

CYCLING > INTERMEDIATE CHAMPIONSHIP ROUND 2

The legendary Mae Hegarty

Clare lost one of its greatest female sportswomen last week with the death of Mae Hegarty from Kilnamona, writes Joe Ó Muirheartaigh who recalls her brilliant cycling career in the 1940s.

"I won everything that was worth winning and then I quit."

Mae Hegarty

THE Kilnamona woman was speaking in 1985 when giving an interview to Willie Molloy for a history of cycling in Clare.

That quote reappeared in the last few days on a Facebook site operated by Jackie Elger under the nom-de-plume of *The Vintage Lens* and at once was a window into the sporting life and times of the nonagenarian who excelled in sport and in business.

She was called 'The legendary Mae Hegarty', with that tag originated from her sporting days as a cyclist following her into her other life of business as the founder of Celtic Crystal in Galway that survives and thrives to this day.

But it was the cycling and the determination she showed against all-comers that first and foremost marked her down as that legend, something she recalled in that revealing 1985 interview.

The first sport she would have played in Kilnamona was camogie, in the wake of the Clare Camogie Board being established in the county in 1934, the golden jubilee of the GAA, by Paddy Hennessy from Quin.

But it was when she took to the bike that she found her true sporting vocation - something that she revealed happened purely by chance when she was her summer holidays with relatives in West Clare.

"I was on holidays with my aunt, Mrs Brennan. There was Ann, Bridie and May Brennan and they lived in Tullycrine and were very well known cyclists at that time," she remembered. "I had just a Raleigh sports bike with dropped handlebars and when they went out in the evenings I used to go along and I discovered I could keep up with them," she added.

At once cycling was the sport for and Hegarty, with the support of her family, went on a sporting journey that endured for much of the 1940s, brought her around Ireland and had she wanted it, would have brought her abroad onto the world stage as well.

"My father bought a bike for me in 1942 or '43 for £12.50," she remembered. "In '43 I decided I would go somewhere that nobody would know me and see how I would get on in a race. There was a ladies one-mile event somewhere beyond Gort.

"A cousin of mine and I set off one Sunday after Mass. We cycled about five miles outside Gort to the sports off the Loughrea Road. The Mannions from Knock were there; Angela Egan, a sister of the famous Martin Egan and some lady from Ballinasloe.

"They didn't know who I was of what I could do on a bike, so they wrote me off as a black horse. These were handicap races, the maximum handicap being 160 yards. I was handicapped 80 yards. The race was eight laps of a circuit. I discovered I was just passing them out with five laps to go I was sailing away around the track on my own. I won that day.

"Next I won at Clonclony, near Croom. On to Labasheeda Sports - Ann, Bridie and May Brennan - I won there again. The Brennans were county champions of their time. Henrietta Bradley was another good cyclist," she added.

But Hegarty was the best of the them all, locally at first in Clare and then on a provincial and national level as she plundered title after title over a variety of distances from a mile to five miles and onto 25 miles.

"I bought a Claude Butler - a track bike - in 1944 and I had another bike, a Stilton Glider for the road (16 lbs weight)," she recalled. "These bikes had tubulars, could fold up and take the handlebars off. I won by first All-Ireland in 1944 at Ballinasloe. There were about 30 competitors. In 1945 I set a record of 58m 59 seconds for a 25-mile race in Dublin," she added.

Throughout the 1940s Hegarty became the most feared of all the competitors in the women's competitions, so much so, that

her presence in the field scared many of her opponents away as she dominated Munster and All-Ireland title races like no other competitor from 1944 through to '49.

"There were always a lot of competitions, especially in Dublin," she remembered. "They would say, referring to me: 'That' one from Clare, watch out for her. Some wouldn't compete if they knew I was taking part".

"I used to train 50 miles on a Sunday, 25-30 three nights during the week. I often came home black and blue, but I never felt it.

"We had no fat, it was all sheer muscle. We were trained down to the bare skin and bone. Up in the mornings and did all the jobs before we went to our sports. We went to the sports and the dance after and hoped to be back

home in the morning before you got the call to get up and tough cheese if you didn't get your night's sleep."

For Hegarty it was always the case of 'have bike will travel' - and that went for competitions, getting to and from the competitions, not to mind social occasions around the county.

"It was fantastic," she said. "They thought I was mad - gone to the head. My mother said to me, 'you'll keep going until you break all your bones'. In 1947, down in Ballinasloe, a very strong girl pedalled into my rear wheel and I toppled over. The corner steward picked me up.

"I had an All-Ireland jersey on and the grass marks never left it. I won the All-Ireland with a broken collarbone. I was at home for two weeks with sandbags under my shoulders and for a finish I had to get it reset by Martin Sexton from Miltown Malbay. Down in Blarney I broke it again."

But undaunted Hegarty cycled on, even when the Gardai sometimes gave chase, as she recalled.

"I remember one evening coming back from Cooraclare Sports," she remembered, "coming up the hill where Coughlan's Garage is in Lissycasey. I was pedalling hard and it was pitch dark. When a car would pass you would tuck in behind and get as far as you could with the lights.

"Suddenly a hand came out of the wall and grabbed me: 'Where are your lights,' he said. I put the speed on and the Guard on the bicycle behind me. He had a great light and I had no light, so I didn't want to get too far ahead of him because I wouldn't know where I was going, it was so dark.

"It was grand when I was going up the hill - had a fixed wheel and he was pedalling mad to keep up with me. We came to Darragh Cross and Paddy Sheedy and all the lads were there.

"They said 'Hello Mae, how did you get on today'. The Guard piped up, 'who is she?' The lads didn't know what to say. Well said the Guard, 'you may thank your lucky stars that you're able to cycle because I'd give you a free night's lodgings."

And how Mae Hegarty could cycle, with international recognition of her outstanding abilities coming in 1949 when Europe and America came calling. In Europe it was Copenhagen, while in America it was Villanova University in Pennsylvania.

"In 1949 came my big chance to go to the World Championships (in Copenhagen). I was the holder of the mile, five mile and 25 miles titles, but I was discouraged from going.

"I would have loved to have gone to America, looking back on it now, but it might have been chance. I got the scholarship (to Villanova) but didn't go and things turned out a lot better for me."

All because Hegarty turned her had to business, founded Celtic Crystal in Galway and turned it into a national and international business.

It meant that her international recognition came in business, when it could have been cycling many decades before that.



Left: The late Mae Hegarty from Kilnamona, one of Clare's greatest ever sportswomen, who passed away recently.