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## **Amateurism in the GAA a Professional Debate**

by Robert John Gray

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## Introduction

The GAA is an amateur sporting organisation held together by its community spirit. It has developed and prospered through the devotion of thousands of voluntary workers. As a result of this, many of its members do not realise how large a business the association has become. The structure of the GAA moves from the club system to the county boards to provincial councils up to the Central Council, which is the supreme governing body of the GAA.

My research into the history and establishment of the GAA found the following books invaluable, *The Story of the GAA* by Marcus De Burca, *Catch and Kick* by Eoghan Corry, *The GAA 100 years* by Micheal O Heir, *Green Fields* by Tom Humphries and *The Story of the GAA* a compilation of documents composed for the National Library by Séamus O Ceallaigh. The first chapter will focus on the establishment of the association as an amateur organisation. The second chapter will illustrate how the GAA was born in a passionate and political time. In spite of its early problems Michael Cusack, its original founder, described its growth as being like a "prairie fire." This section also refers to how politics has surrounded the GAA from its inception. It may not be a political organisation but it has always been associated with politics. The third chapter will involve the debate to retain the amateur status of the GAA and discusses how its core elements have always been pride, determination, and tradition, each a vital part of the GAA as an amateur organisation. Equally, problems have also arisen in this regard, and these shall be analysed. Chapter four will investigate the views of a variety of GAA members as regards professionalism. The primary reason for the recent development of a professional debate is due to the realisation among players of how much money has entered the game. The money entering the game can be seen through lucrative sponsorship deals and the development of stadia. Of late there has also been an increasing amount of managers receiving incentives. This chapter will also critically assess the steps taken by the Central Council to respond to the players pressure, including the establishment of a committee to analyse amateurism, the findings of which will also be considered in the final chapter which illustrates how the GAA has a positive view of the future. There will be a careful look taken at the problems they face, the opportunities to be explored and an assessment delivered for the future of the largest and most powerful sporting body in the country.

# Chapter: 1

AN AMATEUR HISTORY

Amateurism in the GAA

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A Professional Debate

On November first 1884 not more than thirteen, possibly only eight men headed by Michael Cusack met in Hayes Hotel Thurles Co. Tipperary (See Fig. 1). On that day a concerted effort was made to set up an amateur association which would be Irish run, free from British involvement. Initially called the Gaelic Athletic Association for the Preservation and Cultivation of National Pastimes, it was to be

*A National Organisation which has as its basic aim the strengthening of the National Identity in a thirty two county Ireland through the preservation and promotion of Gaelic Games and pastimes.*

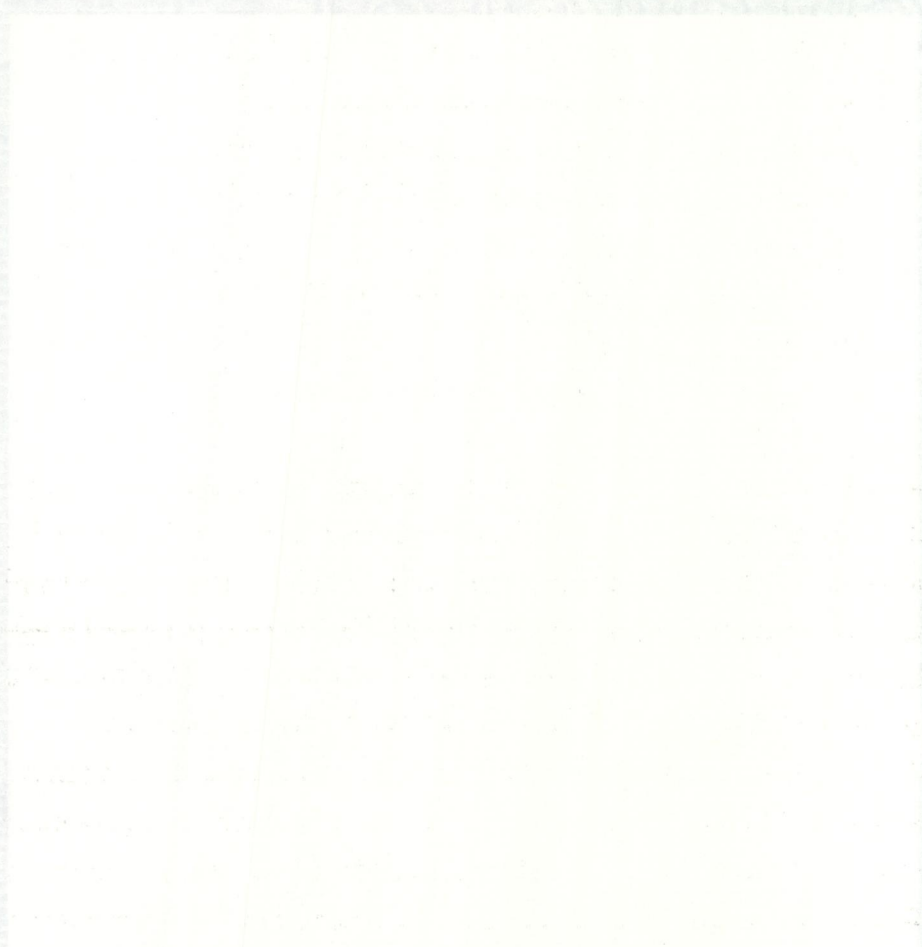
(GAA Official Guide, 1997 p. 4)

The GAA hoped to establish a fellowship among all Irishmen by bringing them together through gaelic games, pastimes, and the Irish language. They wished to help end parish feuds and eradicate unreasonable recrimination. In the aftermath of the famine earlier in the century, the GAA tried to create interest among exiled countrymen in America and elsewhere. Nothing concrete, however, was established at the original meeting. The GAA found it difficult to enforce rules resulting in the association being very unorganised. It was on January fourth 1888 that a more solid central council agreed upon the constitution of the GAA. The rules became publicly accessible. The GAA had refined its main aims to the following,

1. *That the name of the Association shall be "The Gaelic Athletic Association," and its object shall be the preservation and cultivation of national games and pastimes.*
2. *That the basis of the association be as follows:*
  - a) *Clubs formed within the bounds of parishes. A parish to mean the district presided over by a Parish Priest.*
  - b) *Committees in each county for management of county business*
  - c) *A Central Council, or Championship Committee, for management of the All Ireland Championships; this committee also to be a court of appeal in disputes between counties, and in cases of affiliation and suspension of clubs.*
  - d) *A General Convention or Gaelic Congress, with power to make laws*



Figure 1  
Hayes Hotel, a group men gathered here on November 1st 1884 to found the GAA.



*for the Association and control its funds.*

*3. That the sport for which the Association is intended to legislate and cater be hurling, football, handball and athletics, the last to include, jumping, weight throwing, foot-racing and wrestling. That the Association shall hold hurling, handball, football and athletic championship competitions once a year, and that those competitions be the only ones worked by the Association proper, for which prizes may be given out of its funds.*

(GAA, rules agreed upon at the General Convention, 1888)

The goals the GAA set out for themselves have generally remained the same today, with the exception of reviving athletics. Despite of the fact that athletics was the main concern at the initial meeting in Thurles. The men in attendance at the initial meeting each had a valuable skill to offer. John Mc Kay, who was an important figure at the first meeting, was a Belfast born journalist who was then working for the Cork Examiner. John Wyse Power was a staunch IRB member but also an athletics enthusiast. His main reason for attending was however for political reasons. Joseph Ryan a solicitor by profession was a very valuable asset, especially in the early years of the Association. George St. John McCarty was a rugby international, athlete and an Officer of the Royal Irish Constabulary. However the English ruled Athletics at the time and policemen were banned from playing sports as they were not deemed to be amateurs. Consequently he was not involved in the GAA. William Foley, John Butler, Dwyer C. Culhane, William Delahunty and Michael Cantwell were also in attendance. The two most influential members present however were, Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin.

Davin a keen rugby player and member of Carrick on Suir Athletics Cricket and Football Club was also dominating Irish athletics along with his two Tipperary born brothers at that time.

He possessed two attributes decisive in the period of the new body, which Cusack lacked. Through a series of major victories over leading British athletes in the eighteen seventies he had achieved international fame. And as a moderate nationalist he would be acceptable to all shades of opinion, perhaps even to some unionists if the occasion arose. (De Burca, 1990, p. 21)

His main belief was that Irish Athletics should be an amateur sport run by Irish people. Davin became the first president of the GAA.

Cusack was born in 1876 in Curran, Co. Clare. Both his parents were Irish speaking. Throughout his life he was involved in different sports such as athletics, hurling, football, handball, cricket and rowing. Like Cusack, It was athletics that first grabbed his attention.

Cusack was appalled with the influx of British games into Ireland at the time. Cusack held a seat on the Irish Athletic Club Council, and also opened his own athletics academy. By 1879 Cusack had become both feared and respected on the athletic fields of Dublin. His feelings on athletics however became feelings indifferent. The standards of athletics were dramatically dropping.

“Money prizes were being commonly given to amateurs; betting was widely tolerated; handicaps were being framed to favour popular athletes, to the discouragement of younger men.”

(De Burca, 1990, p. 13)

Artisans were also deemed not to be ‘gentlemen amateurs’, therefore they were unsuitable for Athletics. With the standards in athletics lowering and the move to professionalism becoming more imminent, an idea which coincidentally Cusack deplored, he found that it was time to move towards rugby. Rugby was then known as a ‘game suitable for Irishmen’ and therefore it was a natural progression for Cusack to become involved with the game. Cusacks academy XV played with much success. Cusack still however was concerned with the growth of professionalism in athletics. With this he began as de Burca writes,

“a revival of what he called pure athletics.”

(De Burca, 1990, p. 14)

He looked for as de Burca explains,

“the lifting of the class barrier preventing the man in the street from taking part in sports and the achievement of unity in the management of Irish

Athletics”

(De Burca, 1990, p 14)

Pat Nally, a leading member of the IRB and a promising athlete, had exactly the same ideas as Cusack. They hoped to achieve these aims by re-introducing the spirit of the ancient Irish games of hurling and caid. The original game of football was a rough and tumble game named caid. A football was made from a pigs bladder or a bulls scrotum and two neighbouring parishes would organise a game (See Fig. 2). Local community spirit laid down a good foundation for the game and it is still the same today. The true National game however, was hurling. The game was originally called baire, and the hurley stick called a caman. Hurling can be dated back as far as Cú Culainn. The tales that surround him and the High Kings of Ireland are legend. Cusack in 1881 wrote three articles for the *‘Irish Sportsman’* illustrating exactly what he thought was wrong in Irish athletics. He looked for the creation of clubs throughout the country and he urged people to organise regular meetings. The GAA itself has grown up on the concept of the parish game with community spirit being its most valuable asset. 1882 was an important year for Cusack. In this year he produced the bilingual newspaper *‘Gaelic Journal’*. This was a great boost for the rejuvenation of the Irish language. This year also saw the foundation of the Dublin Hurling Club which later became the Metropolitan Hurling Club. At this time hurley was being played around Dublin, a game which was closely related to hockey, which had become very popular in England. Hurley was a genteel form of hurling, nothing like the courageous game Cusack had seen in Clare thirty years previous. Cusack therefore set about promoting the re-establishment of the ancient Irish game of hurling. He had no real success at first, subsequently he decided to focus his efforts on the revival of hurling, athletics and the Irish language, a quest he called his *‘Gaelic Mission.’* He soon began to call for the formation of an association which had as its basic aim,

“the strengthening of the National Identity in a thirty two county Ireland through the preservation and promotion of Gaelic games and pastimes.”

