

NEED POWERS



The Words of Ned Power

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Discipline – A Vital Element In Sport

July 12, 1996

Ah sure it's old fashioned now this discipline crack. In the present age of wonder and enlightenment and modern thinking we are urged to express ourselves, to do our own thing regardless of conventions or practices; to be uninhibited by laws and ordinances, customs or traditions. This disastrous present day agenda of phoney freedom has made life much more difficult for families where one time discipline shaped, regulated and promoted, standards of behaviour. Now in most cases young children are so accustomed to having every wish acceded to and every whim indulged that they find it almost impossible to accept unpalatable realities such as pain or disappointments. Nor is it easy for them to say no to what is socially or morally wrong. Gratitude and respect were early victims of this loosening of moral strings and consequently this attitude encourages selfishness and self-indulgence and makes it very difficult for young people to face any situation where self-control and discipline must be exercised.

In team games like hurling and football discipline is a vital element. No success is possible if that essential ingredient is missing. It begins with training. Without regular training no player, however physically endowed, will realise his full potential. Within the training session there has to be order and subordination, correction and instruction which many present day players must find difficult to cope with, given the multiplicity of soft options available nowadays. Only those who have shared a tough training schedule fully appreciate the enormous benefits accruing to them from this. There is a strengthening of character, a heightening of team spirit, an increase in morale, a bonding of those who share the hardships of rigorous preparation. Thus evolves the team which refuses to entertain the notion of defeat because hardship and suffering endured and shared add an extra dimension to any team.

Take the present Limerick team. Their overall skill level isn't very high and I don't know if they will win an All Ireland or even a Munster title because of the stern obstacles to be surmounted to achieve those goals. What I do know is that they set out early this year to follow Clare's example and push themselves collectively through the pain barrier. Last year Clare's stamina-training torture chamber was the Hills of Crusheen. Dave Mehedy, Limerick's Trainer, found its counterpart in the steep gradients of Maguire's Field, part of the University of Limerick complex. Excruciating nights of soul-destroying slogging there in February, March and April built up Limerick for the devastation of Cork in the championship at Pairc Ui Chaoimh. Even if it is agreed that Clare played the best of the hurling for most of the Munster semi-final, Limerick's indefatigable self-belief drove them inexorably on to that super one-point win over the Banner in a game which, it could be claimed, they scarcely deserved to win. No wonder their war-cry beforehand was "Remember Maguire's Field!" Last Sunday they showed even better than they did against Clare what absolute conviction they possess in their own worth.

In 1962 Jack Fraser took over the training of the Waterford Senior Hurling team. Jack was a methodical conscientious trainer who had an enthusiasm for his job which was infectious and he put the panel through a very demanding course of training. My only regret is that he didn't begin with the panel much earlier in the year. Had he started with us in February, I'm quite satisfied that we would have won the All Ireland because the stamina work would have borne fruit in mid summer. Jack was a disciplinarian. As Dick Stokes said to me about Mick Cregan (Eamonn's brother) "they were like calves running up to him if he rattled the bucket". But Jack never enforced a sterile rigid discipline. He was positive and very well organised and we all felt a great shared mental strength and sense of well being after his sessions. We had a memorable victory over Cork in Thurles but in the Munster Final against Tipperary in Limerick we were a bit lethargic and couldn't seem to get going. Perhaps too much work a little too late in the season.

In October of that same year, however, we met our neighbours Tipperary once more. It was the Oireachtas final at Croke Park at a time when this competition enjoyed a high profile. It was a great game, the magnificent crowd providing great atmosphere, and best of all we won with some style. The sweeping groundstrokes of our forwards never let Tipperary enjoy the type of close physical contest they yearned for. Although he was on the defeated team Donie Nealon always claimed that it was the best hurling match he had ever played in. All, I have no doubt, mostly due to Jack Fraser and his disciplined preparation, the effect of which was exemplified on that Autumn Sunday when Waterford won its only Oireachtas title. The residue of fitness acquired under Jack carried us on to the League and All Ireland finals of 1963.

Discipline for a player doesn't begin when the referee throws in the ball but much earlier. It's really an attitude or approach inculcated over a period. It starts when he organizes himself to ensure that he can be present at training regularly. It continues when he packs his playing gear and makes sure to arrive on time for each session. His willingness to readily comply with the trainer's demands further advances his growth of character and his resolution and mental health increase as the big day approaches. Because, and make no mistake about it only the mentally alert and calmly focussed will prevail on the big occasion. The trainer who neglects to train their mental processes while concentrating solely on the physical preparation will fail to fulfil his team's potential and will leave his team prey to physical and oral provocation and intimidation which, I'm afraid, are a significant part of big game occasions. If a player isn't ready for a demeaning or insulting personal remark or some other form of irritant his concentration will be distracted with disastrous consequences.

In this year's hurling league final, Tipperary v Galway, young Kevin Broderick had an introduction to this aspect of the big day. He ran up to his position on Michael Ryan. Ryan jostled Kevin playfully, stood back and looked him up and down feigning great astonishment "What are you doing here, young fella", said the bauld Michael, "surely you don't think you can hurt a man like me?" Kevin, well prepared mentally, smiled that boyish smile of his and moved away. He had the last laugh, too, because it was his goal late in the second half, which changed the trend of the game and set Galway on their way to a league title.

I remember taking over a neighbouring team some years ago to assist them in an intermediate hurling championship campaign. I spent about 20 minutes the first night outlining the reasons I wanted to help the, how mutually beneficial it would be to both our clubs if an increase in neighbourliness could be attained without sacrificing one bit of our rugged independence. I stressed the positive disciplined approach, how negative thoughts or destructive physical intention distract a player from the necessity to keep full concentration on the ball, which was all that mattered really. When I invited comment after this address to the troops one of the old school of mentors – or should it be tormentors – cleared his throat scratched his chin reflectively and intoned a slight caveat. "I don't know, mind you", he drawled with deliberation, "that's all very fine but shouldn't you let them know you're there". That jolted us back to earth in earnest, I tell you. If you don't know what the euphemism "letting them know you're there", means I can only assure you, that it definitely didn't mean politely handing him your card containing your name and address! That was my cue to remind them that it was precisely the strength of character, the discipline, to cope with opponents who want to "let you know they're there", that they would need if they were to win the title. They won it impressively and with panache and in the county final I felt quietly proud of the patience, forbearance and concentration of the winners as the losers strove throughout in the crudest fashion to "let them know", they were there. The winners' full forward in particular was nothing short of heroic. Playing on one of the dirtiest players the losers possessed he absorbed every bit of provocation and ill treatment dished out, never once retaliated earned precious frees and finished up contributing 2-2 to his team's total. I felt very satisfied and fully vindicated.

