

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 103—DICK O'BRIEN of Dromcollogher

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

IN dealing with Mick O'Brien, of Dromcollogher, in a former issue, and his prowess over the hurdles, mention was made of his brother, Dick O'Brien, who is the subject of this article. Whilst Mick specialised in one event, Dick was more versatile as a runner, jumper, footballer and handballer.

He was brought up in a district where the names of the Davins, Leahys, and Bresnihan's were household words and their fame and athletic feats were imbeal na ndaoine and were spoken of at cross roads and at fireside chats during the long winter nights, just as the tales of Ossian, Fionn Mac Cui and the Children of Lir were told and retold ó beal go beal and are to-day classics of Celtic mythology.

A MEMORY OF FATHER CASEY.

Gaelic football was the sole game played in the District during his youth and he has distinct recollection of the great Father Casey of Abbeyfeale rushing along the side-line and unleashing his whip at encroaching spectators in the excitement and ebb and flow of a contest between his and that of a neighbouring football team.

Brought up in this atmosphere, rich in the lore of athleticism, Dick, like other youths of the parish, wished if not to excel at least to emulate their example. Thus we find him as a youth, at the age of sixteen, competing in the hop, step and jump at St. Munchin's College Sports and clearing the remarkable stretch of 43 ft. 9 ins. He jumped 5 ft. 3 ins. in the high jump but found a class-mate one better, to notch 5 ft. 4 ins. This youth was no other than the now genial Very Rev. Michael Ryan, P.P., Glin.

TAKEN IN HAND BY J. J. BURKE.

From boyhood Dick soon developed into manhood and J. J. Burke, famous high jumper and hurdle runner, who took honours at the Papal Sports, noticed Dick's athletic build and perfectly moulded frame of six feet, took him in hand and coached him in the finer points of athletic science. And in July, 1911, at the age of 19, he journeyed with Jim Burke to Rathkeale Sports, where the latter won the high jump at 6ft. 3ins. The 220 yards' championship of Munster was one of the events on the programme and Jim entered his protégé for this event and with his assistance and guidance Dick raced away from twenty-three competitors and romped home an easy winner in the fast time of 22.8 seconds.

HURDLE RACING.

He next turned his attention to hurdle racing, but whilst not as classic as his brother Mick over the obstacles, he had devastating speed between them, thereby overcoming many an opponent. His first unforgettable experience over the sticks without the watchful eye of his trainer, J. J. Burke, was at Listowel Sports. On this day he cycled fifteen miles over rough, hilly and broken roads to Abbeyfeale, whence he entrained to Listowel. There he met the two brothers Teehan, of Kilcummin,

who had no peers in Kerry in the art and science of hurdling, and J. Flynn, the present popular T.D.

MOST THRILLING RACE OF DAY.

It was the most thrilling race of the day, the four athletes matching stride for stride with one another, with Dick breasting the tape in front. The late J. A. Collins, of Newcastle West, sports correspondent of the "Limerick Leader" at the time, in reporting the events, described him as the "rising youngster." He then so perfected himself in this branch that at Kanturk Sports in the next season, after eliminating the Leahy brothers in their heats, his brother Mick and himself found themselves contesting the final against D. A. O'Leary, a noted athlete and now the owner of a large confectionery business at Blackrock, Dublin. Leaving O'Leary far behind, they raced hand in hand over the final obstacle to the tape.

At that time Duffy's Circus was the only means of entertainment in the country, and amongst the many side-shows two acrobats called the Lloyd Brothers thrilled the audience with their feats of skill and daring. After their runaway victory at Kanturk the Dromcollogher pair were known subsequently at all sports meetings as the O'Brien brothers, and were mentioned as such by "Carbery" in his book on Irish athletes under the title of "Champion Athletes I Have Met."

WENT FURTHER AFIELD.

Dick, now realising his ability, went further afield and we find him winning the 100 and 220 yards at Ardnnan sports. When the handicapper, D. P. Power of Ballywalter, himself an all-round world champion, saw how ready he won these events against the leading athletes of Tipperary, penalised him by forty yards in the "440" event.

At Tralee on September 3rd, 1916, Dick secured the valuable "Kingdom" Cup in winning the 100 yards and running second in the "220." At Tulla, he won the 100 and 220 yards. One of his opponents on this occasion was Mick McTigue, to whom he gave several yards' handicap, and who later became the World Champion boxer, beating Battling Siki in Dublin. On this day his brother Mick and himself thrilled the spectators with their exhibition of hurdling. There being no opposition, they were asked by the Committee to repeat the performance.

At Castleconnell he won the 100 yards, and nearer home he captured the 100 yards at Kanturk, the 100 and 440 yards at Feoghanagh, the 100 and 220 at Foynes, and the hurdles at Newcastle West. His most formidable opposition was at the evening meeting at the Drapers sports, held in the Mardyke in Cork City in June, 1918. There he met and faced the leading athletic talent of the country and after being placed in the preliminary and semi-final heats, he got on his marks for the final to win the most coveted and precious prize of the sports.

A STUDENT OF U.C.C.

We find him in 1914 a student of University College, Cork and there he was sought after by the Lees and the Nil Desperandum football clubs to join their teams, but

Dick, true to his college colours, remained with the College team who ousted the Lees in the first round and Macroom in the second round. The summer holidays then intervened and the College team broke up. Many of the players, having finished their course, went further afield to win fame and renown in other spheres.

Asked his opinion on athletics of the present day contrasted with the conditions which obtained in his time, Dick had this to say:

"You have to-day well laid out and smooth surfaced fields in which to compete. Transport facilities to and from the sports fields make for better performances, whereas in my day you were cramped up when you travelled by gig, trap or heavy cumbersome bike from ten to twenty miles over pot holed roads."

ATHLETES IN THE SCHOOLS.

Dick believes that in the country many potential athletes are left to reach high efficiency in some particular line. He thinks that the Ministry of Education should have within its schemes a certain department wherein men of outstanding athletic ability could be trained to coach, advise and demonstrate to budding athletes in the various primary and secondary schools throughout the country. He himself boasts that he trained three of his pupils to attain championship rank—J. Mulvihill of Castlemaine, and J. Donovan, Clashmore, became All-Ireland champion hurdle runners and J. Rogers of Liverpool the Northern Counties champion hurdle runner of England.

Dick was a great friend of Padraig O'Conaire, writer of short stories. He can still visualise Padraig tying his black ass to a lamp post in Grafton Street, Dublin, and arriving at the Wicklow Hotel where old friends welcomed him to listen to his latest tales of the open road. One of the best stories Dick heard from his lips is "The Two Nuns of Verona" and he notes that it still remains unpublished.

Dick's one regret is that many of the sterling athletes he mentions died young. Go faihreas De le na n-anam.

STAY IN THE COUNTRY.

To those who possess a holding, however small, in the country or an alternative means of livelihood, Dick's advice is—remain there! The lure of the city with its glittering lights and neon signs is purely artificial. Whilst even the seasons of the years bring with them their variety and change to the countryman, the hum-drum life of city folk continues undisturbed in dreadful monotony broken only from time to time by the latest craze in artificial entertainment—usually as expensive as it is new.