

No. 108—JIM HALLET of Foynes

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

WE visit the little port town of Foynes for our athletic star this week, and there meet a figure whose name has been a household word in the district for almost half a century, the one and only Jim Hallet. Perhaps few County Limerick footballers had a finer career than Jim, who was one of the most popular sportsmen ever to grace a field.

The sons of this little picturesque town have been always loyal to the cause of the G.A.A., and though for nearly five decades the men of this district seem to have more love for the kicking code, yet Foynes had great days with the caman too. To the parish goes the credit of being one of the very first in West Limerick to organise a hurling club. The great Foynes "Father Murphys" combination, universally known as the "Shannon Sweepers," is still an ever popular name with old hurling enthusiasts. Their great clashes with the neighbouring men of Mount Pleasant still live in memory, and in a memorable tournament played at Curragh Chase, they hurled three matches the same day and won outright a silver cup by defeating Rathkeale in the final. Star of that occasion was their founder and Captain, Mike Kirwan, the other members of the side being: Jim Kirwan, who later played on the Smith O'Brien's football team; Ned and Stephen Jackson, Paddy and James McNamara, Jack and Ned O'Connor, Tim and Jack Savage, Mick and Dan O'Sullivan, Mickie and Jim Shanahan, Ned Barron, Dan Sheehan, Johnny Hartnett, Jim Healy, Ned Walsh, and Jack Enright. The colours of the Father Murphy's club were green and gold, and, like most players of their time, the members wore caps of the same colours. And their first set of twenty-one hurleys that club bought for the modest sum of one guinea.

THE SMITH O'BRIEN'S.

It was not until the opening of the new century that the football found favour in Foynes. Nearing the end of 1904 a club was formed called the Smith O'Brien's in honour of that great patriot. William Smith O'Brien, who was one of the '48 insurgents. Mike McNamara, James O'Connor and William Cahill were the principal officials of the club, and John O'Connor, one of Ireland's leading full backs, was appointed captain. And what a grand side he led—a bunch of dashing footballers, great sportsmen all, while the famous club colours of green and white were soon to annex glory and pride on many a field.

For the first game in the history of the club they opposed Kilmallock in a friendly encounter at Adare. Although the more experienced South Limerick side were victorious, still the men of Foynes did very well. After the game the referee, the late D. S. Lyons, complimented Foynes on their fine display and remarked: "This is the coming team." What he said came true, for those enthusiastic sons of Foynes had not long to wait before being rewarded for their great work and loyalty to the cause.

MEMORABLE YEAR.

The season 1907 certainly stands out as being the most glorious in the history of the Foynes G.A.A. for in that memorable year the gallant men of this village—as brilliant a bunch as ever left any parish—mowed their way in victory array through all opposition, before finally overwhelming the great Commercial's to the tune of 1-5 to 0-4, in one of the greatest of Limerick football finals. Outstanding for Foynes on that memorable occasion were: John and Pat Sheehan, the two O'Connors and the subject of this sketch, Jim Hallet, who did Trojan work at midfield and completely mastered the great Albie Quillinan. The names of all that Foynes side deserve recalling: John O'Connor, captain; Tom Corbett, goalkeeper; Michael O'Connor, Pat Sheehan, John Sheehan, Ned Shanahan, Jim Kirwan, Ned Sheehy, Ned Enright, Martin Fitzgerald, Jack McCarthy, Paddy Madden, Tom O'Brien, Jim Hallet, Tom Hughes, Jim Walsh, Dan Costello, Paddy Liston, Jim Braddish and Pat O'Shea.

PLAYED IN CLARE AND KERRY.

In addition to their many County championship engagements the team played leading teams in Clare and Kerry. For their Banner County matches the players travelled in a boat kindly given by that grand old sportsman, the late Larry McNamara, of Mount Pleasant, who was himself a noted hurler and a great

friend of the Smith O'Brien's players.

Born at Mount Trenchard, Foynes, in 1878, Jim Hallet, a tall, powerfully built man, usually played at mid-field, where he formed a fine partnership with Jim Braddish and later with Ned Shanahan. Jim was a fine fielder and lengthy kicker and was also a good runner. He travelled widely during his long football career and was well known and respected by all.

Actually, Jim's connection with football dates back to the middle 'nineties when he figured with distinction on the local school teams. After his school days he worked at Foynes Saw Mills and later as a carpenter. While engaged at the saw mills he had to be at work at six-thirty every morning and often ran the two miles from his home to the village in order to be in time. In the evening after tea, he would walk into the village again and play football for an hour or two. Thus, he generally walked at least eight miles a day. **KEPT HIM FIT ALL THE TIME.** This, he says, kept him fit all the time. The entire Foynes team came together every summer's evening and practised. If it was a bright moonlight night they would keep playing until ten o'clock.

Plenty of walking and ball practice, Jim says, is the best and most natural training. Foynes and Ballynahill often played friendly games. The Foynes men would walk across the country to Ballynahill village, play a hard game, and then vamp home across fields and ditches again.

Tom O'Brien, Tom Hughes and Michael O'Connor were the three youngest members of that great "Smith O'Brien's" side of 1907, whilst the oldest player was Jim Hallet. Jim was thirty-two years of age when they won the County title, and eighteen years later—surely a football record—he played for Foynes against Glin in the West Limerick Junior final, at fifty years of age. On this latter occasion Jim guarded the net and acquitted himself very well.

