

# Great Limerick Athletes

## No. 70—MARTIN R. LYNCH of Caherconlish

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

THE news that the Gaels of Caherconlish have brought to fruition long hatched plans for the purchase of a sports field in the town will be received with feelings of real pleasure, particularly by old timers who remember the district as the home of some great runners and athletes in days gone by.

The outstanding figure in the athletic story of the area was undoubtedly the world's champion weight thrower the late Jack O'Grady, and associated with him in many of his greatest triumphs was Martin R. Lynch, who had built an athletic repute of his own several years before the great O'Grady made his bow in the arena he graced so well and for so long.

The closing years of the last century and the opening decade of the present one produced splendid athletes, many of them untrained and untutored, yet capable of achievement on track or field which all the specialisation of the present day has not succeeded in bettering.

Some of the great Irish figures of the golden era have had their records surpassed but the bulk of the old timers will tell you it is the methods that have advanced, not the men, and they hold, and maybe rightly so, that the athlete of today is not superior, man for man, to the athlete of say, fifty years ago.

Now we have methods of scientific training and approach undreamt of when men like Lynch were in their prime, and it would be a rash judgment to conclude that the records of his day were less meritorious achievements than the wonder figures we hear of from other countries to-day, giving due consideration to the methods of training of the respective eras.

### HOW HE TRAINED.

When I asked Martin Lynch how he trained during his years of active competition he just shrugged his shoulders and said that he was out from Monday to Sunday during the amateur season at sports meetings anywhere within decent range of his pony and trap or bicycle. After that, an odd run around a field was all the training he ever did, yet he hardly ever went to a sports meeting without bringing home a prize—oftener than not a few of them and that despite big fields and stern competition. And all the week he worked hard on the farm—milking cows and all the other odd jobs that make up a dairy farmer's long day.

All the great figures of the Irish arena had the natural attributes that are the first essentials in an athlete. Endowed by nature with a healthy body and strong muscles, to which was allied sound wind, success came with the mental adaptation that is necessary before full advantage can be taken of the other endowments.

Born at Caherconlish nearly seventy years ago, Martin R. Lynch was still in his teens when he won his first race in a pair of borrowed shoes, the property of a then athlete of All-Ireland renown, now Very Rev. Michael Kennedy, P.P., Murroe. And to add spice to the story, he beat Father Michael's brother, John Kennedy of Ludden, Ballyneety, to take one of the sweetest victories of a long list that brought him more than one hundred and fifty prizes—the most of which he gave away almost as quickly as he won them.

### TYPICAL INSTANCE.

A typical instance of this was supplied at Bilboa sports, where he won the 100, 220 and 440 yards, and yet did not bring home any of the three trophies. Accompanied to the meeting by Tom Ryan (Luke) and Matty Ryan (Voorra) he gave them a prize apiece, and presented the third—a melodeon—to Pat Lee, a neighbour, who afterwards travelled many journeys with Martin, and always brought the melodeon to while away the happy hours going to or coming from a meeting.

Another of his early triumphs was achieved at Murroe, where he beat the local idol, Tom O'Brien, a great strong runner, after cleverly dodging the "favourite," a well known performer called Holmes. The trio were running neck and neck entering the straight, and with the crowd roaring "Close in Holmes," the Caherconlish man spotted a space between Holmes and the peg and shot through to win a magnificent race.

The events at which Martin excelled were the 100, 220 and 440 yards, but he also won prizes at the 120 yards hurdles, the long jump, and, in later years, at pushing the 28lbs. from shoulder. His most notable achievement in the hurdles was accomplished at the Markets Field, where he beat no less a personage than the great Larry Kiely, a success that encouraged him to try his luck at this event more frequently afterwards.

### SENSATIONAL RACE.

He was actually forced out to make up a number in the great race with Kiely. The Carrick man encouraged him to compete, suggesting that, as a good sprinter, he would be able to hold his own for most of the distance. Lynch had a great heart, and when he got going took a fit man to beat him.

In the race with Kiely he found himself in it with a chance at the second last hurdle, and he put on

the spurt that the champion could not emulate, and Martin won a sensational race with something to spare. He was also victorious in the "220" at the memorable meeting. He gives credit for his success over the hurdles to the tutoring of an R.I.C. man named O'Connor, who was then stationed at Caherconlish.

