

# Great Limerick Athletes

No. 83—TOMMY O'BRIEN of Herbertstown

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

IT is not often we find a man figuring strong at the same period in both hurling and athletics, but Tommy O'Brien combined excellence in athletics and a very successful career with the caman, winning renown and no mean repute in the respective arenas.

Born at Herbertstown just three score years ago, Tommy, at the tender age of twelve, was wearing the Ballybricken jersey on the hurling field. That introduction to the native game was the commencement of a span that extended almost thirty years, enclosing honours and memories that any Gael would be proud to cherish.

Two years later, on October 4th, 1908, to be exact, Tommy made his athletic debut at Bruff sports and won the boys' race there, a success he repeated the following season. It is interesting to note the other competitors at these meetings—P. J. Finn, Kilfinane; Jim Keays, Pallas; James J. Walsh, Betteville; P. McCarthy and J. J. Hurley in the sprints; Tom, Jim and Tim Leahy; D. M. O'Connell and P. J. Lehane in the jumps; M. Heelan with the weights, with D. B. Condon to the fore in the cycle events.

## FIGURING WITH THE MEN AT 17.

At seventeen, Tommy was figuring prominently "with the men," his first big success in open competition being a three mile road race organised in connection with Knockaney sports, which he won. A fortnight later he had a similar victory over the same distance, the runner-up on that occasion being Tom O'Grady, who later became a priest, cutting short an athletic career of great promise.

At Gormanstown that same season Tommy O'Brien notched another "three-miler" to his name on the road and also won a one-mile flat event in the field.

The following year brought another batch of sterling victories, commencing with a mile win at Gillogue; a mile and three mile success at a sports in his native parish of Herbertstown; an encore of this performance at Killeely; followed by a new departure at Bruff, where the 880 yards event was entered to his credit.

The winning of a five mile road race at Holycross brought him a fine overmantle, which is still a cherished possession of the O'Brien household. He followed this victory by a "treble" at Elton, taking the mile, the 880 yards and best distance in a rise and strike the hurling ball competition. The end of a great season came with the winning of the one and three mile events at Ballinscaulagh.

The coming of another season he heralded by taking the one and three mile top prizes at Herbertstown, and the 880 yards and one mile at Elton.

## NOTABLE ACHIEVEMENT.

A notable achievement was the winning of the "double"—the 880 yards and one mile for two years in succession at Ballysheedy, beating the good Clare runner, J. J. McNamara, of Tulla.

His first big success in the shorter distances came soon after, with Meelick the venue. On that occasion he tied for first place in the 100 yards and won the "440."

Space does not permit mention of all the races in which he participated, and we will have to skip many happenings in the home county in order to get a glimpse of a few of his performances on Cork athletic fields, after he had taken up residence in the Leaside City.

On August 15th, 1920, at Blarney Sports, he won the half-mile, and then caused the upset of the day by beating the Dublin man, J. J. Byrne in the final of the "440." The following Sunday, at Donoughmore, he again won the half-mile, and was placed second in the 1,000 yards Steeplechase Championship of Munster.

## EVENTFUL TRIP.

The trip to Ballineen Sports was an eventful one, Tommy, and that grand old sportsman, Ned Walsh, of Kileen, cycling the fifteen miles from Cork city on two bad "bikes." However, it did not affect the Herbertstown "form," and three prizes were captured that day—the top award for the 440, the 880 and the mile.

Another journey that remains in his memory was the eighteen mile drive on a sidecar to a big meeting in Kinsale, in 1921. On that occasion many difficulties were encountered, and the negotiation of some bridges partly blown away by the Black and Tans was a tricky business. Coming home, anyway, he had first prize in the "880" in his possession.

Other successes that season included the 880 at Banteer; the 440 yards at Dunmanway; the 880 and the mile at Blarney; the 100 yards and the 880 yards at St. Francis Sports, Cork, in which he beat the champion, W. F. Shanahan, whose lamented passing a few weeks ago was universally mourned. Another title holder fell before him at Cork Drapers Sports, the Irish champion, the late D. "Rocky" Healy, and in his favourite event too, the 440 yards.

## HIS HURLING OUTINGS OF NOTE.

We must retrace our steps a bit to pick up Tommy's hurling outings of note. We find him a member of the Ballybricken team which won the Limerick intermediate hurling title for 1912, the final not being played until 2nd May, 1915 when the venue was the Markets Field, and the winning tally: Ballybricken, 4-3; Newcastle West, 4-1, a score that gives its own indication of the thrilling tussle it was.

He hurled with Caherline in the 1916 Senior County Championship, and reached the final, played at Pallaskerry on 1st July, 1917, which resulted: Cloughaun, 8-3; Caherline, 2-1. Three years later, Tommy was playing in another county final, this occasion with Fedamore, the day, 2nd May, 1920, with Limerick Markets Field the venue. An exciting game it proved, one of the lowest scoring in the history of the championship, with Croom gaining the verdict by the narrowest of margins: Croom, 1- Fedamore, 1-0.

