

foundation for a litany
of future successes.

L E I T R I M

Connacht Champions

Frank Brady

Some thought!

For emigrants the annual visit to their native land is the highlight of the year. For Gaelic sports enthusiasts, trips to Croke Park for the All Ireland semi-finals to see la Creme de la Creme are an added bonus. The trip of 1994 would be a memorable one as Leitrim were heading for Croke park and so it appeared was everybody else.

As a schoolboy I was mesmerised by the scintillations and skillfulness of McGarty and Flynn. This era, though often referred to as the golden Age of Leitrim football, sadly produced no silverware. One of my primary teachers, a pioneer in the integrated curriculum, frequently drew parallels between the course of Irish history and Leitrim football. Both had fought great battles and were often on the threshold of a culminating victory only to have the spoils snatched from their grasp and consequently suffer the ignominy of defeat. Indeed the saga of Leitrim football had elements of a sisypean struggle in Greek mythology. Sisyphus, a legendary king of Corinth was forced to roll a heavy stone up a steep hill in Hades only to have it roll down again as it nears the top.

After the early sixties Leitrim football appeared to enter the 'Dark Ages' which also coincided with my days as a boarder in St. Patrick's College, Cavan, then the famed cradle and nursery for Cavan footballers. There were many dark days there too, not exactly the result of cloudy weather either. If children can sometimes be cruel by the candid remarks, boarders could be ruthless in this closed and confined environment, especially as the contingent of Leitrim students were



very much a minority. They persistently professed their football prowess and superiority by flaunting and taunting us with their lengthy litany of Ulster titles and boisterously bragged of their battles with Down. Names for All Ireland teams in '47,'48 and '52 were recited like nouns from a declension in Latin. We had no such list of heroes and we suffered in silence. Watching national League games at Breffni park between the neighbouring counties was a bitter and painful pill to swallow. it was difficult not to feel almost apologetic for Leitrim. Out day would come, but not soon enough.

In 1975 Leitrim football underwent a Renaissance and revival as they captured the Fr Manning Cup. Leitrim became more competitive at all levels and inevitably began to overcome neighbours Cavan and I couldn't help but gloat a little. Despite the intensive indoctrination in matters of faith and morals at St. Pat's during those formative years, I can't remember if revenge qualified as a deadly sin. The shoe was gradually switching to the other foot and it felt good. As regards remission and remorse I'll settle for the approach of St. Augustine in his 'Confessions' - "Lord cleanse me but not just yet.", he uttered after he slept with a concubine.

Leitrim was often the butt of many unflattering jokes in the barren years. Critics and cynics said it was harder to get off the team rather than get on it. Twice in the seventies I went as spectator and ended up lining out when I might have had difficulty passing a sobriety test never mind a fitness test! In late 1977 I failed to find anybody who would accompany me to a game against Donegal in Letterkenny. Indeed the supporters were so few that the Co. Chairman, George O'Toole invited them to the post-game meal.



A scene in Croke Park

PHOTO: IRISH PRESS



Ronan Gallagher who came from Washington with his family to join in the fun.

IRISH
INDEPENDENT

Among the loyal few were Paudge McGowan, the flamboyant Leitrim and Melvin Gaels keeper from the sixties and Paul McGuire, Kiltyclogher, a Health Board CEO in Letterkenny. Now space is at a premium on buses heading for Cork and many areas look like the 'deserted village' when Leitrim is playing. The times certainly are a changing.

Winning the Connacht Title seemed to unleash a groundswell of emotion that swept years of failure, futility and frustration into oblivion. The victory did more for the mental and physical health of Leitrim people here in the U.S than all the pills, potions and prescriptions that have become staples of our rat race driven existence. Many who had been shy or silent about their Leitrim origins now rushed boldly to proclaim them and jumped on an evergrowing bandwagon. Years of incessant bombardment with negative labels had sublimely induced a mind set that sought to loosen their Leitrim ties. At home scores who had hitherto striven to accentuate their proximity to the more high profile counties of Sligo, Donegal, Cavan now claimed the most central part of Leitrim as their residence. maybe the statisticians and demographers had gravely

undercounted as Leitrim seemed to undergo a population explosion or at least a temporary influx anyway. Like the G.P.O. in 1916 with its expandable wall, judging by all who claimed to have been in it, Leitrim seemed to have expandable boundaries now.

The great campaign of Leitrim's success produced many unanticipated ramifications. A.T. & T, one of the telephone giants in the world saw their stock soar on Wall St. Financial analysts attributed this to the great increase in telephone calls to Leitrim on days when the senior team was in action. Educational experts agree that Leitrim may have the most astute female population in matters of football, especially the senior citizen group. This particular group was charged with transmitting the relevant sound bites about Leitrim football to exiles all over the world. They mastered the lingo and jargon of football to such an extent that Kerry men would envy them. The mass evacuation of the county began on Friday and continued unabated until Sunday morning. In Dublin as the Leitrim fans converged on Croke park they eyed each other with the anticipation that they should know other. After all Leitrim is supposed to be a small place with few people. As the Leitrim team raced on the field, the support reached a crescendo. Leitrim were now among the final four, the elite.

How I wished my mates from St Pat's could see me but there were none of them to be seen. 1994 would be the foundation for a litany of future successes. John O'Mahony had led the chosen team to the promised land but then I realised that P.J. Carroll, a Cavan man began the odyssey. At best Leitrim, in the role of David might slay Goliath. At worst a learning experience and a preparation for future endeavours might be the outcome. Now it appears that Down slay Goliath and Leitrim must come back with a bigger sling and stone to Croke Parke next year. OO