

Great Limerick Athletes

(No. 2)—LARRY ROCHE of Bruree

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

VERSATILITY has been an outstanding characteristic of our Irish athletes. As opposed to the specialisation of the Americans, the Irishman took a hand at everything.

This trait was probably a tradition of the pattern and cross-road meet, where jumps and weights were interspersed with "foot races," as they were called. Mayhap it was a Celtic characteristic, and though this all-round tendency has left us behind in the race against time and distance, it has much to commend it as a source of symmetrical development.

Standing 6 feet 1 inch, of handsome face and figure, Larry Roche was an outstanding man, one of our most versatile athletes, and a vigorous pioneer of Gaelic games.

A gentleman of big interests, his admirable qualities as judge and referee did much to put the G.A.A. in Limerick on a solid footing. At the age of 19 Larry Roche refereed the great County Senior Hurling final between South Liberties and Kilfinane, at Charleville, for the 1890 title, a grand sporting game won by "Liberties" with the only score of the day—a point.

One of the noblest and most distinguished sportsmen that ever appeared before the Gaelic "footlights," his name became a household word in Limerick and its surrounding counties, and his achievements were recorded in many lands.

RARE VERSATILITY.

His sporting category embraced a versatility in physical and skilful endowments which may well be held to stand as a record, for Larry Roche was a wonderful athlete, weight-thrower, sprinter, jumper, hurdler, who played and won the All-Ireland Football final with Limerick Commercial in 1896.

Writing in "Sport" almost two score years ago, that great authority on athletics, Ballylanders-born Frank B. Dinneen, said:

"I do not know even to a year how long ago it is since I first met Larry Roche. It is, perhaps, twenty-two or twenty-three years ago. That would take us back to the early 'nineties.

"I was on my way to Limerick, on the line from Charleville, and on looking out at Bruree I saw a tall, strapping, well built youngster walking the platform. He looked an athlete all over, and when he had reached the compartment I was travelling in, he entered and took a seat opposite me.

"I kept staring in admiration at the well built lad, for, in form and feature, face and limb, he was one of the best looking youngsters you could meet, and being full of admiration for anything in the way of a promising athlete, I was anxious to know who my companion was.

NEPHEW OF BOB COLL.

"He broke the ice himself; he knew me, and introduced himself by telling me he was a nephew of one of the greatest athletes that Ireland was ever proud of—Bob Coll of Dromin. He could not have

a better introduction to me, and I felt not a little proud of my judgment, even before young Roche told me he could do a bit at weights.

"Larry Roche proved himself an athlete from his boyhood. Being of powerful build, as a youth he made a study of weights, and, to keep himself fit, he played football. At both he shone.

"He won the All-Ireland Championship of the 16 lb. shot in 1897 (37 ft. 8½ ins.); and the previous year he won the All-Ireland Championship of pushing the 56 lbs., both under Gaelic laws. In 1894 he won, under I.A.A.A. laws, the 56 lbs. between legs without follow or run championship (24 ft. 4 ins.), and many other events at various sports meetings.

"I thought at one time that he was rather careless about training, for sometimes men of great build become careless. At times he would appear in great form at a sports meeting, and nothing could beat him; other days he would appear completely off colour; but he was possessed of that kind of temper that knows no defeat—and it invariably carried him through to success.

GREAT FOOTBALLER.

"He was a great footballer. I think it was with the Kilmallock Club he used to play, but, at any rate I know that Club invaded his house at Bruree one day and placed a marble slab, which contained a suitable inscription, into one of the walls of the house, the inscription recording his great services to the Club and his great deeds on the athletic field. I remember driving out one day from Kilmallock to view that testimony of appreciation. I remember reading the inscription, but the years that have rolled by since have made me forget more than that.

"He was a member of the Limerick Commercial Football team that won the All-Ireland Football Championship in February, 1898, from the Dublin Young Irelands at Jones's Road; and when that match is spoken of by anyone they refer to the dash of young Roche, at midfield, when he broke from his place at half-back, rushed through his opponents, who could not prevent him, and sent the ball to his forwards, who made the proper use of it.