(GAA Official Guide, 1997 p. 4)



Figure 2

Inflating the bladder was a complicated task and most villages used bladders stuffed with hay.

He received support from two popular Irish Newspapers '*United Ireland*' and the '*Irishman*'. With this he argued his case in the newspapers anonymously. A quote of his appeared in the '*United Ireland*' and it was as follows,

Irish football is a great game and worth going a long way to see, when played on a fairly laid out ground under proper rules. Many old people say that hurling exceeded it as a trial for men. I would not like to see either game as the rules stand at present. I may say there are no rules and therefore these games are often dangerous. I am anxious to see both games revived under proper rules.

(Eoghan Corry, 1989, p. 9)

When Davin publicly supported Cusacks views he brought with him a "personal prestige" which would help the new association. Invitations were then given for the first meeting to be held in Hayes Hotel and so the GAA was born.

There were both rugby and cricket clubs now based throughout the country with the number of soccer clubs increasing rapidly. Eoghan Corry the author of '*Catch and Kick*' a book which describes the story of the GAA, has written how,

"British statesmen and journalists often expressed how they were superior on the sporting field."

(Eoghan Corry, 1989, p. 11)

This is something that I believe would have incensed Cusack. The feeling in Ireland at this time was one of strong nationalism. In 1892 Douglas Hyde who was the founder of the Gaelic League and who was later to become the first President of Ireland gave a lecture on 'the necessity of de-anglicising.' Hyde was an avid supporter of the GAA. Ironically though he was later expelled from the association for attending a soccer match, ignoring a ban the GAA had imposed on foreign games. Nobody wanted to see English games being imported into Ireland and it became a quest to revive the national sports. P.J. Devlin, a nationalist writer at the time, wrote the following on the founding of the association

It was a national effort to recall a national inheritance; to emancipate people

from an idea, social thralldom; to save them from brooding, melancholy and physical degeneration; to discipline them in the practice of their traditional amusements, in the atmosphere of active nationalism and for the ultimate achievement of national independence.

(Eoghan Corry, 1989, p. 12)

Cusack wanted the GAA to be established as a non-political and non-professional organisation. Yet politics and the GAA have gone hand in hand since it began with the GAA having a strong nationalist flavour it in its early days. Eoghan Corry illustrates this in his quote,

“The GAA was born in the middle of a passionate confrontation between Irish nationalists and unionists”

(Eoghan Corry, 1989, p. 11)

Before the takeover of the GAA by the IRB Cusack described the growth of the GAA as being like a “prairie fire.” Much confusion did however surround the GAA in its early years. Money was an important factor from the start. On July fourth, 1886 in the absence of Davin, F.R. Mulhoney held the chair at the meeting where Cusack was dismissed as Secretary of the Association for not fulfilling his duties satisfactorily. He was dismissed by a vote of 47 to 13. In September of the same year Davin proposed a ban against players playing under rugby or non Gaelic rules. He also proposed that the number of players on a team to be fixed at twenty one. On April eleventh 1887 Davin walked out of a meeting in the Cruise Hotel in Limerick and later resigned from the GAA. On November ninth the most historic convention the GAA has ever seen was held in the Thurles courthouse. One thousand six hundred delegates were present and a new president was yet to be elected. P.N. Fitzgerald of Cork was proposed, with Rev. J. Scanlon creating an uproar by putting forward Major J O Kelly who had been expelled from the Association by the ongoing executive. The atmosphere became increasingly hostile. Blows were exchanged between delegates and windows were broken. Reverend Scanlon left with a number of clergy, former founder J.K. Braken and about a hundred delegates. They held a separate meeting discussing the possibility of a rival organisation. They decided to invite Davin back to the Association as President. However, E.H. Bennet of New

Market on Fergus was voted ahead of him 316 to 210 votes. A special meeting was held for January fourth 1888. County conventions were ordered to select delegates for the convention. It was at this stage the IRB took control. Davin returned to the presidency. The IRB wanted the GAA not only to be a great Athletic Association but also a virile National force. Davin was later criticised for his handling of the finances and subsequently left the association in 1889 never again to have involvement with the GAA. Peter Kelly a prominent IRB member was elected in his place. A split in the GAA now seemed inevitable. The Catholic Church was always a supporter of gaelic games, and at this point they set out to verbally demoralise the GAA because of its political associations. Charles Stewart Parnell, Michael Davitt, William O'Brien, John O'Leary and Archbishop Croke were patrons of the association at the time. Croke did not see the GAA as a moral threat to the people of Ireland because of its political associations. Instead he focused his energy on promoting the GAA as it, like him, believed in the GAA as an amateur sporting organisation promoting our national games. He abhorred the English and how their sports were scattered throughout Ireland. He said of this problem

One of the most painful and frequently recurring reflections that, as an Irishman, I am compelled to make in connection with the present aspect of things in this country is derived from the ugly and irritating fact that we are daily importing from England, not only her manufactured goods, but her fashions, her accents, her vicious literature, her music, her dances, and her pastimes, to the utter discredit of our own grand national sports and the sore humiliation, I believe of every genuine son and daughter of the old land.  
(Eoghan Corry, 1989, p. 12)

Despite Croke's loyalty, the GAA was tearing itself apart. The IRB were now backing Parnell against the Church. Clubs disbanded throughout the country. A feeling of uneasiness in the GAA was to follow. The association was in a state of disorder, games were never played, teams were without enough players and different rules and different styles of play were being used in various parts of the country. Riots were also widespread with bad crowd control, violent games and bad refereeing decisions were also a feature. It is difficult to believe that the GAA came through such hardship to become one of the only remaining amateur sporting organisations in the world today. This is because of its background and its self belief as an amateur organisation. This is what I see as the basis for the amateur status argument. It has set itself apart

from other sporting organisations. In 1889 the GAA almost disbanded,

“The Central Council was by now half considering winding up the GAA and leaving its organisation to the county boards because of financial problems and organisational ineptitude”

(Eoghan Corry, 1989, p. 56)

The GAA did however, survive into the next century when it once again became a popular organisation with which to be involved, especially for politicians. Despite this rise in popularity both football and hurling finals continued to be both delayed and cancelled. Disputes among County Boards and the Central Council were also evident. The new century did however, bring with it a number of trips to America and Australia in order to promote the GAA among its exiled countrymen. In this respect the visits were successful, although financially they were disastrous. With the new arrival of the new century crowds began to grow and record attendances meant more money for the Association. The rules of the game were still changing and evolving to the benefit of the game, resulting in the game we know today. At this stage the teams were now reduced to fifteen a side. Enough money was also raised to finally purchase an administration headquarters and stadium for the GAA. After much debate it was decided to buy the Jones road site. Jones road, previously an unsuccessful race course, was purchased by GAA man Frank B. Dineen who never really received much recognition from the GAA. The GAA themselves later purchased the site from Dineen when he ran into financial difficulty.

# Chapter: 2

A POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Amateurism in the GAA

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A Professional Debate

The Irish Parliamentary Party with the turn of the century were back where they were under Parnell with the balance of power at Westminster. Because of this, Unionists formed the Ulster Volunteer Force, who indicated that they would use violence if necessary to oppose the inclusion of a self styled government in Ireland. In 1905 Sinn Féin was set up by Arthur Griffith and in 1913 Nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers. One of its main speakers was Luke O Toole the secretary to the Central Council of the GAA. By 1914 the GAA, who opposed the idea of being involved with politics had embraced members and supporters of every nationalist movement. John Redmond, leader of the Irish Party at the time was present at the 1913 memorial final. Despite protests from Ulster Protestants, the British Parliament finally passed a Home Rule Bill in 1914. Under Home Rule, Ireland would remain part of Britain, yet have its own parliament for domestic affairs. The outbreak of World War One however prevented it from taking effect. But the republicans saw this as an opportunity to gain total independence, Englands difficulty being Irelands opportunity. Led by Patrick Pearse they began a rebellion on Easter Sunday 1916. The British defeated the rebellion and shot dead 16 republican leaders after the uprising. In 1918 republicans gained control of Sinn Féin and took 73 of Irelands 105 seats in the British Parliament. Instead of taking the seats in London however, they met in Dublin and called themselves Dáil Éireann. On January twenty first 1919 they declared all of Ireland an Independent Republic. Subsequently fighting broke out between Irish Rebels and British forces. The British Parliament as a result of this passed the Government of Ireland Act. This was the act that divided Ireland in two. Dáil Éireann rejected the act and began to fight for complete Independence. Rebels under Michael Collins began to attack British army installations and government buildings. The British responded with an especially brutal police outfit called the Black and Tans. In 1921 a treaty was accepted that made the 26 county Ireland a self governing country. The government which was then split into two parties outlawed the rebels or IRA as they are more commonly known today.

Interestingly, from its origination the GAA was under investigation from Dublin Castle, which was then the centre of British rule. Remarkably, Harry Boland, Michael Collins right hand man, was the referee at the first filmed football final in 1914, where a twenty thousand strong crowd was present (See Fig. 3). Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith, and Eamon De Velera were also regular visitors to Croke Park. Interestingly, it was through the GAA that Michael Collins was introduced to



Figure 4  
Harry Boland can be seen in the centre of the picture holding the football about to start the game.

the National Movement. He was introduced to Gaelic Football while in London as a boy. Surprisingly he later became club secretary at Geraldine Hurling and Football club in London. From this he became treasurer of the London county board. Collins was a strong believer of enforcing the ban on English sports and it was through this that the IRB noticed his potential. He was initiated into the IRB in November 1909 and by 1914 he was treasurer of the movement for the entire south of England. The GAA had become a real recruiting ground for volunteers, as they, like the IRB had similar feelings about British involvement in Ireland. Collins enrolled GAA officials and they in turn brought with them members of the parish, county and province. It was never Cusack's idea to have the playing fields entangled with the battle fields of Ireland. On November twenty first, 1921, fourteen leading members of the British secret service were killed by Irish Volunteers. The British forces chose Croke Park as the target to take out their revenge. A match was being held between Dublin and Tipperary and was only ten minutes old when an aeroplane circled the field. Armed forces entered the ground and with machine guns and rifles opened fire on the innocent crowd. Thousands tried to escape the pandemonium which ensued, thus creating a human stampede. Armed forces poured into the park. The result of this malicious attack on defenceless men, women and children was the death of 14 people with a further 63 wounded, some of whom died later as a result of severe injuries. Michael Hogan of Tipperary lay dead at the Clonliffe end of Croke Park in his own pool of blood, half on the field and half on the running track. He was shot through the mouth. The day became known as Bloody Sunday. Michael Hogan was buried the following Wednesday and thousands attended his funeral. The Hogan stand was later named in his honour. After the Civil War the GAA who still held their beliefs was careful to avoid involvement with politics.

