

# No 127—JOHNNY McAULIFFE of Bruff

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH.

**H**URLING has regained the front of the stage in recent years as the premier sports attraction of the country. For a period, Gaelic Football was inclined to oust the caman code from the place of honour but the hurling has come back in no uncertain fashion and the last twelve months witnessed a remarkable revival of interest and enthusiasm, coupled with some great displays on the playing fields.

For this happy state of affairs much credit must go to Johnny McAuliffe, who has devoted more than half a lifetime to produce a hurling ball that would meet the very exacting requirements of a critical hurling public.

The McAuliffe story commences in Bruff, many years ago, when Johnny, as a young lad, came to the fore with the Bruff hurlers—won many tournament ties with the home parish, and helped them reach a couple of championship finals, but without ever tasting the fruits of championship success.

## GRAND FIGURES.

Bruff boasted some grand figures then, in hurling, handball and athletics; men who could hold their own in any company, and it is a real pity that circumstances deprived them of what their prowess justly entitled them to. But times were troubled in Ireland at the period and the Bruff heyday coincided with the unsettled days, when championships were often impossible to play whilst on other occasions, teams were unable to muster their full strength, due to more important calls in the cause of national endeavour.

That Johnny had always an interest in the ball as well as the hurley can be judged from the fact that he was recognised "mender" even in his youthful days in Bruff, when the ball required a few stitches or some more elaborate repair operation.

Moving into Limerick City in 1919, Johnny McAuliffe soon became associated with the famous Young Ireland Club, then at its peak, and he was not long wearing the storied old colours of Blue and Gold before he won the gold medal that still hangs from his watch chain, as symbol of Limerick senior hurling supremacy.

## ONLY ONE OF MANY HONOURS.

That was only one of the many honours won with Young Ireland, though the opportunities of the time were restricted and dangerous, with English bullets causing bereavement in many a Gaelic home-stead.

The Fight for Independence and the Civil War left their undoubted impress on the Ireland of his active playing days, and Johnny had hung up his hurley and togs by 1925, when matters Gaelic got back to something like their old position once more.

Actively associated with the Young Ireland Club as he was, and a committee member of same, his interest in the ball, and his prowess at patching the burst and broken ones, gave the notion to his fellow committeemen that if he could mend balls well he should also be useful at making them.

So in 1925 it was "making and mending" as far as Johnny was concerned, for he took up the challenge of the Young Ireland lads, and made a few balls for the Club that were quickly recognised as better than any that could be got elsewhere.

## ALL THE TIME SEEKING IMPROVEMENT.

Even at this early stage in his career as a maker, Johnny was all the time seeking improvement, and I remember the occasions when he went to a game in which Young Ireland were playing, with a pocketful of balls—and had one to suit any weather conditions.

Handball, too, the original Irish hardball type, was popular in Limerick around this period, and Johnny entered that domain also,

making balls that such a fine exponent as the late Johnny Bowles was even pleased to use.

Thirty years have passed since the first hurling ball with the McAuliffe brand went on the playing fields of Limerick. Its worth was fairly quickly recognised, and the old hurler was soon making a number of different types of balls—for the primary schools, the colleges, the minors, the camogie players, and the standard ball for championship play.

## ORDERS ROLLED IN.

Soon their fame had travelled far outside Limerick, outside Ireland, in fact, and the orders rolled in with such profusion and regularity that Johnny had rarely an hour he could call his own.

Eventually, he was forced to resign his position in a city bakery in order to devote his whole time to the business which had started as a hobby, and a little later his son also had to come to his assistance, so great was the demand. From his home in Thomas Street, the balls were soon rolling out in a seemingly endless stream to all the great hurling Counties, to England and America, to Africa and Australia, until soon the McAuliffe address book was like a register of Irish people domiciled the world over.

With the erection of the huge Cusack Stand, at Croke Park, in 1937, came the first real complaint of inability to see the hurling ball. Spectators began talking about the difficulty in following the flight of the ball against a background of packed stands and embankments.

Immediately Johnny set to work in an effort to overcome this trouble. If my memory serves me rightly, the first experiment was with a red ball and it was used in an All-Ireland Colleges Senior Hurling final, at Croke Park, about ten years ago. It was not a great success, and soon we find it replaced by another, which quickly gained favour as the following extracts from a newspaper report of the period show:—

"To-day, at Croke Park, the new hurling ball will have its biggest test to date, before a crowd which is expected to pass the sixty thousand mark.

## BIG DIFFICULTY.

"Ever since hurling was first played the biggest difficulty has been to find a ball which would be visible at all times, particularly in wet and dull weather.

"A well-known Limerick manufacturer (McAuliffe) has been experimenting for many years in an effort to solve the problem and now has produced a white ball with a red rim, and it is so treated that it will not lose its colour during a game, even in wet weather. It is also waterproof and so, unlike all previous balls, it will not become heavy on wet ground.

"It was used at Croke Park during the recent Laois-Galway All Ireland semi-final, when rain fell during the entire match, and was generally accepted as satisfactory.

"The Central Council of the Association have approved of it and it is likely to be accepted by all county boards and councils throughout the country."

## YEARS OF EXPERIMENTS.

Years of experiments with pigments and powders went into the production of this ball, and putting into an oven to bake further improved its "staying powers." But it had one fault which made it unpopular with many hurlers. Extremely hard at the start, and livelier than any ball used previously, its "life" was short, thus proving an expensive proposition, particularly for teams that considered it essential for use during training, in order to familiarise their players with all its features.

Meanwhile, the experiments continued, and I remember seeing a rimless ball in use on a few occasions. Johnny told me at the time that it was purely a match ball and not suitable for the wear and tear

of practice. After a match in which it was used, Christy Ring said the new ball made for truer hitting and was easier to catch. Dr. Jim Young thought the ball would make for longer pucking and was only suitable for a hard ground, whilst Jim Barry was of the opinion the ball would tend to make the game even faster, which was not desirable.

The rimless article proved unpopular and Johnny was back, almost where he started. The white ball was generally accepted as the right solution, but the difficulty of making it retain its whiteness when it came in contact with the green dye of the wet grass was not easily overcome.

## AN IRISH TANNERY TO THE RESCUE.

Then an Irish Tannery came to the rescue when, at Johnny's request, they produced the first natural white chrome. I saw it following its first trial, examined it carefully and also saw a piece of the material used, and I can say that the new covering impressed me, introducing as it did a hard wearing distinctive white cover, which is waterproof, without interfering with the properties that proved so popular in the old ball.

The new product was an immediate success and quickly came into use for all the big games of the Gaelic calendar, and I cannot do better than conclude with an extract from the latest edition of "Carberry's Annual" on the subject:—

"The snow white chrome leather ball which Johnny McAuliffe is now producing has added much to hurling's present attractions, both for players and spectators. The veteran Limerick hurler has devoted long years to the perfection of this ball and has, at last, achieved his aim. A well-known leather manufacturer helped him out; the present match ball is beautifully made from core to rim—a sound ball which retains its shape, snow-white colour and resilience in all weathers. A long series of experiments were necessary to achieve the perfect ball and John McAuliffe's pains are rewarded."