

No. 114—TOM MEANEY of Bruff

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH

WHEN the great handball revival swept Limerick in 1925, many of the grand players of other days—men like Johnny Bowles, Stevie Gleeson, Jack Ryan, Eddie Bourke, Arthur Lysaght, etc., returned to the arena in order to give the "young blood" both encouragement and instruction in one of the greatest of all games.

Ireland had only emerged from a testing time and the ballcourts were deserted for many years—the National fight for independence, and the unfortunate civil split that followed, diverting interest from the playing fields and alleys.

Growing up in Bruff in the middle 'teens of the present century was a very promising youth, by name, Tom Meaney, who profited by the expert tuition of worth, while players like the late Jim O'Grady, Dinny Tolton and Michael O'Brien, and was soon able to give a useful few games to such expert local ball-players as Jim Carroll and Denis Conway, who were then very much to the fore in Bruff handball circles.

THE BRUFF BALLCOURT.

The Bruff court was over seventy feet long and it was the youthful ambition of the "young set" coming along to be able to "send it in from the dead line," with the result that many of them acquired a really strong stroke.

As manhood approached these lads had no means of displaying their prowess as any kind of organised games gradually became more and more difficult as resistance to the British occupation of the country stiffened everywhere.

There were no championships—the G.A.A. did not really interest themselves in the development of handball until sometime around 1924—and as far as Bruff were concerned, neither had they "regulation" balls. They just played each other in singles, doubles, and the long extinct, but then very popular matches of six—three aside. They used balls running in price from two pence to the luxury "half-solid" at a shilling and were also often glad of a sphere made of old stocking thread wound around a cork or—if they could get it—the heart of a golf ball.

HIS HEART IN THE RIGHT PLACE.

Tom Meaney was twenty-eight when handball got back to its own in Limerick and many might say that his greatest days were over—or at least rapidly passing. But Tom had different ideas. He had undoubtedly lost many of the grand years when the bloom of youth and the enthusiasm that goes with it scoffs at every obstacle, yet he was to prove for as long as sixteen further years that spirit and a genuine love of the game can make light of many disabilities. And the fact that, at forty-four, Tom played his last inter-county game for Limerick is evidence enough that Tom's heart was in the right place and Limerick handball can well be proud of the devotion and service it got from men of the calibre of this Bruff stalwart.

Immediately the first championships under G.A.A. auspices were announced for County Limerick, Bruff entered a team and played in the junior hardball teams of six competition. They met Limerick City in the final which was played at the old Rutland Street ballcourt of such happy memories. Dom Ahern and Tom Ryan took the first of the rubber by beating J. O'Kelly-Andrews and the late Jim Connors of Bruff.

VISITORS LEVEL UP.

The visitors levelled up when Willie Hannon and Tom Meaney beat Garda Sgt. Ryan and Dinny Murphy. The "who shall" saw Garda Sgt. Ryan and Arthur Lysaght gaining the verdict over Jim Carroll and Denis Conway, but Bruff successfully objected to Sgt. Ryan playing twice and were awarded the title.

An outstanding game in an earlier round of that championship was played at Ballygarry, and in which the victors were "Dor" O'Sullivan and John Godfrey (now Rev. J. Godfrey, C.C.) over Connors and Kelly-Andrews.

Business reasons brought Tom to reside in the city during 1926 and 1927. He joined the famous Limerick club, was appointed a member of the committee and annexed the gold medal in a famous club tournament. During his city membership he played with or against most of the great city men of that time, including the late Johnny Bowles, one of the greatest ball-players Ireland ever reared; Jacky Ryan, Jimmy Kirby and a host of others.

WINNING OF GOLD MEDAL.

His winning of the club gold medal was a feat in itself. One week in June he started on a Tuesday, by beating Tommy Ryan, on Thursday he beat Tom Ryan, on Friday he lined out for a walk-over from the late Jim McCarthy, Saturday afternoon he was back in togs again, and beat Jack Trimby in the final to annex the coveted trophy. And then, to crown it all he was "out" again on the following day—Sunday—representing the city club in the county junior hardball singles championship and gained the ver-

dict. And Tom never lost a game in that whole series of engagements.

A week later Tom played Willie Hannon in a tournament engagement and was leading 19-14 with his hand in when he argued with the marker concerning a disputed score. On resuming he tossed his hand out and scarcely got an ace for the remainder of the rubber. But he learned the lesson of concentrating on the play.

His only other defeat in any other singles competition was by Danny Kelly of Ballygarry in a later round of the 1926 championship.

INTER-COUNTY SERIES.

In the inter-county series of 1926, the representation of Limerick went to Bruff, as county champions, and as Tom had by this transferred to the city the players nominated were Jim Carroll and Denis Conway, who lost to Stephen Ryan and J. Killackey, of Tipperary, the rubber being decided at Bruff. On the same occasion Tom Meaney, partnered by the late Jim Connors, beat the Wade brothers of Tipperary by four games to nil.

In the 1926 County Doubles Championship Tom Meaney and Johnny McCarthy were beaten by Mick Quaide and Danny Kelly of Ballygarry, the second time that season the West Limerick club deprived him of championship laurels.

