

Great Limerick Athletes

No. 65—JOHN O'CONNELL of South Liberties

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

A FEW weeks ago, when dealing with the career of Mick Malone, I coupled his name with that of John O'Connell as the two most prominent Limerick hurlers of their day.

On that occasion we traced the rise of hurling in Limerick, and discovered that the game had taken root in the city and surrounding districts even before the G.A.A. was formed.

John O'Connell, or "Johnny Connell" as he was more popularly called, hailed from the Rosbrien district, which was the centre about which the movement revolved for the revival of the ancient pastime. This gained momentum in the early 'eighties, and Johnny was one of the first youths to wield the camán in Limerick, anticipating the founding of the G.A.A. by a couple of years.

The pioneers, a small group at the time but very enthusiastic, quickly attracted interest, and gradually the numbers were reinforced, until soon all the young men in the immediate and surrounding districts were equipped with a hurley of some description and engaged in the "puck about", as the early practices were called.

As the circle widened hurling gained a grip in the city, and whilst the roots were extending in remarkable fashion, Johnny Connell, Jack Malone and their associates were considering ways and means of bringing some sort of order into the propagation efforts.

INSPIRATION BORN IN A SHOWER!

Eventually, the idea of some sort of a club took root, and it is on that the first "general meeting," if you like to call it such, from which a hurling club was formed by the Shannon, was actually just a discussion between a group of the Rosbrien hurlers, while taking shelter from a shower of rain.

There is a bit of romance, too, associated with the naming of that first hurling team. It was an early March day in 1882, and thoughts were probably turning to St. Patrick. Anyway, one of the party plucked some of the "dear little plant," fresh and green after its shower bath, and from this little act came the inspiration to christen the club "Shamrocks."

The name made an immediate appeal, and so came into being the first Limerick hurling club. News of the formation of the club spread like wildfire, and there was soon a clamour for membership that was almost embarrassing. However, interest was now centred more than ever on the game of hurling, and from that day forward the lure of the camán has proved irresistible to countless sons of Sarsfield's County.

The first great forward move in the development of the game on a competitive basis came with the formation of a second club, which provided stimulating opposition and the first opportunity for the organising of a match under a set of rules which were to prove the forerunner of those under which the G.A.A. later regulated play.

LIMERICK'S SECOND HURLING CLUB.

To St. Michael's Temperance Society goes the honour of founding Limerick's second hurling club. Then young in existence but already numerically and influentially a growing power in the City of the Violated Treaty, St. Michael's further enhanced the attractiveness of the hurling code, and soon had a great muster of members trying their hand at the ancient game of the Gael.

It was only a matter of time now, of course, until the rivalry that was undoubtedly in evidence in the practice fields found expression in a "challenge," and no time was lost in arranging a meeting between the pair—a match that earns its place in hurling history as the first fought out under the heading of clubs in Limerick. And the teams were the Shamrocks and St. Michael's. Rosbrien, centre of the revival movement, was, appropriately enough, the venue.

Word of the proposed game spread quickly and tremendous excitement gripped the immediate supporters of both clubs. This soon spread to a good proportion of the citizens, early evidence that the game of hurling was one that could grip the imagination of the populace and provide thrills in ample measure.

MATCH AROUSED GREAT ENTHUSIASM.

The match, when it did come off, aroused remarkable enthusiasm. Before a splendid crowd the hurlers played with great dash and vigour, and despite the absence of

anything in the nature of set rules, it must be put on record that nothing in the way of an unseemly or unpleasant incident marred the enjoyment of a memorable occasion. And to make matters more attractive the result was inconclusive—a drawn battle which left the issue of supremacy undecided.

The accounts of the exciting incidents and thrilling exchanges at Rosbrien sharpened interest in the re-play, with the result that a huge crowd were at the Island Field when the teams lined up for their second meeting. This was another worth-while exhibition of hurling. It was contested in a very determined but real sporting manner, and ended in a narrow success for Shamrocks, a result that was received with great jubilation in Rosbrien.

CHALLENGE FROM NORTH TIPPERARY.

By this time the fame of the Shamrocks had spread to the adjoining counties, and one fine day there arrived a challenge from Kincora, a team hailing from the North Tipperary district.

The challenge was accepted, and the venue agreed on was Ballina. Again Shamrocks were in the making of G.A.A. history, for their game with Kincora was the first inter-county club match played in Munster.

The Tipperary men won by a goal, and Kincora made the event an unforgettable one by the hospitable manner in which they received the Limerick men, who were lavishly entertained after the game. Music and song whiled away the pleasant hours, and this first great social gathering between the Gaels of Limerick and Tipperary nurtured a warm friendship that has weathered the passage of the years.