Another aspect of mental discipline is the readiness of the mind to cope with disappointment, with setbacks, with the unexpected. You have won the toss, let's say, and have use of the wind and sun. Perhaps against the run of play they score first or take an early unexpected lead or some misfortune awaits your team. How do you react? This kind of setback I describe as the "hump on the road", which jolts you and tests your confidence and resilience. Limerick experienced this "hump", last Sunday and only their iron will and strength of mind (same thing really) rescued them in that pulsating second half.

In the 1984 county senior hurling final Tallow met Portlaw, strong favourites. We won the toss and unhesitatingly opted to play with the wind into the road goal at Dungarvan. We took the lead straight after the throw in but in Portlaw's first serious attack Eddie Rockett goaled, a rocket from his weaker right side. This "hump" wasn't in our script but to Tallow's credit they kept their cool and continued notching the points and had a dozen on the scoreboard by half time. Remember how Limerick kept scoring the points last Sunday? Anyway for the second half Tallow knew the size of the task and lifted their game to emerge victorious.

Is there a better way to express the core of discipline than the great patriotic workman Terence McSweeney did? "It is not those who inflict most who triumph but those who endure most".

Discipline

August 4, 1995

Of all the ingredients of the ideal team's make up none is more important than discipline. No single aspect of a player's make up is more important than personal discipline and without this centrally important characteristic a team will fail to fulfil its potential. Great skill, courage, commitment and intelligence are, of course, crucial for success but if the training, which produces self-control and a capacity for orderliness and co-operation, is absent that team will never reach the pinnacle of success.

Being disciplined means being mentally strong. Without preparation this mental toughness in a team is incapable of being turned on in the course of a tense game as one would a tap. Rather is it the product of a rigorous spell of hard training, seriously contested, tough physical training matches where the ability to withstand severe pressure is cultivated and players are being mentally prepared for the kind of intimidation and provocation inherent in major game situations. Discipline is developed by being always in attendance at training, being on time, fulfilling all the tough demands of a training session and complying fully with the trainer's instructions. The disciplined player's lifestyle would conform to the requirements of the training schedule.

Consider your own club. Do all members of the panel attend, as much as it is possible for them, all training sessions? Arrive on time always? Throw themselves enthusiastically into all aspects of the preparation? Are there "hidlers" among them? Or dodgers? I remember some years ago attending the training sessions of two teams, Kilkenny and Dublin, where the atmosphere of one was in direct contrast with the atmosphere prevailing at the other.

Eddie Keher had charge of the Cats at that time and even though he was an outstanding hurler, an astute student of the game and a crafty mentor, his approach to discipline was somewhat lax. There was no punctuality, lads trickled into the dressing room gradually over a half hour period and he was lucky to have the bulk of his panel by 8 o'clock. I remember, Mick Brennan arriving late, half-heartedly indulging in some hurling and then for no apparent reason except laziness perhaps deciding that he had exerted himself sufficiently for that night. He left the field when the physical part of training started, showered and dressed. Afterwards when I expressed my surprise to Eddie he excused the culprit by explaining that Brennan was a temperamental chap who, he felt sure, would be all right on the big day. Well, he wasn't, played badly and his team were beaten by Offaly. His marker Pat Fleury didn't give him a puck all afternoon and Brennan was taken off in the second half. Kilkenny lost.

I watched Dublin training under Kevin Heffernan in preparation for an All Ireland semi-final with Cork, I think. Every panel member but three was out on the field by 7.15p.m. so that Kevin could begin at 7.30p.m. The three absentees (Brian Mullins was one) were out of town on business and arrived at twenty to eight. They immediately joined the rest after some stretching and warm up but when the session concluded at 9 those latecomers continued to work hard for another 20 minutes. The training that night followed the usual demanding pattern and the training match (twelve a side) was as keen and competitive as any championship game. Tackling was hard and uncompromising. Heffo encouraged the most severe demands on player's physical and mental condition and only blew his whistle twice, to start the match and to signal the finish. Crunching tackles, holding, pulling and pushing were allowed and none of them complained. By subjecting them to this kind of experience Heffo reckoned that on a big day they were prepared for anything and they would have the toughness, mental and physical, to cope with any kind of pressure. Dublin won their match against Cork.

I thought of those and many other examples of the importance of a team's collective self-control while watching Dublin on Sunday evening leaving no doubt about their right to the

Leinster football crown. Their discipline was awesome and was a central factor in their clear 10 point victory over great rivals Meath. They were able to absorb all of the physical punishment, the niggling and holding, without petulance or loss of self-control and were so focussed on the job to be done that bruising tackles and provocative physical confrontation never ruffled their admirable equanimity. Missed chances never deflected them or dispirited them. Their mental preparation for the mighty battle – and that's exactly what it was – was outstanding.

Meath surged forward after half time whipped over a point, followed by the equalising goal and now it was just as we anticipated, suffocatingly close. Graham Geraghty sent a great kick from over 50 yards between the uprights to put Meath ahead and we had a feeling of déjà vu. It was then that Dublin displayed their discipline and calm control. No panic, no losing of their shape as they did in last year's All Ireland. Filled with self-belief they went up a gear, pouring forward in relentless fashion with a conviction that only teams of character possess to pile on the points and score the goal to which Meath had no answer.

The disciplined team reacts positively to adversity, is mentally prepared for it and confident of dealing with it. Cork in the Munster final showed a similar mental strength. This should mean a great game when those two fine side's meet in a few weeks time. Are Dublin invincible? Ask a Corkman! Ach is maith an scéaláí an aimsir.