"I remember that famous dash of Larry Roche. I could liken it to nothing better than to the dash in the old days of horses of the Dublin Fire Brigade before the introduction of motors, when everyone cleared the way for the horses and all stood in admiration of their splendid gallop. For years the dash of the Fire Brigade reminded me of Roche's dash of victory that day long ago in February, 1898.

IN THE LONG JUMP.

"In the sports field, as apart from football, the day I was most pleased with him was at Kildorrery sports years ago. It was in the long jump competition. He was going great guns. The sun was on his back, with a strong wind against him. His strength helped him, and he won from very strong opposition. His run to the take-off was as grand as could be looked at. Such power, such speed, that I thought he could not take his tries, but he did. That was Larry Roche; he could not do things by halves.

"He took a prominent part in the administrative affairs of the Gaelic Athletic Association. He was Vice-President of the Central Council for a period; Chairman of the Limerick County Board, and represented Limerick on the Munster, Central and Athletic Councils. He refereed many important games and advocated several big changes in the Constitution of the Association, notably that one of taking over the control of cycling."

Prior to the founding of the G.A.A., hurling had practically died out owing to emigration and many other causes, culminating in the Black Winter of 1879, when the young men fled the country in thousands to America, New Zealand, and other lands.

The only football clubs functioning in Limerick in 1878-9 were Dromin and Feenagh. The Dromin team was led by such stalwarts as Bob Coll and Tom O'Connor, and Feenagh, by Frank Noonan, Pat Vaughan and Con Bresnihan.

Dromin first affiliated under G.A.A. rules in 1886. The President was Bob Coll, Maidstown Castle, and the captain, Larry Roche. The club disbanded in 1892 owing to many of its players emigrating to America. Those who remained at home joined the Kilmallock Club, and from 1894 to 1898 were seen to advantage in many a hard fought game. The Dromin footballers were all men of splendid physique who played with great dash and possessed a scientific turn which made their play a treat to witness.

WON 110 FIRST PRIZES.

During half a dozen years in the active arena, Larry Roche won 110 first prizes under G.A.A., I.A.A.A. and A.A.A. laws, in the following athletic events, his best recorded performances being given where available, in brackets:—100 yards flat, 220 yards flat, putting 42 lbs., three jumps (33ft. 1in.), running high jump (5ft. 6ins.), running long jump (22ft. 6ins.), putting 28 lbs. (30ft. 10½ins.), 16 lb. hammer (125ft.), putting 16 lb. shot (37ft. 8½ins.), slinging 56 lbs. with follow (29ft. 4ins.) and slinging 56 lbs. without follow (26ft. 9ins.).

The G.A.A. had a big field day at Stamford Bridge, London, on Easter Monday, 1896, when Larry

Roche figured with the Irish football team that beat London, 3-15 to 0-3. The same occasion, Munster hurlers beat Leinster, 5-7 to 2-8, and John Flanagan, of Kilmallock, broke two world's records at the sports meeting which followed.

Larry Roche was responsible for a Whit visit of a team of Limerick hurlers and athletes to London in 1904. They arrived on Sunday morning, and remained there until Tuesday night, being lavishly entertained by Liam McCarthy, President of the London County Board, and donor of the All-Ireland Hurling Championship Cup, and the members of the Irish National Club.

On Whit Monday, at Elm Park Grounds, Lea Bridge, before five thousand spectators, Limerick beat the London-Irish, then holders of the All-Ireland title, 3-4 to 0-3.

The London-Irish returned the visit, when they arrived in Limerick on September 24th, 1904, being met at the railway station by thousands of citizens accompanied by two bands. An address of welcome was presented during a dinner at Geary's Hotel, over which Larry Roche presided, also in attendance being Ald. Michael Joyce, M.P., and Ald. John Daly.

The following day, at the Markets Field, Limerick scored another victory over the champions, the score being: Limerick, 4-11; London Irish, 2-6. Larry Roche was the referee.

The Limerick County Convention in 1909 found all competitions up to date, and old debts cleared. This accomplished to his satisfaction, Larry Roche resigned all his representative positions and so closed a grand career of successful endeavour in the cause of Irish athletics.

No. 3—Tim Ahearne, of Athea.