One of the most thrilling incidents in Jim's career occurred during this game, when he saved a certain point in wonder fashion. A Glin forward kicked in a very high ball from an acute angle. It would have barely skimmed the post for a point, but just as the ball was crossing over, Jim pulled the post, which was loose, and the leather went inches wide. That was how he saved the point.

VIEWS ON PRESENT-DAY FOOTBALL.

Jim is very disappointed at the poor standard of football in Limerick now. "The days of the fine fielding are gone," he says. "Nowadays players have so much breaking and fumbling with the ball that you'd think it was hot. At the present time there are too many pretended injuries and players are getting winded every minute. In our playing days there was no such thing as a player lying down winded and a fellow wouldn't go down unless he was seriously injured and that was very seldom. In those times a player had no business entering a field unless he was prepared to take hard knocks. We could keep playing a match for hours and I was often sorry when the long whistle sounded, it looked as if the game was only on for half an hour. The game to-day is only like handball compared to our time."

HIS VIEWS ON GREAT PLAYERS.

Jim rates Mick Feely of Croom as the best hurler he ever saw, while the two best players he met during his football career were Jim Riordan and Albie Quillinan. But Jim holds that the Foynes skipper, John O'Connor, was the most reliable full-back he ever saw: "No matter what kind of a ball went towards the Foynes goal—a high drive or a low rasper, and no matter how many forwards were there, the ball was sure to be cleared by John O'Connor." In illustration, Jim pointed out that John and his backs went through the whole 1907 championship without a goal being registered against them. He also holds that their net minder, Tom Corbett, was as sound a keeper as ever stood between the posts. "Any man who tackled Tom didn't go into the square again. You can be sure he saw stars." Incidentally, it was the six-foot-four Jim Walsh who guarded the posts in the opening game of the 1907 championship, but he left for America, and Tom Corbett, another powerfully built man, stepped into the breach.

Jim Hallet is as active to-day as he was forty years ago, and has not lost his interest in football. "Of course I'd play still if I could," he says, and rarely misses a game in

which the present Foynes teams figure.

THRILLING EXPERIENCES.

The great "Smith O'Brien's" team had many thrilling and exciting experiences. The day of the 1907 West Limerick final the players travelled in a wagon drawn by two horses, while a long string of side cars and common carts followed. Jim Hallet, "Birdie" Madden and Jim Kirwan never took a seat—they just ran ahead of the rest, and throwing the ball to each other from side to side of the road. On their arrival at Rathkeale they were as fresh as daisies, and played a good tough game afterwards. It was a cold day, and shortly before the match a very heavy mist came. Mrs. Flaherty had kindly given the Foynes men the use of her cottage, and after the game the drenched players got a few cups of soup and a junk of mutton each. Jim Braddish did not take off his wet jersey, and as a result he developed pneumonia, and consequently missed the County final.

On the day of the County final a special train left Foynes, carrying the players and a huge crowd of supporters, led by Conor O'Brien, the world famous yachtsman and gun-runner, and Charlotte Grace O'Brien. Prior to this the girls of Foynes had knit little scarves of green and white for the players to wear, and when both teams were parading round the field after the band a few old women were heard to remark: "They must be college boys, they look like them anyway." Then, as the parade moved down the opposite side an old man on seeing Tom and Jim marching in front was heard say: "I wouldn't like to get a clout from the two of them."

WONDERFUL RECEPTION.

On their arrival home that night the victorious men got a wonderful reception. The village was ablaze and on every window rows of candles were lighting. The great "Smith O'Brien's," in existence only a few years, had overthrown the mighty Commercial's, County champions on eleven previous occasions and twice All-Ireland holders.

On one occasion when an Askeaton-Foynes selection travelled in Larry McNamara's ketch to Cahircion, where they played Kildysart, the Limerickmen remained in the Clare village until ten o'clock. Then they left on the homeward journey but as there was no breeze to drive the boat, it started to drift helplessly and continued so all night and when dawn broke they found themselves near Ballysteen.

Foynes also housed a few useful athletes around this period, and it may not be generally known that John Sheehan was a crack sprinter and gave some brilliant displays at sports meetings in his native Foynes, while his great contests with Mick Fuery, of Dromreasy, Glin, still live in memory. Then there was Paddy Corbett, who could clear six feet in the high jump, and Stephen Danaher, who was a useful miler. Tom Hughes and Tom O'Brien were also very versatile in amusement. They were both talented musicians, and in their spare time acted as dancing masters.

TRIBUTE IN SONG.

We must now leave the pretty village of Foynes and her gallant sons, who brought glory to their fine old parish and county, on days when it was not so easy to do so. And as a conclusion to this sketch nothing better could honour those gallant men than to quote a few verses from a fine song written in praise of them by their old friend and loyal supporter, Paddy O'Connell, of Corrig:

"So for the sake of Gaeldom boys, and the good old days gone by
I pen these lines in tribute to those worthy "Smith O'Brien's."
No truer hearts did ever beat 'neath jerseys green and white.
Since they brought the County Championship to the Lower Shannon side.
So we'll drink a toast to their memory, where e'er they now may be,
At home among their native hills or beyond the foaming sea.
Tho', alas, some, too, have passed along where angels pure abide,
And now look down on the Gaelic fields and their own dear green and white."

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