

# No. 203—DENNY ("RACER") CONNOLLY of Caherline

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE success of the American athlete is the result of the influence of Gaelic sports in the United States. Prior to the Gaelic invasion, as the American tour of the Gaelic champions on athletic fields and crack hurlers of 1888 was called, Columbia 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 a little over a century, it would be foolish to think that the Gaelic invasion was the first impression of the Irish athlete on American civilisation. The boys who 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.

The Irish name has always been associated with feats of strength, endurance and agility, disregard for danger, aggressiveness and pluck, as hurlers, boxers, weight-throwers and jumpers. The claim that baseball is Irish in origin—a direct descendant of our rounders game—deserves credence from the fact that men of Irish blood have been, and are, prominent in all the championship teams.

## THE IRISH GAME OF HANDBALL.

The Irish game of handball is very popular in America. There are handball courts in all the big cities and most of the colleges. The Olympic Club of San Francisco makes the game a speciality; the Young Men's Christian Association reserve space in most of its gymnasiums for the sport, and the professional high-salaried baseball and boxing stars regard this Irish pastime as an excellent exercise to keep fit.

The Gaelic invasion of 1888 was a bad affair for Ireland, for it robbed her of some of her reddest blood and her best bone. The New York press glowed with praise of the physique and bearing of the men. Their abstinence from tobacco and alcoholic drink was the subject of approving comment. The Irish athletes were the flower of Irish manhood—her champions and record holders and two teams of crack hurlers.

## SEVEN LIMERICK MEN ON VISITING SIDE.

On the visiting side were seven Limerick men: Dr. J. C. Daly, Dromin; Willie Real of Pallas; Dan Shanahan, Kilfinane; Dan Godfrey of Murroe; Jack McCarthy, Michael and Jack Connery of the Staker Wallace Club.

At Boston, before ten thousand spectators, Dr. J. C. Daly broke the existing record of 26ft. 6½ins. for slinging the 56lbs. by three inches, 26ft. 10ins. At Madison Square Gardens, New York, Daly threw the same missile 26ft. 9ins. for second place, to again beat the record, and J. C. Mitchell of Emly won the event here with a throw of 26ft. 10ins., identical with Daly's Boston distance.

The other athletes won many championships and the hurling team remained in America amongst them being Jack McCarthy, Michael and Jack Connery, J. S. Mitchell, W. McCarthy, Macroom, champion miler; J. J. Mooney, sprinter and long jumper, and W. Prendergast, Clonmel, one-time Secretary of the Central Council of the G.A.A.

## CONFEDERATION OF CLUBS ESTABLISHED.

These rallied hundreds of other young Irish emigrants and soon football and athletic clubs were organised. In a short time a confederation of some fifteen clubs formed by the Irishmen in New York, Brooklyn and Jersey City, was established. Games were played at Woodside and Ridgewood, Long Island. The press was diffident but the events drew large crowds.

The influence of the G.A.A. was practically unknown outside the South and East for many years, but it extended gradually, and thirty years ago when the Tipperary hurlers made their great coast to coast tour games were played in all the big cities right to the Pacific Coast.

Tommy Conneff of Kildare was one of the greatest runners the world ever produced, and held world's records for the three-quarter mile, and one and a half miles.

Mick Kennedy, of Cashel, won the cross-country championship of America in 1891. The finish was highly dramatic, for the Tipperary man ran away from his rivals. He waved a flag over his head, and shouted, "Hurrah for Cashel" as he came to the post in a series of buck jumps.

## JOHN FLANAGAN'S FAME.

John Flanagan's fame as a weight thrower has travelled to lands where such sports are unknown. He made world's records, time and again with the 56 lbs.—from the side, two hands, no follow, from stand, without follow,

both hands from a seven foot circle, no follow, and with unlimited run and follow. His world's record with the hammer was made at Celtic Park at a sports meeting organised by the United Irish Societies of New York.

The feats of Martin Sheridan, who represented America at the Olympic Games at Athens in 1906 brought joy to every man of Irish birth in all parts of the world. Sheridan won more points than the entire representatives of the then vast British Empire. He was all round champion of America in 1905—a title that Tom Kiely won in 1904 and 1906.

William Prendergast was the first to declare that Gaelic Games should have a park of their own. He was scoffed at by many to whom he broached the subject, but the few loyal souls who aided his efforts were worth a legion, and the Celtic Park Grounds were opened in 1898.

