

Great Limerick Athletes

18/9/54

No. 97-PADDY SCANLAN of Castleconnell

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

ALMOST twenty years ago, August 11th, 1935 — and it looks only yesterday—since that great Munster hurling final at Cork Athletic Grounds between Limerick and Tipperary that, to my mind, gave us one of the grandest goalkeeping displays witnessed on the hurling field.

Paddy Scanlan was the hero of that epic occasion, and I can still see him standing in the Blackrock goal that hectic first half hour, when Tipperary, the strong breeze to their backs, and he clearing shots of every description with uncanny skill and masterful precision.

Short two great players that day—Paddy Clohessy and Jacky O'Connell—the challenge of Tipperary was a mighty one, and I well remember the early onslaughts, powered by such great hurlers as Jimmy Cooney and Phil Purcell, and the dramatic saves of the wonderful Limerick culbair.

But we were only opening up, and as the unforgettable struggle developed other thrills were in store. A long raking shot by another of the Tipperary glory line — Willie O'Donnell, reached that doyen of hurling full forwards, the one and only Martin Kennedy, who got the sliotar in that fist of his—an action that usually sent the umpire bending for the green flag. Martin shot straight and true — Scanlan blocked and cleared with the rhythm of the master. Then Mick Cronin was back again the next instant with a low bullet drive from the "twenty-one" that the green-jerseyed athlete lashed on to drive sixty yards clear. It was beautiful!

ASSAULT AFTER ASSAULT.

Tipperary were storming the Limerick lines. Like tigers unleashed, they launched assault after assault, the determination of which could scarcely have been equalled by the Williamite soldiers, that in days gone by, attacked the ancient walls of Garryowen.

Derry Gorman, John Maher, Lanigan, Wall, Gilmartin — all manned the battering ram that pounded the Limerick defences, but the human barrier of great backs and gallant net minder made light of the most dangerous assaults, and on the few occasions that the last line fell back in temporary distress, Scanlan in the berna baoghail, proved like the Irish troops of Fontenoy — the saviour of his side.

I could go on and on telling of the drama of that memorable occasion, but to the hero of it all, it was just another day in his years of service to club, county and province on the hurling fields of Ireland.

OPENING OF HIS HURLING CAREER.

Paddy Scanlan opened his account with Limerick hurling lovers in the early 'twenties, when as a member of a fine Limerick C.B.S. team he figured in some thrilling games for the Harty, Hallinan and O'Mara Cups. Later, as a member of the famous Young Ireland Club, then in its heyday, he played in some of the ever memorable tussles with Cloughaun that were the highlight of Limerick hurling at the time. His last appearance in the popular blue and gold jersey was at Nenagh on Easter Sunday, 8th April, 1928, when Young Ireland beat Toomevara, 3-2 to 3-0, in the final of a great local tournament. That occasion gave us the first real glimpse of the coming star, and the newspapers commenting on his displays, described him as "cool as a cucumber, stonewalling the hot ones, pulling on flying balls and intercepting the others with charmed ease. He was cheered often and loud as he got his hurley to balls that were all but over the line."

Playing previous to this as often outfield as "between the sticks," his display against the famous "greyhounds," spearheaded by no less a score-getter than the mighty Martin Kennedy himself, settled for once and all any doubts concerning his best position on the field. He was a superlative goalkeeper!

SCORED GOAL FROM A PUCK OUT.

Hurling was at a low ebb in his native Castleconnell during his early hurling days, and when Paddy and a few other lads from the district were itching for a game they often had to cross the county boundary to nearby Newport, where a good team flourished at the time. The greatness of

Scanlan was quickly recognised in the Premier County and the Newport colours were his all through a great North Tipperary championship, which Newport won from the best of opposition. That was in 1926, and when the north later lined out against mid-Tipperary, Paddy chalked up the remarkable feat of scoring a goal from his puck-out—a wonderful drive, with few counterparts in modern hurling.

The Ahane Club was formed at a meeting held on November 22nd, 1926, and Paddy Scanlan was appointed a member of the Organising Committee. It is interesting to note that the Secretary appointed on that occasion was our present Co. Board Chairman, Mr. P. O'Reilly. On December 12th, Ahane played their first game — against Newport—and were only beaten by a point.

THE NEW AHANE.

The new Ahane created more than a surprise by entering both senior and junior teams for the 1927 Limerick championships. This step, was, however, a wise one, as it kept the players of senior status resident in the parish for the club. Ahane found no easy road to the top, and it was 1930 before they really hit the headlines. Invited to play Erin's Own (Waterford) at the opening of the Clonmel Sportsfield, they followed with great championship victories over Treaty and Cloughaun, and narrowly lost divisional honours in a thrill packed decider with Young Irelands. That was in the senior grade, but meanwhile they were hitting a successful trail in intermediate ranks, and Paddy got his first County Championship medal when they won the title.

Senior renown came the following year and Paddy Scanlan was captain of that Ahane team that won the first of fifteen county crowns in a spell of eighteen years — a remarkable achievement that may never be equalled. The other Ahane men that October day away back in 1931 were: Denis O'Malley, M. McDonagh, P. Hilliard, John Mackey, Mick Mackey, Anthony Mackey, Timmy Ryan, J. Ryan, M. Ryan, E. O'Brien, M. Hickey, M. Quinlan, E. McDonagh, P. Joyce.

Paddy won two further senior championships with Ahane before a business appointment took him to Galway, where he was to help Liam Mellows win the 1935 senior crown by the Corrib.

LIMERICK TEAM COMING INTO THE LIMELIGHT.

