

Thanks for the Memories, Lads

AODHÁN Ó CÉILEACHAIR

Leitrim Minor Selector reflects on their 1998 Campaign.

ONE WOULDN'T expect the Leitrim minor team and General Humbert to have too much in common, but they both wrote themselves into the history books by conquering Connacht.

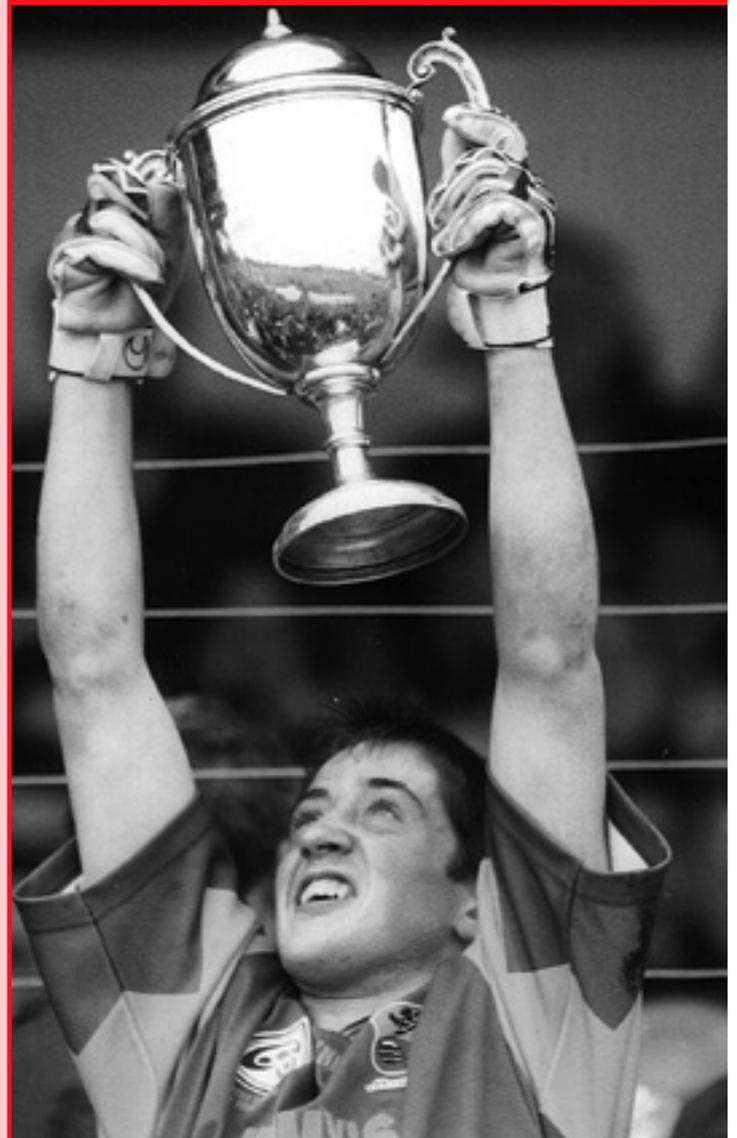
The French general performed the feat in 1798, but only made it as far as Ballinamuck. In 1998, the Leitrim Minor team picked up many supporters and admirers along the route and went all the way inside the Pale to the sacred sod of Croke Park. By mid-summer, the people of Leitrim had contented themselves by sitting back and commemorating this watershed in Irish history with pageants, enactment's and a few drinks.

Leitrim minors had another form of commemoration in mind and they soon injected some sunshine into peoples lives, in an otherwise damp miserable year, with a brilliant march through the province. Unlike the French of 200 years ago, they couldn't call in the cannon balls. Instead they depended on a size five football, a belief in themselves, a steely determination to succeed and a clear vision of the challenge that lay ahead. What this highly disciplined bunch achieved, lifted the hearts and spirits of Leitrim folk around the globe.