A return match was arranged for Rosbrien which aroused unprecedented interest. The Tipperary contingent were accompanied by a splendid band, dressed in attractive uniforms, while the Boherbuoy Band, led by their popular bandmaster, the late Tom O'Brien, headed a great concourse from the city to the scene of battle.

THRILL-PACKED STRUGGLE.

It was a thrill-packed struggle, again fought in true sporting spirit, and the scenes and excitement of the occasion left not alone a lasting impression but actually drove the populace hurling mad.

During the match one of the Shamrock's team, Willie Nugent, a splendid type of natural hurler, was accidentally hit on the head and sustained a bad wound from which he bled profusely. Sticking plaster and bandages were the first aid applications, and while most thought that his next move would be to some hospital for attention, the crowd got a real thrill to see the wounded player, blood stained and bandaged, not alone back on his feet, but renewing acquaintance with the game, and with such extended vigour that he gained the admiration of the multitude, many of whom were viewing a hurling match for the first time.

It was a game of intense interest all the way and aroused remarkable enthusiasm. Youths were left trembling with excitement along the sidelines, while the hats of the older folk could be seen flying in the air, which was then a very usual form of endorsing appreciation of a very worthy performance or registering pleasure on the achievement of victory.

The Tipperary men repeated the success of the Ballina game and by the exact same margin. They afterwards scored also at the festive board where they were entertained on an elaborate scale, actually remaining overnight in the city.

JOHNNY CONNELL'S GREAT DISPLAY.

The events of that great day established hurling on a firm foundation in Limerick, and it is not out of place to say here that Johnny Connell added much to the glamour of the occasion by his almost inspired display in the half-forward line. Pitted against one of Tipperary's best he gave an unforgettable exhibition of the code—his quick hitting methods winning for him a host of admirers.

One immediate result was that clubs sprang everywhere, but particularly in the city area, where something like twenty-five teams were shortly to be counted—a remarkable number, probably without parallel anywhere.

Such a wide extension of the game naturally affected the existing clubs, for each new combination sought some experienced players, with the result that the pioneer sides were considerably

weakened. Nearly every district and society organised a team, and with these claiming their immediate friends and neighbours a big change was soon in evidence.

The old Rosbrien field was mainly patronised by hurlers from Mungret, Crecora, Donoughmore and Knockea, as well as by a number from the St. Michael's parish of the city, and when the famed Shamrocks disintegrated they soon had what was considered first class material to form a new club.

FINDING A SUITABLE NAME.

A name had then to be found, and while many favoured the idea of retaining the old "Shamrocks", others felt that a more distinctive name was now essential—one linking the team with a particular district.

Many suggestions were made before Francis Bartley of Ballysheedy found general agreement to his proposal that as all the parishes comprising the membership were in the South Liberties of Limerick that the Club be called "South Liberties." The new Club was well and truly christened that night, and so came into existence a combination that later made such hurling history by the Shannon.

Johnny Connell was in at the birth of the "Liberties" and was to continue with them for many long years. Also in for the initial meeting was his brother, Michael, whilst another brother, Peter, came to the fore with them in later years.

The team went great guns from the start, thanks to the hard work of its leading members. The subject of our little sketch this week threw everything he knew into establishing the Club on a firm basis, and how well he succeeded should be apparent to even the most casual observer.

HIS GREATEST GAME.

His greatest game was undoubtedly the match played against Murroe, at Croom, in 1888, when he was instrumental in securing a victory that was not alone a triumph for his team but the means of restoring unity amongst all the clubs in the county, a happy aftermath that repaired most of the damage caused by the disastrous split that kept Limerick hurlers from competing in the first great fight for All-Ireland honours.

There was never such an attendance at any county match as that assembled to witness the great contest, for not alone was the settlement of the dispute at stake but two teams of outstanding merit were to meet. The game was described at length in the course of a previous article, and it is sufficient to say here that it was the cleverness of Johnny Connell which decided the issue on that occasion.

It was a vigorous, thrilling and sparkling display of top geared hurling in which defences shone to such an extent that up to within eight minutes of full-time there was no score for either side. At this juncture Johnny Connell got possession, and instead of making an effort to score himself, he disappointed the defence by passing the ball in an unexpected direction, where Con Sheehan lay unmarked. The latter took his opportunity in spectacular fashion, scoring the only point of the game, amidst wild excitement.

THE PARNELL "SPLIT."

Johnny Connell wore the "Liberties" jersey until the disbandment of the famous old team in 1891, when the Parnell "Split" wrecked havoc with so many of the great clubs of the early G.A.A. days. On his retirement he could boast of three senior hurling County championship medals to his credit, won with the "sweeping twenty-ones", an achievement that he richly deserved, as fitting reward for many years devoted to the propagation of hurling, in times when the majority of our people knew next to nothing about the ancient games of Ireland.

No. 66—Jack Keane, of Castleconnell.