

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 22)—J. J. BOURKE of Dromcollogher

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

IRELAND has rarely, and never long, lacked high jumpers of superlative merits. While the achievements of the Davins, Kelly, Creede, the Ahearnes, Bourke, Ryan and the Leahys are recalled, the fame of Irishmen in this very attractive branch of athletics cannot be obscured.

Until the introduction of the famous "Osborne roll," such a feature of the 1924 Olympic Games, Ireland had been supreme in the art, and there are many who hold that a very clear distinction should be drawn between jumping as accomplished nowadays and the halcyon times when grand figures like Paddy Leahy and his co-peers stalked the land.

The methods at present employed are undoubtedly most effective, and result in heights being attained that were never attempted in the good old days of natural jumping. But there will always be a divergence of opinion as to whether the new style of "rolling" over the bar and landing on all fours is legitimate jumping at all. It is, of course, sanctioned by the International Athletic Federation, yet, nevertheless, many maintain that it should be classed apart, and that the best leaps in the old fashion should not be superseded by performances which differ as much in action as casting a weight with and without follow.

WHAT PADDY LEAHY WOULD HAVE DONE WITH OSBORNE ROLL.

The freedom now permitted has resulted in the olden generation of Gaelic athletes being eclipsed and in the mastery of the event passing to jumpers trained in the new style. But, between the position of, say, Paddy Leahy in negotiating the bar and Osborne, whom we saw in action at the first of the revived Tailteann Games nearly thirty years ago, there is almost the contrast between vertical and horizontal; and their postures on reaching the ground present a like dis-similarity.

Sound critics who saw both in action assert that, with the advantages modern jumpers enjoy, Paddy Leahy would have excelled them all and, jumping like Osborne, would have reached an altitude little short of seven feet. Against a slight rise of ground, the Cregane "beauty" jumped 6 ft. 5½ ins. at the Limerick Markets Field fifty-five years ago. It was accomplished in the old, unequivocal, upright style. It is undeniable that the new style accomplishes greater altitudes. Each of our foremost jumpers of the past could have jumped a rigid six-foot barrier with confidence. I have already told the story of Con Leahy's remarkable jump over a spiked iron gate on his way back from school one evening in the early days of the athletic revival. No modern exponent would be foolhardy

enough to attempt such a feat even under necessity.

A GREAT ATHLETIC CAREER.

Amongst the greatest athletes of the first decade of the present century was the world beater, J. J. Bourke, of Dromcollogher. Although practically all of his athletic triumphs were achieved whilst residing in Dromcollogher, Bourke was actually born in Cappawhite, County Tipperary, that notable event taking place about the year 1885.

The outstanding event of a great career was his brilliant victory in capturing the championship of the world in the high jump, at the international athletic competition held in Rome in connection with the Jubilee celebrations of Pope Pius X, in September, 1908.

A picked team of Gaelic athletes travelled specially to the Eternal City, and on the 16th September, Jim Bourke, competing against forty-six others, drawn from the nations of the world, won the running high-jump event with a splendid effort of 6 ft. 3 ins., T. J. O'Riordan, of Listowel, being second. The lathy Irishman's graceful style won loud acclaim. In addition, Bourke filled second place in the 120 yards hurdles.

The only other Irish success on that occasion was Percy Kirwan's victory in both the 100 and 200 metres.

It is interesting to recall that Eamonn Ceannt, who paid the supreme penalty for devotion to Irish Ireland ideals following that glorious Eastertide of 1916, played a selection of Irish airs on the pipes, in the presence of His Holiness, also in conjunction with the celebration of the Jubilee.

SPECIAL MEDAL FROM THE POPE.

Bourke received a special medal from the Pope to commemorate his feat in securing high jump honours. Before leaving the Rome visit, it is of interest that Bourke's jump there was exactly similar to the effort of H. F. Porter, of the United States, in winning the Olympic Championship that same year at the Olympic Games held in London. Bourke did not compete at the latter, as Irishmen were denied participation in same except under the flag of Britain, and this true Gaels could never accept.

Jim Bourke first donned togs at the age of eighteen, and soon came into prominence by a notable achievement at Cobh Sports, when, in an invitation hurdle race, he

found none other than the far-famed Tom Kiely as an opponent. Bourke, over eager for the fray, broke before the shot, and was penalised for doing so. He then started at scratch with Kiely and to the surprise of everybody won. An almost unknown quality at the time, he quickly stepped into the limelight, and during his heyday put the following all-Ireland titles to his credit:

120 Yards Hurdles Championship, 1905, time, 17 secs.; 1908, time, 16 4-5 secs.; 1909, time, 16 4-5 secs.

Running High Jump Championship—1908, 5ft. 10ins.; 1909, tied with T. J. Leahy at 6ft. 1ins.