The Different Hurling Styles

August 18, 1995

Galway's style over the last 10 years is easily defined and is a reflection of the influence over the Corrib men of their most successful coach, Cyril Farrell, whose coaching of Galway teams really began in 1978 when Galway under 21 won the All Ireland. In 1983 he took the maroon minors to All Ireland victory over a Dublin team which featured a giant of a lad called Niall Quinn who was to achieve international fame ever since by using his head rather than his hurley. It was the best of those two teams which back-boned the Galway All Ireland champions of 1987 and 1988 final.

Whatever criticism may be made of Cyril's game plan or hurling style – and you and I have as much right to question as the next person – it must never be forgotten that he won his native county a considerable amount of respect and a new status while taking Galway to All Ireland success as well as League Oireachtas and Railway Cup. Galway became a force to be reckoned with and Cyril was an innovator in hurling coaching.

The Farrell style was new and was a radical departure from the more traditional. He had an aversion to ground hurling, didn't acknowledge its importance and based his approach on securing possession and retaining it. His philosophy owed much to Gaelic football and to the Kerry style where running and passing were central elements. He saw no good reason why elements of the Kerry game should not be adapted to hurling. His game plan placed a big emphasis on solo running and passing until the posts were in sight. Then scoring entered the equation. Hours were spent on perfecting hand-passing movements and interchanging positions and ground hurling got a low priority. In his book "The Right Win" he lambastes what he calls "the twaddle about ground hurling, as if it's somehow a superior way of doing things. It most patently is not. Yes it had its uses if a player is in a tight corner but it can never be as beneficial as getting a ball into your hand," page 135.

Two points should, I think be made. Nobody with any pretentious to being a student of the game would assert that ground hurling and handling are mutually exclusive. We have the evidence of every great game over the last half-century to support the view that no All Ireland winners won with a team which was lacking in the ability to play the ball on the ground as well as from the hand. And that includes Galway. Wasn't it Noel Lane (with Peter Finnerty the best striker of a ground ball on the Galway team) who clinched victory for his team in the 1987 and 1988 All Ireland finals with goals late in each game from ground shots? Another misconception is that ground hurling means "pulling on everything that stirs" as a junior hurling guru I knew used to describe it.

Once before a league match in Laois the county chairman invited the team to "go out and pull and pull until you are tired of pulling". Fortunately we ignored that precious advice in the interests of public safety and survival. What about the flicking or touching on or moving the ball on the ground of which skill Eugene Coughlan over 10 years ago and Kevin Kinahan of today's Offaly team were the masters. They knew well that "in a tight corner" tipping the ball away to allow them the option of lifting was the safest, most controlled and best course of action. And boy could they pass too! Kilkenny or Cork the leaders of hurling's All Ireland roll of honour know only too well the critical importance of controlling the ground ball and striking it. That is precisely what Kevin Hennessey did to a crossing ball in the 1986 All Ireland. He got a stick to it to control it before smashing an unstoppable shot low into the Galway net.

When Cork and Kilkenny met in the 1992 All Ireland final the game was remarkable for how little Cork played the ball on the ground throughout the game. Yet it was a piece of neat ground play by Kilkenny which clinched the match for them late in the second half when Liam McCarthy fastened on to a breaking ball on the edge of the Cork square, touched it forward on the ground and drove powerfully across Ger Cunningham and into the far corner to the net. That goal came from two simple groundstrokes.

I met John Connolly (would you believe on a beach in France where we were both holidaying and hurling) a few years ago. He was quite bothered by the disproportionate amount of training time which Cyril used give to running, soloing and passing to the neglect of striking. He wondered what satisfaction as a hurler a panel member would derive from a training session in summertime when ball striking was relegated in importance and most of the session stressed handling and running. John himself was skilled at lifting, handling and striking but what really troubled him was what he saw as a lack of balance in training programme. Besides, as John knew the practice of ground striking in training enables players to confidently perform that skill whenever during a game it was needed. Only players can make that decision, not the management on the line. What is more, only a skilful player can play the ball properly on the ground.

Watching Damien Byrne or Billy O'Sullivan or Stephen Frampton doing a bit of ground hurling during training is a delight they are so accomplished. It is no accident that the same lads are fine strikers from the hand. The player who is master of the groundstroke has no difficulty with any other aspect of the game. Eamonn Cregan, among others, appreciates this and if you recall this year's Leinster final (how could anyone forget it) you saw the fruits of his hurling convictions.

Cyril had exceptionally fast players in Anthony Cunningham, Martin Naughton and Joe Cooney in the 80's and was anxious to utilise their speed in opening up defences. Sadly Anthony couldn't strike from his left side, Martin couldn't (or didn't) from his right and Joe at centre forward wasn't able to double on a ball (an essential for any number 11). Pity these weaknesses weren't addressed over the half dozen years of the players' prime. Then, perhaps, more All Irelands would have been won.

One way or another Cyril Farrell left a deep imprint on Galway hurling. He shaped their style, made them proud of their county and gave them many glory days. He has earned an honoured place in Galway hearts. I get a distinct feeling that Cyril Farrell's second coming is imminent. He'll be back.

Clare's Achievements

September 15, 1995

More has been written about Clare over the last week than about previous winners of the Liam McCarthy Cup. They have captured the whole nation's attention and the imagination of all hurling lovers by the magnificence of their achievement. Many people are now preoccupied with trying to understand how a team of ordinary hurlers was transformed into a super-charged irresistible force; how Clare have exorcised all the physiological hang ups and obstacles, the fear of winning as much as the fear of losing. Let's ponder the combination of talents, which is the Clare hurling team.

By appointing Ger Loughnane as Manager the County Board ensured that a man of strength, honesty and integrity was in charge, a man too who sought the position. He was given complete freedom to nominate his helpers in management and he knew whom he needed to pursue the fulfilment his dream – every Clareman's dream; the Liam McCarthy Cup. He picked two men Michael McNamara and Tony Considine who were as he said himself “on the same wavelength” as himself. Translated that meant that all three shared the same vision, agreed on fundamentals, were completely honest and open with one another and that each had his own particular talents in management to offer. They weren't his “yes-men”, his puppets to be manipulated, the expendables upon whose shoulders the blame for failure could be laid, men who could be used and abused as has been the case with many management teams in many counties over the years. Heights of achievement cannot be reached with yes-men. A good manager needs very intelligent accomplices if he is to function effectively, not sycophantic morons who swallow his thoughts and ideas without the ability to digest them. Every worthwhile manager needs the corrective of sound minded colleagues. Ger, Michael and Tony were consumed by a passion, a shared passion, which drove them relentlessly on. Clare would win the All Ireland and those three men knew the magnitude of the effort needed from themselves, from the County Board and from the panel they would choose.

