

No. 212—Michael Downes Of Kilfinane

(CONTINUED)

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

CHAMPIONSHIPS ran late in Limerick and throughout the county in the early G.A.A. days, it was May 1st, 1898, when the final for the previous year in which the contestants were Kilfinane and Cappamore took place at the Markets Field, Limerick—for many seasons the venue for the leading games of the G.A.A. year, and the scene of the historic gatherings in the story of native games by the roadside.

It was a match well worth watching for, hurled at a terrific pace with the issue in doubt to the last whistle. The exchanges were very close fought and tough all the way, with rivalry keen and excitement at fever pitch.

DECISION THAT WAS HOTLY DISPUTED

Kilfinane won by a solitary point, 4-9 to 4-3, a decision which Cappamore hotly disputed, on the grounds that scores disallowed should have been granted. The issue was hotly debated for many weeks, long after the County Board had over-ruled Cappamore's appeal protest, and it was some time before amicable relations between the pair were restored. The Kilfinane team which won that day at County success will be remembered with interest: Denis Grimes (captain), T. Ryan, P. Flynn, Maurice Flynn, T. Flynn, T. Casey, "Sean Oge" Hanley, John Finn, Michael Finn, F. Dunworth, Patrick O'Brien, T. Brazill, Michael Downes, J. Corkery, M. Regan, Carey, J. Connelly.

The All-Ireland Championships were at this period fought on a county basis—the champion clubs of the county battling for the respective titles in hurling and football. The concession had been made a few years earlier, however, of admitting these teams pick from clubs within the county—a concession not allowed in the very early days of All-Ireland competition.

LIMERICK'S FIRST ALL-IRELAND

Limerick's first engagement in the All-Ireland Championships of 1897 was not until June 19th, 1898, when the county took on Clare in both hurling and football. Owing to a dispute over the county final, Cappamore refused to allow any members of their club participate in the Kilfinane selection, which led to a narrow escape from Tulla (Clare), winning 2-5 to 2-3.

This was a great game fought at break neck pace and fired Limerick enthusiasm to such an extent that the Cappamore men forgot their grievances and intimated their willingness to help in future games.

The unforgettable match with the Clare champions was played at Greenpark Racecourse, the Limerick players being:—J. Reidy (goal), J. Cottrell, P. Noonan, J. Bourigan, P. Keating, P. Buskin, P. Flood, P. Flynn, M. Flynn, M. Finn, J. Hanley, F. Dunworth, P. O'Brien, M. Downes, T. Casey, T. Brazill, D. Grimes.

Mr. Michael Deering, a Limerick man then resident in Cork and later President of the G.A.A., was the referee.

NEXT ENGAGEMENT

Limerick's next engagement was the Munster final, which was played at Tipperary on September 25th, 1898, the opposition being provided by Cork, who were represented by Blackrock.

The game opened at a fast tempo and play was close and robust, as both sides tried valiantly to assert superiority. The dashing James Hanley was in irresistible form on this occasion and was mainly responsible for registering a goal early in the hour. When Blackrock equalled excitement ran to fever pitch. Some great Limerick assaults crashed on the blade of Tommy Finn's caman, for the great Cork goalkeeper was at his best and saved the Leaside fortress in gallant fashion time and again. A sharp foray by the men from the rebel County secured them a two-point advantage, but Limerick fought in strong style and a goal

by Michael Downes, plus a well taken point by John Hynes, had them ahead at the interval, 2-2 to 1-3.

EXCEEDINGLY FAST PLAY

"Sean Oge" put Limerick attacking right from the re-start, but every inch of the ground was hotly disputed and play became exceedingly fast. Michael Downes notched another Limerick minor from a free at good range and the Shannonsiders were on the road to victory when Hanley supplemented with a great goal, which he shot from midfield—an unstoppable effort that raised the big Limerick following to a widely excited crowd, with their first Munster hurling title in sight.

