

# Leitrim Icons

## *Brendan Harvey*

I WAS BORN in 1946 so by the mid 1950s I had begun to take note of things happening around me. In the Leitrim of that time things were very remote indeed. It was a world of ponies and traps, donkeys and carts, bicycles and lovely young people disappearing from the landscape on a weekly basis – a time of little hope, only the occasional parcel from America and the letters with the Christmas dollars. I still remember the daily trek of about a mile from home to Aghacashel School. The road travelled at that time was little better than a dirt track – an old gravel road with more pot holes than gravel. I can still vividly remember the Council workers under the supervision of the ganger Jack Doherty as they widened and resurfaced the road as a preparation for the tarring process which was to follow.

On the dark damp winter mornings my friends and I made our way to the academy of learning at about ten minutes to nine. Monday mornings were especially eventful as we usually found the twelve or so Council workers divided up and huddled together into three groups. It appeared as if there was a leader in

each group with a copy of the daily newspaper. As the leader read out the report of the previous day's match there was a very attentive audience hanging on his every word. Now I'm sure my readers will have no difficulty understanding that in the Aghnasheelin of the 1950s it would be normal enough to have access to either the Irish Independent or the Irish Press but to be reading freely from both in that rural area would be a cause for mild surprise. However, surely what would put the tin hat on it altogether was to find that this same group of Council workers had a copy of the Irish Times as well and were feverently raddy Downey's account of Leitrim's game. As Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Gael Liam Ó Néill said on the occasion of Paddy's death "Paddy Downey was a legendary figure in the coverage of Gaelic games. His wit, eye for detail and clarity of prose regularly brought game incidents to life in print for those who had not witnessed them".

Leitrim people who have only a passing interest in GAA affairs will know that in 1956 Leitrim contested the All-Ireland Minor Final against Dublin and although they were

beaten they had a great run through that year's Minor Championship and had some very good wins en route to the final. That coupled with the fact that Leitrim contested the 1952 Junior Final meant that there were a number of exceptionally good footballers playing on the Leitrim Senior team in the 1950s/early 60s. Some players from the 1956 Minor team formed the backbone of the Leitrim Senior team going forward and this resulted in the county contesting four Senior Connaught finals in a row. Although they were beaten on each occasion by the remnants of the great Galway team of 1956 All-Ireland fame nevertheless their participation confirmed their consistency and it all added up to a heightened awareness of the exploits of our footballers.

In a county like Leitrim, which was at that time seriously lacking in Industrial initiative and with a patchwork of uneconomic small land holdings, the boat and emigration were the only outlet and hope for our people. It was with pride therefore that great numbers of people travelled long distances to see Leitrim playing on Sunday and with equal amount of pride that they read of

their great exploits and achievements on Monday morning. National sports journalists like Peadar O'Brien, *Irish Press*; John D Hickey, *Irish Independent* and the aforementioned Paddy Downey, *Irish Times* became almost household names in Leitrim.

Under the tutorage of Fr Seán Manning as County Board Chairman, Tommie O'Riordan as Secretary and Jack McNally as Treasurer, Leitrim achieved considerable football success. While the selectors changed from time to time Eddie Delahoyde, Tommie Mollaghan, J J O'Rourke and Gerry Mahon seem to feature a lot in the selectoral capacity. Players like Jackie Gallagher, Paudge McGowan, Brian Cotter, Frank Quinn, Jack and Frank Reynolds, Tom Colreavy, Jim Lynch, Hubert Reynolds, Leo Heslin, Pat Conefrey, Patsy McBride, Jim Lynch, Ollie Murray, Jim McKeon, Frankie Beirne, Eddie Duffy, Josie Murray, Barney Doyle, Tony Hayden, Mick Mullen, Seamus Brogan, Jimmy O'Donnell, Noel Blessing, Brian Sweeney, Tommie Greenan, Eddie Rowley, Mick McGowan, Packie McGarty, Joe Dolan, Paddy Dolan, Liam Foran, Columba Cryan, Mick Kelly, Paddy Reilly, Cathal Flynn, Máirtín and Kevin McGowan, and slightly later Dermot Gannon, Fergus O'Rourke, Paddy and Patsy Guckian, Kevin and Gabriel O'Malley, Eamonn Gallagher, Davy Dorris, Pauric Wrynn,

Benny Mitchell, Mickey Colreavy, Joe Leyden, Aiden Gallagher, Pauric McGloin, Jack Faughnan, and Terry Blessing were an exceptional group of men of character and commitment, who were successful and committed in their private lives and chosen careers, and brought honour to Leitrim on the football field. Every one of them has walked through life carrying that same dignity and sense of place. Those of us growing up at the time could bask in the reflected glory. This group have always been available to any Leitrim cause and have given freely of their time and we have every right to be very proud of them as they are of Leitrim.

The grim reaper must have had a shortage of full-backs for his football team in the sky for he seems to have summoned a good few of the Leitrim lads home prematurely; Frank Quinn, Leo Heslin, Patsy McBride, Jim Lynch, Ollie Murray, Eddie Duffy, Conor Keaney, Tony Hayden, Jim McKeon, Frank Reynolds, Hubert Reynolds, Frankie Beirne, all played with distinction in Leitrim's full-back line at one time or another. Other members of that group gone to their reward are Brian Sweeney, Paddy Reilly and Noel Blessing. May they rest in peace.

Thankfully the majority of them are still with us and it was wonderful to see so many of them attend the recent launch of Leitrim Treasure and

to be present for the Treasure presentation to Fergus O'Rourke - an award made to him for his commitment to Leitrim down through the years. Seeing Packie McGarty in the Bush hotel on the night of the launch surrounded by a group of fellow players and admirers and judging by the moves on the floor obviously re-playing a past game brought to mind something Packie once said in an interview: "I was born and raised outside of Mohill and if I was sent to town for a message I always had a ball with me. I was always tipping a ball on me toe or jumping up to try and hit the cigarette signs over a shop. I was a small little fella, but I was always hopping a ball or dummyming and swerving and going on solo runs."

The more things change in Leitrim the more they stay the same. We still need people who remember their roots and are willing to help the cause as the occasion demands. These men were wonderful sportsmen but above all else they are wonderful human beings. Truly we can say they are icons. I feel enriched to have known them all and very privileged to claim them as my friends.

*A photograph of some of these Iconic Footballers is located on page 111.*