The following year his first big engagement was against Johnny McCarthy and it was arranged as a two-day rubber. Tom cycled from Manister the first evening to keep his appointment and Johnny led him 21-20, 21-20, 12-21. He was in Limerick for the second leg, and won 21-6, 21-6, 21-8. He next beat Peter Long at Ballyneety and has the proud boast that he was not beaten by anybody in either singles or doubles that year. However, no title came his way, as bad weather and subsequent disorganisation left the hard ball championships of that season unfinished.

EXHIBITION GAME.

Tom's only game in 1928 was an exhibition one at the Rutland St. Court, Partnered by Eddie Bourke

he came through victorious over Jacky Ryan and George McSweeney after a great rubber.

In 1930 he again donned the Limerick colours and had as partner a Kilfinane man, J. Ryan, but lost to Tipperary in the first round of the Munster Championships.

The Bruff Club was re-organised in 1933 and three years later shared equally with Hospital the honour of capturing all the county titles—the Bruff share being Minor doubles, Junior hardball singles and doubles. Tom accounted for the Junior singles and figured in the doubles victory—his partner in this being Des Hannon.

The following year he had one of the stiffest games of his career—a Junior hardball singles tussle with Tommy Downes of Hospital. Tom won three games to nil, but the score in the last game was 21-20, and he had four hands before getting the final ace. He then beat Jim Daly of Ballygarry, then representing Broadford, and, in the County final, Paddy Barry of the City Club. Incidentally, that was the last occasion he saw the famous old Rutland Street court—the scene of such hectic fare in its palmy days.

JOINED THE HOSPITAL CLUB.

The Bruff Club dissolved in 1938, and Tom joined Hospital, where they had many useful players at that time—Tommy Downes, Jim O'Toole, Paddy Moloney, Dan O'Sullivan and Mat Mitchell—to name but the more prominent ones. Meaney and Downes won the doubles title for Hospital that season. Tom did not play in 1939 but was appointed Vice-Chairman of the County Board, in which position he rendered valuable service to the game.

Downes, partnered by Michael Moloney, lost their doubles title to Ballygarry, who were represented by "Bunny" Kelly and Jim Daly, now back with his native parish.

Seventeen clubs affiliated to the County Board in 1940, the highest number of any county. Senior, Junior and Intermediate Championships were organised and Tom made another spectacular comeback, and with Downes won the Senior Hardball Doubles Championship for Hospital.

In passing I might mention that Tom has a great opinion of Downes's worth as a ballplayer and holds that he was most unlucky not to have won All-Ireland honours. He rates him far ahead of Billy Walsh of Cork, "Ginger" McMahon of Tipperary and others who succeeded in doing so.

APPOINTED CHAIRMAN OF COUNTY BOARD.

Appointed Chairman of the County Board in 1941, Tom made that a memorable year by lining out with Downes in the All-Ireland series and scoring a great victory over a fancied Tipperary side by three games to one. The most memorable game of his career came in the next round, when, with Downes, he faced an ex-senior All-Ireland champion, Danny Brennan, partnered by McGrath, at his own court, Talbots Inch, Kilkenny. The Limerick lads lost the first game 21-18, and maintain that had

luck favoured them in its closing stages they would have won in straight games. As it was, Kilkenny pulled out by three games to two and went on to win All-Ireland honours. And on this high note the grand old veteran of forty-four years bid good-bye to championship handball.

Leaving the active arena did not by any means sever his connection with the game and only this year he was as prominent as ever at County Board meetings, and gained a new interest in events when the Bruff Club re-affiliated and his son, Michael went on to win the South Limerick hard ball singles, and qualify to play Ballygarry in the County semi-final. Tom, it might be mentioned, was always a keen follower of hurling, and Michael is now a useful exponent of the code and plays with the Bruff Emmets.

HOW HE TRAINED.

Once asked how he trained, Tom said that he kept fit by playing handball at very opportunity and he felt this was the best training for the game. In addition, his work as a church decorator kept him busy climbing ladders whilst he did plenty of cycling in his time, often over a hundred miles in a day, besides indulging in many long walks.

The best handball game he ever saw, he holds, was the match between J. J. Bowles and Stevie Gleeson against Tom Soye and T. J. O'Reilly during the latter's great tour of Munster in 1927. It went the full seven games, the final one going to the Dublin man, 21-17.

Asked his opinion of present-day players Tom thinks the soft ball men as good as those of thirty years ago, but holds that with a few exceptions, the hard ball players are inferior to the lads of the 'twenties and 'thirties. "Of course," he adds, "the difference is that in the old days the cracker was the popular game, whereas now the soft ball is favoured most."

Tom tells how he cycled from Charleville in 1927 to Limerick to play Jack Brennan but got a walk-over after his journey. He also regularly cycled to Ballyneety, Kilfinane, Rathkeale, Ballygarry, etc., just to play an ordinary game or to see a match.

A LITTLE STORY.

I will conclude with a little story he tells: "I played in what was possibly the only hard ball championship ever decided in Ballyneety, against the gable of Keane's publichouse v. Peter Long. The left 'side wall' was only a ditch. Peter tossed the first ball which I sent far down the Limerick road. It passed close between the heads of some old gentlemen who were sitting on the 'side wall,' one gentleman's pipe being sent flying from his mouth. While the ball was being recovered there was an animated discussion as to why such a dangerous 'missile' was used."