It all started back in February, when a panel of all the best young talent in the county was assembled together by manager Pat Prior. It was decided then, that over the next six months, both players and management would give their loyalty to the county minor team ahead of all other commitments, for the sole objective of winning a Connacht title. That commitment was honoured to the very end. For the bulk of the squad, this would be their last year as minors and so, making silage, rearing turf or playing club football, would have to take a back seat. From there on in we were all in this together, win or lose. No one would be sacrificed on the altar of defeat.

Any doubt in their young minds as to their ability to succeed, was dispelled in their first game of the season, when they drew with the All-Ireland champions, Laois. Preparations continued quietly, but intensely, under Pat Prior, as he blended together his charges. For the next four months, every sinew was stretched to their limits for the big test.

In March and April, it was nearly impossible to get a training pitch in wetland Leitrim, but, Bornacoola Club came to our rescue when we were like orphans and Dromod became our home for most of the campaign. We are grateful for the favour.



Leitrim captain Seamus Maguire, proudly lifts the Kilcoyne Cup.

When the championship draw was made, Leitrim was thrown into the tough section with Mayo and Galway and nothing really was expected. It seemed that the team would just fulfil its annual duty of playing a game in the competition, and then consoling ourselves with the idea that its not about winning, but about competing. But that gets monotonous when one is losing all the time.

As the clash with Galway neared, people reckoned that the lad's hadn't a chance. The team soon came to terms with the fact that here they were 15 players against 15 Galway players who had prepared the same as them, and had the same anxieties as themselves:



Leitrim manager Pat Prior, discusses a point with selectors Aiden Kelleher & Frank Rooney, in Croke Park

sitting the Leaving Cert, thinking of the life ahead, trying to fit in the Debs dance with the important challenge game. Once they came to grips with this, it was only a matter of convincing them that it was possible that 25,000 Leitrim people could be wrong in their predictions. For most people around Leitrim, especially the young, July 3rd meant the clash of the green and gold of Brazil and Denmark in the World Cup. Only a few knew that months of gruelling training by the minor team would be put to the test against Galway, in their own back garden in Tuam.

Over the next couple of weeks that stadium would be their theatre of dreams. On that pleasant evening the Leitrim minors took a giant step into the GAA history books. It was the teams finest hour. Trailing by eight points with 20 minutes to go, it seemed it would be the usual result, only a different day. The few, faithful followers who travelled, would soon witness the greatest comeback by any Leitrim team in modern times.

Who present on that memorable day will ever forget the place kicking of Shane Canning, who scored an incredible one goal and six points, or David Crowe's huge point from a sixty yard free, or Michael Duignan's massive point from fifty five yards, or the crunch points from Hugh Magee and Sean Rehill. Heroics were performed by goalkeeper Enda Lyons and a back line inspired by team captain Seamus Maguire. I can still see the tremendous fielding by mid-fielder Donie O'Callaghan and that great forward run by Gary McCloskey to secure the free in injury time that won the game. Leitrim had taken on one of the biggest powers and WON! It was the shot in the arm that these youngsters needed.

Meanwhile back in Páirc Sheáin, the battle lines were drawn for the Provincial Final and another visit

to Tuam. Beating Galway would count for nothing unless we won Connacht title. There would be no hard luck stories this time, no excuses, we just had to win that elusive Connacht title. The players would win this one for themselves. No longer would it be just a romantic vision.

In the run up to the Connacht final, training took on a new urgency. Pat Prior left no stone unturned in order to have the team in top physical and mental shape. As the preparations intensified one couldn't but admire the full-some effort being put in by every panel member with no quarter asked or given. Our supporters were now of the opinion that Leitrim would surely beat Sligo. Well, we had no divine right to win a Connacht Championship, or if we had, I'm sure God wouldn't have left us waiting from 1956 to do so. No, this one would be won by hard graft from everyone, blood sweat and tears. The lads had gone the extra mile to beat Galway. Now they were being asked to go the length of a finger nail extra to beat a good Sligo team, who had won the prestigious Father Manning Cup two years previous. By Connacht Final day every player was fully convinced that no matter what turn the game threw up, Leitrim was going to win this one.

