

1956 and all that!

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Paddy Conboy & Patsy McIntyre taken a few years ago in London

In October 1956, I was privileged to play for Leitrim Minor footballers in the All Ireland final in Croke Park—the curtain raiser before the classic Senior Final between Galway and Cork. Dublin proved too big, too strong and too slick for us and we suffered a crushing defeat, not helped by some bizarre refereeing. On the Dublin team that day were, amongst others Lar and Des Foley. The Leitrim team included Jimmy O'Donnell, Liam Foran, Josie Murray RIP, and Paddy Dolan RIP, all of whom played senior football with distinction for their respective counties in later years. It is worth noting that en route to that match we defeated Sligo, Roscommon, and Donegal. In Leitrim, starved of any significant success on the football field, our achievement, though incomplete, stirred a lot of interest and enthusiasm at that time, and our effort was appreci-

ated and praised. Consequently, on a number of occasions over the years, the progress made has been recalled and reflected upon in the *Leitrim Guardian* and in other publications. I realise that for the current generation, 1956 may seem almost pre-historic, but I will attempt, as with a tube of toothpaste, to squeeze a little bit more content from the story of this adventure—this time from the ‘inside track’—from my perspective as a member of that team. Some of my recollections are as clear as day, others have dimmed and blurred with the remorseless passage of time.

The Trainer

Our trainer was Father Sean Manning, who was Parish Priest in Annaduff. He already had a well-established high reputation in football circles because, whilst on the staff of St Mel's College, Longford (more of which later), he had guided them to great success on the pitch including at least one All Ireland Colleges Championship. To me, he appeared rather distant and not very communicative, and, to this day, I can only guess at the secret of his success. I think his forte was that he recognised natural ability, and if that was combined with physical fitness and commitment, you met with his approval and were selected accordingly. He was not a Coach. A Liverpool player once said that Bob Paisley, the legendary manager of the side, thought that tactics ‘were little peppermints that come in a clear plastic box’. I don't know what Father Manning thought they were – he never used them. The only times he ever spoke to me was to convey approval or constructive comment. In retrospect, it seems to me that what he considered best was maximising the strengths of the players at his disposal rather than asking them to play in a pre-



scribed way, or in a position that might restrict them from being effective for the team as a whole.

To me, his greatest achievement was that he brought together a group of youngsters from north and south Leitrim, forged a sense of belonging and of common purpose, and in doing so, got the best out of us. The lads from North Leitrim were gems — great players. Some of the surnames were a little unfamiliar to us ‘southerners’ and one or two of them had a slight hint of a northern accent in their speech — great lads!

During the campaign, we gathered two or three evenings a week (I can’t remember exactly) in Carrick for training. Paddy Conboy, Francis Canning, Francis Clyne, Brian Nangle, Patsy Heslin and myself were conveyed by taxi. Des Duignan did the driving. We worked hard under the eagle eye of Father Manning — I remember experiencing supreme physical fitness — and we gelled well as a team.

Prior to the Match

Sometime in early September, after the Donegal semi-final, Liam Foran and I returned to our ‘internment without trial’ as boarders at St Mel’s. We did not see or hear from any of the others again until

we met them a few minutes before getting ‘toggled out’ in Croke Park in early October — thereby hangs a tale. (The traditional September date had been postponed that year due to a countrywide outbreak of foot and mouth disease).

On the Saturday before the final, the team travelled to the Grand Hotel Malahide, where they relaxed and rested before the big match on the following day — all except Liam and I. St Mel’s, at the time, was an institution whose main, if not sole, purpose was to prepare boys to pass exams and preferably to go on to the Priesthood. For us boarders, it was a tough, Spartan existence and little attention was paid to any non-academic or personal development needs that young men might have. Liam and I were not allowed to travel with the others. We were in the Study Hall until 9.30pm on Saturday night as usual, then had Mass and a stodgy breakfast on Sunday morning. There were good wishes from our fellow students (particularly the Leitrim ones), but not one word of recognition or encouragement from any of the staff in authority. Liam told me that the only thing one of the Priests said to him as we eventually left at about 9.30am on Sunday morning, was ‘I hope you made your bed’.

All Ireland Minor Football Final — Leitrim v Dublin. 7 Oct 1956

Back: Jimmy O’Donnell, Patsy Heslin, Padraic McGloin, Padraic McGowan, Willie McWeeney, James Bredan, Liam Foran & Tom Fallon.