A PLACE WITH THE GREAT.

Thus he found a place with the great, worthy to rank with such grand figures as J. P. O'Sullivan, Killorglin; Denis Carey, Kilfinane; T. F. Kiely, Percy Kirwan, J. J. Keane, W. Britton, P. Bourke, Kilmallock, and a colleague, M. W. O'Brien, also of Dromcollogher, in the hurdles, and with McGrath, of Lackenderra; Murty O'Brien, of Mallow; J. M. Ryan, of Tipperary; the Leahys, Peter O'Connor, Mick Creede, T. A. Ahearne and Bill Shanahan in the flight over the bar.

No more graceful jumper ever stepped on an Irish arena. He was built for the art—height, 6ft. 1in., and weight from 12½ to 13 stone—tall, supple, clean-limbed, with verve in every action and grace in every motion of his symmetrical frame, measuring proportionally from head to foot. His style was a treat to witness. He always preferred to jump against a rise of ground. His spring was attractive, and in a swallow-like style he crossed the bar, landing as light on the ground as a bird. He paced his run to the jumps, and seldom took more than eight or ten steps to take off.

It is recorded that at Banteer sports he was declared the winner of the high jump at 6ft. 1ins. He moved the lath to 6ft. 2ins., and with two springs cleared this height with ease. It was considered one of the most outstanding jumps ever witnessed in the locality.

It is also recalled that at a hurdle race in Dromcollogher between Joe Leahy and himself, Bourke laid out the hurdles, but finding the ground short decided to run on nine hurdles, which did not suit him, since he had to start from scratch. When Leahy was facing the ninth hurdle Bourke was over the eighth, and with a

panther-like spring he cleared the ninth just ahead of Leahy to win a great race.

On another occasion he cycled from Dromcollogher to Shanballymore, a distance of almost thirty miles. He won the high jump from scratch, at 6ft. 2ins., mounted his bicycle and was home that night.

HIS STYLE IN THE HURDLES EVENT.

Many keen judges considered him to be unbeatable at the hurdles event. His style was similar to that of A. C. Kraenzlein, the famous American hurdle racer, who put up an Irish record of 14 4-5th secs. at Ballsbridge on the 5th July, 1901. With the usual three strides, Bourke had a clean style of skimming the sticks by a slight turn of the right leg and a swallow-like effort, landing lightly on the left foot well from each stride.

Bourke's best high jump was at Newcastle West sports, where he cleared 6ft. 4ins. on a memorable occasion. Following his return from Rome, he was specially requested to patronise a sports meeting at Ballymore Eustace, Co. Kildare. At this event he gave a remarkable display of all-round athletic ability, making a clean sweep of the programme to win eleven events. A storm of protest followed in the Press, in which the main grievance appeared to be the bringing of such an athlete to the meeting. At Kilkenny sports Bourke was also a competitor and put up figures of 6 ft. 2 ins. in the high jump.

OTHER DROMCULLOGHER ATHLETES.

Closely associated with Jim Bourke were three other Dromcollogher athletes—M. W. O'Brien, an all-Ireland hurdles champion, winning the title in 1917; R. W. O'Brien and J. Fitzgibbon, of Knockacraig. It was the pressure of Bourke's activity in training that brought these men to the limelight, as Bourke was not slow in recognising the essential elements in any young man.

Bourke's brother, "D. P.," was a crack sprinter, and took part at many sports meetings.

Jim was a baker by trade, and it is only fair to state that it was under the guidance of Mr. James Fitzgerald, P.C., Dromcollogher, that he achieved and won most of his honours. James Fitzgerald was always an ardent Gael and, with an intense love for sport, lost no opportunity of forwarding the interests of Bourke, whose success and prowess he always acclaimed.

Alas, like many of those of whom I have already written, J. J. Bourke is no more. This famous athlete met with a more or less tragic end some eighteen years ago. Cycling in his native Tipperary, he met with an accident, and was removed to Clonmel Hospital, where he soon died. Thus passed from the Gaelic arena one of the finest figures of his day.

No. 23—Tim Leahy, of Cregane.