Tuam was washed-out with rain on July 19th. Our light physical team would have preferred a dry day but they had to take what God sent. It didn't look too good at half time going in trailing by 3 points to 2 after playing with the wind and rain. For the second time in the Championship, the team showed real character in the second half. Against the elements Leitrim took control for 15 minutes in the most courageous display seen at the venue for many a day. The half back line of Pauric McGarry, Philip Casserly and Barry McKiernan got a grip on the game and a good supply from mid-field to the forwards yielded some brilliant points from David Crowe, Michael Duignan and John McGuinness. Such brave displays lifted Leitrim hearts, but the same hearts would flutter many times before the finish.

In the white heat of the second half battle, I couldn't help thinking back on those epic exchanges on the training ground of Pairc Sheáin, between Terry Kelleher and both John McKeon and Michael McGuinness. These tussles, so full of passion of the type that sports writers often refer to, would prove very significant in this absorbing Connacht Final. Young Kelleher had a magnificent game scoring three crucial second half points from play when scores were at a premium. John McKeon and Michael McGuinness were equally superb at the other end, as they held their fancied Sligo opponents scoreless for the full hour.

The team, brilliantly marshalled by Seamus Maguire, repelled the many Sligo raids in the last hectic 10 minutes, which to us on the line, seemed like an

eternity. These young men had passed the test and again, by just one point, with displays that guarantees the team a place in Leitrim GAA folklore. The final whistle sparked off massive celebrations as Leitrim are crowned Connacht Minor Champions. The young people of Leitrim now had new heroes. No longer would they have to idolise the Maurice Fitzgeralds of the game. This was a marvellous moment for Bord na nÓg and its officials, who had put in so much effort over many years against all the odds.

For me, it was the most fulfilling moment of my football life, seeing our own boys reach the pinnacle of Connacht football, and watching a Leitrim captain ascend the steps to accept the prized Kilcoyne Cup. It was no more than captain Seamus Maguire and his team-mates deserved. Management had put full trust in the team to deliver, and that trust was repaid a hundred fold. As Gallogly's coach departed this happy hunting ground of Tuam, the team was spontaneously cheered on their way by both the Galway and Roscommon supporters, in a nice gesture.

