

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 29)—MICK LEAHY of Cregane

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

I HAVE written already of the doughty deeds in the athletic arena of four of the famous Leahy brothers—a quartette of the most colourful Gaels that ever donned togs anywhere.

Leaving Rathluirc, by the road to Croom, what memories are aroused as one with some little local knowledge picks out the sacred spots, as it were, of Gaelic history.

A short distance, and the early home of the world famed Irishman, the ever loved Archbishop of Melburne, Most Rev. Dr. Mannix, is reached.

Continuing, one passes on the right, the famous sportsfield where the cream of Irish athletes often gathered, and where, in the closing years of the last century, performances were witnessed that even an Olympic gathering would be wishful to command.

And that narrow road to the left, Well, it leads to the home of the Leahys—Leahys, the jumpers, as they are affectionately called by the neighbours.

NO FAMILY WITH SUCH A RECORD.

The world has not seen another family with so many notable units. In the sportsfield just passed Paddy topped the bar at 6ft. 4½ ins. and as he dropped to the ground his tread would not crush a daisy.

Paddy and Con had a world-wide reputation. Con was the elder of the two, but this was not well known, as Paddy had put up a great name before Con made his first appearance. They are best remembered as high jumpers, but they excelled also in the long jump and the hop, step and jump.

Paddy was an outstanding sprinter, and Joe was the best all-round man in the country before the arrival of Bresnihan. Tim, the youngest, approached very closely to Paddy and Con at the high jump, and Mick and Tom were not far behind.

Going back to Paddy and Con as high jumpers, while it must be said that Paddy has the most brilliant performances to his credit, there is no doubt that Con crossed the bar at 6 ft. oftener.

REMARKABLE PERFORMANCE

At a great Gaelic meeting in Limerick Paddy gave a brilliant and spectacular performance at high jumping that will never be forgotten by those who witnessed it. The other competitors were out of it at 6 ft. He continued on. The jumps at 6 ft. 1 in., 6 ft. 2 ins., etc., were called out, amidst a holy hush, by a judge with a stentorian voice. When he called out 6 ft. 5 ins. the applause was deafening. During the performance not a bar was knocked. The final jump was 6 ft. 5½ ins.—a remarkable performance.

The Leahy home at Cregane was a wonderful place, and many a happy evening was whiled away with stories concerning all the great athletes of their time. It was a magnificent era in Irish athletic history, and it must surely make many an old admirer of the grand men of the past lonesome to reflect now on the number of that brilliant band that have passed from this valley of tears, including five of the great Leahy clan—Paddy, Con, Tim, Tom and Jack. May God be with them all, where parting is no more.

EVER HELPFUL IN PROMOTING ATHLETICS.

The Leahys, besides being great athletes themselves, were ever to the fore in the promotion of athletic meetings. That great old Gael, the late W. F. Lee, often told me that Paddy Leahy offered him all the prizes for a meeting, from his own collection, if he organised it for his native district of Castleconnell.

And from another splendid Limerick Gaelic veteran—Mick

Madigan of Rathkeale—we have on record the part played by Paddy Leahy in connection with a big sports gathering that helped to provide the Limerick County Board, G.A.A., with much needed finance at a critical juncture in the affairs of that body.

Here, in Mick's own words, is the story of the venture:

"At a special meeting of the Co. Board the chairman, Larry Roche, asked Paddy Leahy if he would assist in the getting up of a G.A.A. sports meeting. Paddy replied and said it would give him a thousand pleasures, and he would also ensure that every athlete of note would be brought there by him, and so they were. Dublin, Galway, Cork, Clare, Tipperary and Kerry responded to the call of the famous Leahy brothers.

COMMITTEE FORMED.

"A committee was formed, consisting of all the city members of the Board. To these were added myself and Bill Sheahan, from the Western area; Tom Lundon from the Eastern area. Our part in the project was to get in as many prizes as we could. We were everywhere generously met, the Leahy brothers placing at the disposal of the committee some of the most beautiful trophies of the lot, these being won on all the classic arenas of the entire country.

"A beautiful prize was offered by the R.I.C. force at William St. When such was announced the greater portion of the Committee dissented from accepting it; in fact one member opened a window to cast it into the street. A few of the less extreme members argued that it was a truly sporting instinct that prompted some brother Irishmen, though wearing an English uniform, to present same for the uplifting of our national pastime, then at a low ebb. The prize, however, was returned and it is easy to guess what that meant at this particular time, when the word policeman meant such awe and power.

JOINT HANDICAPPERS

"Paddy Leahy, in conjunction with Paddy Hayes, then Secretary of the County Board, acted as joint handicappers at the meeting and the gate receipts far exceeded the three figures.

"The members who comprised the city section of the Committee were: P. Hayes, P. Meaney, Johnny Sweeney, Charlie Holland, Paddy Reilly, Jim Gleeson and James Halvey. In addition to these we had anything and everything that Con Fitzgerald, Albie Quillinan and Jim Riordan could do for the furtherance of our object. Chairman Larry Roche; the Leahy brothers, Paddy, Con, Joe, Mick and Jack; Bill Sheahan and myself with Jack Collins, of Feohanagh, representing the West; and Tom Lundon, who was after elected an M.P., were all to the fore in the running of a splendid meeting. Tom and Tim Leahy, though then mere lads, were also assisting the day of the sports."

