

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 92—MICK O'BRIEN of Dromcollogher

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

A GLANCE through the list of All-Ireland championship winners in the 120 yards hurdles reveals the strong place Limerick athletes filled in this event from the early days of the athletic revival.

We find Denis Carey of Kilfinane winner six times against a galaxy of stars; J. J. Bourke of Dromcollogher, who was thrice successful; T. J. Aherne of Athea, and M. J. Corbett, of Borrigone, who claim a brace of victories each and then P. "Bourke" of Grange; J. J. Keane of Anglesboro; P. A. Farrell, of Limerick City, and the subject of our sketch this week, M. W. O'Brien of Dromcollogher, who also have all-Ireland victories "over the sticks" to their name.

Dromcollogher gave two champions to the Irish arena in this event, and chief credit for this must go to the late J. J. Bourke, who not alone gained distinction himself but encouraged the youth of the district to emulate his deeds, and actually raised Mick O'Brien to the pitch when the student was eventually able to beat the master.

WON SOME 200 PRIZES.

O'Brien's introduction to the hurdles came in this way. Bourke was in the habit of training for his favourite event in a field near the town to which O'Brien repaired occasionally to see the champion in action. On one such visit, Bourke, noting his interest, suggested he should buy a pair of "spikes" and try his luck. Mick duly invested 10/6 and a few evenings under Bourke's care set him on the road that brought him much athletic fame and some two hundred prizes, won mainly over the hurdles, with occasional successes also in the 100, 220 and 440 yards flat; the long and high jump; composite and relay races.

I have already dealt with the career of "J. J." in this series, but I cannot allow this opportunity pass without recalling a meeting he had with the recently Canonised St. Pius X. It was in 1908, and the then Pope Pius X was celebrating the Golden Jubilee of his ordination to the priesthood. In September of that year, J. J. Bourke, accompanied by Percy Kirwan, of Kilmacthomas, journeyed to Rome, having been selected to represent Ireland in a Papal Sports meeting which formed part of the celebrations.

RECEIVED IN AUDIENCE BY HOLY FATHER.

The Irish pair, won between them five of the sprint and jumping events at the sports, and were later received in audience by the Holy Father, along with a big number of other people in Rome for the occasion.

When the Sainly Pope passed he offered them his ring to kiss, and as he moved to the next pilgrim one of his attendants whispered in his ear. Immediately, the Pontiff returned to the two Irish athletes, and the crowded audience chamber were amazed to see him grasp each of them by the hand in a warm handshake as a gesture of his approval of their successes.

The grand Pope was a great lover of sport, which he encouraged by all means at his disposal. His words on another memorable occasion will be recalled with pleasure: "I bless all your games and amusements because these pastimes will keep you from idleness, which is the mother of every vice, and they will be a symbol of emulation for you in the practice of virtue."

FIRST TRACK APPEARANCE.

Mick O'Brien's first track appearance was at Abbeyfeale Sports in the early summer of 1910. He cycled the twenty miles from Dromcollogher, took second prize in the hurdles, and cycled home again. On August 7th he won at Tallow Sports, Tim Leahy filling second place. The following day he was at Mitchelstown, and was again successful in the hurdles, J. J. Leahy being second.

Tim Leahy was again second to O'Brien at Kanturk, on September 18th, whilst Joe Leahy filled a like position at Dromcollogher a week later.

It is of interest that Mick opened his career in the good company of J. J. Bourke and Percy Kirwan, whilst the names of other Limerick athletes who gained successes at meetings with him that first season include D. P. Wallace and Dan M. Condon, of Kilfinane, in the cycle events; P. J. Finn (Kilfinane), P. J. McCarthy and E. Neiland in the sprints; Joe Thompson and J. J. Hennessy (Kilfinane) in the distance events; Tim and Joe Leahy in the jumps.

SUCCESSSES IN 1911.