Michael McNamara was a sadistically hard trainer who was determined, like Kevin Heffernan in 1974 with Dublin, to make Clare the fittest team in the country. Do you know that training for the 1995 championships began on 5 September 1994, a year ago!

Michael's punishing regime was only for the bravest souls, the most committed men. Sometimes sessions were timed for 7a.m. Often sessions lasted two hours. Just recall for yourself the dreadful weather of last winter and spring. The hills and muddy fields of Crusheen and Shannon could tell of torture and torment as the essential stamina work was pursued. How they must have hated the thought of such suffering especially during that most excruciating spell from Christmas to Easter. During this spell the dark grey aching, misery which was training, was lightened only by the bon-homie and cheerfulness of Tony Considine, a bubbly character who made the hellish punishment a little more bearable. Behind the levity and craic, however, Tony was shrewd and knowledgeable about hurling, hurlers and team requirements. His immensely likeable manner and easy sociability served to conceal a man driven by the same demons which drove his two colleagues Ger and Michael.

“It was all about passion”, Ger is reported to have said afterwards, “passion and heart which have been our trademark this season”. With respect it was about far more than that although without the driving enthusiasm which consumed management and was transmitted to the players the unforgettable deeds of Clare 1995 could not have been accomplished. As we know there comes a time in every game, big or little, when a team is rocked back on its heels. Sometimes that happens early in a game (Vienna last week), often it's later on when the game is perhaps delicately poised. The winners don't always dominate from start to finish. When Cork scored a sickening late goal on Clare last June former Banner representatives would have hung heads and accepted inevitable defeat. When Galway came within two points of Clare in the All Ireland semi final a crisis point was reached. Johnny

Dooley's pointed free 5 minutes from time in the All Ireland final sent Offaly tricolour flags dancing and gave the holders a 2-8 to 0-11 lead as we prepared to hail mighty Offaly and to applaud Clare's gallantry in defeat. On all three cases Clare's stamina, utter self-belief and mental strength lifted them and swept them on to victory.

However efficient the team management no thoughts of glory could be entertained if the squad of players weren't men of character. Only lads of great character would sustain a gruelling training schedule over such an extended period. Only such men could be infused with the passion of their mentors and not be satisfied with the hurling world's sympathy or honourable defeat. Seven of last year's Munster panel were dropped as the search went on for lads of character, trust and intelligence. Big, strong Ollie Baker, steady calm imperturbable Brian and Frank Lohan, rangy P.J. O'Connell, indefatigable Jamesie O'Connor are good examples of what were needed. And the powerful bond which knit the squad together derived from sharing the pain and suffering and bleakness of spartan training sessions. Playing in a Munster championship or All Ireland game was much easier than one of those McNamara training specials. When you have scaled Mt. Everest climbing Cruachán is child's play and the accumulation of layers of resilience, heart and spirit banished negative thoughts and fears and allowed them to express themselves.

I was in Thurles on Saturday last for the annual Hurlers Inter County Golf Competition and, of course, nearly all the talk was about Clare. Mick Hayes, Noel Pyne, Johnny Callanan, Seamus Durack, Sean Heaslip and Sean Cleary from the Banner were showered with congratulations. A constant rejoinder from those chaps was: its Waterford's turn now for a break through. They were giving expression to the thoughts of All Waterford followers. If Clare who were humiliated in the Munster finals of 1993 and 1994 could overcome such traumatic experiences why not Waterford who are little behind them if at all.

Now is the time for Waterford to take inspiration. Select a panel of manliness and character. Lads who have the commitment to undergo the harsh training required to reach the summit, the ambition to aim high and the potential to be top performers. Let them share the murderous hard work in the conviction that like Loughnane's men they know they will succeed in their quest for hurling's ultimate honours.

Heights by great men reached and kept,
Were not attained by sudden flight,
But they while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.

Professional Preparation

October 27, 1995

To achieve success nowadays at inter-county or even club level the preparation of teams must be put on a high level of organisation. No longer can a team with aspirations be satisfied with a haphazard happy-go-lucky attitude. The day of the three or four rounds of the field and a few sprints is gone and the whole approach has changed utterly. A "trainer" I knew would be out of business nowadays. That man's training schedule owed nothing to imagination or sophistication. He rigidly stuck to his 6 rounds of the field perimeter starting at the dressing room door and taking a predictable anticlockwise path of boring jogging until the sixth circuit had been completed. One night I ventured to speak up as we faced the dull unvarying routine. "Why not change it a bit tonight" I suggested, "and make it a bit more interesting". "Begor", he responded, "That's a great idea. Right lads, we'll change the whole thing: run around the other way tonight". And we did.

Today's top teams – and not only the All Ireland champions – approach the preparation of their teams in a highly professional manner. Three people usually comprise the management team. Those three are individuals who may differ from one another in many ways but are ideally, united by a shared philosophy. They must be on the one wavelength if progress is to be made and each must make his own special contribution to the overall welfare of the team. Specialised areas such as diet; physical training and psychological preparation must be adequately catered for. This latter aspect of preparedness, the psychological one, has only come to the fore in recent years. Where none of the appointed management team can fulfil the role of sports psychologist then the services of one should be sought because this is an area which we neglect at our peril.

Sports psychology is a source of amusement to some and a subject for good-humoured ridicule for others. But no area of a panel's preparation is more important. Getting a panel to reach a high level of physical fitness is comparatively easy once players are dedicated, as they invariably are. Preparing their minds is far more difficult. All players suffer mentally with the approach of a big game which could, in fact, be merely a first round. They have their private fears, anxieties and doubts. Doubts about fitness, about their ability, about their opponents, about the weather, their hurleys, their boots, minor ailments and many other matters which prey on the alert mind of a player sincerely committed to his team. Players desperately crave reassurance and a personal conviction of their own ability to perform on the day. Fear is a very strong emotion – fear of failure to deliver, fear of defeat, fear of personal capability, fear of the unknown. If the team is to be successful the positive attributes of the players must be stressed: their speed and fitness, high skill level, team spirit, team work, experience of big days. A feeling of isolation often grips a sensitive player who doesn't realise that the outcome of the game doesn't depend on him alone, that support from equally fit and determined colleagues is ever present and that there is a shared responsibility to which he can make his one valuable contribution.