MICK'S PROWESS IN THE HURDLES.

Well, I set out to record the doings of Mick Leahy, who donned silk for the first time in 1905. He frequently cleared the crossbar at 5 ft. 9 ins., but mostly devoted his attention to the hurdles and the

pole jump, at both of which he was very successful. Rather sturdily built, he was inclined to be a bit corpulent, a fact, however, which did not interfere with his athletics, for his speed and dash in the hurdles was truly amazing. Always there or thereabouts when honours were being handed out for the jumping, he had few equals in the country in his day in this branch of sport.

We first hit against Mick in winning lists at a sports meeting held at Fohenagh in 1905, where he was successful in the 120 yards hurdles event. This appears to have been his only prize secured that year.

The following season he fared even worse, for he had to be content with second place in the same event at a gathering in Holycross. 1907 was a blank year with him, but behind every cloud there's a silver lining, and it was merely the calm before the storm.

FIRST PRIZE IN THREE EVENTS.

He opened 1908 with a quartette at Nenagh that really put him on the map as an outstanding athlete. In the North Tipperary venue he drew first prize in three events—the running high jump, the pole jump, and the 120 yards hurdles, whilst he was second in the running long jump, the only success I can find recorded for him in this event.

He followed up the Nenagh triumph with victories in the high jump and hurdles, at both the Limerick R.I.C. and Kilcullen sports, but in a visit to the D.M.P. meeting had to be content with the second position in the flight over the bar.

At Kanturk he was second also in the high jump, but resumed a winning way in the hurdles. In passing I might remark that he had often his more famous brothers, Con and Tim, to contend with in the high jump, so second place at times in this event was an honour in itself. At Mungret, Mick resumed his winning "double"—the high jump and hurdles—increasing this to a "treble" at Askeaton a little later on in the year, when he put pole jump figures to his credit with the other two. Thus finished his most successful year.

The following season saw him only once figuring in the prize parade, and then to collect 2nd place at Bandon in the hurdles. During this year he went to America, where he remained for some time, and there is no mention of him in the home arena during 1910.

So we must continue along to Listowel in 1911 before next making his acquaintance. In the North Kerry venue he won the old reliable hurdles event and chalked up second scores in "high". At Dunmanway he was best in the pole flight for height, a mastery which he confirmed a little later at Tralee and supplemented with a high jump victory.

ANOTHER RED LETTER YEAR

1912 proved another red letter year in the career of Mick Leahy. At Rathkeale he had a first and two seconds—the former in the high jump, the latter pair the pole jump and hurdles. At both Mitchelstown and Ballyporeen he was second in the jump for height, and at Banteer repeated his Dunmanway performance of the previous season. At Cobh he was "just another of the Leahys"—familiar

figures there, and where I think,

Tim made his athletic debut. He won in the hurdles to keep the name and fame intact. His last appearance this year was at Done-rale, where he filled second place in his beloved race over the sticks.

The next season witnessed his farewell to the active arena. He commenced it with a second at Rathkeale in the high jump; he followed up with a pole jump at Banteer. At Clonlara he gave a sound display, and was rewarded with a dual victory—the high and pole jumps yielding to his prowess. Perhaps it was but fitting that his finale should be at Mallow, where he now resides, and he signalled his last appearance by upholding the Leahy name in the high jump and by securing second position in the pole event.

We must leave Cregane now, and bid farewell for the moment to the famous family of such happy athletic memories. We have just one more visit to pay there in this present series, to meet an old friend in Joe, now the only one of the great brothers left in the old home of the grand athletic gatherings in days that can come no more.

No. 30—Mick Creed, of Elton.

CORRECTION

A fortnight ago, when dealing with the career of Jim Keyes of Pallasgreen, I mentioned that he was beaten "by a fellow Limerick man, J. P. McCarthy of Kilfinane," in the 100 and 220 yards Flat Championships of Ireland at Mallow in 1911.

This statement was in accordance with the official records as given in Carbery's "Fifty Years of Ireland Athletics" which credits to "J. P. McCarthy, Kilfinane," the following:

Won (under I.A.A.A. laws) 100 Yards Flat Championship of Ireland, 1911, 10½ secs.; 1915, 10 2-5 secs.

Won (under G.A.A. laws), 220 Yards Flat Championship, 1911, 22 4-5 secs.; 1915, 24 secs.

In bare justice, I must now state that the championships enumerated above were won by Very Rev. Patrick J. Finn, now P.P., Kilmeeady—a native of Ballinanima, Kilfinane. I understand that the name under which he competed in 1911 was "P. J. Quinn," and, in 1915, he ran as "P. J. McCarthy."

In 1911, Father Finn was a student in St. Munchin's College, Limerick, and later that year left to continue his studies at the Irish College, Paris, where he remained until the outbreak of war in 1914. In November of the latter year he entered Maynooth, and the following season saw his welcome return to Irish athletic fields. In addition to the championship titles he won in 1915, Father Finn had a remarkable success in a memorable race at Kinsale sports for a gold watch, beating Denny O'Leary of Cork, in a great finish.

I hope at a later date to deal more fully with Father Finn's achievements, but wish now to correct an error in the accepted guide book to a great era in Irish athletics.

S. O CEALLAIGH.