

GREAT LIMERICK SPORTSMEN

No. 191—JAMES O'KELLY of Rathkeale

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

IT may safely be said that no district in Limerick County can boast of as long a standing in the realms of the G.A.A. as that little town nestling on the banks of the rippling Deel, known as Rathkeale.

Long before the great revival by the famed Archbishop Croke and Michael Cusack, the old form of "goaling" as it was then termed, was carried on all over the town and neighbouring districts.

The ball used in those far off days was an ordinary twine heart, covered with sheepskin, and the form of caman used was an ordinary branch of ash, hazel or whitethorn, something similar to a hockey stick and called by old Gaels a "Graffaun," so named probably from its resemblance to a graffaun, which was a bent or hooked iron for the grubbing of furze, brushwood, etc., then largely used by the peasantry for the reclaiming of their lands.

The back streets and bye ways of the town in those good old days were the practise grounds—a custom that still lingers in many places where one may still see the lads having a "puck" on what are historic "pitches," to, as it were, perpetuate a pastime that spoke of the national and athletic soul of the country, whose traditions must be upheld as long as a remnant of Irish nationhood remains.

RATHKEALE'S RESPONSE TO G.A.A. CALL.

Rathkeale quickly responded to the call of the newly-formed G.A.A., and 1885 was indeed young when the first club from the town affiliated to the great national Association. James O'Kelly had the honour of being elected first Captain of the Rathkeale team, and Bill Sheehan filled the role of Vice-Captain. I think they are the only survivors of that great combination, which included Bill Donoghue, Con and Tom O'Donoghue, Tom Condon, Tom Quinn, Jerry Sheehan, Dick Keating, Mike Harrington, John Donoghue, Bill Heffernan, their goalie, Denny Hayes, John McKnight, John Frawley, Denis Kelly, Jimmy Markham, Paddy Fitzgerald, Tom Glenny, Jack Keating, Mick Guirey, Bill Goodwin, Tommy Markham, Jim Hanrahan and Johnny Connors.

President of the Club was Jim Blackwell, with Harry Blackwell as Secretary. Committee members were Willie Ward, Jack Ambrose and J. M. O'Grady. A parish collection to purchase a set of jerseys realised £6 10s., a princely sum then.

GOT HURLING URGE AT EARLY AGE.

James O'Kelly got the hurling urge whilst still very young and one of his longest memories is of having walked to Croom to see a famous match between South Liberties and Kilfinane—a thriller which finished with honours even and which so roused the Rathkeale enthusiast that he walked to see the re-play also, another stirring encounter which the "Liberties" won narrowly.

The glamour of those two great days at Croom made a hurling pioneer of the sixteen years old enthusiast, and he quickly formed a team of twenty-one in the Boherbee district where he was born and spent his early years.

Mike Goodwin organised the rest of the town, and the pair played an inconclusive match before the move was made which resulted in the formation of the club already mentioned.

TWO DECIDERS PLAYED ON ONE DAY.

Tournaments were then the fashion everywhere—the championships had yet to be established, and the boys of the newly formed Rathkeale Club entered for one organised by the Askeaton Club and worked their way to the final of it. Two deciders were played the same day. In the senior, for which the trophy was a set of beautiful gold medals, South Liberties proved victorious, whilst in the junior, Rathkeale annexed the Silver Cup at the expense of the local lads. Askeaton, in existence before Rathkeale, were firm favourites and their defeat was a big surprise. It was said afterwards that the homesters threw their hurleys into the river, so disgusted were they at being beaten by Rathkeale's young twenty-one.

The second silver cup that came to Rathkeale was won at Newcastle West, where Croom were defeated—the lads from the Maigue being led by the great Gael, the late Denis Spencer Lyons of Croom Castle.

Shortly afterwards Rathkeale won the Ardagh tournament, their

opponents in a great final being Monagea, led by the late Willie Hough, father of Limerick's All-Ireland captain of 1918.

HOME AND HOME MATCHES.

Home and home matches became very popular and it was not long until Rathkeale were visitors to Bruff, Caherline, Balingarry and Kilfinane, and had these teams back to play them by Deelside. The strength of Rathkeale can be judged from the fact that they won most of these games.

The year that Kilfinane won the All-Ireland (1897) Rathkeale played them at Ballyagran in the county semi-final, and were only beaten by what was then known as a forfeit point.

Many will recall how the old Rathkeale team were known as the "Abrahams." The club took this name in recognition of the work of William Abraham, who then represented West Limerick in the British House of Commons.

RIVAL BOARDS.

Rathkeale always remained true to the ideals of the Association as propounded by the original founders and when the split occurred in Limerick and Rev. Father Sheehy formed a rival Board the West Limerick town was one of the foremost in declaring its allegiance to the Board led by that great fighter and Irishman—the late Paddy O'Brien ("Twenty"). The O'Brien Board eventually triumphed but not before a lot of damage had been caused to the Organisation in the county through the disunity, which upset championship schedules and proved generally harmful.

On the occasion of his marriage, James O'Kelly moved to Balingarry, where he made his new home. Bill Sheehan took over control of the Rathkeale team, which was to make further history, with Mick Madigan, Ned Kennedy, Gerald Scully, Pat and Eddie Flaherty the main planks of what proved a fine combination.

In Balingarry the former Rathkeale captain took an active part in the management of the club but did not play. He was with the Balingarry lads through a great spell in the history of hurling in the "Garden Town," his help and advice being very valued by the team mentors.

KEEN STUDENT OF THE GAME.

A keen student of the game all down the years, he saw all the great changes made in the playing rules. Goals were the only scores allowed under the first regulations, but shortly afterwards a ball going over the crossbar was recognised as a point. In addition, what was known as a forfeit point was allowed under circumstances in which at present a fifty yards free in football or a seventy yards free in hurling would be given. If instead of crossing the end line the ball went over the bar, three forfeit points would be allowed against the defending side. Forfeit points were abolished in 1888. Side point posts were provided in 1886, and continued in use for a number of years. At an earlier period five "overs" counted a point. Until 1892 a goal had no equivalent in points with the result that a team might score any number of points and still be defeated by their opponents who had only a goal to their credit. In 1892 five points, and in 1896 the present amount of three points were declared equal to a goal. The number of players to the year 1892 was twenty-one as to 1913 seventeen, and since the latter year the present number of fifteen.

GREAT RESPECT FOR THE OLD TIMERS.

This great veteran of a glorious hurling era has wonderful respect for the old timers and is firmly convinced that the players of today are not a patch on the fine strapping men of the early G.A.A.