Leitrim v New York

It's only a game

Frank Brady

As a Leitrim supporter I should have reasonably good credentials, well at least better than the typical bandwagon jumper. From the time that I supposedly reached the use of reason in the late fifties, I attended nearly all of Leitrim championship matches plus a fair few national league games as well. That was until I emigrated in the late seventies.

Teddy O'Loughlin, centre, analyses the Leitrim/New York game for John Lynch and Seamus Duke of Shannonside Northern Sound.

It could be argued that I learned most of the geography of Connacht from trips through the province. Boarding school and exams prevented me from having perfect attendance at championship games. During the seventies, I was more than a spectator or supporter as I was a member of the Leitrim panel, acting mostly as an understudy to Noel Crossan and also as a backup halfback. However due to a combination of Noel's brilliance and consistency and a lack of mine, I saw little action at that position, and I was a keeper in waiting. However I seemed to get more action coming from the stands or terraces rather than the bench or dugout. On two occasions, once at a league game at Irvinstown against Fermanagh, and again at Ballymote in a Gael Linn Cup match against Sligo. I was drafted in from the rank of a spectator to the role of a player as Leitrim were shorthanded. My actions were definitely well above and beyond the call of duty of a supporter. It reminded me, though it was far from as noble as the farmer who left his plough to lead the army that I learned about or perhaps half learned about in Latin class long ago. In hindsight, my major role during these years may have been more a sounding block for many of Michael Mc Gowan's ideas, the manager who brought resurgence to Leitrim football, as we travelled to and from training in Ballinamore and Drumshambo. Indeed Michael would later regard this experience as a kind of mentorship in management. I was possibly his first graduate but he is a little reticent about the grade. Meanwhile since arriving on this side of the Atlantic twenty-five years ago, I have stayed abreast of Leitrim's efforts while occasionally timing a few trips to coincide with their games. When the late Joe McInerney formed the Leitrim's Supporters Club of New York, he co-opted me as a member. Since then I thought that I was a supporter in relatively good standing that was of course until Leitrim were coming to the Big Apple to play New York in the Connacht Championship.

Last Fall, the then President of the New York GAA appointed a management team with Leslie McGettigan as the manager, himself as a selector and myself as the trainer and the third selector. Immediately conspiracy theories began to flourish about my role and the situation wasn't helped by the Machiavellian nature of Monty's operations. The reality was that nobody wanted the positions, as the New York management situation is probably the least glamorous and least rewarding of these jobs. There is a very small pool of players which is constantly in flux, no facilities, no competition to judge progress or players and frequently very harsh winters and springs. It didn't seem to matter to the diehard Leitrim supporters that I have been involved in a variety of roles with New York during the last decade. Questions were being asked about my intelligence, character, and loyalty: 'How could Brady be so

All is forgiven as New York selector, Frank Brady makes a presentation to Leitrim player, Terry Kelleher at the Commemorative Banquet in Flushing Meadow.

stupid' or 'has Brady any shame at all in him' or 'what kind of a Leitrim man is he to get involved with New York against his own county.' There were rumours that I could make history by being the first person to be expelled from the Leitrim's Supporters Club if I didn't disassociate myself from New York. Pat Murray, the C.E.O. of the club allayed my fears by announcing that he would use his veto to block such a move. However the evening of reckoning arrived sooner than expected and caught me unprepared for my defense. A high ranking member of the Club put me right on the spot with a question reminiscent of George W. Bush when he was trying to line up foes and friends. 'Are you with us or against us?' As I scrambled to evade the dilemma, Frank Dwyer, interjected with a nice touch of common sense, 'Folks it's not a war that we're going to, it's just a game.' So in a way I could continue to hunt with hounds and run with the hare.

In November, an advance party of Seamus Gallagher, the manager Declan Rowley and Tommy Moran arrived in New York to plan for the game in May. They had a working breakfast with Mike Carty, Pat Murray and Frank Dwyer, the top officials of the Supporters Club. I was courteously invited despite my dubious status. Tommy, who has a knack of contextualizing things by putting the most trivial or insignificant events into a significant arena or global context introduced me to Declan Rowley as the John Walker of Leitrim football. At that time a most disgusting picture of Walker was plastered across the front page of American papers and he was labelled the most despicable and degenerate American citizen after he renounced faith and fatherland to join to the Taliban. He had become an infidel, hell bent on conducting a Jihad or holy war against his own country. Being compared to the scum of the earth or at least the US part of it, could leave one questioning their identity?

