

Sport Inspires and Uplifts

Brendan Harvey

AS I SET OUT to write this piece on Wednesday 10th October I have just learned that Colin Griffin and Laura Reynolds have been confirmed as the *Leitrim Guardian Persons of the Year 2013*. I am just thinking to myself what a wonderful choice. In one fell swoop the *Leitrim Guardian* has chosen a male and female, young people, who have by their perseverance and endurance represented Leitrim and Ireland during the year with such distinction and style. To prepare for top class athletic events at any time requires dedication and a great singularity of purpose, and no doubt they will prove to be very popular Persons of the Year.

As I think a little bit about Colin and Laura and the economic position of our country at this time, which inevitably has a knock-on effect on Leitrim, I am reminded of previous times and previous generations, who have encountered the same uncertainties and have been uplifted by sporting endeavours. We all read occasionally about the lean and hungry times of the 1940's and the chronic haemorrhage of

emigration in the 1950's. Leitrim suffered more than most other counties at that time. Uneconomic farm holdings together with a lack of industrial initiative made it imperative for many Leitrim people to earn their living and seek their fortune in many different destinations all over the world.

In the 1957 Connacht senior football final contested between Leitrim and Galway in Pearce Stadium, Salthill, Leitrim suffered a drubbing to the tune of 4-8 to 0-4. It was a low point in the morale of Leitrim people, coming as it did after more than a decade of stagnation and emigration. Despite the fact that the previous year Leitrim had contested the All Ireland minor final, and were well beaten by Dublin, it now seemed as if Leitrim were set to continue their barren endeavours on the football fields. But this was to draw those conclusions without factoring in the spirit, determination, and exuberance of people like Jackie Gallagher, Frank Quinn, Tom Colreavy, Leo Heslin, Josie Murray, Berney Doyle, Tony Hayden, Mick Mullen, Jimmy O'Donnell,

Mick McGowan, Paddy Dolan, Columba Cryan, Paddy Reilly, Cathal Flynn and the doyen of them all, the indomitable Packy

Having defeated Roscommon by 11 points to 9 in a dower and rugged Connacht Championship semi-final in St Coman's Park, Roscommon in June 1958, Leitrim progressed again to the Connacht final. For historical reasons Leitrim were given no chance but what ensued was the finest game of football played that year and Galway were extremely lucky to emerge 1 goal 1 point winners on the score: Galway 2-10, Leitrim 1-11. The *Irish Press* at that time had a system of awarding stars to each game on the basis of the quality of football played, its competitiveness and value as an entertainment spectacle. The Connacht final that year with Leitrim and Galway was the only game to receive the top rating of 5 stars. The general consensus of all neutrals present was that Leitrim were the better team and were very unlucky to be beaten on the day. And while Leitrim were beaten, what was extremely unusual was that

Man of the Match, Packy McGarty, after an extraordinary display, was carried shoulder high from the pitch by Galway as well as Leitrim supporters. But far more importantly it raised the sagging morale of a county devastated by unemployment and emigration once again. Of course that was the era that Leitrim contested four Connacht finals in a row, and I remember well the excitement around Aughnasheelin at the rise in Leitrim's football fortunes, and especially when our local hero, Fr Joe Dolan, played in the 1959 final, and of course Leitrim went on to contest the League semi-final of 1959 against Derry.

Sport again played its part in lifting the morale of Leitrim in the 1990's. The recession of the 1980's had the usual repercussions all over Leitrim and it was the era of the "tighten your belt" budgets made famous by Mr Haughey. Nevertheless, an active and progressive County Board of the GAA put in place a structure to finance and train, to the best extent possible, a football team which was to emerge as Connacht Champions in 1994, under the management of John O'Mahoney, and bring so much pride and excitement to a county which had not won this distinction for 67 years. Who will ever forget the joy

and excitement in Roscommon after that Connacht final, and no doubt it lifted the morale of people of a county that had taken more than its fair share of knocks in the recession of that time. In that campaign local man, goalkeeper Martin McHugh, was one of the stand-out characters and he contributed handsomely to the overall effort and was a source of excitement for us all.

While Leitrim has just been beaten by Mayo in this year's Connacht Championship the score line of 4-20 to 0-10 does not tell the full story. Once again that old chestnut and perennial enemy of our county – emigration played an even greater part than normal, that, and an abnormal amount of injuries this year resulted in a considerably weakened team taking the field. The team recovered however and put in some wonderful performances in the qualifiers. History has taught us that Leitrim has always emerged from these set-backs stronger and more resilient. People who carry out their functions competently and efficiently in any endeavours they undertake should always be an inspirational and uplifting experience for us all. It may not always be in a participation sense. We, in Aughnasheelin, experienced those emotions in 1991 when Seamus Prior, in his unique and competent manner,

was the man in the middle in the Meath/Down All-Ireland final of that year. In that match and indeed in many other games of a similar profile over a number of years his performance, and that of his support team; Killian Mulvanerty, Peter Flynn, James McCaffrey and Tommie Costello was of the highest order and always gave us locals a lift.

Indeed it hasn't been left to the male part of the population to fulfil our ambitions in relation to sporting endeavours. The Ladies football team brought All-Ireland glory to Leitrim in 2007 and were very worthy *Leitrim Persons of the Year*.

I look forward to the year ahead and especially to the efforts of George Dugdale and Barney Breen to manage Leitrim, against all the odds, to a worthy contribution to next year's football activities. I know also that Colin Griffin and Laura Reynolds will represent the *Leitrim Guardian* and the people of Leitrim with honour and distinction both on and off the field. They are wonderful young people and the future belongs to them.

CAOIMHE GALLAGHER LAWSON
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LOVELIEST THING ABOUT LEITRIM

Loveliest thing about Leitrim is
Open valleys and meadows and
 sometimes a little snow,
Veils and veils and veils of green,
Everyday new sights to be seen.
Lakes and rivers and a bit of sea,
Yes, that is the home our home sh^{ould be}.