

MAURICE WALL OF NEWBRIDGE

(By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH)

THE final decade of the last century saw a noted football combination in Newbridge, a district situated in the flat and fertile plain between Rathkeale and Askatoon, about three miles from the former and half that from the latter.

The traditions of Gaelic games were laid in the district before the stirring days of '67, and when the high hopes of that time of insurrection against British aggression went down in disaster and woe, the influence of the Irish Republican Brotherhood never ceased to be used for the purpose of maintaining the active interest of the youth in the Irish Ireland ideal.

Consequently, when Michael Cusack issued his clarion call in 1884, asking the youth of the county to enrol themselves beneath the G.A.A. banner, the response from the youth of Newbridge, and the adjoining districts of Riddlestown and Coolcoppa was as full and as enthusiastic as the fame of the area in the national struggle suggested it should be.

We have it on the authority of such old campaigners as Michael Slattery, James Downey and Mike ("Pad") Mulcahy that the ancient pastime known as "goaling" was everywhere played in the area long before the founding of the G.A.A., with the result that the road was well prepared for the introduction of the game under the rules drawn up by Maurice Davin, shortly after the Association was established.

A man who had much to do with the formation of the first regular football team in Newbridge was that outstanding figure of the locality—the late Maurice Wall. His influence and capacity for hard work and earnest endeavour was never better reflected than in the efforts he put behind the gathering and training of the youths of the locality into a combination which many good judges held to be almost equal in status to the renowned Limerick Commercials, even at a period when that great team held the All-Ireland title.

MAURICE WALL ELECTED CAPTAIN.

The Newbridge footballers elected Maurice Wall as their captain—fitting recognition of the part he played in their establishment, and it can be safely said that few captains were respected and loved as much as he was.

The Newbridge footballers played many great games against some of the greatest club teams ever to grace the Limerick arena, but pride of place was always given to some grand outings against the Commercials, notably those played whilst the city lads were preparing to participate in the 1896 All-Ireland series, in which they scored such a spectacular triumph.

Commercials adopted as their method of training for that great assault on the national citadel the playing of a number of games against leading club teams. That the policy was a sound one can be judged from the results. Matches bring out the true values in every player, and the matches of most value are ones that bring defeat as the portion. More can be learned from such a game than from all the victories ever won.

Of all the teams they engaged it was the firm conviction of the Commercials captain—the great Con Fitzgerald—that the matches with Newbridge produced the most useful tests the Commercials had.

Another famed Commercials player, one of the most spectacular footballers Limerick reared—Tim Ryan—has left on record this statement: "We played against teams all over the country but the toughest and best boys we ever met were the bunch who comprised the Newbridge team, under

the leadership of that great Gaelic Maurice Wall."

And here is what the great athlete and footballer, Tom McNamara, of Shelbourne, thought of the Newbridge lads:—"I have played in all the notable matches of the county, against some of the greatest combinations in Ireland in the inter-county series, but there is one I will ever remember, and that is against Newbridge. They put me in bed for most of a week—not by any means were they foul players, but their style was the then rough and tumble tactics, the well beloved of early G.A.A. days. In football of this class they stood out on their own."

THE SHADOW OF FACTION.

The shadow of faction was still in our midst in those now long past early days of Gaelic endeavour. No race meeting, political gathering, fair or market, would wind up without having some melee, and it was only natural that when the excitement and enthusiasm associated with the early games under Gaelic laws brought rival crowds together that clashes should occur. In their earliest engagements the Newbridge boys were often called upon to hold their own, and responded manfully, even on occasions when long distances from the home parish left them very much outnumbered.

In common with other leaders of Gaelic thought at the time, Maurice Wall set himself to remove this blot from the Irish countryside, particularly from the sporting scene.

No man was better equipped for the task, for Maurice's motto all through life was never to make an enemy. Captain of the team for many long years, and representative of his district in public affairs for over twenty years, it was truly remarked by an intimate friend that wisdom and coolness were the two factors that expressed his honest and unassuming character.

He discouraged any type of bickering between players, and if a flare-up did occur, his advice was: "Take no notice of them. Like the two goats pulling this way and that way, when they get tired they'll stop."

Only once did his team get really out of hand under his command, and on that occasion his influence was quickly evident. On the edge of the fighting crowd he gained immediate attention by putting up his two hands and shouting: "Boys, listen to me for a minute. What is all the fighting and arguing about? What will the people say only we are all a pack of blackguards. By the way ye are going on, one would think it was a hundred acre farm or a girl with a thousand pounds fortune all this row is about. Here, in the name of God, shake hands with each other and finish the game. What is the whole thing only a bit of fun, that none of us will gain anything by, whether we win or lose."

REMEMBER WALL'S ADVICE.

Maurice Wall's advice is as sound to-day as it was three score years ago, and on the threshold of another season Gaelic players could usefully dwell on this subject and realise that whether in field or forum the national pastimes are sporting engagements over which no one should lose control of temper or even make of an opponent on the field of play an enemy.

We have all too many divisions in our national life and our big aim in the G.A.A. should be to cement friendships—to meet at all times in friendly rivalry, and when active days are over to be able to remember with pleasure the many friends met on Gaelic fields.

That is one of the great achievements of the really successful player—to be able to look back with pride and satisfaction on days made happy through the medium of friendships forged in the white heat of an unforgettable game.