

A WORD ABOUT IRISH ATHLETICS

By Michael Cusack.

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No movement having for its object the social and political advancement of a nation from the tyranny of imported and enforced customs and manners can be regarded as perfect if it has not made adequate provision for the preservation and cultivation of the National pastimes of the people. Voluntary neglect of such pastimes is a sure sign of National decay and of approaching dissolution.

The strength and energy of a race are largely dependent on the National pastimes for the development of a spirit of courage and endurance. A warlike race is ever fond of games requiring skill, strength, and staying power. The best games of such a race are never free from danger. But when a race is declining in martial spirit, no matter from what cause, the national games are neglected at first and then forgotten. And as the corrupting and degrading influences first manifest themselves in capital towns and large cities, so, too, we find that the national pastimes and racial characteristics first fade and disappear from such large centres of population.

And further, as persons whose reason is unhinged often put off the substantial and decent clothes suitable to their condition, and deck themselves in gaudy frippery and fading flowers, thereby demonstrating that the throne of man's dignity is uncrowned, so, too, we find the deteriorating residents of cities and the thoughtless votaries of fashion ever impotently looking out with feverish anxiety for some change in their dreary pastimes after having abandoned those of the people. The corrupting influences which for several years have been devastating the sporting grounds of our cities and towns are fast spreading to our rural population.

Foreign and hostile laws and the pernicious influence of a hated and hitherto dominant race drove the Irish people from their trysting-places at the cross-roads and hurling fields back to their cabins where but a few years before famine and fever reigned supreme. In those wretched homes – homes consecrated by sufferings which should appal the devil – the Irish peasant too often wasted his evenings and his holidays in smoking and card-playing. A few years later a so-called revival of athletics was inaugurated in Ireland. The new movement did not originate with those who have ever had any sympathy with Ireland or the Irish people.

Accordingly labourers, tradesmen, artists, and even policemen and soldiers were excluded from the few competitions which constituted the lame and halting programme of the promoters. Two years ago every man who did not make his living either wholly or partly by athletics was allowed to compete. But with this concession came a law which is as intolerable as its existence in Ireland is degrading. The law is, that all Athletic Meetings shall be held under the rules of the Amateur Athletics Association of England, and that any person competing at any meeting not held under these rules should be ineligible to compete elsewhere.

The management of nearly all the meetings held in Ireland since has been entrusted to persons hostile to all the dearest aspirations of the Irish people. Every effort has been made to make the meetings look as English as possible – foot-races, betting, and flagrant cheating being their most prominent features. Swarms of pot-hunting mashers sprang into existence. They formed Harrier Clubs, for the purpose of training through the winter, after the fashion of English professional athletes, that they might be able to win and pawn the prizes offered for competition in the summer.

We tell the Irish people to take the management of their games into their own hands, to encourage and promote in every way every form of athletics which is peculiarly Irish, and to remove with one sweep everything foreign and iniquitous in the present system. The vast majority of the best athletes in Ireland are Nationalists. These

gentlemen should take the matter in hands at once, and draft laws for the guidance of the promoters of meetings in Ireland next year. The people pay the expenses of the meetings, and the representatives of the people should have the controlling power. It is only by such an arrangement that pure Irish athletics will be revived, and that the incomparable strength and physique of our race will be preserved.