

# Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 59)—Mick Madigan  
of Rathkeale

(By SEAMUS O'CALLAIGH)

IN the many articles already published, I have dealt with the Gaelic and athletic deeds of men who not only shed lustre on their native districts but also placed our county on an athletic and national pedestal of fame, of which we all should feel justly proud.

Now, my pen strays fondly to the old historic Borough Town of Rathkeale, whose G.A.A. and national renown takes no second place to any other town in our southern province and in the perpetuating of these two great and laudable objects we must always associate a name which even to-day is something of a household word—the one and only Mick Madigan.

To do full justice to his many and varied activities would require more space than I have at my disposal, for each and every activity of his was a forward step to advance and place his native town in the fore-front, not alone of Gaeldom but in national, athletic and cultural spheres as well.

## INTEREST IN HIS NATIVE TOWN.

Even as a lad of sixteen Mick showed marked interest in the progressive outlook of his native town and a few years later, when a vacancy occurred in the Town Council the leading citizens of Rathkeale unanimously agreed that he should fill the position. His inclusion whilst still six months short in age, of twenty years, left him the youngest member of any Town Council in the country, another interesting feature being the fact that his father was also a member of the same Council.

A great worker in the furtherance of any cause for the advancement of his native town, I discovered that no matter what project was launched, there he was usually the one selected to act as pen-man.

Generally associated in most minds as an outstanding and life-long worker for the G.A.A., I found, however, that Mick's pride in his great achievements as Secretary of the local Branch of the United Irish League.

Here, there and everywhere in the Ireland of his young days there were landlords of the rich class that even the mighty and overwhelming power of the Land League failed to dislodge. The great Father Casey of Abbeyfeale launched a county wide campaign to make them as obnoxious as possible by not allowing them hunt over the holdings of any land-owner but it did not meet with the success expected.

## BIG TRIAL OF STRENGTH.

At a meeting of the West Limerick Executive, Father Casey, reporting on the failure of the campaign, said they had met with a setback, but they had hope that, with the cooperation of the G.A.A. and its widespread organisation and membership, they might succeed yet in reversing the situation.

To Mick Madigan was entrusted the task of enlisting the active support of the G.A.A., and it was agreed that the big trial of strength would take place at a hunt meeting to be held at Ballynue. The Rathkeale man, aided by willing helpers, set to work and, despite stern opposition, particularly from the R.I.C. Inspector and his men, the Gaels made a coronation around the hunt members and defied them to proceed. The result was that in the space of a few weeks word reached the members of the League that all evicted tenants would be reinstated. Two members of the G.A.A. muster that scored the great victory of that occasion, and still happily with us, are Jack Power and Jerry Cahill of Ballynue.

## THE LABOUR CAUSE.

When Lord and Lady Emily, J. J. O'Shea, M.P. and John Osborne visited Rathkeale to organise the first Irish Land League and Labour Association, Mick was appointed secretary. Outstanding achievement of this organisation was the securing of the additional half-acre to all cottage plots, as well as the introduction of the direct labour scheme on the roads.

This Association, though then

comprising only a few labour units, mostly illiterate, might be termed the foundation stone of the now mighty I.T. and G.W.U., which secured not alone stability to the worker in his job but also a decent wage for the upkeep of himself and his family.

Other secretarships held by Mick included the Town Tenants' Association, the Coursing Club, Game Preservation Club, and, of course, the G.A.A.

In the early years of the present century, when the County Board was a financial wreck, Mick Madigan rendered valuable assistance as Vice-Chairman. A little later, when a bad split came in the G.A.A., ranks, he was called upon to fill the post of secretary to a small committee, consisting of some eight or nine members, who were entrusted with the task of keeping things moving until better times dawned.

In the vocal and musical world he was very much at home, making many popular contributions to the social life of the town, always rendering his own composed recitations, songs, monologues, and sketches. In the all too rare ventures of the G.A.A. into the social sphere he lent valuable support, and captivated Limerick City audiences on a few occasions with his unusual and very entertaining contributions.