In spite of this the GAA is still in one form or another associated with politics. In fact one of the GAA greats Jack Lynch, a six time All Ireland medal winner, later became Taoiseach. (See Fig 4) Coincidentally, even our Taoiseach today, Bertie Ahearn is an avid supporter of the GAA as is his finance minister Charlie Mc Creevy. A GAA official recently said of Bertie

“Not even Jack Lynch has attended as many matches as Bertie has done.”  
(GAA Official in Tom McGurk, 1997)

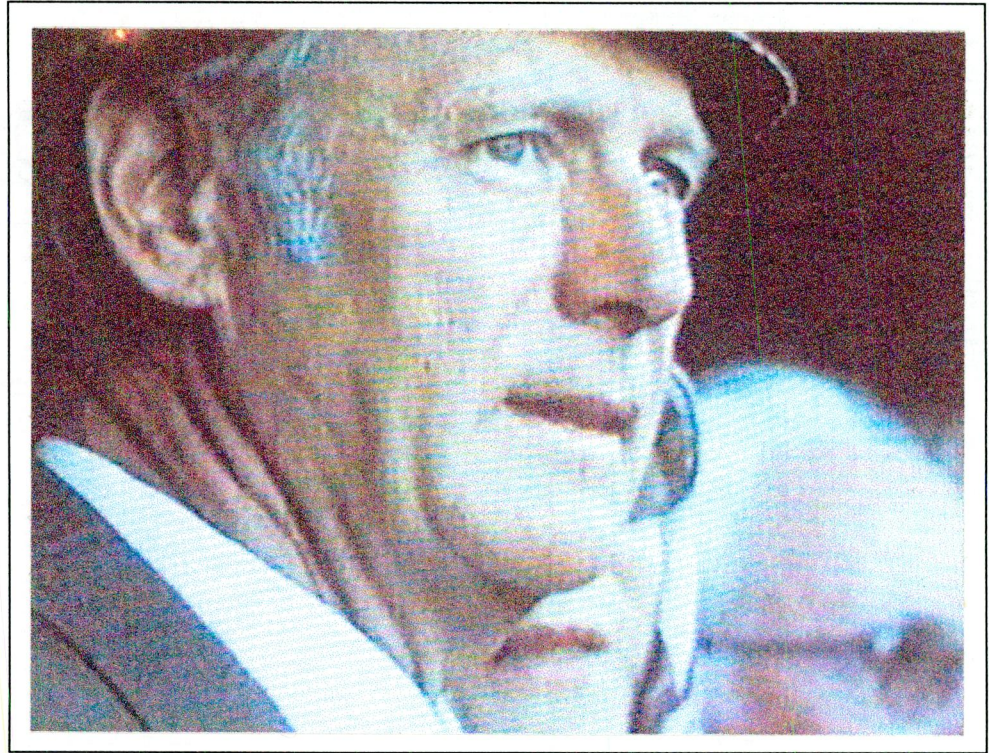


Figure 5  
Former President Jack Lynch watching a game at Croke Park.

To date Bertie has given twenty five million pounds to the GAA through the annual budget. Five million in 1993 and more recently with Charlie Mc Creevy at his side, he has given the GAA an additional twenty million pounds via the National Lottery funds. Mc Creevy in a recent interview on the 'Late Late Show', defended his actions by saying that in the upcoming year the GAA would be spending 140 million pounds and subsequently paying 20 million pounds in taxes. Mc Creevy went on to say that the GAA did more for the country proceeding the civil war than any other National Organisation, mentioning players such as the great Christy Ring of Cork, arguably the greatest hurler of this century (See fig 5 & 6). The Association has always kept a firm standing on rule twenty one 'ineligibility'. Interestingly enough, Bertie has supported the removal of rule twenty one, along with our newly appointed President Mary Mc Alesse. The official rule book for the GAA explains the rule,

*Members of the British armed forces and police shall not be eligible for membership of the association. Anyone participating in dances, or similar entertainment promoted by or under patronage of such bodies, shall incur suspension of at least three months.*

(GAA Official Guide, 1997 p. 21)

The original ban began its existence in 1886 when it was first introduced as a rule stating that *Players of non Gaelic games are barred from the GAA*. The ban itself has an interesting history which links the GAA very strongly to politics. In 1888 the rule stated that *police be barred from the association*. In 1893 the rule *banning police from the association was rescinded*. Into the next century the rule remained an interesting subject for the GAA to deal with. In 1901 *resolution against imported games was made compulsory* and a year later *the ban on foreign games was made compulsory*. In 1903 *British armed forces were barred from the association*. Throughout the century members of the GAA had been calling for its removal. In 1923 *a motion to remove the ban was defeated by fifty votes to twelve*. The following year in Cork, Dublin, and Sligo, motions calling for the removal were quashed. Two years later congress decided that *the ban only be discussed every three years*. In 1962 a man named Tom Wolfe formulated a Dublin motion, which called for the appointment of a committee to examine the different aspects of the ban. The motion however, was defeated. Tensions ran high in Ireland around this time as tensions in the north heightened. Regardless of this, certain members of the GAA still didn't want to be associated with non Irish games. The GAA did however, *approve a motion requesting a committee to*

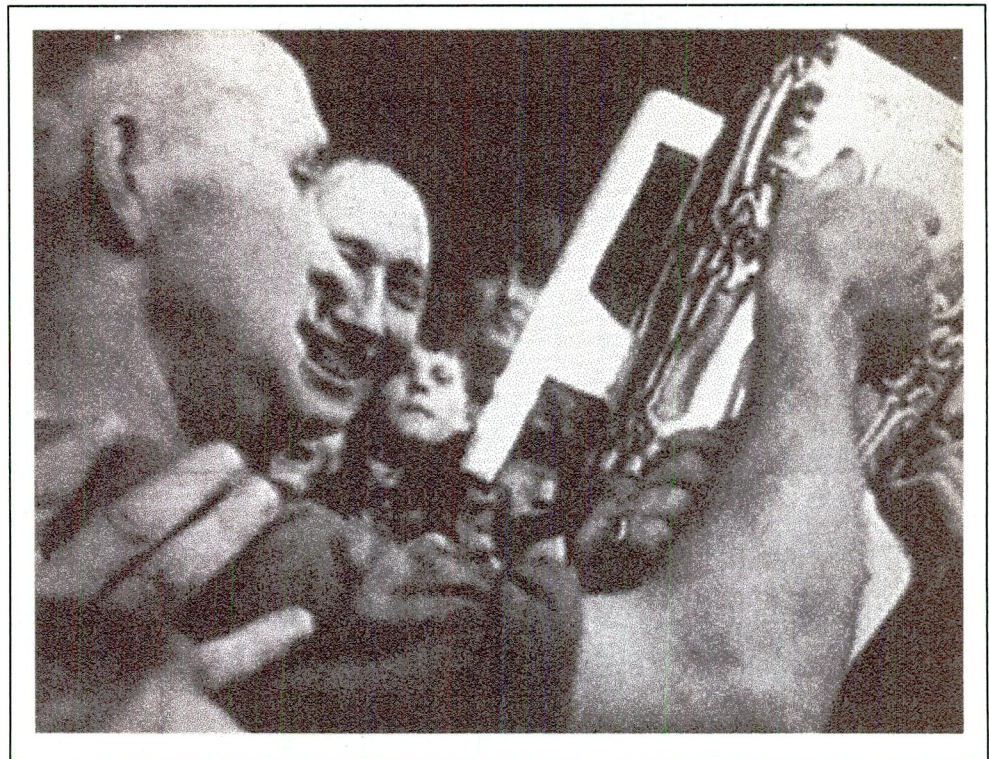


Figure 5  
Christy Ring holding the McCarty Cup.

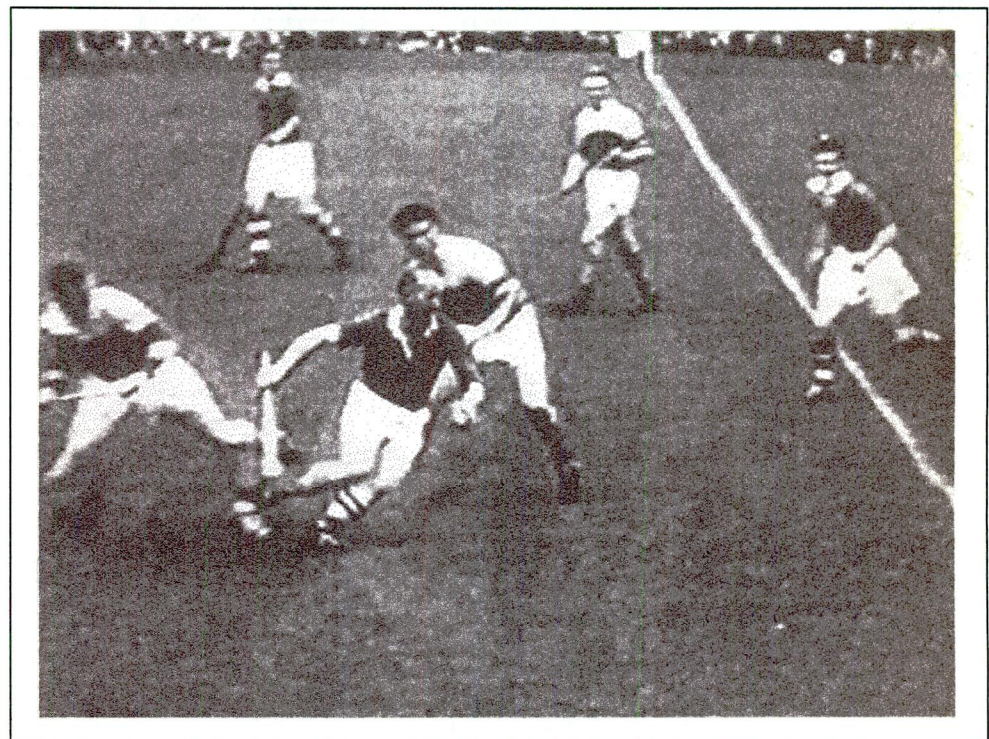


Figure 6  
Christy Ring still played the game in his fifties. Christy was probably the greatest hurler this country has ever seen.



*investigate the different aspects of the ban.* As late as 1971 the ban was still in place, although later that year every county voted for the removal of the original ban. It was therefore removed at congress.

I believe the GAA had and still do have archaic views on certain subjects. I recently purchased the GAA rule book, with many of the rules being pointless in the sporting world today. I recently interviewed Cliona Foley a sports journalist from the *Irish Independent*. Cliona has a great interest in the GAA. While interviewing her she brought two humorous stories to my attention regarding the rules. The first being about a team who saw a nice set of jerseys in a local shop, who purchased the gear for a competition that was being run at the time. They won the competition, but somebody noticed that the jerseys were not Irish made thus making them ineligible to play in the competition. The second story she told was of players who received suspensions, joking, that they could play anyway as the paper that the suspensions was written on was not Irish made. I believe that for the GAA to progress in a positive way, especially if they make a move towards a semi-professional or professional game, they must remove certain rules such as rule twenty one which is still in effect despite the removal of the ban. It would act as a crucial point in the talks in the north especially as they stand at the moment. I have conducted several interviews with different members of the GAA, each from different backgrounds. Not one person agreed with the rule.

Initially I put the question to John Bereton, an Offaly man who played senior football for his county in the sixties. John also became a selector for a short period of time. He was the first person I interviewed and although retired, he still has a comprehensive knowledge of the game and his answers were invaluable to me. His reply regarding the question on the ban was as follows,

In the first place I don't see why rule twenty one should still be in place, reasons being that I would imagine that British soldiers or unionists would not play the game in the first place, and it only stops nationalists or catholics who may be in the RUC or in the British army who wish to play.  
(John Brereton, 1997)

I also put the same question to Jerry Devlin, a former member of the Dublin County Board. Jerry has recently retired from the County Board to concentrate more on his taxi firm, yet, all the time keeping an eye on the proceedings of the Association. His answer was similar to John Brereton's. He went on to say that he also never agreed

**Chapter 2**

## a political background

with the rule by saying,

“I think our games should be open to anybody who wants to play them and who will be an asset to the Association. I don’t think their politics or religion, or where they work should have anything to do with it.”