Cork fought back in thrilling fashion and some right hard and bitterly contested passages were witnessed before Cottrell clinched the issue with a great goal, afterwards whipping in two points. Limerick took complete control after this and emerged good winners, on the score—Limerick, 4-9; Cork, 1-6.

THE LIMERICK PLAYERS

The Kilfinane men were stronger, more athletic, possessed of greater dash and played with great combination, and there was no doubt that they richly deserved their victory. The Limerick players on this occasion were: D. Grimes (capt.), J. Reidy (goal), P. Buskin, J. Cottrell, M. Finn, J. Finn, P. O'Brien, Maurice Flynn, James Flood, F. Dunworth, T. Brazill, J. Hanley, M. Downes, J. Hynes, P. Mulcahy, J. Condon and P. Butler.

The road was now clear for Limerick's first All-Ireland hurling final appearance and this took place at Tipperary on November 20th, 1898. A great Limerick crowd made the journey to the venue and they were rewarded with an exciting and thrill-packed game, which Limerick won in a storming finish, on the score—Limerick, 3-4; Kilkenny, 2-4. The Noresiders were represented by the far-famed Tullaroan Club.

A GREAT GAME

It was a great game from the moment referee J. J. McCabe set the players in motion. Kilkenny were on the defensive at the start, but "Fox" Maher was in his prime as one of Ireland's greatest net-minders, and the Leinstermen had other stars in the Graces, Lalors, Walsh, Dalton and Teehan.

When Kilkenny turned to the offensive Buskin and Hanley battled like giants, and Hynes, at right back, gave everything that was in him. The issue was locked between two great teams, and then the Noresiders really threw down the gauntlet, when they notched a fine point, beautifully taken from near the touchline, and then a well got goal.

TERRIFIC STRUGGLE

Limerick took up the challenge in sterling style and a terrific struggle developed. Brazill drew first blood for the Shannonsiders, revealing fine form when he cut through for a well taken point. A long spell without further scoring followed but nearing the interval Kilkenny had their second point, to which Cottrell replied in like strain, to leave the half-time position: Kilkenny, 1-2; Limerick, 0-2.

Kilkenny looked all set for a great win when they scored a fine goal shortly following the resumption. This success encouraged them to greater effort and in the following minutes the Limerick posts were peppered but time after time Reidy saved in magnificent fashion. Relief only came to a sorely pressed, but valiant defence at the three-quarter way stage when Hanley in a brilliant bout got to Cottrell, who raised the enthusiasm of the crowd with a great goal, which further increased as Brazill forced through for a nice point.

Kilkenny returned to the attack in the seething excitement, and after failing to penetrate Reidy, raised their sights and sent over a brace of points. With time closing in Limerick made an all-out effort. "Sean Oge" rallied his men with a superhuman tear away. Pat O'Brien collected his fine delivery

and Pat Butler made the well-kept ring with a lovely goal which left the position: Kilkenny, 2-4; Limerick, 2-3, with four minutes play remaining.

LIMERICK'S SUPREME BID

Ash splintered and men fell in shoulder to shoulder bouts as Limerick made their supreme bid. In terrific excitement they forced a "fifty." (This was increased to seventy yards for hurling in after years) and "Sean Oge" prepared to take it. As the crowd roared their encouragement, the Kilfinane Brass Band that had travelled with the boys from the town struck up a bar of "Let Erin Remember." "Sean Oge" lifted the ball and missed it but Pat Mulcahy was standing near and with a mighty swing landed it in the Kilkenny goalmouth. As "Fox" Maher turned it over for another "fifty" Limerick and Kilkenny men galore went through the posts and nearly over a little ditch at the back in one mad charge.

THE CRUCIAL PUCK

John Hynes took the crucial puck this time and as it landed in the goal area, Downes and Cottrell were on top of it. Neither touched it, however, but the "Fox" was deceived and as he picked the slotar from the rigging Limerick led for the first time with the hour all but gone. No team in the land could hold them then, and as the ball was pucked out Jim Flood hit it back and John Condon, from the wing, sent over a point that gave Limerick victory by a clear goal.