His opening meeting of 1911 was at Listowel on June 29th, where he was second in the 440 yards to Jim Keays. He won the hurdles from Tim Leahy at Rathluirc on July 23rd, but on August 20th, at Kanturk, Tim reversed the position capping a great day by winning the high jump and the hop, step and jump. At Newcastle West "M. W." won the hurdles event from Leahy, and at Mallow shortly afterwards Mick O'Brien and his brother, "R. F." had a great race in the hurdles, the latter winning nicely. Other successes this season included a first in the 120 yards hurdles and a second in the pole

jump at Rathkeale; a similar return at Skibbereen; a first in the hurdles at both Cogh and Dunmanway, a three-legged race win, with Tom Leahy as partner, at Dunmanway, and another hurdles first prize at Mitchelstown.

AT ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONSHIP MEETING.

His big appearance during 1912 was at the All-Ireland championship meeting at Fermoy on July 14th, where he was second to D. McCarthy in the hurdles. Other Limerick successes at that meeting were:—Jim Keays, first in 100 and 220 yards; Michael O'Brien of Bulgaden, a win in the 28 lbs. and second in the 56 lbs, no follow; a win by D. M. O'Connell in the long jump; another by Tim Leahy in the "high"; a second by Con Kiely in the three jumps, a like placing of M. Heelan in the 28 lbs. and a tie by Mick Leahy with J. J. Holloway for second place in the high jump.

At Skibbereen Mick O'Brien had a win in the "220," and at Dromcollogher Feis on May 26th he took his usual honours in the hurdles. At Rathkeale he won an unusual event—a composite walk, run and cycle a lap, whilst at the same meeting his hurdles win was achieved in the best of company—the four Leahys, D. M. O'Connell, D. McCarthy, D. O'Leary. At Foynes he had a triple success, winning the hurdles and the 440 yards, and also being a member of the Dromcollogher hurling club team that won the relay, the other of the team being John and Gerald Fitzgibbon, and his brother, R. F. O'Brien. His success, towards the end of the season, in the hurdles at Listowel was the first of three successive wins at the annual sports there.

HIGHLIGHT OF 1913.

The highlight of 1913 was the inter-county contest at Killarney, in which Cork defeated Limerick 36 points to 31, with Kerry a poor third with a mere 11. Special trains ran from Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Tralee and Canerciveen and the attendance at the meeting was one of the largest on record.

The "Cork Examiner," reporting on the meeting the following day, said: "From every point of view the meeting proved a great success. It cannot be denied that for the past few years a decline has been noticeable in this important department of the national pastimes, but it can be safely asserted as the result of yesterday's proceedings that a new spirit has been introduced into the movement, and that within a very brief space of time athletic and cycling fixtures will be restored to their former proud position. Ireland—and particularly Munster—can boast of possessing athletes and cyclists capable of performing with the best to be found anywhere, and this fact has been established again as the result of this most successful gathering."

TIME PERFORMANCES.

In the slinging of the 28 lbs., J. O'Grady, of Limerick, won with the fine distance of 35 ft. 5in. which established a new Gaelic record, as it upset Real's previous best of 35 ft. 1 in. Another Limerick competitor, M. O'Brien, was second. The high jump went to T. J. Leahy, of Limerick, with 6 ft. 0 1/2 ins. Two heats were allotted to the 120 yards hurdle event, and both produced a good finish. The first heat was captured by P. "Bourke," Limerick, with D. McCarthy, Cork, a good second, while M. Aherne, Cork, defeated M. W. O'Brien, Limerick, by inches in the second heat. In the final Limerick gained the laurels, "Bourke" securing first and O'Brien second place, with Aherne third. The well known handicapper, D. M. Power, of Ballywalter, often said afterwards that it was the best race over the hurdles he had seen for years. The time was 17 seconds.

In slinging the 56 lbs. over the bar Mick O'Brien of Bulgaden won with a distance of 13ft. 4ins. In the long jump J. K. Beazley of Cork won at 21ft. 2ins. In the long jump J. K. Beazley of Cork won at 21ft. 2ins. P. "Bourke" and D. M. O'Connell dead heating for second place at 21 feet.

