

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 11)—DAN AHEARNE of Athea

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

WE have already travelled a share of the American Continent in the wake of our great Limerick athletes. And now we must visit New York, Boston, Baltimore, New Orleans, Pittsburg, Chicago, San Francisco and various other places there, in an effort to portray some of the greatness of another Shannonside star, Dan Ahearne, of Athea.

We know the success of the American athlete owes much to the result of the influence of Gaelic sports in the United States. Prior to the Irish "Invasion" of 1888, the land of the stars and stripes had none but sprint records. Now she practically holds them all, having won her laurels through the example and by the aid of Irishmen.

As amateur athletic records extend almost the full century, it would be foolish to think that the "Invasion" was the first impression of the Irish athlete on American civilisation. The boys that fought for American freedom in the grim game of the revolutionary war learned the swift, sure stroke of victory on the hurling fields of Ireland.

A SAD AFFAIR FOR IRELAND.

The "Invasion" was a sad affair for Ireland, for it robbed her of some of her reddest blood and her best bone. The Irish athletes were the flower of Ireland's manhood—her champions and record holders and two teams of crack hurlers.

The "New York Herald" of 25th September, 1888, had this to say of the "Invaders":—"It would prove a difficult task to bring together at short notice a more splendid assemblage of specimens of manhood than the half hundred clear-complexioned and clean-limbed, stalwart, bright-eyed, muscular, strapping and fine-looking young fellows who were grouped on the deck of the steamship 'Wisconsin' at noon yesterday. The crowd would have inspired an artist in quest of a model for a 'picture of health.' They were the representatives of Ireland's muscular Christianity culled from every county of the Emerald Isle—literally the flower of Erin's manhood. Their attire was as characteristic as their appearance. Their 'reefers,' cutaways, Ulster and Inverness capes were of the soft, warm, national frieze. Most of them wore knee-breeches."

CHAMPIONS ALL.

Names that stir the blood were on the lips of the Irish exiles when the green-clad athletes took the field. Champions all, they were ready to uphold the old tradition of battling to the last hurdle until success was assured. The mighty powers of these men from the homeland gave them victory in a field of crack competition.

T. J. O'Mahony, the Roscarbery "Steam Engine," proved his worth in the 440 yards; Pat Davin triumphed in the hurdles; J. S. Mitchell of Emly was successful in the hammer event, and Dr. J. C. Daly of Dromin had a throw of 26 feet 10 ins. with the 56 lbs. weight to beat the existing record by over three inches.

At Philadelphia the resurgent Gael was again seen in action, when Mitchell put up new records for the 16 lb. hammer and the 56 lbs. weight. Pat Davin invited competition for an all-round contest, which met with no response. At thirty, he could still inspire fear on the athletic field.

FOUNDATION OF G.A.A. IN THE UNITED STATES.

The courage and daring enterprise of the athletic movement to sponsor this "invasion" so soon in its history, was richly rewarded when the foundation of the G.A.A. in the United States was laid. Tommy Conneff was a graduate from the Association and one of the best runners the world ever produced. Mickey Kennedy, of Cashel, won the cross-country championship of America in 1891; John Flanagan of Kilmallock fame as a weight-thrower, had travelled to lands where such sports were unknown. Similarly with Matt McGrath, of Nenagh,

and Paddy Ryan, from Pallas-green.

The feats of Martin Sheridan, of Mayo, at Athens in 1906, brought joy to every Gael. All round champion of the world, he won more points than the entire representation of the British Empire.

The Celtic Park grounds were opened in 1898, and many weight and jump records were broken there. The club that organised the Celtic Park Grounds was known as the Greater New York Irish Athletic Association. It gradually gathered a body of all-round athletes, and won honours in all the big meets on the Atlantic seaboard. John Flanagan joined in 1901. His coming marked the era of success that later made the club the greatest athletic organisation in the world. Celtic Park became a rendezvous for all lovers of manly sports and a mecca for the exiled children of the Gael.

TURN OF THE CENTURY.

At the turn of the century new blood mingled with the old to maintain the great tradition in Irish athletics. In America was formed a surging pride in men of rare quality who brought a breath of the air of practically every country in Ireland. Mayo, Cork, Limerick and Tipperary were especially represented. They filled the clubs from the Pacific Coast to the Atlantic, and even among Canada's best talent could be discovered a generous sprinkling.

Scattered among the hilly remote parts of West Limerick, almost touching the Kerry border, where the River Gale in its journey reveals a hundred moods in light and colour, are the remnants of a hardy race. Upper Direen, home of the two famous athletes—Tim and Dan Ahearne—lies between Lower Direen and the little town of Athea.

Their immediate ancestors were not notable as athletes, yet running and jumping were practised in their townland and a grand tradition carried down to our own day in the once popular sport of jumping from a mark. We still wonder if their type will be seen again—if another illustrious breed of athletes will spring up to bring back past lustre. To Dan Ahearne belonged the distinction of being the last of the "old glory" line.

BRILLIANT CAREER IN EXILE

As exponent of an ancient art, possessing all the grace and power of those who preceded him, the Athea man's performances in the home arena were of a very limited character indeed. He appears to have made his debut at Tralee sports on August 11th, 1907, where he was second in the long jump. In the following year he was again in action at Tralee, and also competed in Listowel, gaining a place in the broad jump on each occasion.