In the 1950's Waterford feared Tipperary more than any other team and weren't too confident whenever the two sides met. The players seemed to be in awe of the Tipperary men and accorded them far too much respect. Only in 1959 did Waterford play without inhibitions and record the famous victory over the then – All Ireland champions in Cork before going on to win the title. Yet it wasn't until 1962, in October, that Waterford regained their self-belief to defeat Tipperary in an Oireachtas final of rare grandeur (Donie Nealon still thinks that it was the finest hurling match he ever played in). Now with fear of Tipperary removed from their collective minds Waterford went on to defeat the neighbours on three other occasions in 1963: a tournament, a league final and a Munster final. Fear was banished, self-confidence surged through the team and performances were enhanced.

This year offered us food for thought on this subject of mental preparation. Dublin are the latest team to reap the benefit to tackling their psychological problems. All honour to

Donegal, Derry and Down champions of 1992, 1993 and 1994, who had unexpected success over Dublin teams which boasted all of the qualities of a champion team save one: poor mental preparation. Any fair-minded unbiased observer of the football scene couldn't fail to note how mentally strong and focussed the Dub's were this year and how confidently they coped with crises during the course of matches. Their management insisted that they were no fitter in 1995 than they had been in the previous three. Surely the input of the sports psychologist had some bearing on Dublin's firm self-belief throughout this year's campaign and tilted the balance in their favour in tight situations. Can we easily forget the mental hardness of Clare whose fitness alone could not have helped them against Cork, Limerick, Galway and Offaly. This was the county seemingly unable to do themselves justice on major occasions when they had the material to make a break through. Until this year, that is, and what a fillip to other teams, including our own ambitions, their achievement has been. Within our own county Mt Sion replay specialists, were confidently expected to win another title when confronting Ballygunner in the replayed final. Even without their most prolific score getter Paul Flynn, the 'Gunners had a super win which was distinguished by a passion and positive mental approach which withstood the fiercest Mt Sion pressure.

Just now the Waterford team seems to have some mental blockage when confronted by Tipperary jerseys who happen to be our opponents once more in the 1996 championship. All who watched this year's meeting of the sides in Cork were shocked at the feeble challenge offered by the Decies. The most disappointing aspect of the game was the lack of will and drive and conviction. There appeared to be a passive acceptance of defeat, a concession of Tipperary's right to slaughter us. Must we endure this painful humiliating experience once more next year? No, and a resounding no must be the loud and clear answer. Tony Mansfield and his fellow selectors must give priority to the mental preparation of the team for next years repeat of the 1995 debacle at Pairc Uí Chaoimh. We are presented with a wonderful chance to make amends and to show that Waterford aren't satisfied any longer to be the whipping boys for Tipperary or any other county.

Professionalism

November 3, 1995

When rugby football, to whom amateurism was sacrosanct, went professional in recent months there was a collective gasp not alone from those within the game but from all who cherished the true amateur ethic with all its unselfishness, commitment and pursuit of excellence for excellence sake. There was fear, too, that playing would cease to be, as it is in all amateur sports, a source of personal uninhibited enjoyment and shared team satisfaction and become a business, a mercenary operation channelled into the greedy hands of a body with no feel for the game or for its ethos. Anxiously was expressed, too, that those thousands who have over many years spent much of themselves in organisation, preparation, support, administration and promotion would now become marginalised and consequently lost to the game.

We in the G.A.A. have some reason to be apprehensive and smugness should not blind us to reality. Professionalism in hurling and football hasn't yet raised its challenging head but I fear that in time, maybe sooner than we think, some of the amateur values that we hold dearest will be questioned. In today's materialistic world a price will be placed on every area of involvement in our association from the Uachtarán's position down to the chap who mows and lines the field or the member who takes the Under 12's for training. This is a daunting scenario which we may be loath to contemplate in so far as we the older members of Cumann Lúthchleas Gael find it alien to our lives' experience and an affront to our many years of unpaid commitment to an association which was the dominant force of our existence. Nevertheless only those who bury their heads in the sand will fail to identify and recognise the trends.

Professionalism in the late twentieth century is a growing thriving reality. Even already an element of this professionalism is present in the G.A.A. The payments authorised for coaching are modest and find general acceptance as necessary and reasonable. Travelling expenses and a coaching fund cause no surprise embarrassment any more because all genuine effective coaches perform to a very high standard and operate at a professional level. There is such a dearth of good coaches, however, the many clubs are obliged to engage the services of men whose qualifications and achievements fall far short of their unjustified and inflated fees. Those "coaches" bring coaching into disrepute.

In order to compete nowadays many counties seek to employ a coach from outside their county. High profile personalities, whose playing or coaching expertise (or both) won national acclaim, were courted by those counties who sought a return to the heady days celebrated in their county's history. The much acclaimed Mick O'Dwyer went to Kildare having succumbed to the honeyed blandishments of Michael Osborne and his associates. John O'Keeffe and Ger Power, two of Kerry's brightest and best, successively took over Limerick and Jack O'Shea, brilliant Kingdom All Star commuted between Leixlip and Castlebar in the interests of Mayo football. In our own county Joe McGrath and Georgie Leahy took turns with coaching our hurlers. Each one of those highly regarded men failed to achieve his objective, some more dismally than others. Why? On some other occasion, perhaps this question can be tackled. Right now I want to allude to that element of professionalism which was shared by all of them – financial reward. Georgie Leahy was, perhaps, the exception. His expenses were only in accordance with our county's guidelines and I would venture to say that his brief connection with us left him at a net loss.

With the others mentioned the cost – sorry, the word most favoured for it is "expenses" – amounted to large sums of money. How much in each case I haven't a clue. When I broached this subject once to Mick Osborne he smiled and gently reminded me that the matter was between the Supporters Group and Mick O'Dwyer. So you can draw from that any conclusion you wish. One thing is certain: they were well paid. And why not? After all it was their reputations which were on the line and the travelling involved was astronomical.

