

# Great Limerick Athletes

## No. 107—NED CREGAN of Monegay

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

**M**ONEGAY of the grand hurling memories gave an All-Ireland Captain to Limerick in 1918, and it was but fitting that when Limerick won the Golden Jubilee All-Ireland hurling crown in 1934 another Monegay man should be there playing his part in helping to bring Garryowen back to the topmost place in Irish sport.

That Blue Riband success was a fitting climax to a grand hurling career that would be even more impressive but for the fact that its proud owner gave his greatest days to his country in the glorious years of the fight for National Independence. Ned Cregan was a soldier of Ireland in a period of Irish history that for the sheer magnificence of the courage and heroism of its fighters is not easily equalled, and he later proved as heroic a figure when he worthily formed one of the rearguard of as grand a Limerick hurling team as Sarsfield's county took pride in.

### GREATEST HURLING SPELL.

Born when the century was still young, Ned Cregan was ushered into the greatest hurling spell ever in Monegay, and from infancy he grew up with the stories of the great hurling days, and the grand men that made the welkin ring in that period beyond compare in the G.A.A. history of the parish.

Ned Cregan's father played football in the early years of the G.A.A., but hurling held the stage in the great years of Ned's upbringing. Nevertheless, the senior side occupied the full stage and there were no organised games for youngsters. So Ned just learned the rudiments, and later the craft, of the game from stalwarts like Willie Hough, Mick Danagher, the Shanahans of Rathcahill, the Greenes, Don and Roger, Paddy O'Connell, Brian King and the Mackessys, by playing on the fringe of the group that gathered in the field that the parish priest—the late Father Edward Clifford—never failed to place at the disposal of the hurlers.

### HIS EARLY GAMES.

The glory days were over, however, when Ned was ready to line out "with the men" and consequently his first game was played with Newcastle West in 1919. Then followed the long years of struggle against the foreign foe and it was 1925 before Ned was able to resume his appointments with the playing fields of the Gael. Monegay were still without a team and he lined out with the Ashford

junior hurlers before returning to the Newcastle West colours, in which he won a number of West Limerick titles besides many tournament successes. In passing it might be mentioned that Newcastle West experienced its most prosperous hurling spell from 1917 to 1932 and Monegay was closely associated with all the glories of that great era.

### FIRST MUNSTER MEDAL.

Called to the County junior colours in 1927, Ned gained his first Munster Championship medal that year but Meath foiled Limerick's bid for All-Ireland renown. In senior county ranks the following season, he continued wearing the green and white colours with distinction until the conclusion of the great tour of the United States in 1936, when he hung up the hurley that had served Limerick so gloriously during a period of both team building and of record breaking—through both of which Ned shone as one of the best right full-backs, wonderfully clever in anticipation, able to use both hands dexterously, and with fine length in his rapid clearances. A grand old judge of hurling once summed up his qualities in this terse statement: "Ned is steady as a rock, the closest of tacklers, with two good hands. Best at close quarters, he has pace and driving skill, and is a sterling man where play is hottest."

### MANY AND VARIED TRIUMPHS.

His trophies won in senior Limerick ranks were many and varied but I can only mention the outstanding ones: the 1934 All-Ireland crown; three National League trophies, three Munster Championship medals, one Railway Cup memento, several Thomond Fels souvenirs besides honours won in London, New York and Boston.

Best criterion of his worth as hurler can probably be got by a look at some of the men he played against—mention of whose names recall bright lights indeed in Ireland's hurling lore—the great Martin Kennedy and John Joe Callanan, of Tipperary; the one and only Matty Power, of Kilkenny; Cork's pride, Gah Ahern; another sound Leaside score-getter, J. Kenneally, and the Connacht and Galway star—J. Deely, to bring to memory but a few of the many he met and mastered in the great days of Limerick hurling power and majesty.

### TICKLISH SITUATIONS.

Playing against such masters of the hurler's art, it is only natural that Ned should have encountered some ticklish situations in his day, and he sets fans a nice neat poser that could serve as a debating point at many a fireside when he put me the question: "Should you leave your own man to go to the assistance of a colleague, and if so, under what circumstances?"

To illustrate his point, Ned gave a few personal experiences: "In the 1932 championship against Cork, in the second half, when Limerick were defending the town goal, Gah Ahern was my opponent and W. Clancy was playing on Paddy Clohessy. The Mallow man trapped a ball in front of his Fedamore opponent and slung it out towards the wing. I judged I could get to it before him and went for it but he just snigged it out to Gah, who was now unmarked. The latter took his time, lifted it and slammed an unstoppable shot to the net. Within five minutes the same tactic was employed and again I fell for it with the exact same result. Cork won by a point, I think.

### WHEN TACTIC SUCCEEDED.

"On the other hand, in the replayed game in Croke Park in 1934, Denny O'Neill had got Tom McCarthy for two goals, with a tactic which I had studied and when the next ball came between them and O'Neill was in a position to score I left my opponent and cut down O'Neill's stroke to save a certain goal and I succeeded, despite the attention of my own man in effecting a clearance.

"I did a similar thing against Tommy Treacy a short time later and probably saved a score. They were precious at that stage, too."

Ned explained that he only raised the incidents by way of example to illustrate the problems and he is hoping that other great defenders of his time like Paddy Clohessy, Mickey Cross and company might oblige with similar experiences that could prove helpful to the hurlers of to-day and give them some idea of how to act in similar circumstances. He stresses that he only set the problems, and readers who experienced similar situations, whether they found the correct answer or otherwise, might oblige by writing in their solution.

### COUNTER ATTRACTIONS OF TO-DAY.

Also keenly interested in handball, coursing and horse racing, Ned is of the opinion that the overall hurling standard is not as high now as formerly because of so many counter attractions for the youth of to-day. He believes that a hurler is made between the age he first picks up a hurley and his late teens. From that on he learns improved tactics through meeting the better men and trying to meet their methods of play with his counter efforts.

He feels that the picking of balls off the ground before striking is a feature of modern play which has taken from the speed of the game, for the old method of first-time striking was definitely more effective than the present style.

### AS GOOD PLAYERS NOW AS EVER.

Despite the lower general standard Ned holds that there are as good hurlers playing now as at any time, and some games can certainly thrill as much as the best of other days.

Ned, who also officiated as a referee at some important games, regards the National League game against Kilkenny at Nowlan Park in the 1934-5 competition one of the closest and most exciting of the many great matches in which he figured.

And of all his fine performances and big match victories I feel that he is proudest of all of the fact that he never retired during his long career from any game even though he suffered severe enough injuries at times—a record fully in keeping with the traditions of the olden arena that were so strong in the Monegay of his early days.