(John Brereton, 1997)

It seems to be a pointless rule today and one that is just holding the GAA back from further progression. It is interesting to see that the Association is once again associated with politics, especially with the arrival of Bertie Ahern and Mary McAleese. Some believe it to be a brilliant political move on Bertie’s part to be so involved with the GAA. With common interests once again shared in the GAA and the government, and with the large grant the GAA has just received from the government, I believe Bertie is trying to push the GAA towards the removal of rule twenty one. I think this might put pressure on them to remove the rule. While speaking with Jerry Devlin, I put this point to him, he however disagreed, and went on to say,

I don’t think it will put pressure on them. I think the GAA are starting to move into modern times and I don’t think it will be too long before the ban will go. There is no reason in this day and age why we should have a ban, particularly if we are trying to promote peace in the north.

(Jerry Devlin, 1998)

Regardless of Cusack’s dream of a non political amateur organisation the GAA has strong roots with politics, the church and the community. This is something that has separated the GAA until recently from the debate on professionalism.

# Chapter: 3

THE PARISH GAME, AN AMATEUR SPORT

Amateurism in the GAA

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A Professional Debate

For me the backbone of the GAA is the parish game which is held together by its community spirit and voluntary workers. You could travel to any parish in Ireland and there would be a GAA club close by. I think part of the reason for the GAA being so strong in rural areas is due to the fact that the GAA is the main source of recreation for both young and old. Also, in many small towns families are confined to only the Irish television stations. The resulting effect is that both football and hurling become a way of life. Tom Humphries a journalist with the *Irish Times* explores this in his book *Green Fields*. Throughout the book Humphries tells us of the hardships and the heroes of small villages throughout Ireland. He paints a romantic picture of national pride, tradition and determination. He tells us of how the Down boys must travel to Ballykinlar to begin training on a cold February evening. They, like other teams around the country will be training hard for the next four months. They may only end up playing seventy minutes in June when the championship starts, but that's the beauty of it, that's what makes the championship so exciting and as it progresses to the two big days in September, we are brought on a journey of excitement through the pen of Tom Humphries. Humphries also tells us about the struggles of Pavé, a Dublin itinerant team. We also learn of how Tom Morrissey is a local hero in his hometown of Corraclare. The most interesting fact though, was when I learned of how Jason Sherlock became versed in the game while spending his summers in north county Cork playing for Ballyhea. Humphries captures the essence of the GAA in his book. This can be clearly seen as he describes his book by saying,

*Green Fields* captures the pulse of the last great amateur sports on earth, taking us all the way from the local hurling field and the dreams of childhood to the national stadium in Croke Park and the accomplishments of adulthood. *Green Fields* is not just a book about Ireland and the Irish, it is the story, people, places and passions, tales about games which run deep in the Irish consciousness, sports which have stirred a country like no one else can. Irish sports provide the prisms through which communities view themselves and each other, from which disparate communities draw their pride and hope.

(Tom Humphries, 1996, front cover)

Ger Regan is a member of my parish and everyone knows who he is and that he plays for his county. It is every young boys dream to wear their county colours and charge into battle. I recently interviewed Kevin Heffernan, a man who was great as a

player in the fifties with his elusive side step and a master tactician when managing the Dublin team in the seventies. (See Fig 7 & 8) Kevin now works for the ESB and has recently begun managing again with the second senior team for St. Vincents Football and Hurling Club. Kevin came across to me as a very passionate man who stands by his views and the game he made his own, while earning so much respect over the years. One of the answers he gave me while talking to him typifies his feeling for the game. He was speaking about professionalism and the nature of the game at the time, and he said of the subject,

“This is where I say, to have such a thing does away with the natural hate and passion present when you play for your county, where you nail your colours to the post for good or for bad.”

(Kevin Heffernan, 1998)

I recently came across an article in the *Irish Times* by Tom Mc Guirk which dealt directly with the subject of amateurism. Mc Gurk wrote, as follows,

The GAA was created by the people of Ireland in over a century of voluntary effort; its roots are deep in the community, parish and townland. And it is precisely because it is an amateur game and a creation of the peoples own effort that it enjoys such a deep affection and identification.

(Tom Mc Gurk, 17/11/1997)

While conducting my interviews I first stated that, the GAA has always been associated with the local parish. Then I asked the question whether they believed that this aspect of the game would be destroyed if the game was made professional ? The answers varied. John Brereton could see it having a negative effect, the reason being that if you had one or more players on your team being paid, there would be a chance that the rest of the parish would become disinterested. He went on to say that the parish was a vital aspect of the game and that the county teams only existed because of the parish teams. It could be true to say that jealousy might creep into the team, but a greater sense of competition might also become present. I put the same question to Jerry Kelly, hoping to get a more commercial point of view. Jerry Kelly along with Johnny Fortune formed Proactive Sports Management in Ireland, a sister company to Kevin Morans company in England. They formed an alliance with Kevin Moran, Jasper Olsen and Paul Stretford who set up the company in England.



Figure 7  
Kevin Heffernan seen here playing his football for Dublin in the fifties.

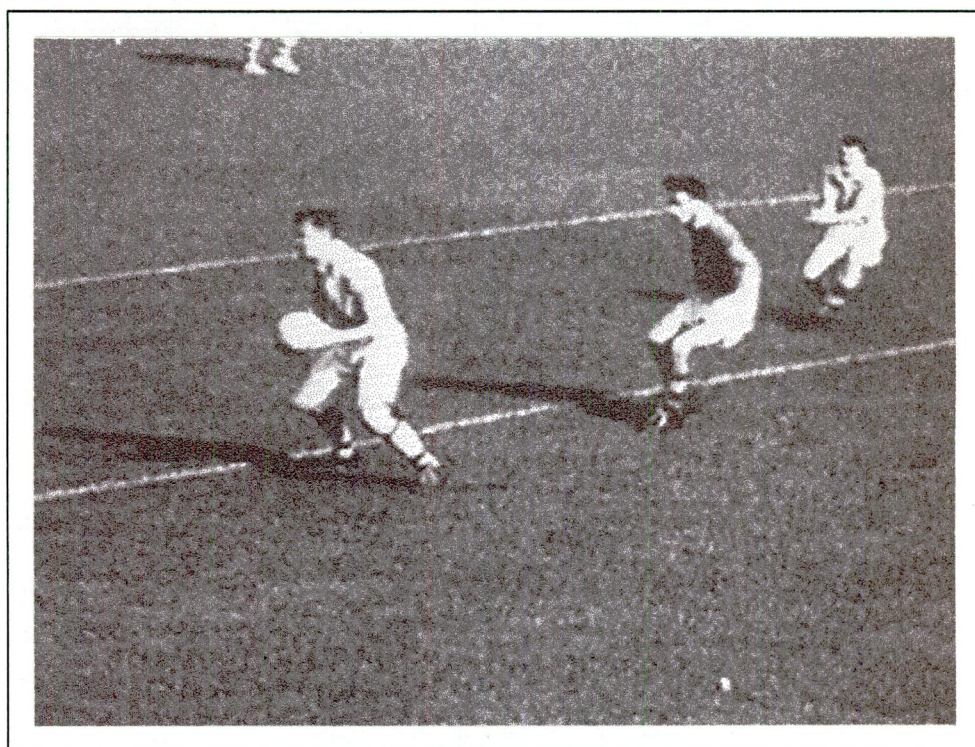


Figure 8  
Kevin Heffernan known as a player for his elusive side step.

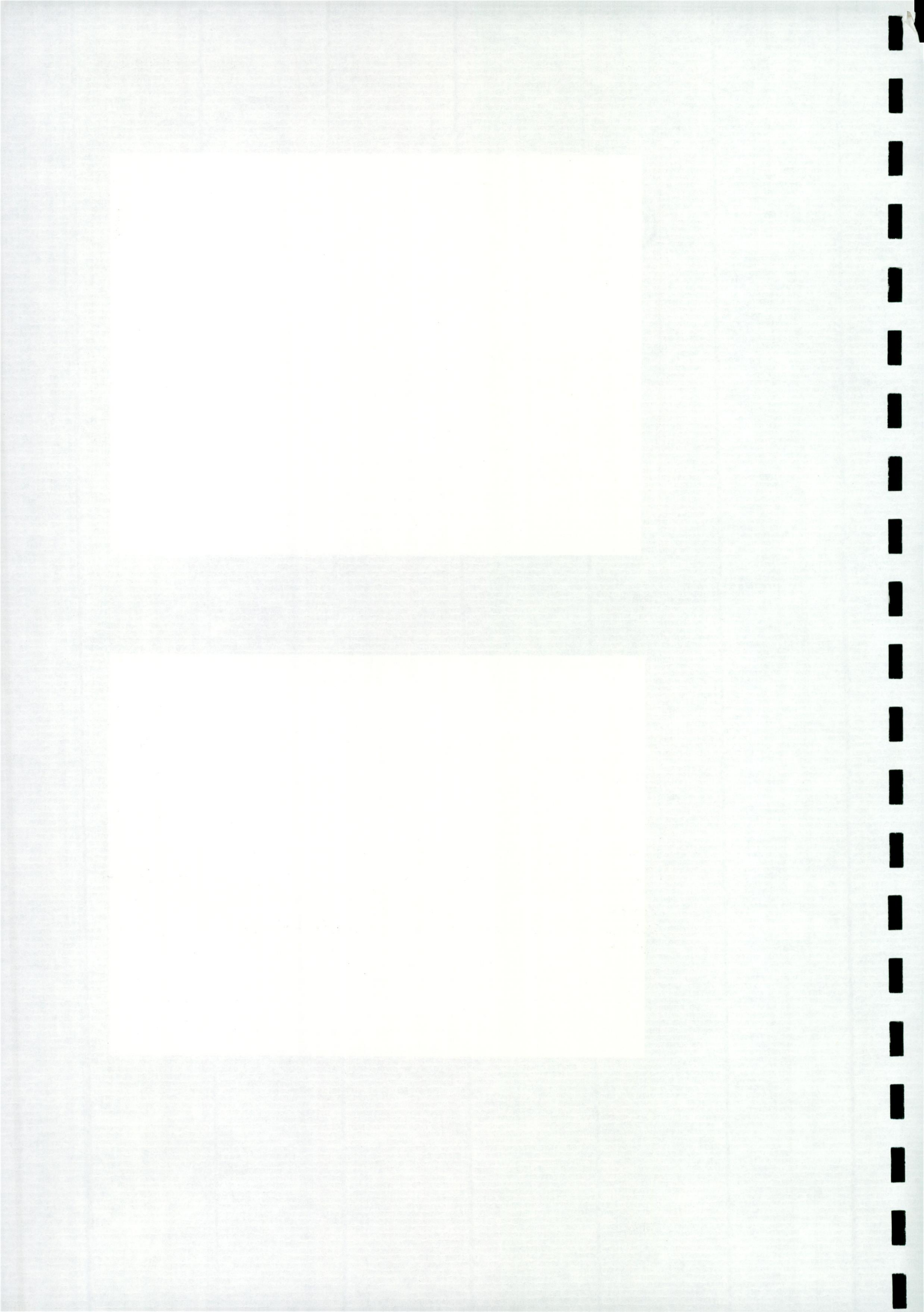




Figure 9  
Dulin fans on the Hill. The fans show great passion and identification in their support for their team.





Figure 10  
Two Clare fans at the 1995 All Ireland Hurling Final.

