

# WHEN HARRY (AND MEGHAN) MET COLIN

Colin Regan

IT'S NOT EVERY day that you get to meet royalty. Although, having done so, my most common quip to related queries is that when you've grown up in Leitrim, it's nothing unusual.

In truth, my time in Croke Park with the Duke and Duchess of Sussex, more commonly known as Harry and Meghan, was a fascinating experience on many fronts. It offered me a brief insight into the world of royalty and all the trappings and protocols that come with the position. It revealed the utter obsession with this young couple by many people in Ireland and around the globe. It highlighted that for some Irish people, the British royalty remains a symbol of imperialism and past oppression. And for me, it was the first time that my mother was interested in the fact that I worked for the GAA.

First, to dispel a rumour. I was not selected to guide the royals



on their Croke Park experience because I am a Protestant, as disappointing as that may be to any conspiracy theorists out there. Of course, I did give Prince Harry the secret Protestant handshake

when we first met, just to let him know he was in good hands. It all began with a phone call from a colleague, Niamh McCoy, director of the GAA museum in Croke Park. She had received communi-





cation that an international dignitary was interested in visiting Croke Park during a trip to Ireland and was asked to put together a potential hour-long agenda that highlighted how sport was being used by the GAA for social good, particularly for young people.

As Community & Health manager for the GAA, that pretty much encapsulates my brief. My work, and that of my team and department, is focused on maximising the contribution of the GAA, by broadening the traditional boundaries of both sport and sports clubs. We try to ensure that all persons who engage in our games or become members of our clubs are enriched by that experience. Sport already contributes greatly to the physical, social, and emotional health of those who participate in it with balance. We seek to start with that premise, and then explore what

additional needs and opportunities exist. For example, we have demonstrated GAA clubs to be a receptive setting for the delivery of healthy eating workshops for young members, equipping them with tools to develop life-skills necessary off the field of play. Sport is now recognised as fertile ground on which to tackle the stigma of mental health. Mental fitness is celebrated in athletes and the skills associated it with—meditation, positive self-talk, the ability to accept both success and failure, responding to setbacks—are all components of a healthy mind outside the white lines too. Through the GAA Healthy Club Project, we also work with GAA clubs to ensure they are age-friendly, diverse and inclusive, respectful, smoke-free; in other words, clubs that seek to become hubs for health in their communities.

Back to the royals. Well, at this stage I didn't know they were royals, but I began to put together a plan for on-field activities that would showcase some of the GAA's work in the usage of sport for social good. A delegation was due in a week for a walk-through of the concept. It involved splitting Croke Park's famous field into four quadrants, involving football and hurling games that showcased social inclusion of new Irish populations, persons with special needs (through the GAA's newest game Fun & Run, a version of Rounders adapted for persons of all abilities and needs), and a demonstration of skills by some of our elite players, including Donegal's Michael Murphy, Galway's Joe Canning, Dublin's Lyndsey Davey, Cork's Rena Buckley, and our Wheelchair Hurling athletes Lorcan Madden and Sarah Cregg. Woven into the tapestry were participants from

our Dermot Earley Youth Leadership Initiative, who would get to talk to the dignitaries about their experiences as young leaders in their clubs and communities.

Just before the delegation was scheduled to arrive in May, we were informed that the potential visitors would be members of the British royal family. We were sworn to secrecy but as anyone who knows me well will attest, the swearing was unnecessary as keeping secrets is one of my fortes. The 40-strong delegation included representatives from Kensington Palace, The British Embassy, and Irish and British Departments of Foreign Affairs, and An Garda Síochána. They evidently liked the concept, and the visit of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex was confirmed within days. I was asked to guide them through the on-field activities, while Niamh was asked to talk them through some selected artefacts from the GAA museum, including the Bloody Sunday exhibition.

It being Ireland, the first rain in weeks arrived as their car pulled up outside the museum. Thankfully it was just a shower and had stopped by the time we reached the pitch. The first thing I noticed was the stiletto heels being worn by the Duchess. We had recommended no heels as she would be walking on the pitch, but my wife always laughed and asked—*‘did you really think she would arrive in flats, with an entourage of 140 media following her every step?’* It was a fair point, but I was just worried that her heels could prove a trip hazard by sinking into the turf. Like a true



star, however, she just glided across the ground before her, her yoga prowess put to good use.

My overall impression was that of typical newlyweds – evidently very much in love, very tactile, relaxed, and watching out for one and other. Both were very engaging and charming. Prince Harry clearly knows his sport and we chatted about the Invictus Games which he founded for members of the defence forces maimed in service. The Duchess made a special effort to engage all the young female participants, much to their delight. They both shone when the time came to meet the children with special needs. They were recruited from GAA clubs that are providing games for children with special needs and from a couple of special schools in the area.

The royal couple were at their ease and abandoned all protocol. You may have seen the photos that appeared in media around the world of some of the children playing with Prince Harry’s beard and Meghan’s hair. It was a very special moment for the parents, many of whom never

thought they’d get to see their children play in Croke Park, let alone engage with two of the most famous people in the world. Some tears were shed. It was the highlight of their visit I felt. Galway’s Joe Canning, nailing a ’45 metre strike from the ground with a hurl he made himself, in front of the glare of the world’s media, came a close second. The couple couldn’t believe that these amateur players would play in front of 82,300 people in Croke Park on a Sunday, and head back to work on a Monday morning.

The most common question I am asked, by both women and men, is, ‘what is she like?’ Prince Harry appears to be an afterthought in this age of celebrity. I’m not a royalist. Nor do I think they should be hung and quartered. They just don’t usually register in my life. I’ve always considered myself a people person, however, they struck me as two genuine, fun-loving people. I would gladly show them around again and recommended a visit to the northwest the next time they are over. Leitrim is lovely at any time of the year.