

No. 142—JACK MURPHY Of St. John's

BY SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH.

GAELS of the old school will remember the St. John's football team who, in the early days of the G.A.A., were a thriving combination and a strong force to be reckoned with in any competition. The Commercials were, of course, the great team of the infant years of the G.A.A. in Limerick, but they had worthy opponents that brought the very best out of them in such former combinations as the St. John's, St. Michael's and St. Patrick's, to name but some of those that made the football welkin ring in grand days by Shannonside.

These old-time teams were always able to give the champions a close call, and on not a few occasions inflict a defeat that the best in other counties could not command.

Jack Murphy, for long years one of the best known figures in City Gaelic circles, as one of the oldest campaigners in field and forum, and a life-long devotee of native games, played good football with St. John's long before he made a hurling name with the old Shamrocks, and their successors, famed Young Irelands.

The prowess of John Graney as a goal-keeper is talked of yet by the thinning ranks of the real old veterans of the G.A.A.—the faithful few still happily with us to recall old games and players of the years before very many of us were born.

TIME TAKES HEAVY TOLL.

A span of sixty-five summers takes heavy toll of the old timers and the great bulk of the Gaels that lined the arena in the days when St. John's were at their best have long since passed from this earth. In fact, of the thirty or so whose names were associated with the St. John's of the long ago I can only recollect half a dozen survivors available twenty years ago when I tried to collect some data concerning the club. They were Jack Murphy and John Hurlley, both of them residing in Broad Street; Joseph Roche, Kickham Street; Patrick O'Reilly, Watergate; John O'Flynn and John Sheehan of Thomas Street—the latter club secretary and afterwards Secretary of the re-organised Co. Board, following the disastrous days of the Parnell "split."

Jack Murphy was both a great player and an active worker in the ranks when St. John's were such a big football force.

It would be impossible in an article such as this to give more than passing reference to the noted games of a grand career. However, most glamour is associated with the double clash of St. John's and Commercials in the autumn of 1889.

A MEMORABLE DAY.

The famous Commercials were fresh and flushed from their wonderful victory in the first All-Ireland Senior Football Championship—a success that must always keep the football tradition strong in Sarsfield's County. It was a memorable day in September, 1889, when the All-Ireland champions lined out against St. John's for the final of that year's football championship.

The venue was Derryknockane, and the referee the late Paddy O'Brien ("Twenty") who was then Chairman of the County Board. A splendid tussle for supremacy was spoiled by a dispute arising over a goal claimed by the Commercials, and disputed by St. John's (a goal at this period was greater than any number of points). The result was an unfinished match, the score standing at cessation of play: St. John's, six points; Commercials, 1 goal (disputed). The matter came before the County Board, who ruled in favour of Commercials.

St. John's, smarting under what they considered a greivous injustice, challenged the Commercials to prove their title to the championship, and after an acrimonious correspondence, the teams agreed to meet again at Derryknockane, with Mr. Maurice Moynihan, of Tralee as referee.

A HARD FOUGHT GAME.

The All-Irelanders fielded their best twenty-one, bent on defeating their opponents. But the boys from beneath the Shadow of the Black Battery were foemen worthy of their steel, and retired victors of as hard fought a battle as ever was played under Gaelic rules: St. John's, 0-7; Commercials, 0-2. Thus Jack Murphy's lads were the first side to lower the colours of the 1887 champions of Ireland.

Shortly afterwards, the Clare champions for 1889—the Kildysart William O'Brien's—challenged St. John's to play in Ennis, a match in which the "Saints" were again victorious, 0-4 to 0-2.

St. John's and Commercials again met for the 1890 title, the venue this time being Croom. When the score stood: Commercials, 0-2; St. John's, 0-1, a dispute arose and the match was not finished. The Executive ordered a re-play, both teams to be allowed the scores made at the first meeting, and this took place at Dromin. No score was made by either side on the occasion, so Commercials passed on, only to lose later to St. Patrick's, who gained their first County Senior Football Crown.

POLITICAL DISSENSIONS.

At the annual County Convention held later that season, Jack

Murphy was appointed a member of the County Executive, a position he retained until disorganisation set in and the Board dissolved due to political dissensions.

Clubs in the County dwindled from ninety to a mere half dozen but St. John's continued to keep the Gaelic flag flying and were visitors to Charleville during the height of the "troubles," only to lose to the local lads by a narrow margin.

Strong force behind the club at this stage, was Rev. Timothy Lee, then Chairman of the St. John's Temperance Society and afterwards parish priest in Croom. Fr. Lee took a very active interest in the footballers and actually presented a set of medals for a game in which St. John's proved his confidence in their ability by defeating Commercials after a wonderful tussle.

FOUNDER OF THOMOND FEIS.

Later Father Lee came to the fore as a really great figure, by founding the Thomond Feis, which did such wonderful work for the native language, culture and games over a prolonged period.

When the County Board was eventually re-formed, Jack Murphy resumed his position on the Executive, and we next meet him as a member of the Limerick football team, selected by Commercials, that met and defeated Kerry, 5-6 to 1-1 in the opening round of the Munster Senior Football Championship of 1895. A few weeks later they beat Waterford, 2-7 to 0-1, but were defeated in the final by Arravale Rovers (Tipperary), 0-5 to 0-3.

JOINED COMMERCIALS.

By this time St. John's had disappeared from the active list and Jack joined Commercials, with whom he won 1896 county championship honours, beating Glenroe in the final, 0-4 to 0-1, and later helping the city team win Munster and All-Ireland laurels.

Several further county championship and tournament trophies came his way as a member of the Commercials Club, but side by side with his football prowess was a mastery with the caman that first blossomed as a member of the "Shamrocks" but came to full flower in the blue and gold of Young Ireland, when he helped materially in their winning of county senior hurling honours for 1902.

Eventually, when Jack retired from the active arena, after years of service, he continued his work for the games as a very earnest worker on the County Board, and as one of the most efficient and popular referees of his day.