

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 85—PATRICK O'DONNELL of Bulgaden

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THE great worth of Patrick O'Donnell as a cyclist can best be appreciated by the fact that when he retired from the track at the early age of twenty-two, he had already won the amazing total of over ninety prizes, a remarkable collection for a lad so young, particularly when one considers the wonderful galaxy of star cyclists that were to be found at every meeting of his day, and the huge "fields" that lined out in every event.

Born at Bulgaden, near Kilmallock in October, 1885, Patrick was the youngest of a family of twelve. His father, Thomas O'Donnell of Bulgaden, was one time Chairman of the Kilmallock Board of Guardians. He participated in the Fenian Rising and was imprisoned in Naas Jail for his Land League activities, where he shared a cell with John Dillon, M.P.

The years of Patrick's boyhood and youth coincided with the early days of the G.A.A. and the growth of that organisation in popular favour and esteem made a deep impression on the growing youth.

THE GOLDEN YEARS.

The last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth were undoubtedly the golden years of Irish athletics, and Limerick, more than any other county, contributed to many deeds of glory in far scattered arenas in the old and new worlds.

The Kilmallock district in those days produced many men whose fame travelled to every corner of the globe. The names of J. J. Flanagan, Dr. J. C. Daly, O. D. Coll J. J. Bresnihan, Mick Creede, Paddy Ryan Dan Shanahan, and the Leahys of Cregane, to mention but a handful, were household words wherever the cult of athletics was practised.

Sports meetings in those times were, of course, much more numerous than now and every parish, practically, had its annual sports gathering, whilst many held a few meetings in the season. In the district of Patrick's nativity many excellent meetings were organised and there is no doubt but that the splendid performances of the many great athletes of this wonder era made a profound imprint on the mind of the youthful Patrick O'Donnell, and surely enkindled in him the desire to take part in the fray.

Cycling was the branch of athletics which appealed to him most of all, and it was consequently no surprise when he made his debut on an ordinary push bike in a novice race at Kilfinane in 1903, and gave a very good account of himself, being placed second.

Patrick then purchased a racing bicycle, and entered the arena proper, to try conclusions with a galaxy of great men, many of whom had already made a name for themselves, notably J. J. Condon, of nearby Lough Gur, the outstanding cyclist of his day, and Munster champion; Ned Caulfield, of Hospital, who was also a great man; the Halvey brothers; the Hurleys, of Charleville; the Thompsons, of Mallow, and a host of well known performers from Cork and neighbouring counties. Cycling at that time, in common with the other branches of athletics, was at its best, and it was not unusual to have forty or fifty cyclists competing at a meeting. To win a prize in such circumstances was a noteworthy achievement.

FIRST RECORDED WIN.

That was the arena into which Patrick O'Donnell entered in 1903, and his first recorded win, at Bruff, on June 28th, 1903, was notable for the fact that it was scored over the great Jim Condon, the distance being two miles. It was immediately obvious that he was a top grade man in Munster cycling, and this he proved at many important sports gatherings throughout Limerick and Cork during the four glorious years from 1903 to 1906.

It would be impossible to chronicle the big list of successes achieved at such venues as Kilmallock, Bruff, Bruree, Kilfinane, Elton, Hospital, Galbally, Adare, Pallaskenry, Cobh, Blarney, Nadd, Mallow, Charleville, Buttevant, Tipperary and Tallow, but it must be mentioned that his best performance was at Bruff Sports on September 3rd, 1905, when he won the one, three and five mile cycle races, and his most exciting finish was at Kilmallock Sports on August 19th, 1906, when he won the three mile scratch event from a big field of riders.

A poem published in the local Press about this period and praising the prize winners at a sports meeting in Hospital, had this to say concerning him:

"A meed of praises well deserved to hardy young O'Donnell, A dashing, brawny young athlete and a scion of Tirconnell."

The only regret we can have concerning his career is in connection with his retiral, which took place at an all too early age, a period actually when he was reaching his zenith. Had he continued there is not much doubt but he would have won many championships and become in time the natural successor of Jim Condon.

VERY POPULAR ATHLETE.

He was a very popular athlete and was on intimate terms with all the great figures of his day. This was only what one could expect for he was a most lovable character who spoke well of everybody, except himself. A modest type of man he was not inclined to give much credit to his own splendid career.

Of stocky build and with all the attributes of an ideal cyclist, his work on the farm kept him in the peak of physical fitness. His principal method of training was in a field beside his house where he used to repair after his day's work. With one of his brothers assisting he would concede ample odds and then try and catch him at the post.

