

# Great Limerick Athletes

## (No. 17)—Dan Shanahan of Kilfinane

(By SEAMUS O CEALLAIGH)

DAN SHANAHAN was born at Ballinanima, Kilfinane, on July 9th, 1866, and died on his birthday just forty-seven years later.

He was educated first in Kilfinane and later in Mungret College, and had as school fellows John Flanagan, Jack McCarthy and the Connerys, all of whom won athletic fame not alone in Ireland, but in America and elsewhere.

At this early period they gave evidence of the ability they possessed, and of the successes to which they afterwards attained, which made their names familiar in every household in Ireland, and beyond the Atlantic. Their recreation hours were occupied in the practice of the different branches of athletics in which they afterwards excelled.

Shanahan's forte was jumping, and he chose for his exercise the feat of crossing the river that flows through Martinstown. As the time advanced Shanahan progressed. The championship for the hop, step and jump was held at forty-two feet, but Shanahan and John Purcell, of Dublin, came quickly in pursuit of laurels, and soon exceeded this mark, with the consequent result that there was much speculation as to whether Shanahan or Purcell was the superior, and there was much excitement when they did meet.

Shanahan, however, proved to be the victor, and Purcell left soon after for San Francisco, where he became a great friend of Jim Corbett and also a successful merchant.

### A REMARKABLE FEAT.

It was in 1888, at Limerick, that Shanahan performed the remarkable task of covering 50 feet  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch on a grass take-off, thus establishing a record which, though frequently assailed, was never broken. The judges on the occasion: Michael Flanagan, Kilbreedy; P. Coll, Ballinamuddagh, and the great Ned O'Grady, who superintended the measurements, were unanimous in praise of Shanahan's great feat. Flanagan declared it one of the cleanest jumps ever given, and said that it would take a lot of beating. His prophecy was fulfilled.

Looney of Macroom was second on the occasion. At the same meeting were the celebrated Canadian shot putter, George Grave, who had made a trip to Ireland for the first time; Willie Real and Jim Mitchell, and the three divided the weight-throwing events between them.

Shanahan was one of the picked team that joined the American "Invasion," and, with four other athletes from the Kilfinane district, received one of the "Invasion" medals.

### IF HE HAD BEEN TRAINED.

Dr. Ned Walsh, who knew Dan Shanahan from boyhood, once said: "I can with honesty and sincerity state that were he trained as he should have been, or as men in other countries have been rigorously trained for athletics generally, Dan, I feel thoroughly assured, would have put the hop, step and jump record three or four feet further than that recorded. Even

in his raw and untrained condition he was ever good for twenty-three feet long jump, and actually won the G.A.A. Championship of Ireland in this event in 1886 at 21 ft. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins., and this before the board take-off was even heard of in Ireland. At hurdles he might also have excelled but shyness, his besetting sin, prevented him from making a bid for this as well as other events. He was an ardent supporter of Gaelic pastimes."

Up to quite recent times the running hop step and jump and its variant, the two hops and jump, remained undisputedly under the sway of Irish prowess. The triple leap has always been a favourite test with youth and manhood in this country and it would appear that we have given this particular exercise to the world; and that mainly through Irish influence in America it has found a place on international and modern Olympic programmes.

### ALWAYS A POPULAR CONTEST.

Wherever the tradition of native athletics was preserved in Ireland such a contest was always most popular and it is impossible not to think that this characteristic test of sustained agility answers some inherent impulse. Even now, when our best performers have fallen away from the standard of their predecessors, the event has still a glamour which must have originated away back in the early physiology of our race. It was facile and congenial to all our finest natural jumpers and many of our most notable weight throwers.

A list of the foremost exponents of the running hop, step and jump includes a wonderful array of men upon whose achievements our athletic fame securely rests. First of our champions was Dan Shanahan, followed by other Limerick men in Paddy Leahy and his brothers of equal fame; Bresnihan, whose proficiency was noted; great figures in the Ahearnes of Athea, Dan and Tim; all of them champions of Ireland in this distinctively Irish accomplishment. Each was a beautiful exponent and master of many more events besides. These are only the most noteworthy and far from all of the brilliant band who starred in the three jumps and maintained Ireland's supremacy the world over.

### EARLIEST CHAMPION.

Dan Shanahan was the earliest champion under organised rules, and it must be emphasised that his jumping, and that of his immediate successors in eminence, was accomplished off the sod. The board take-off was not introduced until many years later, and the merits of these earlier performances must be appreciated in the light of the conditions under which they were accomplished. With the training and advantages which later jump-

ers enjoy an advance of a foot upon Shanahan's accepted record leaves it still a feat to unsurpassed excellence. Much of modern athletic progress has been achieved by improved methods, not by better men.

