

KILMALLOCK & LEITRIM THROUGH GOOD TIMES AND BAD

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IT'S FUNNY HOW certain places at certain times can hold memories that you associate with different events. Well, Kilmallock in Limerick was one of those venues that I always associated with Leitrim's relegation to Division Four of the Allianz Football League. The supporters that were there on that faithful day in 2008 will always remember the referee blowing the whistle for half time just as a John McKeon effort was in mid-flight, on its way over the bar. If only the match official had waited just a second more to blow the interval whistle, then things could have been much different.

Fast forward to 2019 and the very same venue was to play another key part in Leitrim GAA folklore—this time in a positive sense helping to secure promotion to Division Three for the first time since that dark day.

Hopes were high, this young and talented team, which was building up some momentum, could finally challenge for promotion in a serious fashion. Terry Hyland was selected by the County Board to carry on and build on the project started by Benny Guckian and his management team. In 2018, the Leitrim side showed good signs against Monaghan and Louth in qualifiers, that they could be contenders to claim one of the two places available to the third tier. Even before the turkey was digested, confidence and new year hopes were high that 2019 could be the year. An early FBD league showdown with

Mayo, that ended in a penalty kick resolution, gave plenty of grounds for optimism. When Leitrim registered three wins against Wexford, Wicklow and Antrim, feelings were strong that something special was about to unfold.

Thankfully technology in relation to GAA coverage has developed over the years. It was so exciting to be part of the Ocean FM Sports Department, where every second of this Leitrim team's work on the field was broadcast live, either on the traditional FM frequency or on the station's website. The messages and the reaction from those around the world was fantastic. It brought home to us what this success meant to Leitrim people near and far. The experience seemed to be enjoyed almost as much by the fans at a distance as was enjoyed by those that were in the fortunate position that could attend the matches.

So off to Kilmallock for Round Four, another tough test was surely going to await Leitrim. The predictions proved to be correct. It was a Saturday fixture. Leitrim had to dig deep and show resolve in winning. A type of game that in the past usually left Leitrim supporters with the feeling of 'what if'?

Kilmallock had not changed much from visits in the past. The ladder that led into the commentary box was still there. The venue provided a traditional atmosphere. The crowd were situated so close to the

pitch that it must have reminded the more seasoned supporters what it was like under the times of P J Carroll and John O'Mahony.

Leitrim secured promotion in the very next round with a win over London, another stubborn opponent in recent times. After losing to Derry in a dress rehearsal of the league final in Celtic Park, they rounded off the league success with a win over Waterford. The sight of the Green and Gold in Croke Park on league final day was another wonderful occasion. Yes, Derry won the league title but Leitrim had secured their number one objective and promotion to Division three.

The excitement and buzz following this league campaign was simply mighty. I started working for on Leitrim matches in 1996 for radio and it was a real pleasure to still be involved in 2019. After the promotion was made official with the London win, I carried out interviews for Ocean FM and RTE Radio down on the pitch. Those scenes with supporters out on the field, congratulating their heroes, were some of the highlights of the year. It showed the importance of the GAA to the county. It was wonderful to see how the entire population seemed to revel in the success of Terry Hyland's team. It's been some year all round with the hurlers also winning the Lory Meagher cup and the opening of the Centre of Excellence at Annaduff, another magnificent jewel in the crown of the association.