Meantime, Limerick county team were coming into the limelight and Paddy Scanlan was culbair of the team that beat Tipperary (5-5 to 4-1) and Clare (2-6 to 2-4) to win 1932 Thomond Feis honours. Limerick beat Tipperary (1930 All-Ireland champions) 4-2 to 1-5, in the opening round of that year's Munster championship, but were beaten by the holders, Cork, in the semi-final, 5-4 to 3-5. Clare later won the southern title and were narrowly beaten by Kilkenny in the Blue Riband decider. In the National League, Limerick beat Clare, 4-2 to 2-2, and worked their way to the final of that competition, where they were beaten by Kilkenny, 3-8 to 1-3. The press report of that game said: "But for P. Scanlan, who gave a splendid display in the Limerick goal, the Kilkenny victory would have been more pronounced."

On the home front, Young Ireland had won back the County crown, which Ahane regained in 1933 and held unbroken to 1939. 1933 Thomond Feis honours were again secured by Limerick and in the opening round of the Munster championship the holders, Clare, were overwhelmed, 6-8 to 1-1. That match, played at Thurles, was memorable because of the fact that a specially chartered train conveyed two players—C. O'Brien (Limerick) and Jim Houlihan (Clare)—from the Metropolis after they had played in the Dublin semi-final. The Munster semi-final saw Cork beaten, 2-0 to 1-6, and Waterford went down, 3-7 to 1-2, in the final. Limerick went down in the All-Ireland final, 1-7 to 0-6, before a great Kilkenny team, but it was evident their day was coming fast, and this was proved in the years that followed.

GREAT EVENTS.

Space does not permit a recital of the great events that brought All-Ireland honours for 1934, 1936, and 1940, to Shannonside; Munster laurels in 1933, 1934, 1935, League renown, five years in a 1936 and 1940; National Hurling

row — an achievement no other county has ever accomplished; Thomond Feis and other tournament successes in ample measure. Paddy shared in all those great triumphs, his only disappointment being the occasion he had to lie ill in bed as Limerick battled against Dublin in the re-play of the Jubilee year All-Ireland senior hurling final. Picture his feelings that day as he listened to all the Croke Park excitement and thought of the part he should be playing there. But fate had it otherwise!

Paddy played for Munster in the Railway Cup finals of 1934, 1935, 1936, 1937, 1938, 1940 and 1941, and won five inter-provincial medals during that period. He travelled with the Limerick team to London on four occasions, and in 1936 was a member of the Shannonside team that played exhibition games in New York and Boston.

THE GREATEST OF THEM ALL.

Of all the many games in which he played, Paddy regards the 1940 Munster final against Cork, at Thurles, as the greatest of them all. He met all the star players of his day, and names Martin Kennedy (Tipperary), "Gah" Aherne (Cork) and Matty Power (Kilkenny) as the super scoring men of his era. He had a great regard for the men with and against whom he played, and is of opinion that the present day players are not altogether as good as in his playing days.

Also very successful as a referee, it may not be generally known that Paddy was a tip top golfer, and beat Larry McCarthy in Galway. His handicap was 11.

PRESS APPRECIATION.

A nephew of the late Patrick McCoy, a famous footballer and captain of the Glin team for a lengthy spell, I quote a Press appreciation that appeared following one of his great Munster games during the Limerick days of glory: "The senior game was fast and furious, but I returned home with an impression that Paddy Scanlan is the finest goalie I have ever seen. Drives from left or right, high or low, were all easily dealt with, and proved fruitless against a player that prefers brains to brawn. Positioning himself close to the left of his goal he compelled the Cork attackers to shoot at his right side, and by doing so he skilfully covered the fact that he is a right-handed hurler. Then, again, when high lobs came his way he stepped forward from the goal-line before making his leap at the ball. That step forward of Paddy Scanlan's allowed him a little margin of safety in case of a charge that would stagger him or knocked him back into the goal. Paddy Scanlan gave a lesson in goal-keeping that was worth its weight in gold, and I hope our juvenile defenders were watching him very closely."

TESTIMONY OF A GREAT REFEREE.

And now for the testimony of a man who refereed more top class games than any other living Gael — Willie Walsh, of Waterford. Here is what Willie has written: "I was recently one of a party discussing that vexed question of goalkeepers—past and present. Some of my friends, like myself, could recall the great days of Tubberadora, Blackrock, Kilfinane, Tulla, Mooncom, Tullaroan, Faughs and Castlebridge. To the younger section of our group, Ned Maher, Bill Parfray, Andy Fitzgerald, J. Reidy, Paddy O'Neill, Fox Meagher and Jack Power were but names. Most of them, however, saw such stalwarts as the O'Meara brothers, of Toomevara; "Hawk" O'Brien, Mick Murphy, Jim O'Connell, Tommie Daly, Jim Ware, and many others in action. As to who was the greatest goalkeeper of all a deadlock was reached, as naturally, my friends, being from different counties, voted one of their men best. I was discreet on this occasion, but made a promise that some time, after due consideration, I would give my opinion—so goes. Away back between 1900 and 1908 Waterford had a marvellous goalkeeper in the person of Jim O'Connell, of Clonea. Hugh Shelly, Joe McLoughney, and many of the old Thurles Blues encountered his prowess time and time again. And the late Tom Semple rated him as one of the best goalkeepers of his era. I hate to put my opinion in print on such a contentious matter, all these mentioned being such wonderful men, but, to fulfil a promise, I believe that Tommie O'Meara's display in the Munster final of 1930, when Tipperary defeated Clare, was the soundest in any given game, but for consistency over a prolonged period, I give my number one to Paddy Scanlan, who, on many an occasion saved Limerick from what looked like certain defeat."