Another unforgettable occasion was at O'Gonnoloe Sports, which he reached by travelling in the train from Killonan to Killaloe, where, after sweeping the boards in winning the 100, 220 and 440 events, he was induced by the handicapper, the late P. J. Hayes, to turn out in the mile. On a small track, eight laps to the distance, he lined out in the heart of fourteen or fifteen competitors, with instructions to pull out when called upon to do so. He was hardly half way through when "P.J." gave indication that he was to retire. However, Martin had other ideas. He noticed that he was at least holding his own, if not actually advancing, and determined to finish the distance, which he did, to win in smashing style.

### FIRST REFERENCE.

Taking a quick glance over the recorded meetings at which he participated, we find first reference to Martin R. Lynch at Bruff Sports, on July 8th, 1906, where he was second in the 220 yards flat, off the 17 yards mark.

A week later, at Tipperary, he had another second—this time in the "440"—the full return reading: J. O'Connor (40 yards), won; M. R. Lynch (29 yards), second; F. Short (30 yards), third.

We next meet him at Pallaskeenry on August 15th, where he won the "440" with W. Alfred of Adare second, but filled second place himself to P. Quilligan, in the 220 yards flat. His journey to that meeting was an eventful one. Setting out to cycle the two dozen miles from Caherconlish he got a puncture shortly after passing Limerick City. Meeting a carpenter, the latter fixed it by cutting the lining from a horse's straddle, and he reached the venue just as the meeting commenced. The handicapper, P. J. Leahy, spotting his distressed condition shouted: "Lie down awhile and put a top coat over you." He did so and was alright in a short time. The big-hearted Paddy Leahy, however, insisted on his returning to Limerick with him on a side car, and Martin slept that night with "P. J." at his home in Cecil Street, cycling home to Caherconlish the following morning.

On August 19th Martin had an even longer cycle, when he covered the journey to New Birmingham and back on his bicycle, recording one of his rare victories in the "Half Mile," W. Alfred again filling second place.

### OTHER SUCCESSES.

At Croom on September 13th, he notched another series of unusual successes, winning the 100 yards flat, with P. Culligan second and M. J. Creede, third and finishing second to M. J. Creede in both the running high jump and the hop, step and jump.

When Martin went to Ennis Sports on June 16th, 1907, he forgot his togs but big Paddy Ryan, of Pallasgreen, obliged with a loan of his, and the Caherconlish man finished second to Jim O'Connor in the "440."

At Mitchelstown on August 3rd, he collected two seconds from the 220 and 440 yard events. Two days later, at Foynes, he had three firsts—220 and 440 flat and 120 yards hurdles, and a second, in the 100 yards flat, to his credit.

On September 22nd at Bruff, he won the 220 yards flat, with J. H. Cullen of Kilross filling second place, and in the 100 yards flat was second to Davy O'Connell of Ardpatrick, whom Martin regards as the best man he met on the flat.

A week later, he had three seconds to his name at CastleMahon Sports, one in his favourite "440," and the others to Joe Leahy, in the 120 yards hurdles and the unusual 16 lbs. shot.

His main performance during 1908 were at Nenagh, on June 7th where he was again second to Joe Leahy in the hurdles, but was beaten back to third place in the "440," which P. O'Connell won, with W. Browne second.

At Clonmel, a fortnight later, he ran second to Larry Dwane of Roscarbery, in a great Scratch Race over 440 yards, for the Mayor Condon Cup. The same day he also took the second prize in the hurdles.

The only other appearance of his I find reported for this season was at Kilmallock on July 19th, where he was second in both the 220 and 440 yards flat.

At Elton, on 1st August, 1909, he won his last big race over 440 yards, and finished second to J. J. Hurley in the "220."

These doings of his, taken from available press reports, by no means cover his many appearances on the track and actually do him an injustice by not mentioning a near All Ireland win at Mallow on one occasion, a Munster championship success at Feohanagh, and other important successes at Ballyvesta, near Emly; Newport, Bulgaden, and Murroe, the latter, for the "New Church" Fund.

### ASSOCIATION WITH JACK O'GRADY.

When Martin retired towards the end of the first decade of the century, few of his admirers expected to see him back as a very effective athletic force some years later.

