

## Famous Irish Athletes of the Past. By "Celt"

# No. 21—J. J. FLANAGAN OF KILMALLOCK

There appeared a series of graphs in Spalding's "Official Athletic" Almanac," which showed the progress made in various athletic events during fifty years. It is a wonderfully instructive mode of summarising improvements accomplished in times and distances. We reproduce the figures from two sections, those representing achievements with the 16lb. hammer and 56lb. thrown from the seven feet circle.

### The Hammer Record.

1888—J. S. Mitchell, 130ft. 0in.  
1892—J. S. Mitchell, 140ft. 11 in.  
1896—J. J. Flanagan, 147ft. 0in.  
1897—J. J. Flanagan, 150ft. 8 in.  
1898—J. J. Flanagan, 151ft. 10½ in.  
1899—J. J. Flanagan, 164ft. 6in.  
1901—J. J. Flanagan, 171ft. 9in.  
1904—J. J. Flanagan, 172ft. 11in.  
1907—M. McGrath, 173ft. 7in.  
1909—J. J. Flanagan, 184ft. 4 in.  
1911—M. McGrath, 187ft. 4 in.  
1913—P. Ryan, 189ft. 6½ in.  
(Present world's record).

### Slinging 56 lb.

1884—Queckberner, 26ft. 3¼ in.\*  
1894—J. S. Mitchell, 35ft. 10in.  
1901—J. J. Flanagan, 36ft. 9½ in.  
1904—J. J. Flanagan, 38ft. 7½ in.  
1907—J. J. Flanagan, 38ft. 8 in.  
1911—M. McGrath, 40ft. 6½ in.  
\*Thrown by the side, without follow.

### Irish Supremacy.

The first thought that must strike one on looking at this record is a realisation of the dominating influence men of Irish birth have wielded in the realm of international athletics. With the single exception of Queckberner, all who figure in the above epitome of manly prowess were of Irish nationality and nativity—Mitchell from Emly, Flanagan from Kilmallock, McGrath from Duharrow, and Ryan from Pallasgreen. In these two events, which might be regarded as the extremes of weight-throwing, our countrymen have won a pre-eminence which has, so far, not been successfully challenged.

As we can see, they have mostly been called upon to surpass each other, and they have seldom found much difficulty in overcoming the challenges of other races.

Mitchell and McGrath bore our shield into pride of place between 1884 and 1911. We now turn to the man who linked them in such a superlative manner, adding year by year greater triumphs to our renown, and fortifying our predominance in the realm of strength and skill:—John Flanagan, of Kilmallock, Irish, English, Canadian, United States, and Olympic champion, whose prowess is well epitomised in the achievements which are tabulated at the commencement of this notice.

Most men would be quite content to rest their claims to athletic distinction upon the above performances. For a period of almost twenty years he was the embodiment of proficiency in the casting of weights in the eyes of the outer world, and represented abroad the material and ability we possessed in abundance at home. We were truly rich in our athletic ranks then: Kiely, Horgan, Walsh here; Mitchell, Flanagan and McGrath across the Atlantic. Nor did these nearly exhaust our forces.

The co-ordination of movement and dynamic energy which Flanagan brought to the throwing of the hammer and slinging of the 56lbs. were only one phase of his wonderful gifts. He was expert in all other weights, even the classic Discus, then regaining its vogue, now came ready to his trained vigour and deft hand.

He furthermore possessed all-round ability of a high order, as many competitions proved, and he could hurl with the best in an area where the practice of the national pastime reached a high standard of excellence.

### Specialities.

In America he devoted himself to the most usual of the weight events there, and to a great extent specialised in the hammer and "half hundred." His success with these would suggest that they were his forte. It may, on the other hand, only have proved his adaptability and it is more than likely that, with equal opportunities, he could have earned just as much fame through any of the other media. The specialities were a limitation imposed by American conditions; not by his natural bent or endowments.

The selection from his performances which is appended renders any enlargement upon Flanagan's achievements and abilities almost superfluous. In his epoch the practice of the weights was brought to a high pitch of perfection, and every innovation found, and left, him master of the scene. He was in every respect the successor of Mitchell in the American arena. Their careers partly overlapped, and no doubt Flanagan learned much from the expertness of the great Emly athlete, now, alas, no more.

