

# No. 130—ROGER O'SULLIVAN Of Ballyhahill

By SEAMUS O'CEALLAIGH.

BACK again in his native Ballyhahill for almost quarter of a century now, is a man who has made his impress on both the Irish and American athletic and football fields.

Born in the parish of Ballyhahill on April 7th, 1892, Roger O'Sullivan was but thirteen years old when on August 15th, 1905 he won the schoolboys' race at the local sports. Exactly twelve months later he had a similar success at Loughill.

Roger went to Dublin in 1908, where he joined the famous Kickhams, with whom he figured for two seasons. Then moving to London, he figured prominently in games in the English metropolis during 1911 and 1912.

## HIS FOOTBALL WORTH RECOGNISED.

Back in Ballyhahill the following year his football worth was recognised by the County selectors, and he was a member of the Ballylanders "pick" that beat Cork by three points in the Munster final at Thurles. Along with John Tom O'Connor he was picked for the All-Ireland semi-final later that season, but he left for New York in September, 1913, shortly before the game was played.

The Ballyhahill man has often expressed his admiration of his colleagues on that Munster champion fifteen and considers the trio—Osborne, Kiely and Walsh—as really great footballers fit to rank with the best of their day. Roger played on the forty yards that occasion—a position he has always occupied, both in Ireland and America.

On arrival in New York he joined the Cavan team and played with them in the U.S.A. championships from 1914 until 1922, winning out on three occasions.

## MEMORABLE TUSSLE.

Returning to Ireland for a six months holiday in 1919, he brought his zest for football along too and was not long at home before he was in action for Ballyhahill against Coolmeen (Clare) in a challenge game. Shortly afterwards he lined out against Abbeyfeale in the County championship at Newcastle West and after a most exciting game the result was a draw.

Roger regards that tussle as the most memorable of his career. Played in September, 1919, they still speak of it by Ballyhahill firesides. Some great men to wear the parish colours on that occasion were Jack Tom O'Connor (R.I.P.), Dick McCoy, Joe O'Shaughnessy, Tom Garry O'Shaughnessy, Jim O'Connor (the Hill), Mick Hanley, Johnny O'Brien, the brothers Roger and Mick O'Sullivan.

## SPARKLING FINISH.

Great crowds travelled to see that game and they were rewarded with a brilliant exhibition of fast, exciting football. The Fealesiders were leading by two goals with ten minutes left to play, and in a sparkling finish Ballyhahill rose to great heights, Roger O'Sullivan flashing through for the pair of green flags that ordained the pair should fight it out again another day. Good Abbeyfeale men on that occasion included Big Paddy Fitzgerald, Dave O'Connor, N. T., Trooper Collins and M. O'Connell.

Roger O'Sullivan was picked by the Limerick Commercials to play in the Munster Championship semi-final against Clare at Killee, in 1919, and returned to New York the following year.

In 1923, he turned out for Tipperary and helped them win the championship of the U.S.A., beating Kerry in the final. He was later picked for America on the football team at the first Tailteann Games, but the trip was cancelled owing to the troubled conditions in Ireland at the period.

## LIMERICK SENIOR TEAM IN NEW YORK.

A Limerick senior team was organised in New York in 1924, and Roger was appointed its captain. They went into the final against Tipperary. A great trio on that

side were Danny O'Connell, Abbeyfeale; Tommy Healy, Foynes; and Paddy O'Shaughnessy, Ballysteen.

I remember hearing Roger once speak of the great men against whom he oft lined up in the land of the Stars and Stripes. They included a whole bevy of grand Kerry men—Phil Sullivan, Pluggy Moriarty, Big Paddy Casey, Mick and Jack Moriarty and the Lander brothers. The others included the Ormsbys of Mayo, Billy Barr, of Thurles, Joyce and Blondy Byrnes, of Kildare, John and Mick McGoldrick, of Leitrim, and old-timers of the American era will tell you the Ballyhahill man was able to hold his own with the best of them.

## MORE THAN MODEST.

Roger was always more than modest about his own part in building the games of the Gael across the Atlantic, whilst generous in his praise of the part others played. I recollected his admiration of the fine figures against whom he played. He spoke of them as some of the cream of the native arena, many All-Ireland men, and paid tribute to the grand clean football they played, with never an effort at pulling a good man down, as was often the case in after years.