What I find disturbing is that side by side with a willingness by counties to invest heavily in the services of an outside coach, there still persists penny-pinching attitudes of many County Boards where players legitimate expenses are concerned. The blank cheque permitted in the remuneration of some county coaches, and even club coaches is hard to justify even in this age of professionalism. That simply is not fair to the players. No matter how gifted or charismatic the coach, it is the players who win matches. That significant fact should never be overlooked.

Many of the coaches I named were strong characters, experienced, good thinkers of the game, great motivators. Yet they couldn't achieve the results which they and their county craved – and paid for. Is it that they couldn't get through to the players and elicit an intellectual as well as a physical response from them? Were they unable to establish the essential rapport between player and management? Were they lacking that psychological dimension which is an essential for coaching at this level? Did they fail to make a professional preparation for a task which demands a professional approach?

Some years ago I spent a long weekend at Coleraine University doing a bit of work. I bumped into an old friend of mine Jimmy Nelson carrying some books under his arm. In answer to the obvious question Jimmy told me that he was engaged in a course on sport psychology preparatory to taking over the Antrim hurlers. I permitted myself a little smile knowing how far removed from shrink-heads and spin-doctors Jimmy was. The more I reflected on it the greater my admiration for a man so far seeing. A couple of years later he became coach of the Antrim senior hurling team. Whatever the extent of success – and I happen to think he did very well, fully extending Kilkenny, defeating Offaly and getting to a senior hurling All Ireland among other achievements – it is to his credit that he sought to explore every means of preparing himself for his onerous duties. His was a truly professional approach to the task.

Inter county coaches should possess the qualities which those opaque politicians keep on nattering about – openness, transparency and accountability. Also the humility to recognise their limitations and the interdependence of players and coach on one another. They dare not neglect the man-management aspect of their responsibilities. If such preparation is made then for that and for all the hard work they do to a professional standard they should be treated with gratitude and remunerated accordingly.

Justin Case

November 17, 1995

It is always good to get the view of others whose opinions we respect on any matter we deem important to us. Sometimes we are so involved or close to the scene that objective assessment fails and our prejudices are reinforced in the absence of critical detached judgement. Thus inherent weaknesses readily discerned by the outsider are never redressed. So I was anxious to know what a hurling lover like Justin McCarthy thought of our Waterford senior hurlers after watching last Sunday week's league match in Dungarvan.

Justin does a weekly hurling column for the Cork Examiner and expresses himself well on his favourite game. He never conceals his passion for hurling and equally, I'm sure, he never expects all of his readers to agree, with all of his opinions, nor should be. "Ní lía duine ná tuairim" the wise old Irish saying reminds us and it is refreshing to read a great hurler's honest opinion of our team in serious competition.

Justin was a master craftsman with a hurley and I got first hand experience of his deep affection for the game when I met him for the first time in the early seventies at Gormanston College, Co. Meath, on the occasion of the annual national coaching course in hurling. A serious injury incurred the year before prior to the Cork v Kilkenny All Ireland final when he badly injured his leg in a traffic accident which left him severely handicapped. At that particular time he carried a large plate inserted into his shin to aid the healing process, so walking was difficult not to mind running. If you think that put a stop to Justin's gallop, you're dead wrong. Every day Justin insisted on going through the full panoply of hurling skills, never shirking the hard work (coaching is all hard albeit enjoyable) work. He pushed himself to the limit despite the obvious pain involved.

Every evening after the day's exertions he headed for the pool to ease the pains and refresh his drooping spirit. Early to bed was a must so that his biological batteries would be fully recharged for the following day's renewal of what to him must have been excruciating torture. He was hell bent on taking a full part in our famous seven aside competition, and steeled himself to overcome his disability.

I will always remember his sweaty struggle through the early rounds. When he reached the final his fierce determination and iron will drove him to exhibit all the smooth gracefulness which was a distinguishing feature of Justin McCarthy's hurling. His silky skills adorned all of his games but at Gormanston I saw Justin the fanatically committed battler who pushed back the frontiers of pain and drove himself in, triumphing over adversity.

So what did Justin think of Portláirge?

He was quite impressed with our first-half display and felt that we fully deserved to go in at half-time with only one point separating us from Cork, having played against the breeze and having taken the game to the Corkmen. He thought, as I do, that Paul Flynn should be placed much nearer goal where with his speed over 15 yards he is a major threat to any defence. Perhaps the selectors wanted to play Michael Hickey in on the square and give him another trial at corner forward. Even so it seems to me that Flynn has the major requirements for a No. 13 or 15; skill, control and pace and should always be selected in his favourite position.

As Justin noted we were on top at midfield and thus ensured a good supply of ball for the forwards. I'm not so sure that it was "good" ball because much of it was lashed in high and to the advantage of Cork backs.

Why aren't players urged to think about the proper use of possession? Maybe, of course, they are but don't carry out game-plan instructions. Johnny Brenner won plenty of the ball,

as already noted, but persisted with long high straight centres into the forward line. This suits any worthwhile backline. There is a mistaken belief that bombing in a succession of high-altitude missiles puts the defence under pressure. Not a bit of it. Remember the 1982 All Ireland a day of howling wind? Cork faced the wind in the first half (they always do; I don't quite know why). Kilkenny forwards moved in towards the Cork goal for every one of their puckouts, drawing the Cork defender with them. Noel Skehan placed his puckout to midfield or just beyond it thus allowing Ger Fennelly and the wingers to come to the ball breaking some 70 yards from the Cork goal and secure possession. Which they did time after time. Ger Cunningham's mighty puckouts of the second half were in complete contrast. Ger Henderson, anticipating the long wind assisted puck, retreated to the '21 line and was able to move forward every time to arrive under the high ball and attack it. His opponent hadn't a chance and Ger was star of the defence.

Something similar happened in the 1984 final in Thurles, Damien Martin's puckout arrived regularly on target to allow centre back Johnny Crowley to star and wipe out his immediate opponent, Bermingham of Offaly. No forward unless he has the physical presence and awareness of a top form Christy Heffernan can compete with an intelligent back who ensures that he is always coming forward to the air ball.