He saw the transformation of the hammer head and handle, and introduced the new implement in the English championships. The nervous energy and body control which the Kilmallock man displayed were amazing, and it is curious now to think of the opinion expressed by an English writer that Flanagan had much to learn about the "laws of trajectory." On the occasion when this sapient comment was concerned he had broken two records!

### Championships.

Flanagan's championships here were comparatively few; but, taken in conjunction with his other performances, they shed lustre upon his native arena. It is a tribute to the natural powers of the man that he at once "made good," to use an American phrase, upon American soil. Indeed, he seems to have arrived there at a most opportune moment to take up the brilliant role which his neighbour, Mitchell, had played in the intensive competitions of the New World.

The Metropolitan (New York) and A.A.U. National Championships fell to his prowess quickly and repeatedly. Across the border, in Canada, he asserted his supremacy with a champion's sway, and in so doing, confirmed a world's pre-eminence which could not be disputed outside Ireland at that time.

### Olympic Triumphs.

He secured the Hammer event for his adopted country in three successive Olympiads, and established a record that McGrath in due course took up and still holds.

The range of his weight events embraced the 7lbs. (for which he can still claim the world's record), the 28lb., in which he surpassed most men of his time, and the heavy weights in all styles where strength could combine with active motion. In 1905 it could be written of Flanagan of Kilmallock that "he was supreme with the big weight, except for height, and *facile princeps* with the hammer."

### A Limitation.

Like many other noted weight throwers, he did not shine particularly in "putting from the

shoulder." This may have been accident rather than inability. Indeed we can recall no athlete of note who reached the highest pitch with the hammer and the shot. It may be an outcome of temperament. Perhaps experts in physical qualities can explain it. We can well believe, without the support of anatomical evidence, that the Gael more dearly loves the whirl of the more active event to the momentary concentration, of the pushing pastime. There have been, we know, men who excelled in the latter, but not in both. Our national pastime would seem to typify the inherent qualities which find expression also in athletics.

There are many methods of slinging the 56lb., and there have been variations in the form of the missile used. Those in which Flanagan excelled were of two distinct types, which together exhibited the complete qualities of the mover of ponderous masses. They were, the Irish style with unlimited run and follow (the whirl again), of which Kiely was a superb exponent; and the American method from a seven feet circle without follow.

There can be found in Flanagan's performances some magnificent exhibitions of both modes. The latter was the style adopted for the Olympic Games, from which it was dropped in 1924. It requires a man of massive build and tremendous propulsive force—a man of battleship muscularity and light-cruiser activity. Flanagan and his successor in the world title are men of such proportions and vigour.

### First Title and Record.

His first All-Ireland Championship was won in 1895—a great year in native athletics—when he captured the 28lb. title, which he retained in the following year. This would have conferred no exceptional distinction at such a period. He did not fail to strike a supreme line, however, for at Cobh he beat Mitchell's seven-year-old record with the 7lb. weight. His cast was 92ft. 11in., 2 ft. 9in. beyond the previous best, and it has remained unbeaten even until to-day. Kiely and Horgan were the most likely to have menaced it, but did not do so. The event has now been entirely discarded. On the same day he threw the hammer 148ft. 2in.

### All-Round Ability.

Flanagan contested the All-Round Championship at Clonmel, and his score of 27 points against T. E. Wood, Mike Ryan and P. McNamara, testified to his versatile ability. In this competition he beat Kiely's record with the hammer, unlimited run and follow, with a throw of 145ft. 10½ in., and in addition to winning the 56lb. and shot, he was second in the high jump and hope, step and jump, and third in the 100 and 440 yards. So we can see he was no massy monster, but possessed all the traditional attributes of an ideal Irish athlete.