THE VICTORS

The Limerick players on that memorable occasion were:—Denis Grimes (captain), J. Reidy (goal), J. Hanley, M. Flynn, P. Flynn, M. Finn, John Finn, P. O'Brien, T. Brazill, J. Condon, J. Cottrell, P. Hynes, P. Butler, P. Mulcahy, J. Flood, M. Downes, P. Buskin.

No. 212—Michael Downes Of Kilfinane

(CONCLUDED)

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE Kilfinane selectors, in addition to winning the All-Ireland title, captured the Croke Cup for the same year, an unique double almost unknown at the time, and still but rarely achieved. The first round of the Croke Cup, in both hurling and football, was played at Tipperary on October 23rd, 1898. Limerick and Clare were contestants in the two codes, the Shannonsiders notching a duel success: Hurling—Kilfinane 4-6, Tulla, 2-5. Football—Commercials 0-17, Ennis nil.

Mr. Tom Dooley of Cork referred both matches and the Limerick representatives were: Hurling—D. Grimes (Captain), J. Hanley, P. O'Brien, F. Dunworth, M. Flynn, P. Flynn, M. Finn, J. Hynes, J. Condon, P. Butler, P. Mulcahy, J. Catterell, J. Flood, P. Buskin, T. Brazill, T. Casey, J. Reidy (goal). Football—D. Biffrane (goal), M. Cuihane, James O'Riordan, John O'Riordan, P. Roche, E. Mullane, J. Buttimer, M. Jackson, L. Sheehan, A. Quillinan, W. Murphy, J. Murphy, P. O'Connell, T. Campion, John Nash, James Nash, Con Fitzgerald.

A REAL THRILLER.

On February 19th, 1899, Limerick Commercials were defeated by Fermoy (Cork) in the Munster Final of the Croke Football Cup competition, but the following Sunday, at Mallow, Cork (Blackrock) and Limerick (Kilfinane) played a real thriller of magnificent hurling contested at a fast and exacting pace, with excitement in plenty, the final score a draw of four points each.

The re-play, at the same venue on May 21st, was another wonderful display of hurling, exciting in the extreme with many passages of power-packed play. The exchanges were terrific in their intensity, and enthusiasm was at fever pitch to the very last whistle, when Kilfinane won by the narrowest of margins: Kilfinane 1-7, Blackrock 1-6.

THE KILFINANE TEAM.

The following represented Kilfinane in those memorable contests: D. Grimes (Captain), J. Hanley (goal), M. Downes, M. Finn, John Finn, P. O'Brien, F. Dunworth, M. Flynn, T. Brazill, J. Hynes, J. Condon, P. Butler, J. Flood, P. Buskin, J. Cathrell, P. Mulcahy, T. Casey.

The All-Ireland Final for the Croke Cup (hurling) was decided on July 9th at Thurles, with Mr. Pat McGrath of Tipperary, for many years Secretary of the Munster Council, the referee. There was a very large attendance, which included His Grace Most Rev. Dr. Croke, first great patron of the G.A.A., to whom the players were presented before the contest by Mr. F. B. Dinneen of Ballylanders, the then Secretary of the Central Council G.A.A.

The game was won by Limerick (Kilfinane selection) who defeated Kilkenny, 3-8 to 1-4. The winning players were:—D. Grimes (captain), J. Hanley, M. Finn, Patrick Flynn, M. Flynn, M. Casey, P. O'Brien, James Flood, Tim Lloyd, D. Riordan, John Hayes, Patrick Mulcahy, John Condon, Patrick Butler, Patrick Buskin, M. Downes, T. Brazill.

LIMERICK AND ALL-IRELAND CONGRESS.