Patrick O'Donnell was simple, modest and unassuming, a pleasant conversationalist who loved to talk of the good old days. A great admirer of Jim Condon, he always held that the Lough Gur man was not alone the greatest cyclist, but the greatest athlete of all times and that with proper training and handling he would beat the world's best. And Patrick's best memory of the cycling arena concerned a great sports at Hospital on September 7th, 1904, when Condon made a clean sweep, winning the one, two, three and five mile cycle events. The Bulgaden man was happiest when in company with his old colleagues, when many a feat on the athletic arena would be lived again.

All through his life he was keenly interested in every form of sport and had many interesting tales of his days in the athletic arena. He knew all the great men of his day and was a friend of the world's champion, the late John Flanagan. He met Tom Longboat, and witnessed his great run from Limerick to Kilmallock.

TRANSPORT DIFFICULTIES.

Like many of the athletes of his time, he encountered many difficulties in reaching some of the meetings at which he competed. There was a sports at Pallaskenry on August 15th, 1906, for which he was promised a lift from Kilmallock. Work on the farm delayed him and he missed the car. Dejectedly he set out for home, and on the way he met a friend who enquired why he was not at Pallaskenry. Patrick explained how he had missed a lift and the friend suggested that there was still time to cycle to the venue. Patrick took the tip, mounted his bicycle and headed for Pallaskenry with just one hour to make the meeting. His friend on reading the paper the following morning saw that he had won the three miles cycle and was second in the one mile event.

On another occasion he missed the train at Kilmallock that was to take him to a sports at Mallow. He immediately proceeded to cycle there. There was a very strong wind blowing against him, but he reached the meeting in time for the first cycle event. He developed palpitation of the heart during one of the races and had to retire. He was attended by a doctor, recovered quickly, and went out and won the five mile race.

An object of interest around Kilmallock at that time was a bicycle made for four which was originally owned by Jim Condon and which he presented to his good friend and companion on many a journey to a sports gathering, Patrick O'Donnell. This was a very welcome gift as Patrick was one of seven brothers, but he often said afterwards that it was a very difficult machine to manoeuvre.

All his old friends with whom I have spoken maintain that Paddy O'Donnell was one of the best cyclists of his day, and in the opinion of many he would have won numerous championship trophies had he continued his career. Though he retired from the active arena at an early age, he took a keen interest all his life in athletics, especially cycling. He was always ready to help in the promotion of sports meetings and took an active part in organising Dromin sports for many years, and

always acted as a judge in the track events.

ADVICE TO THE YOUNG.

He was ever ready to offer advice and encouragement to young cyclists in whom he was most interested. The memory of the good old days saddened him when he attended sports meetings of more recent years. He said that modern athletics lacked the glamour and dash of his day, and he deplored the low standard of cycling and the scarcity of good cyclists, especially in Co. Limerick. He felt it deeply to see only a mere four or five cyclists competing at a meeting, a big contrast from his own days, when forty or fifty wheelmen often faced the starter, and it was nothing strange to have heats, even in the three and five mile events.

Although always a keen follower and supporter of Gaelic games, he attributes the decline in athletics to the growth in popularity of hurling and football. The first step at a revival he held would be, of course, the unification of Irish athletics, and then a more generous support by the G.A.A. He held that athletics should flourish side by side with Gaelic games, because each would help the other as they did in the early days.

Patrick O'Donnell made friends easily, and for Jim Condon he had the greatest affection, although he was his chief opponent at the many big meetings to which they travelled together. Another well known cyclist with whom he was very friendly was Ned Halvey, whilst he was also a close friend of Denny Power, the handicapper.

As, already mentioned, he was a very modest and unassuming man, who always praised his opponents, whilst it was with the greatest reluctance he spoke of his own achievements.

FOLLOWING IN FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS.

At his home in Dromin many of his trophies may still be seen including some valuable cups. And it is a matter of no little importance that his youngest son, is recently taking a very keen interest in cycling and has put in some worth while training at the sport in which his father excelled. And it is the earnest hope of the many admirers of the great Paddy of other days that another of the name will add to the fame that came in such abundance in the halcyon athletic days, that many recall with such happy and nostalgic memories.

The great Bulgaden cyclist was a very devout and God fearing man, deeply religious. Of kindly disposition it was easy for him to be a good neighbour always ready and willing to help anyone in trouble. He always enjoyed good health and his unexpected death on December 5th, 1949, caused profound sympathy. His last illness was borne with patience and fortitude and his cheerful smile and kindly words were present to the end. May God be good to him he truly deserved it!

No. 86—Pat Mulcahy, of Cappamore.