### Victor in England.

In 1896 he became English Hammer Champion, with a throw of 131ft. 11in., and introduced the new style of hammer with the steel wire handle, an innovation which has heralded a rapid increase in the distances attained. During the summer of that year the Gaelic Athletic Association sent picked teams of hurlers and footballers to London to give exhibitions for the newly-organised Gaels there. Flanagan hurled with the Munster selection and it is recorded that he returned a goal delivery from mid-air through the posts whence it came!—a feat worthy of heroic Diarmuid and the playing field at ancient Temair.

He won both the hammer events at the sports, which were also held, and incidentally created two cross-Channel records—156ft. 4in. unlimited run and follow, and 147ft. 0in., from 7 feet circle. It was these

performances which drew the attention of the English critic already mentioned, who, while praising his magnificent physique, found fault with his hammer technique! What a pity England had no one to show him the proper way! Later in the year he was presented with medals commemorative of his achievements; and finding no one to oppose him with the hammer, gave an exhibition throw of over 145ft.

### In America.

The next year found Flanagan in New York and at the commencement of a wonderful series of triumphs. As "Carbery" has written of him, "he revolutionised hammer-throwing, broke record after record, was the biggest attraction in the athletic world of America during his period, won the hammer throw at succeeding Olympics, and carried the world's record from 156 to 185 feet." His friend here does his achievements with the hammer scant justice, for he lifted the American figures from just over 140 feet to the distance mentioned.

In this season of 1897 he won his first of seven American hammer titles, succeeding Mitchell, who had held the championship for eight successive years. His earliest effort was 148ft. 5in., and with the exception of one year (1902) his winning throws were all upon a lengthening plane, until he finished in that competition with the grand delivery of over 170 feet.

### Records.

He made a throw of 39ft. 2½ in. with the 56lb. from the circle in 1908, which remains the Irish record, the nearest approach being 38ft. 5in. by McGrath in an exhibition throw during the Tailteann Games. This style is not practised here, and as we have seen from the table above, the record is held by the genial Mat from Nenagh neighbourhood. Flanagan's first trans-Atlantic championship with this weight was won in 1899, and he secured it six times in all. His sling of 38ft. 5in. constituted the world's best until McGrath's supreme heave of 40ft. 6½ ins. in 1911, which has yet to be excelled.

The Olympics at Paris in 1900 inevitably found him as the U.S.A. representative with the hammer. He won with 167 ft. 4in. As in the American Championships, his two later appearances in Yankee colours at intervals of four years, produced improved distances, until he finished his Olympic record with 170ft. 4½ in. in London in 1908. The stamina of the man was shown by the progressive marks he made over a period of eight years. McGrath had the reversion of this classic championship and record also at Stockholm in 1912, and retains the record of 179ft. 8 4-5 in.

Flanagan also won the British Hammer championship in 1908, with 163ft. 4in., a record for that competition, which later passed to Lindt, a Swede.

### Unbroken Success.

Flanagan's career of success in the States continued unchecked, and records staggered at every meeting where he competed, ever as the star attraction in mid-field. He lifted the hammer record to 171ft. 9in., and the 56lb. to 36ft. 9½ in., and also created a new distance of 207ft. 7½ in. with the 12lb. hammer. The year 1904 was one of his peak years.

He added further to his effort with the hammer and brought the 56lb. measurement to 38ft. 7½ in. The Canadian Championship with the same implement fell to him with a throw of 163ft. 0½ in., and the 56lb. title with 35ft. 6½ ins.—a new Canadian record, soon to be surpassed. In this latter event he had revenge on a great French-Canadian athlete, Desmarteau, who had beaten him in the American Championship at St. Louis.

Still a further record came to him with the big weight—44ft. 2in. unlimited run and follow, which so far as we know, remains uneclipsed. Another noteworthy performance during this year was a cast of 29ft. 6½in. from a stand without follow, which he improved next year to 31ft. 5in. This was also a record. In the Canadian Championships, he was second to Sheridan in the discus, and on several other occasions was beaten only by the Mayo expert. The New York Championships in the hammer and "56" were again annexed with throws of 162ft. 7¼in., and 36ft. 9in. respectively; and at a Tailteann Games organised in New York he won these events with 163ft. 0in. and 38ft. 3in.