## IDEAL FOR ATHLETICS.

The place was ideal for athletics 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 and 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.

In 1891 the "G.A.A. of America" was formed in New York. It had a chequered existence in its early days, and was dormant for long periods. The teams at that time, as at present, were mainly attached to the County Associations, and their activities were often subordinated to the policies and rivalries of this body.

## AN ABUNDANCE OF PLAYERS.

Still the nucleus of an association continued to exist, and the constant influx from Ireland provided an abundance of players. The Irish Counties Athletic Union was formed in 1904 and made Gaelic football very popular. The New York "Daily News" offered two sets of gold and two sets of silver medals for the State football and hurling championships in

June, 1905, and the games became so popular that it was soon found necessary to secure extra grounds.

As the games grew in popularity and prestige we find the names of many great Limerick men associated with their development and progress. In later years few left a bigger impress than the subject of our sketch this week—Denny ("Racer") Connolly of Caherline.

A kinsman of the renowned Jack O'Grady, world's champion weight thrower, Denny Connolly was born in the year 1905 and gave early evidence of his love for athletics and of hurling—twin pastimes that were always popular in his native Caherline.

He came to maturity at a difficult period, when Ireland was in the throes of the fight for Independence, followed by the unfortunate civil strife, and his first blossoming was with Limerick C.B.S., in the Dr. Harty Cup competition, during the progress of which he shone and helped materially in bringing the famed trophy to the Sexton Street sideboard.

## TO THE FORE WITH CAHERLINE LADS.

During his schooldays, he was left for the metropolis to continue his studies at the Albert College, during which period he participated in the Dublin County championship and league ties.

Picked for Limerick juniors a few seasons, he participated as reserve with the seniors in a few of Limerick's earliest National Hurling League engagements.

With Tom Walsh of Cross Country fame, Paddy Ryan, the marathon, and others, he helped in founding an athletic club, which was represented at many sports meetings throughout the country and with a considerable degree of success. Denny Connolly participated mostly in the 100, 220 and 440 yards and had collected quite a number of prizes before leaving for New York. On the day of his departure he was actually entered for the 220 yards flat championship of Munster and had planned it for his last race in the old country. An earlier than expected departure of the liner deprived him of that final pleasure.

## HIS WORK IN NEW YORK FOR IRISH GAMES.

On arrival in the city of the great sky-scrapers he immediately contacted his native county organisation, and was soon recognised as one of the leading Gaels in the playing and propagation of Irish games. As Captain of the Limerick hurling team his

influence was used to advance the popularity of the games, whilst his athletic ability helped much in restoring a lot of the old time mastery of the Irish. He was seen to most advantage in America over the one and five mile distances and many of the trophies he won are now the prized possession of his brother—a priest in Houston, Texas, and a regular reader of the "Limerick Leader."

## DEATH UNDER TRAGIC CIRCUMSTANCES.

Denny Connolly died under very tragic circumstances, as can be learned from an appreciation that appeared in an American paper of the period, and with which I will conclude this article:

"Denny ('Racer') Connolly, Captain of the Limerick hurling team and a former track athlete, had his last race with death in the icy waters of the East River on Friday, February 28th, 1947, when he made a desperate attempt to swim to safety after the snow plough he was driving plunged into the icy waters at 145th Street, but was drowned when ice floes prevented his reaching safety.

"The tragic death of this great Limerick Gael has caused universal mourning among the Irish people of the Greater City, for 'Racer' Connolly was a well-known figure in both Irish and athletic circles. When Denny was a track member of the Old Round Tower A.C., the writer tagged him with the name 'Racer.' The sobriquet seemed to suit the fleet-footed Garryowen boy for it remained with him down through the years.

## NATIVE OF GREAT HURLING CENTRE.

"A native of that great Limerick hurling centre, Caherline, Denny acquired the art of ash wielding at an early age and while still in his teens played for the honour of the 'little village.' While with the U.S.A. forces in the recent world war he visited Ireland, slept beneath the old roof tree, played hurling with his native Caherline, witnessed some big hurling and football games, and returned delighted with his trip.

"Since his first arrival in New York he has been a prominent member of the Limerick senior hurling team and last year captained the newly organised Garryowen fifteen. He was a fast and fiery centrefield player whose speed and long aerial drives made him an outstanding hurling figure. Eternal peace to the soul of this fleet footed Limerick Gael."