They therefore became directors of the Irish company. Proactive sports was set up to look after the interests of sports personalities. Jerry Kelly believed that the parish system could be in great danger and that the GAA should be especially careful. The only thing is though, the parish system has been a breeding ground for the GAA for years. However change is inevitable, and change is not always a bad thing. Mr. Kelly suggested that it would be in their own interest for people to recognise the traditions of the GAA and try to marry them with the modern professional era. If they sit back and do nothing they will find themselves in trouble, or on the other hand if they go too far, they'll find themselves in trouble also, so they've got to be very cautious (Jerry Kelly, 1998). I must admit, I believe that change is inevitable, however I am not sure if the GAA is properly prepared to bring itself into the next century. I think they need to do a lot more, especially in the area of self promotion, promotion of teams and players, and publications. I believe that Joe Mc Donagh the President of the GAA understands the problem with the marketing structure and is willing to devote more money towards merchandising, such as sticker albums, player cards, posters etc. This is an area where the GAA are way behind their competitors especially in English soccer. It is of course only one problem area. More importantly, the players should be treated in a professional manner.

Most of the people that I have spoken to believed that we wouldn't be able to sustain a professional sport because of our relatively small economic population. Yet, there isn't a parish in Ireland that doesn't have a GAA club. When talking to Cliona Foley, she informed me that most County Boards were in debt. But somebody in the GAA must be making money. When talking to Jerry Devlin he agreed that players should be receiving expenses but he could not see the game becoming a totally professional one. His reason was as follows,

Because the whole ethos of the GAA has been built through communities and while there are top notch players in each county who may be able to make a living out of it, the basis of the GAA is a structure from juvenile up and there is no way you could see a juvenile becoming professional. So it is only at the very top level where you could see a move to professionalism.  
(Jerry Devlin, 1998)

But the money doesn't seem to be there. But it is a source which can easily be tapped, as the GAA has the potential to become big business. Evidence of this was illustrated with the success of last years Hurling Championship. The games were of the highest

quality with capacity crowds in attendance.

A member of the LA Dodgers baseball team was in Ireland last year and Cliona Foley met up with him. Cliona told me that he was amazed that our GAA players did not receive anything at all for playing the game. Cliona questioned him on the potential of hurlers playing baseball. His retort was simple. He could see their potential and in time he could see Irish players being recruited to play baseball and thus have the potential to earn vast amounts of money. Stephen Aris, author of *Sportsbiz*, a book that looks into the economics of sport in general, believes that sport has been transferred into a multimillion dollar industry. Aris tells us how,

“Sport, for better or worse has become part of the mass entertainment industry.”

(Stephen Aris, 1990, p 11)

American sports for example have generated colossal amounts of money. With the arrival of Rupert Murdoch, English sports among other sports have also become big business. I recently read an article in the *Irish Times* about how Mr. Murdoch had sealed a three hundred and thirty six million dollar deal that would give him television rights to southern hemisphere rugby for ten years. The game was still an amateur sport at the time and Ken Reid the IRFU presidents reaction was as follows,

“This sort of deal will drive a hole through amateurism.”

(Ken Reid in Irish Times reporter, 24/6/95)

How right Mr. Reid has turned out to be, as rugby has rushed in where angels fear to tread. When discussing professionalism with Jerry Kelly of Proactive Sports, he said that gaelic games was going from strength to strength as an amateur sport. Speaking about rugby however he had the following to say,

“I think rugby is being ripped apart at the moment because of the transition to professionalism, because the Irish structure is unable to compete at the level its expected to compete at, and the money is not there for it.”

(Jerry Kelly, 1998)

Lately though, more and more money is being injected into the GAA. The areas where the money can be seen are areas such as, sponsorship, advertising and the

**Chapter 3**

## the parish game, an amateur sport

introduction of corporate suites. This has opened a can of worms which can be very difficult to close as players are now realising how much money is involved in the GAA today. This can be seen with the realisation that large payments for managers have become common practice. Also major stadia are being developed such as Clones and more recently Croke Park itself which would bring in even larger numbers at the gates. The GAA believe they have a clear eyed view of the future through the optimism of the newly appointed president Joe Mc Donagh. Mc Donagh has a love of the Irish language, sport and music, a real pride of the Irish culture. Sean Moran the main GAA correspondent for the Irish Times has written the following about the man,

“His enjoyment of that culture makes him what he is; he’s not pursuing it to prove a point.”

(Sean Moran, 12/4/1997)

Mc Donagh is the youngest president the GAA have had this century and after reading last years annual report, he seems to understand the problems that the GAA has to confront. Mc Donagh discusses the problems and possible solutions within the GAA in his report of the preceding sporting year. He has his feet firmly positioned on the ground. Sean Moran goes on to say that the quality of his initiatives will project the quality of the Association. The debate for a more professional approach to the game and its players has begun. During his presidency of the Association in the mid seventies Con Murphy said the following,

“that when the clubhouse boom had ended, all the banks were paid off and clubs had disposable income again; the amateur ethos would come under scrutiny.”

(Con Murphy in Dave Hannigan, 13/4/97)

What foresight Mr. Murphy seemed to possess. Now that players have realised that there is money in the game they, have begun to ask the question, where is their piece of the cake?.

# Chapter: 4

PAY TO PLAY, GAELIC, A PROFESSIONAL SPORT ?

Amateurism in the GAA

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A Professional Debate

One person more than any other has cashed in on his celebrity status. He is gaelic footballs first ever superstar. He is of course Jason Sherlock ! Sherlock made his name as the cheeky young Dub, who took the 1995 championship by storm. Dublin crowds sang out his name, 'boom boom boom let me hear you say Jayo, Jayo....', waiting for just one moment of extravagance. Sherlock was like a gold mine waiting to be tapped. He was small in stature and had the appearance of his Vietnamese father, and he was exactly what the GAA needed. Sherlock learned his trade in the small town of Ballyhea, north county Cork. His uncle had moved there some years before and Jason spent many summers visiting him. His uncle described him as a national obsession. When talking about him he liked to say that he was a Finglas lad, but there was also a lot of Ballyhea in him too. Ballyhea has always been a hurling town first and foremost, so it was hurling that he began playing first. He was an instant success, and subsequently returned every time there was a match. A Cork minor selector even came to see him play one day, but left empty handed, a blessing in disguise for the Dubs. One year later Sherlock was wearing blue for the Dublin minors and dazzling the crowd in Croke Park with his skill, turn of pace and sense of showmanship. His main interest was however, basketball, and despite his size he was sent to a NBA camp in Philadelphia with three other Irish lads. Remarkably he was voted most valuable player for two of the four weeks he was there. His dream of being a professional basketball player however remains unfulfilled. There were even rumours of Sherlock being considered by an English soccer club. It was this interest from the public that brought Sherlock to the attention of Proactive Sports and Kevin Moran in particular. Sherlock at this stage had received a soccer scholarship to UCD. At the same time Trevor Giles of Meath was receiving the first gaelic scholarship, also at UCD. Because of the fact that Sherlock's profession was deemed to be soccer he was able to evade the associations rule twelve,

*The Association is an Amateur Association. No player, team, official or member shall accept payment in cash or in kind or other material reward in connection with his membership of the Association, nor shall he be associated with any commercial enterprise in connection with membership of the association. Expenses paid to all officials, players, and members shall not exceed the standard rates laid down by the Central Council. Members of the Association may not participate in full time training. This rule shall prohibit the payment of salaries or wages to employees of the Association.*

(Official GAA Guide, 1997 p. 6)

The GAA realised Sherlocks potential at the time but did they do enough to exploit it ? (See Fig. 11 & 12) Many members of the GAA at this time also showed a certain amount of resentment towards Sherlocks success, which may have also added to his lack of exploitation at the time. A difficult task as the football championship is separated from the league campaign, leaving it difficult to maintain the public's interest. Although this is now being dealt with by running the National Hurling League and Championship campaigns simultaneously. This proved very successful. If the football league and championship had also been run simultaneously Jason Sherlock would have been in the public eye more, thus maintaining the interest of the younger population by which the GAA would have benefited. The New England Revolution, a Boston based club in the US Major Soccer League have very recently taken an interest in Sherlock. Sherlock who is on trial at the moment with the soccer club, may well walk away from the GAA voluntarily to chase his elusive dream of being a professional sportsman. It seems careless of the GAA to loose such a charismatic and marketable player.

The GAA have a two strand approach to money, they cherish the amateur status of their players and they like to keep them associated with the parishes from which they have come, and yet they are also making money by selling their natural talents, something the players have realised more in the recent past. The gulf between the players and the Association has grown over the last couple of years. Hence the arrival of Proactive Sports Management. This was a move the GAA reacted quickly to by setting up the Amateur Status Committee. The committee was formed under former president, Peter Quinn. The members were as follows; Jimmy Treacy a member of the management committee, Paddy Moran a Dublin footballer, Fr. Dan Gallogely, former chairman of the Ulster council, Col. Noel Walsh, Chairman of the Munster Council, Nicky Brennan, Trainer of the Kilkenny senior hurling team, Christy Cooney, former Chairman of Cork County Board, Shay McKeown, chief Executive of Powerscreen Int., Joe Mc Donagh (who was then president elect), Pat Fitzgerald, Secretary to the Clare County Board, Sean McCague, manager of the Monaghan football team, Mick Leahy, Kilmacud Crokes player and Dermot Power from Croke Park. The committee was to draw up a report to be submitted to the Central Council for inspection. The report was to take into account players, journalists, managers, sponsors and supporters.

When I asked Jerry Kelly of Proactive Sports if he thought that the GAA



Figure 11  
Jason Sherlock seen here scoring a goal against Cork in the 1995 Championship.



Figure 12  
Jason Sherlock became the first ever Gaelic superstar. The above photograph shows him being chased by his fans at St. Vincent's GAA ground.

would become professional, his answer was that it already was, in so far as there was already money involved through areas such as sponsorships. But as far as players being paid to play the game is concerned, that seems a distant thought at the moment, although product endorsements and sponsorship deals seem to be close (Jerry Kelly, 1998). This is an area that Proactive Sports seem to be very interested in. The relationship between gaelic games and business didn't just happen yesterday, it was established a long time ago. Commercial sponsorship can clearly be seen with, The Bank of Ireland Football Championship and the Guinness Hurling Championship. Therefore the sponsors will receive rewards, the GAA will receive rewards, television will receive rewards, even spectators receive rewards. However, the players get no benefit from it at all. It is about time this changed, as the dressing room is still the only place kept free from commercialism. It costs no less than one hundred and fifty thousand pounds to buy a corporate suite for ten years which, doesn't seem much set against the pride of playing for your county (See Fig. 13). In some ways it's as if we've come full circle, where the gentry once again set out to watch the common folk play our national games. While conducting my interviews, I was interested to determine the different opinions the interviewees had about the arrival of Proactive Sports. Kevin Heffernan believed that it was a positive one, as many players would need a reputable agency to help them with negotiations. The common outlook was that there is nothing wrong with players earning money as they have earned it and without them there would be no GAA. While I was interviewing Cliona Foley she brought an article written by Vincent Hogan for the *Irish Times* to my attention. The article was titled '*Eight halves equal one pint - when GAA buy*'. The article referred to the three games played between Kildare and Meath in the 1997 Championship. When the tie finally ended the players made their way to the bar. Kildare captain Glen Ryan was standing with a piece of paper in his hand seething at what had just occurred. Hogan writes,

"Here", he snaps, pushing the slip towards this journalist. "That's what you can write about. That's what we get out of three games here, a kick in the f.....g arse."

The paper is white and printed with black writing. It reads "This voucher entitles the player to one pint of beer."

As the captain wheels away again, reigning in his fury at Pat O Tooles abject refereeing, Niall Buckley nods and opens a window to the arcane and antiquated ways of life for the county man.



Figure 13  
Massive crowds in Croke Park on All Ireland final day. The stand above is the new Cusack stand which has corporate boxes situated all along the centre of the stand.