During his half dozen years in Cork, Tommy hurled with the far famed St. Finbarr's, who were just then enjoying a vintage spell, and won with them the County Senior Hurling titles for 1922, 1923 and 1926, as well as many tournament ties.

## SENSATIONAL FINAL.

The 1926 final was one of the most sensational ever hurled by the Lee. Barrs had won, as we have seen, in 1922 and 1923; Blackrock beat them the next two seasons; and by the time 1926 decider was played the famous 'Rockies' had skipped Cork to one of its greatest of All-Ireland victories. Three times they played Tipperary before capturing Munster laurels, and later overwhelmed Kilkenny in the Croke Park final.

A fortnight afterwards ten of the All-Ireland team lined out for Blackrock in the County final against their old rivals, St. Finbarrs, who had two on the side—"Dannix" Ring and Dr. Joe Kearney.

Play opened as expected, and the first half saw Blackrock on top to lead at the interval, 3-3 to 1-1. The pace was very fast and the hurling superb. For the leaders, Sean Oge Murphy, "Marie" O'Connell, Mick Murphy were continually frustrating the 'Barrs' efforts to score. Jim Hurley was playing the game of his life at midfield, while the forwards, led by "Gah" and "Balty" Aherne, "Eudie" Coughlan and Mick Leahy, broke through the challengers' defence several times.

## HECTIC SECOND HALF.

'Barrs rallied following the resumption and cut the leeway to five points but eight minutes from the end Blackrock, leading 5-4 to 2-2, looked in an impregnable position. But 'Barrs were not beaten. A great surge, led by "Micko" Connell let "Batna" Cronin through for a goal. "Dannix" Ring returned the puck out and Dr. Joe Kearney quickly scored another goal. It is impossible to describe the excitement which now prevailed. Followers of both sides were frantic with anxiety as they awaited the final whistle, which could be only a few minutes away.

At centre field "Micko" Connell was hurling the greatest epic of his career, dashing headlong into every scrimmage and heedless of bodily danger, raining balls into his forwards. With the entire 'Barrs' team swarming around the Blackrock posts, the flashing hurleys of Dr. Joe Kearney, Tommy

O'Brien, D. Coughlan, J. Clarke, "Batna" Cronin, and "Dannix" Ring were like sticks inspired and once again the Blackrock net fell. Another assault, and with only a matter of seconds to go the 'Barrs were awarded a seventy. "Dannix" Ring took the crucial shot and dropped it in a goalmouth where two dozen players surged and swung in that hectic last charge that saw 'Barrs through for the goal that gave them such a memorable victory in one of the greatest games in Cork hurling history.

## PLAYED WITH LIMERICK YOUNG IRELAND.

That was Tommy's last game by the Lee, for he returned to Limerick shortly afterwards and was just in time to figure with Young Ireland in a wonderful spell by the Shannon. Lining out against many of his old Fedamore team mates he participated in the three great games for the 1927 Eastern Final that are still without an equal in Limerick hurling lore.

A solitary point eventually decided the issue in Fedamore's favour, but Young Ireland were back twelve months later to open a cycle that brought them the 1928, 1930 and 1932 county titles, along with a whole hatful of other trophies. The blue and gold lads played with distinction in every county in Munster, and shone against club teams from all the great hurling counties. Tommy held his own in those hectic days with team mates of the stature of Denny Lanigan, Bob McConkey, Micky Fitzgibbon, Paddy Hartigan, Bill O'Donoghue, Gerry O'Donnell, Willie Hogan, Sean Kelly, Tom Mullane, Jim Houlihan and many other lads who were fit to grace any hurling company.

A member of the Cork senior hurling team in 1924 and 1925, Tommy had the distinction of playing on the Leaside fifteen that won the first ever National Hurling League crown. Of his inter-county memories, he rates the Munster final of 1925, in which he played, and in which Tipperary beat Cork at the Limerick Markets Field, with Tom Hayes as referee, as one of the greatest matches of his time. With Limerick he hurled from 1927 to 1932, winning two Thomond Feis finals—1928 and 1932.

## BEST HURLER HE MET.

The best hurlers he met in his early days were Egan Clancy, Dave Murnane and Ned Treacy; with Denny Barry, Murphy, Mickey Cross, Paddy Clohosey and Mick Mackey the outstanding men of a later generation.

For road-racing he was usually paced by a man on a bicycle, whilst his hurling training generally consisted in a number of short sprints and plenty of field work. One thing, he was always perfectly fit and hardly knew what it was to be distressed in a game.

Tommy O'Brien worked hard all his life but never lost his love of hurling. He thinks present-day players not as keen on the game as the youth of his time, because, as he says: "We often walked five or six miles for a few pucks of a ball."

And on this note we leave another of our great figures of a glorious past, who is still such an ardent devotee of hurling as well as being a great lover of greyhounds. Slainte, Tommy O'Brien!

No. 84 — Tom Walsh, of Caherline.