

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 34)—Robert J. Cussen of Newcastle West

(By SEAMUS O. CEALLAIGH)

THERE is an old saying that "athletics run in families." In the case of Robert J. Cussen there is no exception, for he was a brother of Denis, whose career we considered in an earlier article.

Denis J. Cussen, as will be remembered, was a splendid all-round athlete, who ran the 100 yards in the record time of 9 4/5 secs. at Croke Park on June 24th, 1928, was "good" for 23 seconds in the "220," had 22ft. 10ins. to his credit in the long jump, was capable of 115ft. 8ins. in the discus, and could send the 16lb. shot a distance of 36ft. 2ins. He was also a good amateur boxer, and an International Rugby player with a great record of achievement to his name in that code.

Robert J., or "Bertie," as he is more popularly known, though never reaching the great heights in athletics as Denis, nevertheless attained greater consistency in the long jump. Though not quite so broad of shoulder or as powerfully built as his brother, he was, nevertheless, a fine type of manhood, very quiet and unassuming, but wonderfully intelligent and sharp-witted.

WON SIX EVENTS ONE DAY.

Born in Newcastle West, Bertie started his athletic career at Blackrock College, where, in 1920, he performed the amazing feat of winning six events at the College Sports—the 100 yds., 220 yds., 440 yds., long jump, high jump and hurdles. The Cussen boys certainly made the athletic welkin ring in the Metropolis that season, for, at Trinity College Sports Denis was awarded the Vice-Chancellor's prize for the best performance, winning the 100 yds. (Freshmen), 100 yds. College Championship, long jump and he tied for first place in the high jump.

Bertie did not take part in athletics again until 1924, when at the College sports at Dublin University he won the 100 yds. and the long jump. On 21st May that same year he took the long jump championship of the Universities with a leap of 20ft. 6 1/2 ins.

On May 28th, 1925, he won the long jump at Trinity with a 20ft. 10ins. effort, and on June 6th improved the distance to 22ft. 3ins. to capture Inter-Varsity honours. He was selected to represent Ireland at the annual Triangular contest with England and Scotland. Picked for the 100 yds., he had as team mate his brother, Denis. That evening at Croke Park was a memorable one, for it is very seldom that one sees two brothers competing for their country and rarer still to see them in the same event. Bertie was of more than average speed at the 100 and was always good for 10 2/5 secs. The long jump, however, was his "pet" event, and it was here that he attained greatest prominence.

In the same year, on August 3rd to be exact, he represented Dublin in an Inter-County Athletic contest against Cork, and won the 100 yards (10 2/5 secs) and long jump (20ft. 11ins.).

OUTSTANDING IN THE LONG JUMP.

The following season he was much to the fore as the outstanding performer in the long jump, clearing 21ft. 4ins. at the Trinity meeting on 16th May; winning an all-Ireland championship (under N.A. & C. A. laws) on June 27th with a leap of 22ft. 7 1/2 ins.; taking inter-Club laurels on July 5th, when his distance was 22ft. 2 1/2 ins., and winning a Dublin county title with a 22ft. 4ins. effort. At the

triangular contest, held in Glasgow on July 10th, he was second in the long jump, his figures, 22ft. 4 1/2 ins.

His Irish championship, mentioned above, was won at Croke Park, and it is interesting to recall that he actually cleared 23 feet, but was unfortunate to just foul the board. Reporting on the championships, "Ireland's Own" had this to say of the Newcastle West man's victory: "Bertie Cussen followed up his county Dublin championship win by annexing the National Long Jump. It was a very popular victory, as the Dublin University man, who is a brother of Denis, last year's sprint champion, has been a very consistent trier for the past couple of years, and jumps with great determination and style."

In 1927, he again won the Irish championship for the long jump, covering 22 ft. 4 ins.; captured inter-club honours with the same distance; tied for the Munster title at 21 ft. 9 ins.; once more won his university crown at 21 ft. 7 ins., and won with a jump of 22 ft. 6 ins. in a contest between the Irish and Scottish Universities. This year also, he again represented his country in the triangular contest, and against the Achilles Club.

EARLY RETIRAL AN ATHLETIC TRAGEDY.

