greetings and the kind remembrances of the past to his many old friends in Galbally and throughout Munster. And on my own behalf and speaking, too, for the many great admirers of the men who have figured in this series of Great Limerick Athletes. I tender to all who have brought athletic honour to the name of Shannonside in any sphere, best wishes for the enjoyment of all the joys and blessings of a Happy Christmastide and many more years to enjoy the reflected glory of their great deeds "in days that used to be."

Pat McGrath and all too many of those whose careers I have reviewed here are no more. They slumber peacefully in some quiet Irish churchyard, or far away in distant lands. But wherever they lie, our earnest prayer is that they are there, to renew on the playing fields of heaven, the rivalry that brought such pleasure to so many here below.