Part of the duties of football management entails compiling as much information about your opponents as possible. I was delegated the task of acquiring a recent video of Leitrim, a rather mundane task I thought. We figure it would be advantageous to familiarize our boys (New York) with the various idiosyncrasies and nuances of Leitrim football. At least they would know what their opposite number looked like and it would be nice to greet them by their first name. I commissioned my agent, a resident north of Manorhamilton (obviously I can't reveal the identity or the exact location for fear of reprisal). My accomplice, who was relatively new to espionage, had almost completed his task; the price, delivery and pick-up had all being arranged when he blurted that the video had to be suitable for American audiovisual equipment. The deal was off immediately as such sensitive information could not be allowed into the hands of the enemy. Now a video of Leitrim football became classified information that you would associate with the Pentagon. It wasn't exactly nuclear secrets that were being trafficked in. Another contingency plan went into effect instantaneously. Another tape was located in Tipperary and rushed to Shannon in a taxi with such haste as if there was a cardiac patient on board. The taximan was instructed to leave it at the ticket desk, where Mr & Mrs. O'Connor, parents of the New York midfielder-the big blonde Kenny, were to collect it on their way out for the game. However there was a slight snafu, the airport desk clerk refused to accept it, fearing that it might be explosive material. She might not have worried, terrorism and football rarely mix? After some hectic communication along the axis to Shannon, Kerry, Tipperary, and New York, some subterfuge had to be resorted to so that the tape would reach its destination. The tape was conveniently lost and surprisingly the taximan found it and duly deposited it with the individual in charge of lost property. The O'Connors retrieved the tape and safely deposited it in enemy hands. Who would believe that a video of Leitrim football would cause so much trouble and anxiety?

Incidentally my agent in Tipperary has assumed a new identity and

gone into a witness protection program to insure his safety.

Once the game began I was detailed to be 'the eye in the sky,' another concept in management where one member of the management team, complete with cell phone watches the game from the stands rather than the sideline. This allows the individual to have a more panoramic view and also arrive at decisions or solutions independently of the others. As my vantage point I chose the middle of the VIP section where I nestled in unobtrusively or so I thought. However I hadn't bargained on being flanked by a high ranking Leitrim politician and his wife. Immediately the politician's spouse began to bemoan the way the big burly New York midfielder was mauling and manhandling the Leitrim players. I protested that Seamus Quinn and company were not exactly treating our boys with kid gloves either. She rebuked me with a rebuttal that the Leitrim players were only doing what any good player would do to protect themselves and finished her tirade by saying that the New York players should take up wrestling as that was what they seemed most suited for. The verbal volleys were just cooling down a bit, when Mike Carty, sensing my discomfort in hostile territory, and perhaps with a view to distracting me from the task at hand, vehemently voiced his disapproval of the affair. He denounced what he regarded as New York's robust and reckless tackling both on and off the ball. I found this a tad amusing and ironic, as Mike could be legitimately perceived as a forerunner of the biathlete; as he had no problem combining two sports, boxing and football, or was it the other way around, in the one arena. One report of a game that Mike played in, depicted him as using Sonny Liston type tactics, as opponents fell around him, while others headed to the casualty unit. Mike it appears had morphed from pugnilist to pacifist-a transformation on the scale of Biblical proportions of that of St Paul on the road to Damascus or what is that about the leopard changing his spots? Pat Murray professed to be aghast at such proceedings and claimed he had serious reservations about the eyesight of the referee.

In a nip and tuck game, Leitrim emerged victorious after extra time. Now most people were their rational and courteous selves again as is their wont. Now with my team out of the competition, I was free to return to my role as a Leitrim supporter. I timed a visit to Ireland to coincide with Leitrim's clash against Roscommon at Carrick-on-Shannon. Tommy Moran ushered me to a grandstand seat behind the Leitrim bench. I don't know if this is a sign of pardon for being an infidel, or whether I should be perceived as a fickle and feckless turncoat. In other words, if you can't beat us, join us. Sometimes I feel a bit like the philanderer when he professed that when he is not near the woman he loves, he loves the woman he is near. So it is with Leitrim, New York, and me.

Next day, I headed to a house of worship in Mullies, only to be greeted with the salutation from a retired educator as I entered the sanctuary, 'You are the so and so that was trying to beat Leitrim.' I can't wait for Leitrim to win the FBD league, then New York will get another chance at them. I hope that will be as much fun as trying to beat them this time. After all it is only a game, though it does get a bit serious at times.

Manorhamilton Castle

The Castle was built by Scottish Planter Sir Fredrick Hamilton around 1634. It was the scene of many bloody outrages against the Irish. Kathleen O'Cuirnin, heroine of Patrick G. Smyth's classic romantic novel 'The Wild Rose of Lough Gill', was held captive there by one of Hamilton's men, Gilbert Harrison. She eventually escaped and was reunited with her beloved Edmund O'Tracy. The couple were forced to leave Ireland with many others. They settled in Spain and were married there. The Castle was burned by the Irish in 1643.

FIRST SPONSOR

Jimmy O' Connor was sponsoring the Leitrim Senior team long before the GAA allowed the logo to appear on jerseys . Indeed he was a very generous contributor to the county cause all his life. It wasn't done for personal material gain but for a genuine love of the game. Jimmy had his hour in the sunshine when in 1998 the Leitrim Minor team, after winning the Connacht championship, wore the 'Jimmy's of Dromod' logo in the All Ireland semi-final against Tyrone in Croke Park.

Sadly Jimmy passed away in September 2003.

Photo: Willie Donnellan

The entire Leitrim GAA entourage in New York including the panel of players, management, wives, doctors, physios, county board officials and even their bus driver.

Photo: Colin Regan

LEITRIM GAA

A PROUD MAN

Cormac Mac a'Ghoill takes possession of the Sam Maguire Cup in 1992 after his home county, Donegal won the All Ireland for the first time.
Photo: Michael O'Donnell

Paul McGreevy & David Crowe, St Marys Leitrim Senior Champions 2003.