EXCITING FINISH.

A very exciting finish was witnessed in the mile flat. Entering upon the last lap, J. J. O'Mahony, Kerry, showed the way to D. Riordan, Cork; J. J. Hennessy, Kilfinane, and P. Leahy, Cork. One hundred yards from the finish Riordan went to the front, and seemed likely to be first man home, but he was hotly pursued by Hennessy and entering the straight the pair came on level terms. An exciting struggle for supremacy ensued and amidst much cheering Hennessy won by half a yard.

It is interesting to note that the P. "Bourke" who ran such a great hurdles race for Limerick that memorable day is the present Bishop of the Diocese, his Lordship, Most Rev. P. O'Neill, D.D.

The Great War of 1914-1918 restricted the holding of sports meetings materially, the curtailment of rail services being a big blow. Newspaper reports also were scanty and few records remain of the meetings that "carried on." We know, however, that Mick O'Brien had a familiar success in the hurdles at Askeaton, where he also helped in winning

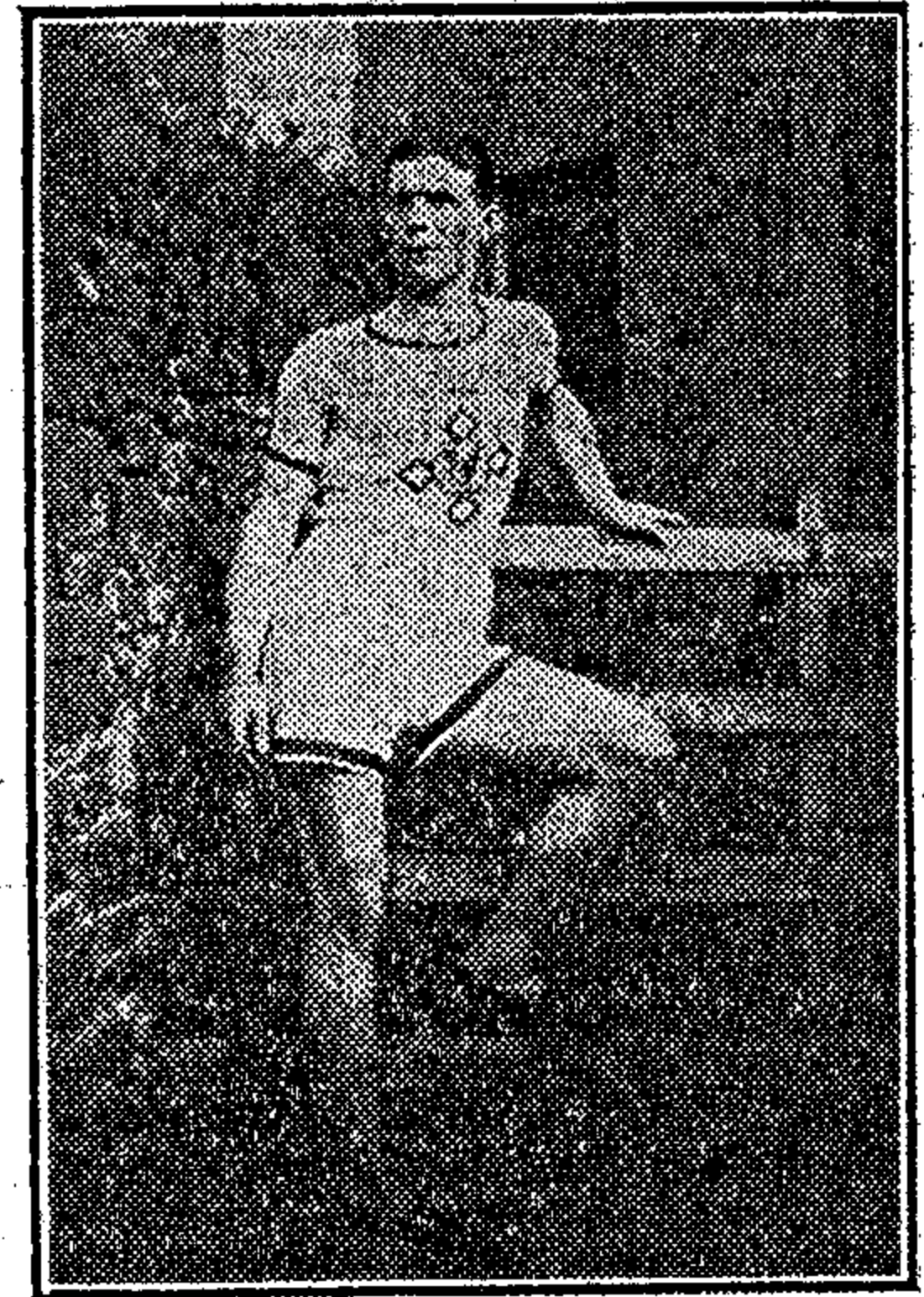
the relay for the Dromcollogher Hurling Club. At a half-holiday sports in Limerick he won the hurdles and the long jump, and at Castleconnell he was again on top in the hurdles, and filled second place in the hurling long puck. Four "firsts" and a second were his "bag" at Tulla—winning the 220, 440, hurdles and long jump and taking second in the "hundred." At Tralee on September 3rd, 1916, he won a great hurdles race, beating J. J. Canniffe of Bandon in the final in the excellent time of 17 secs. on a holding sod.

CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT.

The crowning achievement of his career came on August 12th, 1917, when at the All-Ireland championship meeting held at the Markets Field, Limerick, he won the Irish title in the 120 yards hurdles, heading D. Buckley, of Cork, by three yards to breast the tape in 17 2-5th seconds.

He made another bid for the title the following season, again at the Markets Field, but this occasion found William Britton in fine fettle—the latter capturing the hurdles and long jump titles and tying with Buckley in the high jump.

Mick always was, and still is, a great supporter of any sports gathering in his native district and a story is told of an occasion when he supplied all the prizes in connection with an Aeridheacht and sports in Dromcollogher. After the meeting Mick repaired with Tim Leahy to a local tavern for a drink. They met two burly farmers in the kitchen off the bar also taking a drink, and one of them appeared to be jealous of O'Brien. Anyway, he remarked that it was



MICK O'BRIEN, DROMCOLLOGHER.

a "mug's game" running and jumping and it was only fools that indulged in it. Leahy said that it was at least providing amusement for the public, but as the discussion continued the Cregane man gave the impression of siding with the farmer, who got more and more sarcastic as the talk developed. However, when Leahy and O'Brien were in the act of leaving, Tim stood up, clapped the farmer on the shoulder and said: "You're right, sir, it is a mug's game. But tell me, sir, what would you give if you had a son that could jump as high as me?" The farmer hadn't and it was a sore point with him, so that ended the matter and on a note that hardly pleased him.

OTHER ACTIVITIES.

In addition to his many successes on the athletic field, and it is said that he never returned from a meeting without a prize, Mick O'Brien was also a prominent member of the Dromcollogher hurling and football teams, and captained them for many seasons.

Hard work on the farm kept him always fairly fit, and in winter time he supplemented this by much exercise with dog and gun. In summer, when time allowed he was keen on a spell with the fishing rod.

His most exciting finish in a hurdles race was in Fermoy at the 1912 All-Ireland Championships meeting, when the finish was so close that it took the judges a considerable time to decide the winner. Eventually the verdict went to Dan McCarthy, Mick being placed second.

Mick feels that the athletes of his day were great men, and he holds that if they got the training of the modern exponents there would be made records set that would still be unbeaten.

An early start he regards as an essential for any lad hoping to excel in the arena. The young athlete, he insists, should start during his school days, and every facility should be given him, more especially in providing running shoes for those not very well able to provide them. He also holds that the governing body would do more for athletics by allocating running shoes on loan to hurling and football Clubs for a specified period, than by sending athletes to compete at far away Olympic and other gatherings.

No. 93—Paddy O'Connell of Mount Pleasant.