Later on, in 1908, he crossed the Atlantic, where we must accompany him for the remainder of his active career. Unfortunately, data covering the complete period of his brilliance in exile is not available owing to a variety of reasons.

We know, however, that in the fall of 1908 he won a few events in New York. The following season, 1909, saw him off on his record-breaking feats in the running hop, step and jump and running two hops and a jump events.

Appearing in the far-famed colours of the Irish-American Athletic Club, he found himself following in grand footfalls, and he was the first to break the record of a fellow Limerickman, the late Dan Shanahan, of Kilfinane, who tallied 50ft. 1in. on a memorable occasion at the Limerick Markets Field away back in 1886.

WORLD'S RECORD.

Ahearne's best jump was 51ft.

7ins., but his accepted world's record figures were 50ft. 11ins., made at Celtic Park on 30th May, 1911. This record held until the Olympic Games of 1924, at Paris, when A. W. Winters, of Sydney, Australia, bettered it by increasing the standard to 51 ft. 3½ ins. This jumping was in the running hop, step and jump competition, and I think Dan Ahearne's feat still holds pre-eminence in its variant, the two hops and jump—the better test really.

In fairness to Dan Shanahan it must be said that he covered, on a grand occasion at Kilfinane, the following sequence—51ft. 3 ins., 51 ft. 11½ ins. and 52ft. 3½ ins. The correctness of the conditions and performances were vouched in every respect, and although recognition was never secured, they go down as moral, if not official, world records. In addition, Shanahan jumped off the sod, whilst his successors in the world title availed of the board "take off."

BROKE HIS OWN RECORDS SEVERAL TIMES.

Dan Ahearne's first record came when, at New York City, he smashed the American figures in the running hop, step and jump. He was right in the limelight, but did not bask long, for we find him in active service very frequently during this season, and on 31st July, 1909, he put up his first world's record score by covering 50 ft. 7/10th ins. in the running two hops and jump, in the City of Boston, Mass.

On the 19th September that same year he was at Travers Island, New York, for the American Athletic Union's senior championship meeting, and won both the running long jump and running hop, step and jump events, the official figures being 22ft. 2½ ins. and 46ft. 10½ ins., respectively. An idea of the number of prizes which he won during his first fall season on the American Continent may be judged from the fact that he finished third in the list showing the highest number of points scored for the I.A.A.C. that year.

Several times he broke his own records, until finally, in 1910, he set the figures that kept him for fourteen years at the "head of the class" in the hop, step, and still there in the two hops. The first record came on 31st July, when, at the New York Post Office games in Celtic Park, he covered 51 ft. 7 ins. in the two running hops and jump, without weights. A fortnight later, 14th August, at Chicago, his figures for the same event were 51 ft. 2½ ins.

SOME FURTHER WONDERFUL PERFORMANCES.

On 30th May, 1911, at Celtic Park—a favourite venue of his, apparently—he made his world record in the running hop, step and jump—the distance being 50 ft. 11 ins. In the championship, on 1st July, 1911, he jumped 48 ft. At this stage it is well to add that he won every National Championship of the United States in the running hop, step and jump from 1909 up to 1920—year after year. On 7th August, 1915, at San Francisco, in the A.A.U. Championships, he beat his own record by half an inch, the distance returned being 50 ft. 11½ ins.

In 1911 he went to Chicago to compete for the famous Illinois Athletic Club. Through his wonderful performance for that club he was one of the very few to be voted a life member—an honour that he richly deserved. In addition to the innumerable American titles secured, he also won a championship of Canada, during a visit to Montreal.

Besides his feats in the running hops, Dan Ahearne won prizes in

the broad and high jumps, getting over 23 feet in the former and as high as 5ft. 11ins. in the latter. He also threw weights, including the classical discus.

The Athea man began to slow up about 1920, yet he managed to clear 47ft. 8½ ins. in his favourite event. He also won a place in the United States Olympic team (first chosen) for the hop, step and jump.

COMPETED IN THE 1920 OLYMPIAD.

He thus competed in the 1920 Olympiad, held at Antwerp, but did not strike even average form. This can be judged by the fact that the event was won by V. Tuulos, of Finland, with a performance of 47 ft. 7 1/10th ins. Once more only, in available records do we meet the name of Dan Ahearne, and that in connection with a sports held in Gaelic Park, Chicago, on 4th July, 1925, when he cleared 48 ft. 5 ins. in the running hop, step and jump.

The deeds of Dan Ahearne, as in part stated above, convey some idea of what Limerick men have done to keep the name of Ireland in the prominent place it should always be—at the head of the list in many sports and pastimes. The influence of such men as Ahearne among the Irish people in America has been of inestimable good, and they have achieved many proud records in the arena of muscle. Such success is gratifying, but should not be seductive, for despite all the triumphs and fame attained, there is more genuine pleasure in the most insignificant village sports at home in Ireland than in the greatest of America's monster fixtures. The Gael at home is the backbone of the race, and the envy of his brothers in exile.

No. 12—Tady McMahan, of Limerick City.