Barry Murphy, Cashman and Tony O'Sullivan knew who to play centre forward and what type of supply would benefit the attack. Brian Corcoran tried to fly the ball in diagonally and low. Our full forwards needed low, quick ball. That didn't happen so Denis Walsh and company dominated that area and Waterford starved on the infrequent scraps they received.

Justin though we took the wrong options and didn't play what he called "sensible hurling" and that our half backs and midfielders were "giving ridiculous balls into the forwards". He also thought we lacked teamwork and needed "a few leaders" who could give inspiration. We had one leader in Damien Bryne but need some throughout the team especially in the forwards where Cork's Corcoran showed the qualities of a genuine leader.

Food for thought from a man who has always admired good hurling and has promoted it from one end of the country to the other. He has a healthy regard for Waterford hurling. He rejoiced in Cork's victory but acknowledges too that "they (Waterford) have no serious problems but they are problems that won't get better, if they are not sorted out quickly". Are we listening? And thinking?

Free Taking

November 24, 1995

Free taking should rank highly in hierarchy of hurling skills. In particular the taking of close-in frees and scoreable frees from positions up to 70 yards from goal should receive a high priority in team preparation. It is an incontrovertible fact that a good free taker is worth an average of at least eight points to his team. In fact a team without a reliable free taker is at a big disadvantage. Just keep an eye on team scores in important game and note the scoring rate from frees. Invariably the team with the highest points total and making productive use of frees comes out on top. In last Saturday's Harty Cup game between St Colman's, Fermoy and St Flannan's, Ennis the Fermoy boys came out on top scoring twelve points to 1-5 for the opposition. Even without a goal the points total sufficed the winners. Clare v. Galway on Sunday last provided a very close game which the Tribesmen would have won if Clare's tenacity and hectic finish hadn't prevailed in the end. Indeed Cork on the other hand, would have won if they hadn't missed a couple of frees which should have yielded points and hadn't scorned points in their attempts to score a goal. Galway with 0-13 were more impressive for most of the game than Clare who recorded 2-7.

Having one free taker on your team is not good enough. What happens if he is ill? Or injured? Or is sent off? No, the ideal arrangement is that a team would have three good free takers in each third of the field. Lest we think that aim is unachievable, may I remind you that it needs only five minutes of your average one and a half hour training session to remedy the dangerous situation of reliance on one man for important frees. If the players are in twos, using the width of the field they can practice free taking knowing that they have up to 100 yards to permit them the full follow through with no danger of losing a sliotar. During this part of the session the trainer can note who his best free takers are and confirm for him and for the selectors, who should strike frees in any area of the field on match day. He can also note any weaknesses in style and take remedial action.

Except for very poor weather or pitch conditions (as we could very well have in winter or early spring) there is no satisfactory excuse for missing a scoreable free. Not surprisingly unless frees are constantly practised the free taker will lack that calm confidence to do himself justice. Constant dedicated attention to practice outside of official training times, will reap rich reward.

Christy Ring, Josie Gallagher, Jim Langton, Frankie Walsh, Jimmy Doyle, Richie Bennis, John Fenton, Eddie Keher, Joe Cooney, Paul Flynn, Johnny Dooley, were some of the great exponents of this skill over the last 40 years. Few enough of this group shared precisely identical styles.

One man who fascinated me was Josie of Galway. I saw him quite a few times in the fifties and found his method of free taking (he only took the close in ones) riveting in its simplicity. He just placed the ball in position, stood to the left of it, had one look at the posts and cut it unerringly off the sod straight between the uprights. No job left or roll lift for Josie from Gort, only the simple repetition of one of hurling's most attractive skills, the sideline cut. Only a good hurler could attain consistency with that method, none nowadays would risk it, given the availability of the option of lifting.

The famous Frankie Walsh, Mt Sion and Waterford was one of the finest strikers of a ball that I ever saw, off the ground or from the hand. His huge points total over a glittering career with Mt Sion, Waterford, Munster and Ireland teams must surely constitute a record. Pity scoring statistics weren't kept in those days. I well remember Waterford's final point in the 1959 All Ireland which came from Frankies fluent stick. Securing possession way out on the sideline left of the goal, the Waterford captain feinted to go past his marker, Paddy Buggy, stepped back and then sent a great shot soaring over Ollie Walsh's crossbar from a most acute angle,

especially as he struck it from his left side. Frankie was his team's regular free taker and only on the rarest occasions did he fail to score from placed balls.

His style with frees was unusual in that although he caught the hurley with the right hand dominating he struck the free from his backhand or left side. His rolling up of the ball was very positive and controlled and he struck it with the sweet spot of the boss always as he followed through with the strike. Once in the first half of the All Ireland against the Cats he failed to lift a 21 yard free properly. Undaunted he clipped the stationary ball in Josie Gallagher fashion high over the crossbar for a smashing point. As already mentioned Frankie was an accomplished ground striker so he didn't have to hesitate for long.

You should have tried stopping a Frankie bullet? He was our equivalent at the time of today's D.J. Carey who could be regarded as the most deadly striker playing hurling today (not just now when the short day and inclement weather conditions militate against practice and performance).

Christy Ring was a superb craftsman with a camán overhead, from the hand or off the sod. A fanatic, Ring always carried a hurley and ball with him on his daily journeys delivering oil and petrol for a well-known company. Any available chance of practice was seized and utilised. Many claim that his strong wrists were the product of regularly manoeuvring a big heavy truck which didn't enjoy the benefit of power steering. His free taking from the 21 was lethal.

He used to stand back from the ball, take three steps forward, lift the ball high and forward so that when he struck it he had arrived on the 14-yard line. With the forward momentum generated by his run up, the time to bring back the stick for a full venomous swing and the whip-lash effect of those powerful wrists adding extra velocity it was no wonder that Ring was a prolific scorer of goals as well as points from close-up set pieces. He told us himself that he picked one spot in the line of defenders (you were allowed to line the goal with as many players as you wished in those days; there were no semi penalties) choosing the defender who showed some agitation and self-doubt.

Peculiarly enough he sometimes missed relatively easy frees from 40 yards or so, left or right of centre. Maybe it was his style of free taking which caused him to err. By lifting and taking a few steps forward he changed the angle at which his hurley came in contact with the ball depending on whether he was a little too much behind or in front of the ball when he struck it; if behind he drove it too far left; too far in front and a sliced shot right and wide was the result. Minor imperfections, really, in a powerful polished performer.

