

# Great Limerick Athletes

## No. 104—JACK RYAN of Limerick City

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

IN recalling the handball career of Jacky Ryan we unlock the door of the old Limerick Ballcourt in Rutland Street, and live again through the glorious days when that grand arena was in its heyday and included in its membership what was, without a shadow of doubt, the greatest galaxy of handballers ever gathered together in a single club anywhere, led by the prince of ballplayers himself, the late Johnnie Bowles, of glorious and immortal handball memory.

Looking back over the years of glory, the unforgettable spell when great games and great men graced the old Rutland Street Court, memories come crowding of as grand a bunch as ever graced a sporting arena in this country—fine fellows all, boon companions, souls of wit and merriment and simplicity personified. They sure made the welkin ring in those days we recall wistfully, and many who had the extreme pleasure of being associated with them in times that cannot return for any of us, must feel a pang of pain and regret that so many of the old crowd have passed, whilst the old ballcourt of such happy associations has been allowed fall into such decay as to sadden the heart of any who thrilled to the sharp crack of the old alley cracker in the days of its affluence and fashion.

### MATTER FOR REGRET.

Whilst all lovers of this grand old game are thrilled to see the many fine ballcourts that have been erected by the Municipal authorities in Limerick during recent years, the old timers feel the passing of the old centre, the memory of which has never been effaced, and regret that an arena that could have been purchased for the proverbial song and equipped for the price of the chorus, on present standards, has been allowed pass into a state where one would hardly recognise the once great home of Irish handball. There is, however, still the skeleton to evoke emotion and re-awaken memory.

But, thank God, we have still the living links of many of the grand characters that graced the fine old floor of the now dead ballcourt. It is easy to catalogue the great contests seen there but hard to recreate the pulse stirring events and incidents of its days of glory or the character and greatness of the men who have graced its enclosure.

### ARTISTRY AND SKILL.

Jacky Ryan was but one of these but in paying tribute to his artistry and skill we recall the old arena and the thousand memories that rise out of the mists of past existence, stirring pulses, even those grown feeble with the burden of the passing years, as if the old gallery was again thronged and the old slogans and the old spirit still dominated the place. Alas! idle vision. God be with the youth of us—well ah, well.

Born sixty-four years ago, in the parish of St. John's, Jacky Ryan, as a school boy used to play handball against the gable-end of his house in Clare Street and later continued to practice at the Christian Brothers School in Sexton Street, where he played against the gable wall of the school. He was lucky to have other good players in Clare Street at the time, notably Michael and John Heffernan, and John Joe Airey, all of them now dead. Michael Heffernan was the only player in Limerick capable of giving the late J. J. Bowles a very tight call in a rubber of three or four games.

### ALSO A FIRST CLASS HURLER.

Before continuing with this tale of handball doings, it is well to mention that Jacky Ryan was also a first class hurler and figured as left wing back with the Claughaun team that made junior hurling history between the years 1910 and 1913 by winning championship honours four seasons running. Others who played with him at the time say that Jacky was very handy in wielding the caman and could play in any part of the back division. And when his hurling days were over he gave further valuable service to Claughaun as Hon. Secretary of the Club, a position he held during the years 1914 to 1916, when Claughaun won the senior hurling county title three years in succession.

Playing competitive handball for twenty-one years, from 1905 to 1926, he met all the great players of a remarkable era in Limerick handball and played both with and against most of them, including Michael and John Heffernan, John Joe Airey, Jack O'Grady, John Joe Bowles and Bob Cussen, all of whom have passed away (may God be

good to them), E. J. Burke, A. MacLysaght, Gus Cole, Ger Roche, Jack Brennan, Stephen Gleeson, Tom Forde, George McSweeney, and Jimmy Kirby.

Jacky, who spent all his spare time coaching or teaching handballers how to play the game, indulged in his favourite pastime at least two or three times a week, whilst on Sundays, winter or summer, accompanied by the late J. J. Bowles he invariably walked to Castleconnell and back.

### PRESENT PLAYERS AND COURTS.

To the query: "What is your opinion of present day players?" Jacky replied: "As far as soft ball players in the city are concerned it would appear that the majority of them go in far too much for fisting and kicking, which to my mind is a fatal mistake, as I'd say there are more aces lost than gained. When Ned Bourke, Tommy Forde or Jimmy Kirby played it was a pleasure to look at them with their open hands place the balls with deadly accuracy. I might also mention that present players in the various city courts are at a great disadvantage because the courts are not fit for championship games. There should be galleries erected with dressing rooms attached for players to undress or dress as the case may be, and unless something is done in that respect we can't expect to see our players become champions and uphold the olden fame of our city. I might also mention that Leinster players have a great advantage over Munster because they have covered-in ballcourts, which means they can play in winter and summer."

### HITTING THE HEADLINES AT 15.

Jacky Ryan commenced hitting the handball headlines at the age of fifteen, his first game of a big nature being a doubles hard ball rubber, his partner being E. J. Bourke, and they beat M. Heffernan and Tom Leahy by four games to two, at Rutland St. Court—the date June 10th, 1905. Some weeks later in a soft ball game at Annacotty, partnered by J. Short, the verdict was gained over Tom Early and A. Foley, three games to two.