While there were many great exponents of the triple leap at all times in Ireland, Shanahan was the first man to pass fifty feet in a recognised competition. This was in the G.A.A. championships of 1888 at Limerick, as already mentioned, a meeting made memorable by many other splendid performances.

Shanahan was opposed by Looney, Macroom; O'Sullivan, of Killorglin, and other noted Munster jumpers. All cleared forty-six feet in their first attempts—a distance rarely surpassed now. At each successive jump Shanahan and Looney showed improvement, until the latter led with a magnificent clearance of 49 ft. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.—all the time jumping in his bare feet! Shanahan then made his supreme effort, and covered 50 ft. 0 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. This was at once recognised as the Irish and world's record, until Dan Ahearne surpassed it from a board take-off shortly after his arrival in the United States.

### STILL RANKS AS BEST PERFORMANCE IN NATIVE ARENA.

The Kilfinane man's jump still ranks as the best ever performed in the native arena, the previous best being credited to John Purcell (49 ft. 7 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.) at Cork, in May, 1887.

Shanahan's first public appearance was in 1885, at Cork Queen's College Sports, where jumping bare-footed, he won with an effort of 45 ft. 11 ins. In the following year he reached 48 ft. 8 ins. at Tipperary; 47 ft. 7 ins. at Rathluiric; and finally 49 ft. 6 ins. at Dublin. His attention was practically confined to this form of jumping, in which he seemed to revel and to operate with the utmost grace and freedom of action. This year however, as we have already noted, he won the long jump championship.

His hop, step and jump championship victories alone are eloquent of his expertness and momentum. In six years, from the inclusion of the event on the championship programme, he only yielded the title once—in 1889, to J. P. O'Sullivan, of Killorglin, Captain of the far famed Laune Rangers football team. Shanahan won the other five—1886, 46 ft. 11 ins.; 1887, 48 ft. 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.; 1888, 50 ft. 0 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins.; 1890, 47 ft. 5 ins.; 1891, 47 ft. 7 ins.

### DIDN'T REVEAL HIS REAL CAPABILITIES.

With one exception, these distances do not reveal the Kilfinane man's real capabilities, and he accomplished much finer jumping

in non-championship competitions, as is often the case. Fifty feet was within the compass of his powers under any conditions—the ground was against the jumpers in 1888—and on several occasions he surpassed that measurement by a foot and more. At Newcastle West he cleared 51 ft. 1 in., and in July, 1891, at Mallow, with a slight incline, reached 51 ft. 7 ins., which makes the claim that he had covered 52 feet easily credible.

We are generally urged to be sceptics regarding such claims. Such an attitude may be sustainable by experience, but it can often be most unjust. Here, however, is one instance in which Shanahan's powers were displayed beyond reproach. The only regret is that his jumping on this occasion was ineligible for official recognition. It was done to please another, not to gratify himself.

In September, 1888, soon after he had made his record at Limerick, his uncle, Rev. Father Shanahan, was desirous of seeing him attempt to improve upon it, as all acquainted with his jumping were convinced he could do. The ground for the run up and jump was carefully selected and verified as perfectly level. Fifty, fifty-one and fifty-two full feet were marked off from the lath ring.

### FIRST EFFORT EXCEEDED THE RECORD.

His first effort measured 51 ft. 3 ins. — 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  inches beyond the record. In the second essay he reached 51 feet 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins., and in a grand climax covered 52 ft. 3 $\frac{1}{2}$  ins., or fifteen inches beyond the existing world's record—his own. The correctness of the conditions and performance was vouched in every respect. The second effort was unimpeachable and in the third he just "winded" but did not disturb the lath.

This test was brought off at home, in Kilfinane; and about the same time in Mallow he accomplished the following sequence of jumps — 50 ft. 6 ins., 51 ft. 7 ins., and 52 ft. Here, however, there was a slight fall of ground to the take off. We have the testimony of the late Frank Dinneen as to the absolute bona fides of the Kilfinane and Mallow jumping, and have no hesitation in proclaiming any of the above six performances as moral, if not official victories over the established record.

Had Shanahan been imbued with the modern craze for records, the world's criterion of proficiency in the three jumps would still stand to his credit. It is rather remarkable that like Bresnihan and Leahy, he should have achieved so much and got recognition for so little.

He retired early from active athletics and devoted himself to farming and an urban business in Kilfinane. He died at a comparatively early age; and, though his athletic brilliance shone in a period of which few of later generations of athletes know much, his fame is inseparably associated with the three leaps, and the superiority of Irishmen in that event is indissolubly linked with the greatness of Dan Shanahan of Kilfinane.

No. 18 — Michael J. Hayes, of Lough Gur.