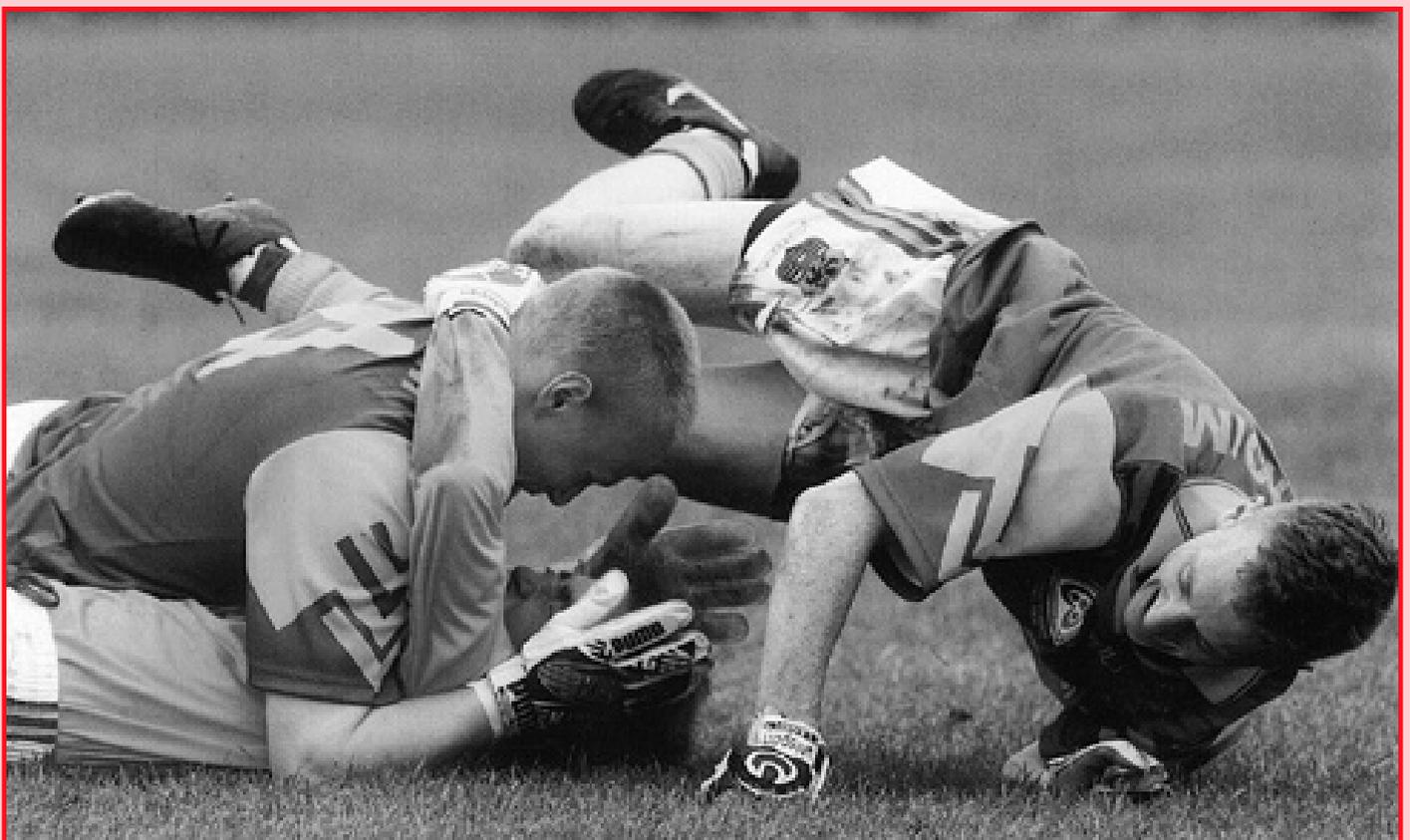
The travelling party were given a heroes welcome back in Jimmy's of Dromod, their generous sponsor for many years, through thick and thin. Shannonside Radio was there to record this history-making return. The 12 hour victorious tour of the county, on Monday was a new and exciting adventure for the players. They were given a Civic Reception by the Chairman of Leitrim County Council, Tommy McCartin in Carrigallen. Down Aughawillan way, round-balers came to a halt in fields. Flag-waving women came to

their doors to salute the victorious team, and their own Pat Prior, who masterminded this great success story. This win meant a great deal to the people of the county. Peter Flynn in Aughnasheelin spoke of his delight that the team didn't forget to call on them. As the cavalcade travelled the length and breadth of Leitrim, thousands came out to show their appreciation of a job well done.

The joy of people in little communities around North Leitrim was heart-rending. The delight on the faces of men like Jimmy McNama in Drumkeerin and Jimmy Phelan in Kinlough was pleasing indeed. Selector Frank Rooney was treated like the Messiah in Manorhamilton and rightfully so, for no man has given more to the GAA and to this minor team, than Frank. His car had become public property as he ferried players from Sligo and North Leitrim to the many training sessions, often clocking up 130 miles a night in the process. At the factory turn at Corderry, the bonfires burned brightly, as that great Gael, Tommy Sweeney and his neighbours, came out to say thanks for delivering the silverware.

As the players reached their own patch it became a little special for them with their friends gathered around to welcome them home. This was also a proud moment for the clubs to know that they were part of such a great occasion. It was wonderful coming back

The long wait is over as jubilant Leitrim players celebrate Connacht final win.



to my own home ground of Gortletteragh where I have watched our two representatives develop from children, to be able to compete against the best in the game. The entire population of Cloone converged on the village to greet their captain and their king, and didn't Seamus keep the good wine till last, with a rousing speech for his own people. Someone in the crowd reckoned that Ballinamuck wouldn't have been lost some 200 years ago if they had Maguire as leader. From the platform, out of the corner of my eye, I could see Seamus' trainer for many years, a happy Pat McNamara, who coached him to such a standard, that when the day came, the young Cloone man slotted nicely into the team.