### OUTSTANDING GAMES.

Space only permits my listing some of the outstanding games of a lengthy handball career, as under:

August 19th, 1906—J. Ryan and P. McCarthy beat Tom Early and W. O'Brien in the City junior doubles final by three games to one, for two gold medals. His first singles victory came shortly afterwards, when he beat Bob Cussen, 21/14, 16/21, 21/8.

September 15th, 1906—Jacky Ryan and Bob Cussen created a big surprise by defeating E. J. Bourke and John Heffernan, 4 games to 2, for gold medals and the Championship of Munster.

May 23rd, 1907—J. Ryan beat P. Keane (R.I.C.), 3 games to 1.

August 13th, 1907—J. Ryan and Doctor Byrne (U.S.A.) beat J. J. Bowles and E. Cleary, 3 games to 1.

September 9th, 1907—J. Ryan and M. Heffernan beat E. J. Bourke and Gus Cole, 6 games to 1.

October 13th, 1907—J. Ryan beat Gus Cole, 3 games to 1, for a small side bet.

September 13th, 1908—J. Ryan beat T. Neville, Cork, at the Old Market Place Ballcourt, Cork, 21/16, 21/17, 21/11, 21/14. On the same occasion J. J. Bowles and J. Ryan beat W. O'Herlihy and C. Drew (Cork), 4 games to 2.

Sept. 27th, 1908—J. Ryan beat T. Neville, at Cork—21-13, 21-9, 17-21, 21-8. This rubber was for a side bet of £5 each.

Oct. 4th, 1908—At Rathluirc Ballcourt, J. Ryan and E. J. Bourke beat W. Bigane and J. Nagle, 5 games to 4.

Sept. 15th, 1909—J. Ryan and Bob Cussen beat S. Gleeson and Con Scanlan (Fedamore), 3 games to 1.

### ACTIVE ON HURLING FIELD.

Jack's handball was restricted from 1909 to 1917 during which period he was actively engaged on the hurling field with a very successful Claughaun combination, who were at the zenith of their power then.

1918—Limerick Co. Championships: J. Ryan beat G. Roche—11-21, 21-17, 21-19; J. Ryan beat G. McSweeney—21, 18, 21-10, 20-21, 21-20. November 3rd: J. Ryan beat S. J. Gleeson, Fedamore, by 105 aces to 103, in the final one of the most exciting deciders ever waged at the City Ballcourt. The winner received a valuable gold medal, presented by the late S. B. Quin, who was the Mayor of Limerick at the time.

1926—J. Ryan and E. J. Bourke beat S. Gleeson and W. Gleeson (Fedamore) in the senior hardball doubles county championship final.

J. Ryan beat J. Carroll (Bruff),

at Hospital in the senior hard ball singles championship (Dr. Harty Cup).

J. J. Bowles and J. Ryan beat Tommy Forde and Jimmy Kirby, 4 games to 2, in a thrilling challenge game that aroused great interest.

### EXHIBITION GAMES.

Jacky Ryan, with the All-Ireland champions, Tom Soye and Terry O'Reilly, figured in a great series of exhibition games in double handed matches for ten days, playing in the following courts: Limerick City, Kilfinane, Hospital, Fermoy, Rathkeale, Ballingarry, Tipperary Town and Sixmilebridge. All venues were very well patronised and the spectators thoroughly enjoyed the games as there was some brilliant play on both sides. The last match of the tour was at Sixmilebridge, where Jackie Ryan and George Meehan (Ennis) beat the All-Ireland champions 2 games to one, with a solitary ace dividing the sides at the end of a great game. At this venue the left-hand side wall only extended half the length of the court and the spectators were looking in on the remaining portion. Jacky was playing on the left side and drew on one ball, and amidst laughter the ball and a spectator's clay pipe went soaring to the front wall.

### INTERESTING PRESS NOTICE.

The great game in 1918 between Jacky Ryan and Stephen Gleeson, already referred to, was the subject of a very interesting Press notice with which I will conclude this sketch of a grand ballplayer and a sincere and valued friend:—

"It took but little cogitation over my ball-playing friends, for me to decide that there is not a man in the length and breadth of our tight little Green Isle more worthy of honourable mention or a place of honour than Jacky Ryan, the Limerick boy, who quite recently won the Senior Handball Championship in the most brilliant fashion.

"I doubt if there is a more popular player appearing in any of the ball courts of the present day than J. Ryan. Eminently courteous, affable and genial—one who never counts the trouble where obliging a friend is concerned—his presence is at all times, and under all circumstances, welcome wherever handball votaries must do congregate. Limerick Handball Club is one of the most flourishing and best conducted institutions in its particular line in Ireland. When matches are brought off under its aegis they are certain to run smoothly and to prove successful so far as human foresight can command success. This is not brought about by careless or lax management, or by letting things take their course. The ruling and guiding star of the Club in recent days has been Jacky Ryan, and under his management as Hon. Secretary, the Club as all admit, has lost nothing in prestige or the successful issues of the tournaments held by it."