When Bill Muleahy led Rathkeale to become Dublin's leading operatic tenor, Mick replaced him as soloist in St. Mary's Choir. He accompanied Christy Lynch for his first audition, and helped to set the former star Rathkeale goal-keeper on the road to musical fame.

## FIRST CONTACT WITH THE G.A.A.

His first contact with the G.A.A. came little over three score years ago—in 1899 to be exact. In that year the first eight-inch football was introduced, and it looked a tiny thing then in contrast to the big heavy balls that were in general vogue.

Rev. Gerald O'Connor, organiser and promoter of the Rathkeale Temperance Society, was G.C. of the parish. In connection with the Temperance movement, he decided on forming a Mass Servers' Football Club, and the activities of this very youthful but enthusiastic bunch of youngsters resulted in the first linking of Mick Madigan and the G.A.A.

That was many long years ago, but Mick never broke his connection with the Association, and it is a proud boast of his that he still remains as ardent and enthusiastic a follower as the G.A.A. ranks own.

When forming his club, Father O'Connor administered a pledge to all the players. This pledge none of them broke. The club, when it developed in after years, lost to Foyes by a solitary point the season the latter won the County Championship. A few of the leading lights of that combination are still to the good—Bernard Tansey, Edwin Johnson and Paddy Flaherty, Rathkeale's former very well-known county players. The late Sean Finn and the late Jack Murroyle were others to figure with them on that occasion.

At the request of his life-long friend, Bill Sheahan, Mick lent his lot in with the Abraham Hurling Club in 1901. He tells me that his instructions were never to look at the ball at all when playing, but in every way stop the opponents, and he was pitted against some of the best, including Mick Clifford of Ballynue, M. Hynes, Cappamore, and the Kerry scoring machine, Michael Hurley.

## VIEWS ON PRESENT-DAY GAMES.

When I asked him what he thought of present-day hurling and football, his reply was that the standard was as high as ever but

lack of length in the pucking was very noticeable. This he attributed to the light sticks now in use, which in the old days would be only rated camogie hurleys as regards weight.

Mick holds very definitely that the spirit of the G.A.A. is not what it was. In his days the players picked their own hurleys and made them. They got a few ounces of thread and wound the balls, which were covered by some member of the club, and they paid their own fares to any of the outside venues for their matches. Mick went on: "Take away dances, whist drives, etc., from our various clubs and they would not be there at all. It is the public to-day that keeps the G.A.A. standing on its feet."

As evidence of the great sporting spirit of the olden arena, Mick says that the players always shook hands with their opponents prior to the throw-in of the ball, and again when leaving the field after the match.

A novel prize offered for a practice match between Limerick Commercials and a Rathkeale-Newtonbridge selection three weeks before Commercials won their second All-Ireland Senior Football title was a half-barrel of stout.

## HIS FIRST ATHLETIC OUTING.

Mick's first athletic outing was made in company with J. J. Bresnahan, both travelling to Foyes, where J. J. won a sprint and weight event and the Rathkeale lad secured first in the half mile and second in the "440."

In three years on the track, Mick won nineteen prizes in mile and half-mile events. In addition, he was a regular competitor at the Sunday evening sports, then such a popular feature in Rathkeale, and was ever open to take on any competitor for a half-mile or mile event. In any of these he was never

beaten. He also secured the award for half a dozen fapper cycling events in the evening contests.

Having sustained a bad knee fracture in a football match, he was forced to retire from the running track, but made a "come-back" at the age of thirty-three and annexed the half-mile for seasons in an event confined to the Town and Parish of Rathkeale.

Mick has a few trophies which he regards with particular affection. One is a beautiful cup presented by Lord Montegale of Mount Treachard; the other, the gift of the late Murray Maasy of Rathronan House, Ardagh. Both were for mile events.

However, the proudest one of his collection was that won with Paddy Ryan, world's championship hammer thrower as opponent, and was in a raising and striking the ball event.