Kildare and Meath have battled for four hours of shuddering football in front of an aggregate attendance exceeding 160,000. Gate receipts are in the millions, television figures, reputedly, have soared. And the county man is rewarded with a free pint!

"One drink," Buckley gasps.

"That's the GAA. The players play second fiddle the whole time. You train for nine or ten months of the year, depending on how you go. And at the end of the day, if you didn't have a supporters' club, players would be even worse off than they are now.

Just think what's been made out of these three games and we get sweet f..k all. One drink in the bar above. Not much consolation."

(Vincent Hogan, 4/8/97)

The players were not looking for lucrative sponsorships or large pay cheques, all they were looking for was respect, something that is well overdue at this stage. The simple fact is that more money should be put back into the game. The above article simply illustrates how incensed the players have become at the situation. It was therefore interesting to see players such as, Dublins John O Leary and Jason Sherlock along with Kilkennys recently retired DJ Carey at the opening of the Proactive Sports agency in Dublin last year. They were the only amateur sportsmen among a large variety of professional sports persons. They suggested bringing a players pool into the GAA or even performance based packages. Players like DJ Carey were never concerned with being paid to play the game, but as a man who gave so much to the game, he could never see anything wrong with an issue like personal sponsorship. DJ Carey, the most outstanding hurling player of the nineties has suddenly retired from the game at the early age of 27 (See Fig. 14). His retirement has surprised everyone involved in the GAA. For the GAA to loose Sherlock seems careless, for them to loose DJ, who has always been an inspiration to so many is unforgivable. At this moment in time, the players simply want to be treated better. Certain players have benefited somewhat throughout the years, for example Paul Curran has a PR job for a corporate golf company, which the GAA set up for him. The GAA have also begun to give players full time coaching jobs, which is something they have never done before. But the number of players that have benefited is still a minority.

A way that players have been able to freely express their views to the public over the last few years has been through personal columns, an idea that has only emerged this decade. Therefore players like Ross Carr, John O Leary and Colm O 'Rourke have begun to write for different newspapers. O 'Rourke wrote an article for

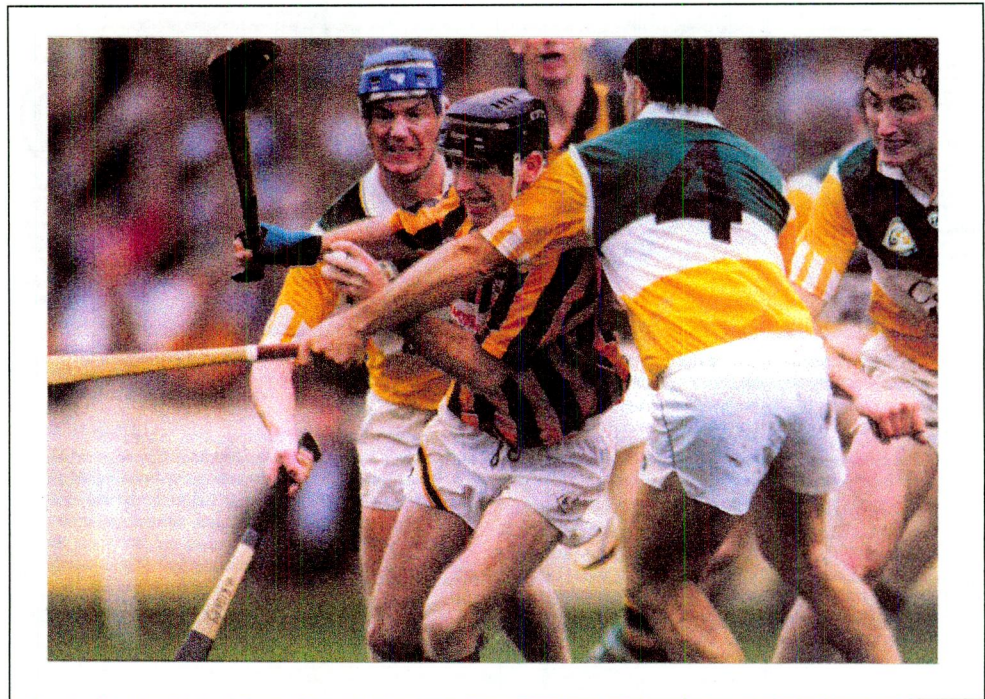


Figure 14

DJ Carey seen here in the centre of the picture with the sliothar in his hand has been the most outstanding player of the nineties. His recent retirement has shocked everyone involved with the GAA..

the *Irish Times* as far back as 1991, addressing the issue of sponsorship and endorsements. The article was titled '*The adman cometh*'. O 'Rourke was quick to point out the dangers of bringing money into the game and he used English soccer as an example of how money can takeover. Despite the dangers of bringing money into the game, being paid to play something you love seems like a very attractive option. Everyone in the GAA seem to be making money on big match days, from the groundsmen to the security guards, even the scoreboard operator, all that is except the entertainers. O 'Rourke in his article describes players as walking billboards for other people's gain. I put this point to each of the people I interviewed as I thought it typified the exact situation. Jerry Devlin accepted that if the GAA was making money off the efforts of the players, that it is unfair for them to get nothing from it. In almost every sport today the clothes you wear will have a logo on them, or the equipment you use, or the car you drive. In Gaelic football and Hurling when the Dubs take to the field with Arnotts across their chest, there is a massive crowd watching them not only at the game but also on television. Hence the arrival of Proactive Sports and the setting up of the Amateur Status Committee.

The Amateur Status Committee was set up in June 1997 to look into the area of amateurism. They initially established that payment for playing was not an issue. I have come to the conclusion that a lot of the players playing at the top level are not concerned with being paid to play. They can see more pressing issues that need to be dealt with at the moment such as expenses. The money they get for expenses is incredibly low and by the time they eventually receive it the season has ended. Insurance cover for any self employed man is also an insult. If a player cannot work because of a football injury then he should be reimbursed in some way. Another area to be looked at is inadequate provision for meals after matches and training. This would only be for players who would have to travel to training sessions and games, thus missing out on important meals. The lack of training gear supplied to teams is also an issue, a jersey at the end of the season is just not good enough. After the Amateur Status Committee looked at these problems they issued a report for Central Council to consider. I have tried but was unsuccessful in contacting Danny Lynch the Public Relations Officer in Croke Park and I have yet to be given a definitive answer as to whether the contents of the report have been passed. The report recommends the following,

1. Mileage rates to be increased.

2. That a substantial sum be allocated to the respective County Committees of the four All Ireland Senior Finalists. This sum to be used for player's holidays.
3. That players be allowed benefit from off field activities including product endorsement but excluding playing gear and products in competition with National, County or own Club Sponsors.
4. County Senior Panelists to be provided with meals after matches and training (*if they wish*).
5. Review and cost Insurance Scheme with a view to increasing medical and Dental Cover for all players.
6. County Senior Panel members to be supplied with adequate training and playing gear.
7. Managers to receive the same expenses as players.
8. That Co. Committees liaise regularly with their Senior Panel in relation to the status of Co. finances in the interest of improved communication.
9. It has also been recommended that no player be allowed appoint a Personal Agent but that the GAA establish its own internal structure at central level to promote product endorsement by players.

(GAA, Press Release, 1997)

This will obviously be a step forward if approved by Central Council. By not allowing a player to appoint an agent the GAA seems to be trying to eliminate Proactive Sports from the equation. Proactive Sports however are well aware of this. If a player needs assistance from a corporate point of view then they will broker it, but there will be no contracts involved. This is difficult to believe as either party would have the option of leaving at any time. I find the idea of the GAA looking after the whole affair as being a good one, that way a percentage of the money can be reinvested into the team, thus eliminating the possibilities of resentment. I find the area of product endorsement however, an area for concern. It seems to put a lot of restrictions on players, by not allowing them to endorse different varieties of sportswear. Mileage rates at the moment are also a complete joke with players getting an average of twenty two pence per mile. Furthermore many players do not receive their reimbursement until the season has ended. I have recently read an article by Cliona Foley in the *Irish Independent* which stated that both the Meath and Kildare teams received £30,000 each from the Lenister County Council towards holiday funds. This seems to be an optimistic start. Other areas however cannot be viewed in such light. It is ridiculous to think that the option of meals was never considered in many counties. The north has especially been neglected in the recent past with little

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pay to play, gaelic, a professional sport?

or no provisions for players. The report also stated that managers receive the same expenses as players. Although many inter-county managers are getting large sums of money to train teams. Its unbelievable to think that it has taken the GAA so long to consider the player's rights.

# Chapter: 5

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

Amateurism in the GAA

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A Professional Debate

It is obvious that the GAA are adamant about keeping gaelic games as free from money as they possibly can. Hence the restrictions shown in the recent report on how players can make money. The GAA may have such restrictions, but it doesn't take a blind man to see there has been money involved in the game for quite a while now. What I am talking about is the brown envelope syndrome, where both players and managers have received money for moving clubs. For example, at the start of last season half of the Offaly football team were supposed to make a move to a Dublin club team. Also a prominent inter-county manager last year put himself on the market for twenty five thousand pounds plus a car. Whether this is true or not is not important, yet I have been assured it is gospel, as the man in question approached two different counties. Certain players within Dublin have also switched clubs, and rumours of what they received are rife. These are only a couple of examples of what is going on behind the associations back without them being able to do anything or perhaps they see they are simply ignoring the situation. Jerry Devlin has said the following on the situation,

Some of the top notch players in Dublin have endorsements to change clubs and have changed clubs. Now we will never be told what those endorsements are because there are a hundred ways around it. I mean, for example, if I wanted to sponsor a club here and they wanted a particularly good player, what's to stop me from saying right here is five thousand pounds for the club and here is a separate cheque for two thousand pounds for the player. That separate cheque doesn't go through the GAA.  
(Jerry Devlin, 1998)

When I asked Kevin Heffernan if he believed that certain players were receiving money or incentives to move clubs, he had the following to say,

There have been suggestions that this has happened and usually there is fire where there is smoke but I am not personally aware of who those people are. I think the numbers would be very low, though, simply because I don't think that clubs could afford it. In one sense I don't favour that particular way to get strong teams, but I think one of the problems is that we have too many average quality teams and I think it would be better with a smaller number. As I say I don't agree with that way of getting players but I'd be glad to see stronger teams.  
(Kevin Heffernan, 1998)

This brings me to the deduction that a certain form of professionalism has crept into the game and the GAA are well aware of it. I cannot see the GAA allowing full professionalism into the game, but if they do, they will need to approach it very carefully. If they did make it a professional game, I would suggest restricting players to only play for their home county and if this was the case, I would have no problem with players being paid to play. There is something about the idea of making a living from wearing a Dublin jersey which really appeals to me. I cannot however, see players being paid in the near future as it is just not feasible, but I am positive that in time things will change. All you have to do is look at the Dublin team from 1995 to see that professionalism is not too far away. They had on their bench, a sports psychologist, a nutritionist, an exercise physiologist, a medical officer, a physiotherapist, a video services unit and a masseur, a lot for an amateur team. At the moment though the most noticeable place to earn money is during the American summer leagues.

This is an area that has caused much concern in the recent past. Every year we hear of new players being suspended for breaking the rules set up by the Association. The most common example would be the team members of Roscommon, who were suspended for using false names. The rules have never been particularly good, until last year, when they tried to make them more clear cut. Despite the efforts from the GAA the rules are being broken continuously. The main culprits are, not surprisingly, the New York board who are a law unto themselves. More than half of the players in the New York final are usually flown over just for that game. Players who have played for the season on the teams in question may however feel injustice. I consider playing in America a way for many players to earn some extra cash, where otherwise they would be unable to earn any extra money.