**Top Scorer.**

His pre-eminence was uninterrupted during 1905. He had by this time joined the Greater New York Irish-American A.C., and in this year, when that invincible combination had carried off most of the laurels to be won in American arenas, he stood a distant first in aggregate scores with an individual grand total of 138 points. This period probably indicated the summit of his triumphs. It was during it that he got the 28lb. shot 39ft. 0½ins.,

which would surpass O'Grady's present Irish record, but with a different cast of missile. His capacity to hurl the "half-hundred" remained unimpaired by time, and his ability to win was proof against intensifying rivalry. He beat the record twice during his year, the best effort being 38ft. 0½in. This he finally exceeded in 1907 with 38ft. 8in.

**More Records.**

We must, however, condense this tale of monotonous triumph and skip to 1909, when he twice broke the hammer record with 180ft. 1in. and 184ft. 4in. In 1910 he won the Metropolitan event with 180ft. 10¼in., and made two new Canadian records: Hammer, 179ft. 7½in., and 56lb., 36ft. 2¾ in. He came again to the English Championships in 1911, and won the hammer with a fine effort of 172ft. 4in., and retained his title in 1912 with 156ft. 8in.

**Epochal Rivalry.**

The contests between Flanagan and McGrath, whose ambition for weight-throwing renown had been first stirred by the sight of Flanagan in action, form one of the epic tales of New World competition. Time and again each excelled in turn, until finally Flanagan retired, weighted more with honours than with years.

During his athletic career he had been a member of the New York Police, in which so many of our weight champions have served; and his experiences, both as an athlete and peace officer, embrace many amusing, pleasant and trying incidents. He returned to his native place, Kilmallock, and still abides there—a great figure of a champion whose presence should be an incentive to preserve the grandeur of the feats he accomplished and the tradition of which he was a superb embodiment.

**Irish Championships.**

Pushing 28lb.—1895, 32ft. 10in.; 1896, 33ft. 9in.

Hammer—1911, 172ft. 4in. (championship record); 1912, 165ft. 8in.

56lb. 9ft. circle—1911, 38ft. 6 in.; Munster Championship, 1894.

**International Contest.**

Hammer—1911, 170ft. 5in.

**English Championship.**

Hammer—1896, 131ft. 11in.; 1900, 163ft. 4in. (championship record).

**All-round Competition, Clonmel, 1895.**

Hammer—145ft. 10½ins.; 56lbs., 23ft. 11 in.; shot, 39ft. 3 in.

**United States Championships.**

Hammer—1897, 148ft. 5in.; 1898, 151ft. 10½in.; 1899, 155ft. 4½in.; 1901, 158ft. 10½in.; 1902, 151ft.

4 in.; 1906, 166ft. 6½in.; 1907, 171ft. 0½ins.

Slings 56lb. from circle—1899, 33ft. 7¼in.; 1901, 30ft. 6in.; 1904, 35ft. 9in.; 1906, 35ft. 7in.; 1907, 38ft. 8in.; 1908, 37ft. 1½ in.

**Canadian Championships.**

Slings 56lb.—1904, 35ft. 6¼in.

Hammer—1904, 163ft. 0½in.

**Olympic Victories.**

Hammer—1900, 167ft. 4in.; 1904, 168ft. 1in.; 1908, 170ft. 4¼in. (this was Olympic record up to 1912, when McGrath won with 179ft. 8 4-5 in.)

**Irish Records.**

Throwing 7lb.—92ft. 11in. at Cobh, 1895, beating Mitchell's (1888) throw of 90ft. 2in.

Hammer—145ft. 10½in. at Clonmel, 1895; 179ft. 10in. at Cobh, 1908 (9ft. circle).

Slings 56lb. from circle—39ft. 2½in., 1908.

**American Records.**

16lb. Hammer, 4ft. handle, 7ft. run—172ft. 11in., 1904; 9ft. run, 164ft. 6in., 1899; do., 7ft. circle, 184ft. 4in.

28lb. from shoulder—34ft. 0½in., 1905.

56lb., 7ft. circle—38ft. 8in. 1907. 56lb., unlimited run and follow, 44ft. 2 in., 1904.