The rise of his near neighbour, Jack O'Grady, as a weight thrower of promise interested Martin greatly, and it was not long before he had Jack in hands preparing him for his debut. The 7th of September, 1913 was the occasion of O'Grady's first great triumph, when he tied with his fellow Limerickman, Mick O'Brien of Bulgaden, at putting the 56 lbs. in a contest for the championship of Ireland. Both men broke Ned O'Grady's old record of 23 ft. 9½ inches, their return being 23 ft. 11 ins., which was certified as correct by an Engineer. The judges on the occasion were John Flanagan and Larry Roche.

At Mallow, three weeks later, O'Grady put up a record with the 28 lbs. weight at 36ft. 8½ ins. that displaced a long standing figure set by Willie Real. That day, Martin R. Lynch was second to O'Grady, a position he occupied several times afterwards.

Martin and Jack were great pals, and it was at Martin's place Jack used to train, his appearance there arousing great enthusiasm, with the result that even old men used often attend and themselves "have a go" with the 28 lbs.

### GOOD STORIES.

Martin tells a good story concerning a meeting they attended together at Rockmills, some five miles beyond Kilfinane. Cycling to Kilmallock the previous evening, they were met there and got a drive to a farmer's house close to Kilfinane where they stayed the night. Passing Kildorrey church just as last Mass had concluded the following morning they heard a Bellman announce: "Come and see O'Grady, the World's champion weight thrower, and Murphy, the Rate Collector, at Rockmills Sports to-day." Whether the Sports Committee or the Rate Collector employed that particular worthy they never found out, but another incident occurred following the meeting, which made it a particularly noteworthy one for Martin.

O'Grady, of course, won the 28 lbs. and with a share to spare, but the press reporter got his figures a bit mixed and Monday's papers gave Lynch the winner, and by a goodly margin. Cycling home that evening by Sheehan's Cross, Martin met a neighbour, who knew them both and thought, too, he knew their capabilities. "So you beat John yesterday" he said. "I did that," answered Martin, knowing of the incorrect newspaper story. "How is it you couldn't beat him before?" went on the neighbour. "I only wanted to give him a chance for a bit" countered Lynch, and soon the story was around that Martin was even better than the World's Champion.

### HANDICAPPER'S ADVICE.

The day Jack tied with Mick O'Brien, for the Irish Championship, he was wearing a big pair of nailed boots. The handicapper, Denny Power, of Ballywalter came up to him and said "Stand back a foot from that tape, and throw your whole weight behind your effort." Jack took the advice, with the happy result already recorded.

Martin, who feels that present-day athletes are very bad considering the facilities they have now is particularly disappointed that we have no jumpers of note. He thinks to-day's youth have too much money to spend and their minds are not on the simple things of life from which such enjoyment was got in the past, oftentimes with only a few shillings in the pocket and travelling a distance to a sports meeting.

Also a keen follower of hurling for many long years, Martin considers Tim Lloyd one of the best hurlers Ireland ever saw, and rates him superior even to the great Sean O'Kennedy, of Wexford who, I think, would be his second choice. Tim, he tells me, was a light hardy player, strong as a horse and so adept at the game that he could literally "take the ball out of your eye."

He also has vivid memories of Jim Flood, who helped Kilfinane to victory in the All-Ireland final of 1897. Jim, who often walked the fifteen or sixteen miles to Kilfinane, in order to play a match, was one of the honestest hurlers he ever saw at the game.

Although fearful of forgetting some of the old hurling stars he admired so much in the past, Martin paid tribute to the greatness of such figures as the Muldoon brothers, Paddy and Jim; the Magan brothers, Mickey Ryan (Macanta), the Bourkes, Matty in goals and Jim outfield; the Kielys, Dan Hourigan, of Newtown; Mick Neill, Paddy Creamer, Johnnie Fennel "a great forward"; Tim Wixted and Jack O'Grady's brothers, Tom and Ned, with Mickey Fitzgibbon of the more modern school, a firm favourite, too.

And on that note I leave another of our great Limerick athletes, with the hope that the years which have been kind to Martin so far will continue so for many a long day to come.

Slainte Martin R. Lynch.  
No. 71—J. F. Halvey, of Limerick City.