America has been more than a negative area for the GAA, as it is also where they have learned many business techniques. American business techniques could be an area, if the GAA approached properly could bring them into the next century in a confident and assertive manner. With the advent of television the game has changed in a variety of positive ways. Every community in Ireland can now watch a game on television which in turn is creating more interest. Rules have also been altered to speed up the game and to eliminate off the ball incidents, which makes more attractive viewing. Television and sponsors work together as a team in many other sports generating a massive turnover. It is now up to the GAA to promote football

and hurling. Dermot Power a representative from the Bank of Ireland is the head of financial matters at Croke Park. He has based a lot of the sports marketing structure of the GAA on that of the National Football League in America. For the GAA to compete with the professional leagues of England and beyond, they must have television coverage that highlights the positive and modern aspects of the GAA. By being involved with the NFL they are making important connections with an organisation that boasts some of the worlds major broadcasters. This summer Fox television, an American television network televised an American football game from Croke Park and also highlights from the Hurling Championship. Last year eighteen games were televised on RTE and UTV and this year more games should be televised. However, the existing contracts with RTE and UTV ended at the end of 1997, which leaves the GAA to negotiate new contracts (Joseph Mc Donagh, 1997, p. 21). The President of the GAA is well aware of televisions potential as the following passage from last years annual report illustrates,

“In my opinion, we should not give exclusive rights to any one station and we should drive a much harder bargain, not only with regard to financial recompense, but with regard to the full range of benefits available for us.”

(Joseph Mc Donagh, 1997, p. 21)

A variety of television stations and games being televised to different countries could be very significant in the promotion of Gaelic Games. Nonetheless, if the GAA want to avoid professionalism then they must be very careful in their actions. In my opinion one of the main reasons for the professional debate surfacing recently was due to the players realisation of the amount of money entering the game. The GAA may well be founded on amateurism and may cherish its amateur ethos, but I believe professionalism is inevitable.

## Conclusion

The GAA was established as an amateur organisation to be run by Irish people in 1884 to preserve and promote Gaelic games and pastimes. Michael Cusack, the founder of the GAA originally seen athletics as the Association's main concern. With its standards dropping dramatically and professionalism creeping into athletics Cusack turned his attention first to rugby then to Gaelic Football and Hurling. Cusack's intentions were for the GAA to be free from professionalism and politics yet, from its inception the GAA was confronted with many organisational and political problems. Despite Cusack's intentions the GAA became an important recruiting ground for the IRB. In spite of this, the GAA has survived, and become the most powerful Amateur organisation in the country.

"We are envied by other Nations in possessing such a great National game as Hurling. No other can compete with it as an all round manly game, requiring strength and skill in the individual and combination in the team."  
(Eamon De Valera in O Ceallaigh, p. 76)

The essence of the GAA to this day is the parish game, which is held together by community spirit and voluntary workers. In my thesis I have illustrated how pride, tradition and determination are a vital part of the GAA as an amateur organisation. Sport today has been transformed into a multimillion pound industry. Large incentives and payments have become common practice for managers in Gaelic circles. Sponsorship deals are also becoming more lucrative for the GAA. The development of new stadia bringing record attendances has also recently strengthened the position of the Association. The marketing potential of players such as Jason Sherlock and the ability for players to voice their opinions through newspaper articles have collectively developed an argument for professionalism. Having spoken to a number of GAA members, I have come to the conclusion that the players are not interested in being paid to play, but simply want to be treated in a professional manner. With the introduction of Proactive Sports the GAA submitted the Amateur Status Report to try and eliminate the possibilities of resentment. However the report is an insult to any sportsman, professional or amateur. In spite of this the GAA under the new Presidency of Joe McDonagh has a very optimistic future. Television is becoming a major factor in the GAA and with interests in America and Japan heightening, more money will be invested in the GAA. If this does happen then the players will need to be treated in a professional manner. The more money being invested into the GAA the further the GAA is moving from the amateur ethos. With

this, the game may become a commercial spectacle, and it is increasingly likely that professionalism will follow.

“It is not that I see anything fundamentally wrong with paying players to give good entertainment, but one has only to look at English Soccer to see that there is some basis in the view that money is the root of all evil.”

(Colm O Rourke, 1991)

# Interviews:

JERRY DEVLIN

JOHN BRERETON

KEVIN HEFFERNAN

JERRY KELLY

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Amateurism in the GAA

A Professional Debate



## Interview 1

Jerry Devlin

q: If players were going to be paid in a professional manner do you believe that the parish aspect of the game would be destroyed ?

a: It would yes.

q: Do you believe that it will become a professional game ?

a: There will be some expenses paid eventually, but it will not become a totally fully professional game.

q: Why do you believe this ?

a: Because the whole ethos of the GAA has been built through communities and while there are top notch players in each county who may be able to make a living out of it, the basis of the GAA is a structure from juvenile up and there is no way you could see juvenile becoming professional. There is no way you're going to see minor becoming professional. So it's only at the very top level where you could see a move to professionalism. The amount of people would be so small that would be involved in that area in terms of the overall GAA. There is not a parish in Ireland that does not have a GAA club. Unlike rugby where you have selected areas around the country.

q: I believe the advent of television and advertising has changed the game making it more professional. Would you agree with this statement ?

a: Yes, we have to be more professional in our approach to the game because of television. Television is probably helping it in the opposite direction to be even more popular to the smaller communities. Virtually every home town has a television set now in every parish. If there is a match on they can see that match. Years ago they depended on just the radio. But they only got selected games on the radio. Now you are seeing highlights of two or three matches at a time. It is creating a lot more interest.

q: I believe that there is a lot more the GAA could do to create more interest in the GAA among younger people. Would you agree ?

a: We have a problem in the extent that the GAA has always done very little themselves as an organisation to go in on the ground, but they have relied for many years on the Christian Brothers and on teachers to do the work for them. Now those days are gone because when a teacher finishes work at half three in the day he is

finished being paid so he does not want to be training kids, because he probably has a second job to go to or he is a married man and wants to get home. And of course we don't have the Christian Brothers in the same numbers that we had years ago. So we don't have the grounding then that we used to have years ago. That's why in Dublin there is such an enormous amount of money being spent on coaching schools. It is to try and develop the game again at the school level. You must get a juvenile involved at seven or eight at the latest in Gaelic games. It is no good going to a guy when he is thirteen and has been playing soccer or other sports when he was seven or eight, and then saying we have got everything to offer you. Because we've got nothing at that stage to offer them. Because he has found his niche in his other game and you are not going to get the majority of them that way. So it is at the schools we have got to get them.

q: Do you agree with rule 21 ?

a: No, I have never agreed with this rule, and I don't agree with the ban on people from the RUC or British army either. I think our games should be open to anybody who wants to play them and who will be an asset to the association. I don't think their politics or religion or where they work should have anything to do with it. If I was the mentor of a team and a black man came into play with the team and I said he couldn't play because he was black, there would be uproar.

q: Bertie Ahern and Mary Mc Alesse have called for the removal of rule 21. Also Bertie and Charlie Mc Creevy have just given the GAA 20 million before Christmas through the lottery funds. As Bertie is a fan of the game, do you think this would put additional pressure on the GAA to remove the rule ?

a: I do not think it will. I think the GAA are starting to move into modern times and I don't think it will be too long before the rule will go. There is no reason in this day and age why we should have a ban, particularly if we are trying to promote peace in the North.

q: Players since the start of this century have gone across to the states and different countries to play the game. They are offered money today especially by the New York Board who are a big problem to the GAA. Do you agree with them being paid to play during the summer ?

a: No I don't agree with them being paid, but if somebody is going over to New York and want to continue playing there games, we should have a system where they can play the game. We have a transfer system in place that isn't particularly a good one. But the New York Board have been a law unto themselves for many years. It is only in recent years that they've tried to curtail their activities somewhat and there is a history of people playing with wrong names and everything over there. It is something that is being tackled and I feel that within a few years that will be gone.

q: Colm O Rourke recently wrote an article in the Irish Times where he described players as walking billboards for other peoples gain. Do you think that players should be allowed endorse products ?

a: I do yes, I think it is a very good idea. If the Association is taking money off the efforts of the players, the players have to get something of that back, be it in the form of a holiday, or expenses. There i nothing wrong with a player going out to open a supermarket and getting expenses for it. But a player should also be getting expenses for mileage or if he is off work, for training. Referees get mileage, officials going to meetings get mileage, without the players we wouldn't be there. We are living in times when, if you put a name across your chest and you see that your county board is getting x amount of pounds for it, there has to be something coming down to the team and to the members of that team. It is not sufficient to say you are getting a jersey at the end of your year, there has to be some means of reinbursment for the players.

q: Kevin Moran himself has set up the Proactive Sports agency. I believe Jason Sherlock and DJ Carey signed up for it. Jason Sherlock however could be through soccer. Do you think their arrival is an advantage or a disadvantage ?

a: I think that it is probably an advantage, and is there anything wrong with John Brown wanting to open a supermarket and ringing Jason Sherlocks agent and saying I'll pay you £500 to open my supermarket. Because Sherlock is a household name, through whatever sport and there is absolutely nothing wrong with it. We have seen everyone else doing it. And these guys through their commitment to the game have made a name for themselves and they should be entitled to use that to make some money for themselves.

- q: If the game was ever made professional I can see superpowers such as Dublin or Cork emerging, which might ruin the game. Do you think superpowers will emerge like they have in the English League ?
- a: No, you mentioned Dublin, Dublin has the largest catchment area in the country, in fact there was talk that Dublin should have two or three boards. Dublin has a deplorably bad record of winning All Irelands and winning Leinster Championships at all levels, yet we have got the biggest catchment area in the country. You've had a few people who have been successful with Dublin teams and the best known of them of course was Kevin Heffernan, because he was a man who was dedicated to it. He set up his program and he had guys who were prepared to work with him. To become fully professional you would have to change a number of rules in the Association. You would have to change the transfer rule. Now a guy living in the country can only be with his parish team, if he goes to live outside it he has to be living outside it for a number of months before he can play. The parish rule states that if he is living in his parish then he cannot transfer. So I do not think you are going to see professionalism but of course you will see endorsements being made to people and endorsements are being made to people all time. Some of the top notch players in Dublin have endorsements to change clubs and have changed clubs. Now we will never be told what those endorsements are because there is a hundred ways around it, I mean for example if I wanted to sponsor a club here and they wanted a particularly good player, what is to stop me from saying, here is £5000 for the club and here is a separate cheque for £2000 for the player, that separate cheque does not go through the GAA.

**Interview 2**      John Brereton

- q: The GAA has always been associated with the local parish, do you think that this could be destroyed if the game is made professional ?
- a: It could have a negative effect on the local parish team, the reason being that if you had one or more players on the county team (professional players being paid) it could

leave the rest of the parish team disinterested. The parish team is a vital aspect of the game, I feel it is the backbone of the GAA. The county team is only secondary, it exists because of the parish teams.

q: Do you think that the game has changed much since you played ?

a: Yes, it has become more professional in its approach without being professional. The rules have changed to speed up the game and to eliminate off the ball incidents. With the advent of television, it's under more scrutiny and that may have an effect on the standard.

q: In the sixties professionalism was not a debate that was being pushed. However if the players you played with then were playing today, do you think they would support the idea of being paid to play the game ?

a: I imagine they would.

q: As you played in the year that Sam first crossed the border, you may have some views on rule 21 as it was still in its full entirety then. Today it simply states that people who are in the British Military cannot play the game. How do you see this rule effecting the game ?

a: In fact, I don't see why rule 21 should still be in place, reasons being that I would imagine that British Soldiers or Unionists would not play in the first place and it only stops Nationalists or Catholics who may be in the RUC or British Army who wish to play.

q: I believe the GAA has always been associated with politics, more so when you played than today. Do you think this is a fair statement ?

a: It is not as political as it used to be, the ban on foreign games is gone, I feel it has outlived its usefulness, anyway I could never agree with the ban personally.

q: Players across the years have played games in the States, I know you have yourself. But today illegal participation has become very popular. Do you approve of players being flown over to the States to play games during the summer for money ? Did this kind of thing happen when you played the game ?

a: It didn't happen very much back then. I would have no problem with it as long as it

didn't adversely effect the Championships here.