Nevertheless, he more than once expressed his admiration for the footballers of more modern times. Some of them he considers really great and far more scientific than in his own day. On one matter he held very strong views—the question of substitution, and could not understand the idea of telling a man to lie down if he wasn't playing a good game. It was a practice that just did not exist in the olden arena. I have not met Roger since the recent Easter Cogress restricted the admission of substitutes, but I know he will welcome it as, at least, a step in the right direction.

## ATHLETIC PERFORMANCES IN U.S.A.

I have mentioned already some of his earliest essays in the realms of athletics. Unfortunately, I have no records of his doings on American tracks but I know he won several prizes there, mainly for the long jump, the 100 and 220 yards. He met all the great athletes of his time, including Tom and Dan Ahearne, of Athea, Con Leahy, of Cregane and Peter O'Connor, of Waterford.

During his 1919 holiday trip to the homeland we find him taking first place in the long jump at four different meetings: Shanagolden (20 ft. 9 in.), Loughill (21 ft.), Newtownsandes (22 ft. 2 ins.) and Athea (21 ft. 6 ins.). On another visit to Ireland five years later, he won the long jump event at Ardagh Sports, his distance on this occasion being 20 ft. 2 ins.

Roger regards Jerry Scanlan, of Tennakilla as one of the most promising men of the Irish arena of his day. Untrained, he often rose 5 ft. 10 ins. in the high jump and was capable of 46 feet in the "hop step." Roger, who studied the training methods of the American arena, feels that if Scanlan was trained under these conditions he would reach world champion class, despite the fact that he was very bashful.

I heard him speak, too, of Jim McKenna, Loughill, as a useful high jumper; Mick Hynes, Curra, very good at the half and one mile events; Father J. Mullane and Paddy Ahearne, of Athea; Paddy "Tack" Sullivan, Derry (near Lis-towel) and J. Barry, of Coolmeen.

## CON LEAHY'S DEATH.

Roger O'Sullivan and Con Leahy were great pals. Two Limerick men, they worked together as salesmen. One evening, when walking down Fifth Avenue about 6 o'clock the talk turned to athletics, as it so often did. Con, who rarely spoke of his own deeds, was in reminiscent mood. As they walked along he said: "Roger, in 1907 I didn't know my strength. I did 6ft. 5ins. in San Francisco in the high jump and 23 ft. 6 ins. in the broad jump. At that time I didn't care about the best man in the world." A few steps further, and pointing across the

road, he continued: "Roger, I know a friend living in that hotel." These were the last words of the great Cregane man, for he fell into the arms of his friend.

All traffic was stopped. The policeman on duty ran over. "Who is this man?" he queried. Roger answered: "Con Leahy." "Is this the famous Con?" he said, as he hailed a doctor who happened to be passing at the time.

Poor Con, however, was beyond all human assistance. The great heart that had stood him so well on many a field had suddenly ceased to function, and a grand figure had passed to his maker.

An ambulance was called and the remains were brought to 54th Street Police Station. In Con's pockets were two Rosary beads, several holy medals, and from his inside pocket they pulled out the emblem of Ireland—the national flag. The officer in command called all his men around him and said: "Look, here lies one of Ireland's greatest athletes," and they all said a silent prayer over poor Con.

## AT THE FUNERAL.

At his funeral two days later, all the famous athletes of America were present. They came from all over the country. The Ahearnes travelled from Chicago to make certain that Limerick would be well represented and John Flanagan, of Kilmallock, was also there.

In 1925, Roger O'Sullivan opened two dance halls in New York one in 125th Street, near Broadway, which he named "O'Sullivan's Hall" and the second in 104th Street, called the "New Munster Ballroom." For five years these proved a marvellous success, and were patronised by the hurling and football clubs and came to be the recognised meeting places of all County Limerick and Kerry people.

The Ballyhahill man returned for good to his native land in 1931, where he reared two sons, Michael and Edward, and gave them their first lessons in Gaelic football. As I must re-open the family album on another occasion to follow the careers of the latter I just say "Au Revoir," but not "Good Bye," to the O'Sullivans.