Front: Laurie Feehily, Patsy McIntyre, Paddy Conboy, Josie Murray (Capt), Francis Canning, Seamus Fallon & Paddy Dolan

The Journey

We were picked up by JP Newton and Jack McNally in JP’s Volkswagen for the journey. JP was about 6’-9” or 6’-10”, Jack was over six foot. The driver’s seat in the Beetle was specially adapted to accommodate JP’s long legs — suffice to say that legroom for Liam and me in the back was limited. Since then I have realised that as we were confined in the back of the VW, the rest of the lads were probably having a bracing leg-stretching walk at the seaside in Malahide prior to the match! JP & Jack were both lovely men and made us feel welcome and as much at ease as possible. The car was not the fastest however and the journey took a long time, especially when we hit the heavier traffic near Dublin. Liam recalls dozens of cars with the old ‘IT’ Leitrim registration whizzing past us on their way to the match — some of the occupants recognising us, giving a wave and a puzzled look, no doubt wondering



what was going on. We made it in the nick of time. I really DO NOT want to dwell on the match — for obvious reasons.

At least we had a good view of the senior game — it was a magnificent Galway win. Afterwards, we went back to the hotel in Malahide, where our dejection was in stark contrast to the elation of the victorious Galway team, who were also staying there. My father, Michael RIP (who died in 1954), had been Chairman of the Connaught Council GAA shortly before his death. One of his old friends from that time, now an official with the Galway team, sought me out, consoled me and tried to cheer me up. A sip of champagne from the Sam Maguire Cup did little to help (I confess to breaking my Pioneer Pledge that evening!). Things brightened up — a band was tuning up and young girls were arriving. Just as I was beginning to feel human again the shadowy figure of a priest from the College loomed large, beckoned to Liam and me to come with him to his car. He had been designated to return us to Longford and we completed the journey in gloomy silence. I entered the bedroom at the College, which I shared with my sleeping brother Michael at about 10.30pm, ruefully imagining what was happening back in Malahide. Later the next week, one of the day pupils told me that Liam and I featured in a brief newsreel film of the match in

the cinema in town. Foolishly, we asked if we could have permission to go out to see it — permission was refused. The concept that an appearance on the silver screen, however fleeting, was an exciting once in a lifetime experience for two 17 year olds in 1956, was lost on the person who refused us.

Although Liam and I were treated shabbily, I hold no grudges. I realise that although in hindsight, the school authority was inconsiderate and that we were too compliant, what occurred was the norm and acceptable in the climate and culture in which both parties lived at the time.

I was young enough to play minor football for the county again the following year in 1957. In July, we narrowly lost the Connaught Final to Mayo in a game played at Saltilhill in Galway, prior to the Galway vs Leitrim Senior Final. After that, for a variety of reasons, I never kicked a Gaelic football again in anger — not due to illness or injury — just circumstances.

In that summer of '56 (around Mohill at any rate), our football exploits bestowed on us a kind of local celebrity. It pleased and surprised me to discover that traces of this still exist today. I am now in my 80th year, 62 years on. On a recent visit to Mohill, I was in the bar in The Travellers Rest in Glebe Street (next door to what

Back: Willie McWeeney, Jimmy Clyne, (sub), Tom Fallon, Padraic McGloin, Seamus Fallon, Noel Hayden, (sub) Patsy Heslin, Jimmy McDonnell, Francis Clyne, (sub) James Bredin, Frank McGowan, Noel Mulhern, (sub) & Tommy O'Riordan.

Front: M McGarry (sub), Patsy McIntyre, Frank Canning, Liam Foran, Paddy Dolan, Laurie Feehily, Gene Murray, Paddy Conboy, Brian Nangle, (sub), & John Joe Noone, (sub).

used to be our family home), when Philomena O'Brien introduced me to Stephen Flynn, a local GAA enthusiast, who on learning my name said, 'You're the footballer!' To this I replied with as much non-chalance and modesty as I could muster, "I suppose I used to be". He insisted on buying me a drink, which I gratefully accepted. I smiled to myself as I recalled what my cousin Christopher Meehan told me once. Christopher is a brilliant pianist and when we were young, to encourage him, Master JJ Kelly told him, 'keep it up Meehan and they'll be bringing pints to you by the tray-full!' I wondered that if we had actually WON that All Ireland in '56 and made people in Leitrim happy and appreciative, whether similar rewards might have been forthcoming. We'll never know! *Sic*, as the fella said, *transit Gloria mundi*.