Paddy was after making his first world's record with the hammer, and also secured a record of 102 yards with a hurling ball. However, the latter was accompanied with a driving wind; the weight of the ball was not given.

In the earlier contests fair raising and striking there was no uniformity as regards weight of ball or hurley, and to rectify this, Paddy Leahy, then handicapper, got a 43 oz. ball made, also a special hurley, which he carried to all his sports meetings. These he introduced at Foyes for the first time. It was

a dead calm August evening, ideal for the event.

## GREAT COMPETITORS.

I will let Mick tell the story himself: "The ball was weighed at Moss, Fitz's, previous to contest. There were twenty-one competitors, including Paddy Ryan, J. J. Bresnahan, Mickey Creed, Mick Leahy and Paddy Flaherty—all having several wins to their credit for the event. There was not an inch between them all. I was standing as a spectator in non-athletic attire, having fractured my knee a short time before, and Paddy Leahy called on me to try and decide the issue. This did quite easily in the second attempt, when I registered 89 yards 3 inches. On doing so, Paddy Ryan congratulated me, shook hands and flattered me very much, I must say, when he asked me to exchange prizes. He gave me his hammer prize won on the occasion and this I very proudly cherish. He has mine for the raising and striking event, I may add, and the handle of the hurley was quite slippery from sweat. I also feel that I lost a few yards by not being in athletic costume."

## THE LATE MICK CLIFFORD.

Mick Madigan considers Mick Clifford of Ballynue one of Limerick's outstanding county players—a real prince of Gaeldom and a thorough gentleman from head to foot. The Ballynue man defeated the greatest number of stars who complete the G.A.A. ever knew in any one team. In his selection he had the three Leahy brothers—Joe, Mick and Tom; Larry Roche, Owen Coll, J. J. Bresnahan, with Mick Gibbons and Dick Quill not inches slower. Imagine the weight and athletic power of Lorry Roche, full-back, with Jack and Jack Bresnahan at each side of him. A much-appreciated gesture of the famous Leahy brothers was the presentation by them of a dozen of their best prizes as a free gift to Mick Madigan when he organised a big sports meeting for Rathkeale in 1910.

## PASSION FOR COLLECTING SOUVENIRS.

Mick had a passion for collecting souvenirs, and among the many he boasts is a piece of rope that laid Father Casey's coffin in its last resting place; a hurley presented by the late Austin Stack in a Kerry v. Limerick match they played at Tralee, and a flag taken from Croke Park goalposts following Limerick's 1934 All-Ireland hurling victory. There is also growing in his garden a shrub from a sprig taken from Parnell's grave in Glasnevin Cemetery.

The public platform did not escape his many versatile turns, and whenever he appeared as orator he always had many kind words for labour's cause. It was only a few years ago he was chosen to give the oration in commemoration of the Croppies, at the Memorial Cross erected to their memory at St. Mary's Cemetery, Rathkeale.

A keen gardener, Mick has a pride he values a lot in a competition open to all Munster. He secured first place with the best head of broccoli grown in the area from seeds of a well-known Cork supplier.

In the coursing world he had some notable successes, two of his dogs, "The Broadway Baron" and "Come On Athane" being stake winners and dividend on many occasions. He also had a bitch that registered a flag against a Waterloo nomination.

## HIS FAVOURITE SPORT.

Mick told me that his favourite sport was harrier hunting. He feels that every town or parish should own a small pack, say ten or fifteen, and divides on many occasions. He also had a bitch that registered a flag against a Waterloo nomination.

He can still be seen with hound and cocker, crossing the fields of his native parish, unimpeded by ditch or dyke. He is the ball amateur sportsman. He says age does not matter, the love of the hound or harrier makes you feel ever young.

And now, as I prepare to leave Rathkeale and Mick Madigan, I must offer to him, and through him to all the great athletes of Limerick still happily with us, a flag symbol of a glorious year. He wishes for a Christmas enriched by the blessings of the Christ-child and a New Year strengthened by His care. Agus go mbeirimid beo ar an am so aris.

"No. 60—Jerry Foran of Broadford.