The part Limerick played in the affairs of the G.A.A. at this period is best illustrated in the report of the All-Ireland Congress held at Thurles the following Sunday, when the officers elected included: Michael Deering, President; J. F. Halvey, Vice-President; F. B. Dinneen, Secretary and J. J. Keane, Trustee—all natives of Saranfield's county.

Kilfinane had their last great day of glory on July 22nd, 1900, when the club team won another

county senior hurling final, played at the Markets Field, the final score being: Kilfinane, 2-9; Loughgur, nil.

Mr. D. S. Lyons, Croom, referred, and the teams were:—Kilfinane—D. Grimes, M. Flynn, J. Finn, P. Finn, D. Ryan, M. Downes, M. Dawson, T. Casey, P. O'Brien, J. Carey, J. Hannon, F. Dunworth, M. Kelly, T. Brazill, Loughgur—C. Hayes, captain; P. Real, W. Gammel, M. Quinlan, M. Ryan, J. Casey, J. Cleary, E. Cleary, P. Mortell, J. Gould, M. Casey, M. Punch, M. Hogan, J. Hogan, W. Hederman, M. Slattery, M. Hogan.

INTEREST IN ATHLETICS.

Athletics were regularly practised in the Kilfinane of Michael Downes' youth, and he took a lively interest in many of the events without specialising in any. He rarely competed at sports meetings but when he was forced out in one at the home venue, he signalled the event by winning the pole vault, his figure being 8 ft. 9 ins. This success, however, did not encourage him to further essays, although his interest in athletics continued undiminished and he regularly trained with some of the men who afterwards gained world renown.

When Michael helped in winning for Kilfinane and Limerick the first All-Ireland senior hurling title he was the veteran of the side, if not in age certainly in the number of times he had donned the jersey of the club. The longest serving member, one Kilfinane enthusiast writing later about the game, told how he filled his allotted place in a most creditable manner, and summed up neatly by adding: "His strength is that of a Sandow, and his manner that of a child."

NOTHING SOFT IN THOSE DAYS!

Lest any may think these Kilfinane lads got anything soft in those days it is as well to point out that none of the local farmers would give the team a field and they had to train in Hannon's Park, a piece of waste ground about 50 yards by 25 yards. Old timers tell how the players were often hunted from field to field, and the boys actually practised on the mountain for some big engagements.

John Tobin told me of an occasion when they went into the parish priest's field. In due time he came along in his four wheeler and shouted to "clear-out." The boys were stripped for a match at the time and only went to the other end of the field. He had his field glasses up trying to know who was there and at last opened the gate and driving in picked up a coat and boots and drove off. To his credit be it said that the coat and boots were sent back that night, and the club always got a subscription from him to carry on the game afterwards.

GREAT MEN OF THE GLORY DAYS.

Some thirty years ago I was a regular visitor to Kilfinane and spent many a pleasant evening in the then newly erected ballcourt down by the old mill. Hurling was again going great guns in the parish at this period, and under Mick Tobin's hospitable roof I met many of the great men of the glory days.

I heard all the old matches discussed and we talked hurling history with the men that made it. Youngest member of the All-Ireland side was eighteen years old Tom ("Goatee") Brazill, who had the distinction of playing on the same Kilfinane team as his father, in a Limerick County Championship game.

THE GREAT "SEAN"
Most consistent player was James ("Sean Oge") whose usual position back, but who, when commanded, was quite capable of going up field and netting scores.

He was the inspiration team mates on innumerable occasions and some old time claim that they never saw on a hurling field. This tribute, indeed, but is the opinion of many who saw the great hurlers of fifty action.

November 20th, 1898, most exciting day in sporting history. Sixty horse car loads of spectators decked with banners and made the joyous journey perary town for the All-Ireland. When the victorious turned that night every every house in the town with candles Tar barrels ated the moat, the local paraded the streets and tribations went on through night — nobody bothered sleep.

Kilfinane will not be itself and its great tradition less it honours in worthy the coming Diamond Jubilee that unforgettable occasion Kilfinane members of the have all passed to the Beyond but their memory