This Connacht Final win should be dedicated to men like Pat, and the many more 'underage' coaches around Leitrim, who give of their time to impart the basics of the game, to the hundreds of enthusiastic young boys and girls. These people are the soul of the GAA, working away quietly far from the glare of a 30,000 crowd on evenings when they mightn't even be able to round up two umpires.

In Mohill, corner forward John McGuinness declared to the nation – "The famine is over – the eagle has landed." His wit brought back memories of his late father Michael who passed away just eight months before this historic win. I'm sure he was up in that great stadium in the sky telling all his friends "That's my two boys down there celebrating in Mohill!".

With the county buzzing with excitement, the show now moved to Croke Park and a new experience for the team. They all adopted well to their new found fame and the big media coverage. Facing a highly fancied Tyrone team was never going to be easy, but again Leitrim went into this game with every intention of winning. We felt we were still in the game at half time having played against a strong breeze. Unfortunately it wasn't to be our day, and so our great run ended. There are good memories of the visit to headquarters like Morgan Shanley's super point, Donie O'Callaghan's fielding and other little things like the joy of seeing the many young people out again in their Leitrim jerseys.

On a more personal note, I have many fond memories away from all the publicity. I always travelled with the boys to training and so was privy to their many social secrets and views. In the sanctuary of Wrynn's mini-bus, they would talk of their modern day heroes and sometimes of their girlfriends.

I would relate stories of the great Kerry team, but they were quick to point out that they themselves had done something that the eight times All-Ireland champions had never done, and that was to win Connacht Minor medals.

The atmosphere was always relaxed before games with no major pressure on anyone. Winning games or

playing before capacity crowds would mean nothing, if we all didn't enjoy and savour the occasion. I feel privileged to have worked with the team and with two gentlemen of the game, Pat Prior and Frank Rooney.

Winning Connacht was definitely a major achievement. With the imbalance in the population of the various counties, and the fact that a Leitrim minor team hadn't won a championship game in seven years, football analysts were having grave doubts if a minor provincial title could be won in the foreseeable future.

The 1998 team made a stand for future generations of Leitrim youth, who will no longer have to look back to 1956 for inspiration. One of the lasting memories of the whole of the 1998 campaign for me, was the hand of friendship extended to us by the Tyrone team and management, after the All-Ireland semi-final. They visited the Leitrim dressing room without the slightest hint of triumphalism to chat and swap jerseys, togs and socks. The game brought back some normality in very trying times for both counties after the Omagh bombing, and the death of Shane McGettigan. Isn't that what sport is about – making friends and soothing the sorrows.

This Leitrim minor team have been great ambassadors for the county. Every one of them could walk into any dressing room in Ireland and hold their heads high, happy in the knowledge that they never dishonoured the good name of Leitrim football on or off the field.

Thanks for the memories lads.

The 1998 Roll of Honour reads:

Enda Lyons (Carrigallen), Seamus Maguire (Cloone)
John McKeon (Drumreilly), Michael McGuinness (Mohill)
Pauric McGarry (Gortletteragh), Philip Casserly (Mohill)
Barry McKiernan (Aughavas), Morgan Shanley (Bornacoola)
Donal O'Callaghan (Glencar/Manor)
Gary McCloskey (Bornacoola)
David Crowe (St Marys), Shane Canning (Mohill)
Michael Duignan (Bornacoola), Hugh Magee (Carrigallen)
Terry Kelleher (Gortletteragh), John McGuinness (Mohill)
Sean Rehill (Aughawillan), Dermot Scollan (Mohill)
Kevin Quinn (Bornacoola), Michael Foley (Drumkeerin)
John McGuinness (Bornacoola), Philip Charles (Aughavas)
Noel Doonan (Carrigallen), Enda McKeon (Kiltubrid)
Paul McGreevy (St Marys)