- q: I believe that the GAA in some ways has almost come full circle, back when the gentry watched the common folk play hurling. Nowadays they have executive boxes to sit in. Do not get me wrong, I am a strong supporter of the GAA I just believe that it has become a big business and the wrong people are seeing the profits. Do you think the game should be made professional ? Do you think players should be paid ? Do you think they should at least be allowed to endorse products ?
- a: I know for a fact that some of these executive tickets can go to people with no genuine interest in the GAA and perhaps they just go to be seen - a free day out. I believe that when it comes to semi final, All Ireland or even provincial finals the year round supporter seems to get a raw deal, in that they never get the best seats in the stands.
- I wouldn't have much of a problem with professionalism, I feel the time has come when players should receive some recognition or financial reward for their efforts. I don't see any problem with endorsing products.
- q: If made a professional game can you see superpowers emerging such as Dublin ?
- a: If for example, Dublin could buy players after receiving sponsorship from big firms, then I could see a problem arising.
- q: Do you think that managers are under a lot of pressure these days ? Do you think they receive the proper rewards for their efforts ?
- a: Well most managers are fairly well looked after financially and I believe that successful managers could almost name their price. But I feel that they are entitled to whatever money or benefits they receive.
- q: It must mean a lot to play for your parish and to wear your county colours, If made professional do you think that some of the bite will be gone from the game ?
- a: If it was the case where you could move to a different county and play for more money, for example, if Dublin or Cork were superpowers, then I feel that could have a negative effect at county level but if it was the case where you could only play in your county - where you play for your parish club, I don't see any problem with being a professional player and being paid for your efforts.

**Interview 3**

Kevin Heffernan

- q: The GAA has always been associated with local parishes, If made professional do you think this aspect of the game would be destroyed ?
- a: I don't think it will ever be professional in the sense that clubs generally will have paid players. I don't think the money is there to sustain it, I don't think even intercounty could support this. It would require transfers. I don't think it will ever be professional in a sense, I think there will be other forms of professionalism, such as sponsoring houses. I think you will always have development in that area but I don't think you will have direct payments for players.
- q: With the advent of television and advertising, the game has become more professional, Do you agree with this statement ?
- a: I do, in a sense that it enhances major development in the GAA. Also the fact that live t.v. proves an attraction and doesn't effect the GAA. There is an atmosphere though that you recapture on the t.v. If you keep in mind that every home in Ireland virtually has a t.v. and can be reached.
- q: Certain players are receiving money and other incentives to move clubs, do you agree with this ?
- a: There have been suggestions that this has happened and usually there is some fire where there is smoke but I am not personally aware of who those people are. I think the numbers would be very low though, simply because I don't think that clubs could afford it. In one sense I don't favour that particular way to get strong teams. But I think one of the problems we've had is that we've too many average quality teams and I think it would be better with a smaller number. As I say I don't agree with that way of getting players but I would be glad to see stronger teams.
- q: I find soccer is a big threat to the GAA would you agree with me here ?
- a: No, it is not really a threat in a sense, I think you will always have soccer opposite Gaelic football. It is a threat in that it's much better organised and it is abig

attraction. The problems of the GAA are heightened by it. In this club now we've about 75% who play both hurling and football. If there is no game on an odd Sunday for some reason, they may play soccer to fill in. There are those difficulties, but I think that with many soccer teams all you need are eleven jerseys and someone to fill in a list and teams come and go and where they weaken us is not so much playing on Sundays, or in the tactics they use, but that they are playing matches and recruiting kids from an early age.

q: When you were a player the ban was in full force, rule 21 today simply states people in the British Millitary and RUC cannot play the game. Do you agree with this rule ?

a: It is hard to say who would play if it was not there, but because of the current political situation I don't see much use for it.

q: When players go over to the States, certain players get paid, and players as for example the situation with the Roscommon members end up getting banned for being paid or for giving false names.

a: No, I don't think they were banned for being paid, there are very clear cut rules of how to do transfers and anybody that doesn't abide by the rules can't play. There was an example of this there a couple of years ago with a couple of Galway players. Now you have to go for a specific period and you have to go through the proper procedures. If you don't then you are liable to be suspended for six months, or whatever the suspension is.

q: Colm O Rourke described in an article in the Irish Times that players are like walking billboards for other peoples gain. Do you agree with this statement ?

a: Some of these companys put very sizeable amounts into their counties like Arnotts are ploughing into Dublin. While one might argue what the value of money is, it is a matter of advertising but you will want some return for your team such as holiday or something of that value.

q: Do you think that players are getting any of this money ?

a: I think the players are indirectly getting something in return. Now there is an argument to be made whether they should be getting something and that is being addressed in the GAA at the moment.

- q: Do you personally think that the players want to become professional or do you simply think they want to be treated well ? For example do you think they should be given proper training gear and proper mileage ?
- a: I do not have any problem with treating players properly especially in the areas of mileage and insurance, but the last thing players want to do is sit down to a steak meal after training. That may be fine however, if you've to travel a long distance and have to skip a meal. Obviously you've players travelling around the country and they have to be fed properly. Circumstances will dictate, but I'm all for treating players properly.
- q: Kevin Moran set up the Proactive Sports Agency with Johnny Fortune and Jerry Kelly. Kevin is a director in Dublin as he runs the sister company in England. Basically what Proactive Sports does is try and look after the players best interests. Do you think their arrival will have a positive effect on the GAA ?
- a: I think that if it is becoming that way it is in the interests of the player to use these people for negotiations. Some players wouldn't have a clue what they were getting into. In that respect I think that a reputable agency would have a positive effect.
- q: Do you think that if the game was made professional there would be superpowers such as Dublin and Cork in a similar situation as Manchester United in England ?
- a: I don't think we have the population to sustain it. This is were I say to have such a thing does away with the natural hate and passion present when you play for your county. Where you nail your colours to the post for good or for bad. But economically I do not think it is on.
- q: I don't think that the GAA do enough for the younger population especially in the form of advertisements and magazines. You can go into a shop each week and buy a soccer magazine, what I am trying to say is I just don't think they do enough. Do you agree ?
- a: Well now, again you are talking about money. They're not comparable because of the economy.
- q: I disagree, I mean there is such a large population in Dublin, don't get me wrong I

am a big supporter of the GAA and the Dubs, but in Croke Park itself you now have your executive boxes and with the money they're getting from them, do you not think that they could do a bit more ? I mean the only magazines are Gael Sport and more recently Championship which are not very interesting.

a: Against that I would say the Title, which was a Sunday Sport newspaper was a good paper but it couldn't stay afloat because it hadn't got a large readership.

#### **Interview 4**      Jerry Kelly

q: Would I be right in saying Kevin Moran and Johnny Fortune set up the Proactive Sports Agency ?

a: What happened was myself and Johnny Fortune set up Proactive Sports Management in Ireland and we formed an association with Kevin Moran and Jasper Olsen and Paul Stretford who were a sister company, Proactive Sports Management in England. So they are actually directors of our company in Ireland.

q: Do you believe that the GAA will become professional ?

a: Well I mean the GAA is already professional to the extent that, there is money involved in Gaelic Games. Or do you mean by professional, do I think that players will get paid for playing the game ? No is the answer, but I do think that players will make money from areas associated with the game very soon , that is, like product endorsements, sponsorship deals and that kind of thing.

q: So are you there to help them out with these deals ?

a: It will be an area that we are certainly very interested in. There is no doubt about it the relationship between business and sport in Gaelic Games was established a long time ago. I mean you know when you see sponsors of the All Ireland football sponsored by Bank of Ireland and the Hurling by Guinness, there is commercial sponsorship involved already. The fact of the matter is though, while the sponsors will get benefit out of it, while the GAA will get benefit out of it , while the spectators will get benefit out of it, while t.v. gets a benefit out of it, the reality is that the

players at this stage are not getting benefit out of it.

q: If it was made a professional game, do you think superpowers would emerge?

a: The first thing is that I actually don't think in the short term that it will become a professional game, because I don't think there is the money to sustain it and I don't think it would actually function. I think the whole backbone of the GAA is based on a structure and a system that does not lend itself to professionalism.

q: Do you think soccer is a threat to the GAA ? as it, along with rugby are professional games. Do you think it is a threat at all ?

a: Not at all, I think Gaelic games and the GAA is going from strength to strength. Last year particularly, when you look at hurling, It was a fantastic success. No, I think rugby is being ripped apart at the moment because of the transition to professionalism. The Irish structure is unable to compete at the level it is expected to compete at and the money is not there for it. I think there are followers of League of Ireland football and they are a special group and they will always be there, but it will never be a threat.

q: Colm O'Rourke once described players as walking billboards for other peoples gain, what is your reaction to that statement ?

a: Sport is a billboard and by taking part in sport nowadays you are wearing logos. I mean people wear logos on everything The fact of the matter is that, if a guy is going out onto the pitch and he is wearing an Umbro jersey, Umbro gear and Umbro boots, whatever it might be and thousands of people are seeing the match on the field or on t.v., then the guy should get paid or should get some advantage for actually advertising a sponsors gear. In the same way if he goes out with a big Arnotts written across his chest or Keypak or whatever it might be, there should be some return for that.

Colm was right you know they are walking billboards, but then I mean it is like racing it is already starting to arrive where they are starting to wear logos. Then you can take motor racing which is the other extreme of the whole thing. I mean sport is directly related and intergrated with business and that means money and that means that any opportunity that exists will be used.

q: Are there many Gaelic players who have signed up for Pro Active Sports ? I saw a

page in the Irish Times last year were a couple of players where at the opening.

a: Yes they came along to the open, but we do not sign people up.

q: Do they just go to you for help then ?

a: Well if somebody wants something from a corporate point of view or if somebody got a player to do whatever it might be then, we will broker it. We help people out, but we do not sign people up on contracts or any thing like that.

q: I believe the advent of t.v. and advertising has changed the game thus making it more professional. Do you agree with this statement ?

a: It is changing the game, Gaelic games is Irelands biggest sport from a number of points of view. I mean it attracts huge numbers of people to go along and watch it. Because of the arrival of sponsorship, because of the demands on the GAA to find money and to have facilities to be more professional in their approach, they also taking in money from sponsors etc. They are selling out more space and more and more the sponsor is gaining access into the game. As the game is televised more. If you talk to a sponsor , the first thing he will say is , you get me television coverage I am in.

q: The GAA has always been associated with local parishes, that has been the backbone of the GAA. Do you think this will be destroyed if players are going to be making money ?

a: Well, I think it will be in danger, they would want to be very carefull. The only thing is that that has been a breeding ground for the GAA , but I don't necessarily think that, I mean change is inevitable, and change is not always a bad thing. I do think that people would want to recognise the traditions of the GAA and try to marry them with the modern professional era. If they don't do anything they will find themselves in trouble so they have got to be very careful.

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A Professional Debate

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