

No. 131—JIMMY KIRBY Of Limerick City

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH.

MEMORIES old and golden of the famous Rutland Street Ballcourt, long lost to handball, are recalled with the career of Jimmy Kirby, one of the best handballers of a great era by the Shannon, and one who strove, almost single-handed at times, to keep the old venue of such happy memories from falling into the decay that now unfortunately envelops it.

The old stronghold of handball, at the back of the Town Hall, was the scene of some wonderful games and tense, exciting drama on at least a few unforgettable occasions—not to mention the occasion when the great maestro—the late Johnny Bowles—played Morgan Pembroke of Dublin in an All-Ireland final there, and the big crowd had to keep perfectly silent, in case the Blacks and Tans, then plentiful in Limerick, got to know of the gathering, and made a raid—with all that entailed at the time.

Every stone in Rutland Street could tell a story, if they could only speak, and what tales they would tell. Almost all the great figures of the glamour days of Irish handball played there, and it even witnessed a world's title fight between J. J. Bowles and Jimmy Kelly, the American champion.

GHOSTS OF BYGONE DAYS.

It is sad, indeed, to see a place of such sacred handball associations going to ruin. The old standhouse that seated highly excited crowds, the clubrooms where the greats of the arena had many a friendly chat, in the showers that made Limerick in its hey-day the best equipped of Irish ballcourts—all are gone, and gaping wounds just remain—ghosts of bygone days, making mockery of the claim that the handball of to-day is the equal of the grand old Irish pastime that hits its Limerick peak when many of the grey heads amongst us now were mere boys.

Jimmy Kirby grew up in that handball "atmosphere." With the game enjoying its hey day, handball was naturally popular with the youth of the city, and Jimmy was early at it—playing up against an old gable near his home in the New Street. There were few motors then—so interruptions were rare.

Hurling, too, came early to him and his first efforts with the caman were with a district team of the time—Celtic Rovers. Later he figured with Catholic Institute, then a flourishing club, and with whom he played for a number of years, besides taking a very active interest in the management of the Club. Colleagues on the Catholic Institute team included Ald. John Carew, T.D.; Joe Duggan and Joe Martin. When Catholic Institute eventually dissolved (and their revival is long overdue), Jimmy lined out for a few seasons in the blue and gold of Young Ireland.

In Gaelic football he played with Boyds Athletic during the brief period of that Club's existence.

ATHLETIC INTERESTS.

As an athlete he figured successfully at a number of meetings, usually competing in the half and one mile events.

A member of the Limerick City Harriers' Club, he was an enthusiastic cross-country runner and rarely missed the Sunday morning runs during the winter months. Winner of the "Limerick Leader" Cross-Country Cup in 1931 he later ran with the City Club in the All-Ireland Junior Cross-Country Championship held over Greenpark Racecourse.

Handball, however, was Jimmy's big love—a game to which he devoted the bulk of his spare time and which he still plays to the present day.

He started his competitive play in the Model Schools, where the Drapers' Club organised a gold medal handicap tournament of 65 aces. Winning from Fonsie Ryan (Young Ireland) in the semi-final, he beat another great Young Ire-

land and Limerick hurling star, Tom Hayes, in the final.

The "Drapers" ran three great Tournaments there, the main organisers being Ned Houlihan, Tom Barrett and Brendan Madigan. Jimmy also won the second one, from scratch, a very closely contested and enjoyable competition—the year, about 1921.

Jimmy's handball improved with every appearance and he pays a well deserved tribute to the late Stephen Ryan, tailor, Shannon Street, a great sports man and a generous coach to all handballers until an unfortunate illness confined him to his home, where he still continued to take a lively interest in the game he loved.

GREAT HANDBALL COMPANY.

When he joined the famed old Rutland Street Court, Jimmy entered great handball company—figures like J. J. Bowles, Jacky Ryan, Eddie Bourke, Stephen Gleeson, J. J. Brennan and Tommy Forde, making it one of the strongest in the country, abounding in splendid talent. In fact, at the time, many held it was more difficult to win the club championship than a county or provincial title.

Jimmy won several club titles and afterwards represented his county in all senior grades, singles and doubles, hard and soft ball.

He won the Munster senior singles soft ball championship in 1925, beating M. Batterbury, of Waterford, in the final, after a stirring tussle, at Clonmel. He was foiled in the bid for All-Ireland honours by Martin Joyce of Dublin, who beat him at Naas, after a hard struggle. Joyce later proved himself one of the best soft ball players ever to grace the handball stage.

One of the toughest games Jimmy ever played was in Tipperary Town, where he partnered Stephen Gleeson (Fedamore) against Ormond and Moloney (Tipperary) in the Munster senior handball doubles final. The pair were level after winning three games each and Tipperary took the decisive game, 21-19, after a thrilling struggle. Jimmy told me recently that it was the most memorable rubber of his long handball career, "exciting and hard fought but played in a grand sporting spirit, which is, unfortunately, not always evident with our present players."

TRAINED HARD.

Jimmy trained hard all through his active career. He played handball about three times a week and also indulged in a number of short sprints besides doing a lot of walking.

The Limerick City man cycled to many of his matches. On one occasion he cycled to Bruff to play and win in a senior singles soft ball championship game and cycled home again. Another day he played one of the toughest of County senior handball singles finals against Tommy Forde in the morning, and then left for Tuamgraney, where he represented Limerick in the senior Soft Ball Munster Championship—a rubber that was made all the more strenuous by the absence of a back-wall.

Jimmy's sweetest victory was undoubtedly the great win over the veteran Johnny Bowles in the 1926 Senior Singles Hard Ball Championship of Limerick. In the opening game of the rubber the great old hero of many a memorable tussle tossed sixteen aces without reply. Jimmy fought back brilliantly and eventually won that game, 21-16. He secured the next two after an exciting struggle and thus got the rubber.

Another game he recalls with pleasure was a lost one. Partnered by J. J. Brennan the pair represented Limerick against Cork in the Munster hard ball doubles final. The first half at Limerick

left the home side leading five games to one, but the final portion saw Cork making a great recovery to win the rubber, seven games to five.

STILL TAKES DEEP INTEREST IN HANDBALL.

Jimmy still takes a deep interest in handball and stresses the point that the recent winning of the Junior All-Ireland Doubles Soft Ball Championship proves that Limerick still has players who are capable of keeping olden glory alive. He feels, however, that the absence of a covered court is a big handicap and thinks that an effort should be made to provide one in the city.

Limerick's great traditions were built in the hard ball code and for that reason he is sorry that the County Board are not promoting hard ball games, and getting the young players interested in the genuine native form of the game. It is a nicer game to watch, he holds, from the spectators' point of view, the sharp note of the alley cracker being sweet music to the real lovers of the code.

Concluding our discourse on handball matters Jimmy said: "I have time and again stressed the fact that in all the ball alleys built in the city not one has a gallery. I regard this as a great handicap as we cannot hope to stage any kind of championships here, in contrast to the many thrilling rubbers that were played in the old Rutland Street venue and aroused such interest and enthusiasm, which helped materially in the speed of the game. Another item I must mention is the lack of dressing rooms of any kind where players could get ready for a game or hold a meeting. I have often seen boys stripped and when the rains came they had no cover to keep their clothes dry. And oftentimes they were forced to put on wet clothes—not very good for the health, we must agree. And, as a last word, I regret to say what I think is the greatest drawback to handball is the fact that so few of the old players went back into the game to coach the youngsters after their playing days were over. Their help and encouragement could do a lot towards reviving this grand old pastime in Limerick City and County."