It was one of the tragedies of the athletic arena that Bertie retired following the 1927 season, for he was then only twenty-four years of age, and at the height of his power, holding, as he did, undisputed sway in his favourite event—the long jump—all through 1926 and 1927. Hopes were strong that he would have added further to the glory of Limerick in the story of athletics, and his early departure from the arena that he adorned deprived his native county of laurels that were then eagerly sought and greatly prized.

Shannonside at the time was experiencing some of the lean years, following the many seasons of plenty, and with many of the old brigade hungering for the glories of palmier days it is only natural that his loss should be keenly felt and widely regretted.

A good boxer and, like his brother, a splendid rugby player, who captained his University fifteen most successfully, he had a very successful academic course at Trinity, and completely discounted the theory that games and work do not combine. He went to the top rung in his examinations, obtaining the degrees of Master of Arts and Doctor of Laws.

TAKING KEEN INTEREST STILL IN ATHLETICS.

Now practising as a solicitor in Newcastle West, he still takes a keen interest in athletics and has been associated with every effort in his home town to organise sports meetings or otherwise further the athletic cause. A Vice-President of the County Board for a number of years, he gave valuable assistance in keeping the athletic flag flying in Limerick during difficult times. During his all too short years "on active service," he confined his efforts mostly to championship and representative fixtures and rarely

competed otherwise. He had an old trainer, Tom Maguire, in Dublin, who saw to it that he was perfectly turned out for the special occasion.

Keenly interested in the doings of all the big athletic figures of history, he was especially attracted to his fellow Limerickman, big John O'Grady, who was just then keeping the name of Sarsfield County in a prominent place as far as the heavy weights were concerned. Speaking of O'Grady, Bertie said on one occasion: "He was a personal friend of mine and I always looked forward to meeting him at Croke Park. I will never forget his first appearance there after the amalgamation of the G.A.A. athletic unit and the I.A.A.A. to form the N.A.C.A. It was sometime about the year 1923. He was so big all round that it was very easy on first sight to think that he was suffering from flabbiness, but the manner in which he threw weights of all sizes around soon disillusioned everyone. When he came to Dublin he used to stay with Bill Shanahan, the high jumper, a man that could tell many a story about poor John."

Conscious of the need for a big drive to stimulate and encourage an athletic revival long overdue, Bertie Cussen is an enthusiastic supporter of any move to advance this revival, and is particularly interested in the efforts in his native town to rebuild a solid athletic foundation by endeavouring to interest the schoolboys and organising a special sports meeting for them.

OUTSTANDING OCCASION.

In recalling memories of his many years associated with Irish athletics, he told me that the most interesting athletic function he ever attended was an old athletes dinner sponsored by the N.A. and C.A., and held some time in 1928. Unique in the number and ages of the athletes who attended, he thinks that some description of it should be permanently recorded, thus ensuring a fitting memento of an outstanding occasion.

There is a tradition in the Newcastle West district that a grandfather of the Cussens jumped the Mall, in the Square, Newcastle West. The Mall is a raised stone structure from about a half foot high to one foot high, and measures over twenty feet in breadth. It would take a leap of more than twenty-two feet to negotiate it successfully.

The grandfather is dead for more than two score years, and Bertie could never substantiate the actual jump, but says that it has often been related to him by different people in the district. But he hastens to add that neither his brother, Denis, nor himself, ever contemplated emulating the feat.

THE SAME IN DEFEAT AS IN VICTORY.

In drawing this sketch to a conclusion I might add that the Cussen brothers, Denis and Bertie, were very popular in sporting circles, and were always the same whether in defeat or in victory. There were two other brothers in

the family, John and Michael, and though not attaining to the standard of their brothers, nevertheless, took an active part in athletics, and well upheld the family name as sportsmen and athletes.

They have descended from a good old stock, and their father, Bob Cussen, was prominently identified with the "Long Tails," being flag steward at Clounanna Coursing for long years, and their grandfather, John Moylan, was also a wonderful sport, and one of the original founders and first Chairman of the County Limerick Coursing Club.

No. 35—William Drake, of Kilfinane.