Free Taking

December 1, 1995

John Fenton was a brilliant striker. His hurling was simple and unadorned and, for that reason, highly effective. His expertise with the sideline cut became his trademark. If you think that this skill was an off-the-cuff haphazard one which he just happened to perform on match days, you obviously know nothing of John's long hours of training on a regular basis. He set aside a certain amount of time each week to concentrate on sidelines and frees (a skill for which he won equal renown) and never played a game of any importance without the support and confidence derived from proper preparation. Goals and points flowed from his free-taking and he was at the pinnacle of his career in 1984 when he led Cork to victory in the Centenary Final. Munster Railway Cup success and his native county to All Ireland glory in the Thurles All Ireland against Offaly.

John was a true All Star, the living embodiment of all of what a good hurler should be. Aspiring hurlers could profitably model themselves on him, a man who never pulled a foul or mean stroke. Manly sportsman of the highest class he endured the humiliating experience of being taken off in the All Ireland of 1982 and 1983 (a grievous blunder to take off the best ground hurler that Cork had) only to experience one year later the glory of All Ireland success. And he wasn't merely a free-taker one tolerated by selectors because of his success from set pieces. The Middleton-man had a far more rounded game than that. Do we not recall, when pressed to nominate the finest goal scored over the last thirty years, that magnificent ground shot from 50 yards which John smashed into the net for Cork in Thurles with such velocity that Tommy Quaide in the Limerick goal was left gasping and grasping at thin air. On another damp championship day in Limerick when his mighty sideline cut went soaring on a journey of over 70 yards to dip under the same Tommy's crossbar for a dramatic Cork goal. The Fenton sideline style is the most straight forward and easiest to emulate. By striking down into the ground an inch or so behind the ball contact is made with the heel of the bas and back spin imparted. Hence, the difficulty in grasping the shot and the sudden dipping as momentum is lost.

Paddy Kenny of Tipperary used what might be described as the Ring style and, like the Corkman was able to smash in goals against a fully lined goal. I never liked the business of placing six or seven men on the goal line for a free. Too many, with a danger of overcrowding. Better four with each designated a particular rectangle of space to defend. Anyway Paddy was a key contributor to the high scoring rate of those formidable Tipperary sides of the late forties and early fifties with his generous complement of goals and points. Paddy was a ciotog a natural left-handed striker. So also was his county man Jimmy Doyle whom I had reason to know pretty well during the most fruitful part of his career. Jimmy always reminded me of Frankie Walsh. Both were slightly built and were contemporaries. When Jimmy swung that polished left-handed stroke he invariably made contact with the sweet spot of the bat and the sliotar's path was straight and true. Conceding a free to Tipperary from any part of the field within 50 yards of your own goal was punished with a Tipperary score. Jimmy was such a shy, diffident chap that it wasn't easy to visualise him coping with the cut and thrust and strong physical exchanges which characterised inter county hurling matches in those days. Yet in that era of abrasive uncompromising defensive confrontation, Jimmy's quickness and pure hurling skills outshone any crude attempts to shackle him.

Two men who always looked uncomfortable standing over a free were Richie Bennis and Joe Cooney. Their stance as they addressed the ball did nothing to reassure their supporters. Both held the stick left above right and their left side should have been their strong side but was not. Richie spaced his feet wide apart, locked into position, and his lift was usually so good that he recorded some critically important scores for Limerick, none more vital than his pressure late point from a seventy (strenuously disputed by Tipperary) in the 1973 Munster final at Thurles for what proved the decisive score. His team then went on to win the All Ireland.

Joe Cooney was never as consistent as Richie and made matters more difficult for himself, I always thought, by failing to make a good lift. Now Cyril Farrell, the Galway coach, must accept much of the responsibility for Joe's weakness from the placed ball. It is the coach's job to identify and correct such faults. No player can do it entirely on his own. The more he practised a faulty method the more ingrained the bad habit became. Joe found it hard to bring his hurley square to the ball because of the variation in his lifting. Hence slicing and hitting under the sliotar or across it.

Gary Kirby has the Richie Bennis method and seems to have perfected it because he generally manages a fine line which allows him a full turn, full swing to make firm contact and flowing follow through.

D.J. Carey is out on his own as a player and has his own distinctive style of taking frees. Talking to him about it I was surprised to find him not quite satisfied with it. The ball is quite near him as he lifts it forward before stepping after it to strike. Many a time has he sent over powerful points as he swung up and through the ball. Only that he is such an accomplished striker I don't think he would have recorded the fine tally of points and goals which now stands to his credit. On some occasions the ball had dropped quite low before he could make a swing and his shot for the posts had a very low trajectory, at times not attaining sufficient height to clear the crossbar. At other times he stepped forward too quickly and only succeeded in slicing right and wide. I'm not for a moment trying to decry a man of D.J.'s eminence but suggest that his is not a style which a budding free-taker should emulate because too many elements of his method need the absolute precision of a D.J. Carey.

Neither, if I'm honest would I want my free-taker to adopt the Johnny Dooley style. Johnny is a consummate striker of the ball too. He scoops it up and does that part of the operation excellently and consistently something beyond the capabilities of many entrusted with this task. The only blemish this year in Johnny's record was the penalty against Antrim in the All Ireland semi-final when the ball didn't come up. This method is difficult on a bare sod such as we had throughout the summer and early autumn.

I notice that Paul Flynn has changed from the roll lift to the jab lift for frees and, dare I say it, he has lost some of his consistency. A Clare friend of mine from the seventies era, Colm Honan, changed too and had greater confidence with his frees. Many free-takers are convinced about this method of lifting and this conviction about such an important element of the process is a major boost because without confidence free taking becomes a lottery. What I dislike most about jabbing the ball up for the close frees is that it necessitates a good deal of movement forward in order that the striker can position himself properly to make the correct swing. Unless that forward movement is reduced to the minimum, control can easily be lost. This doesn't apply to long distance frees and no two men struck the ball better in 1995 than Seanie McManhon and Anthony Daly of Clare.

Did you ever watch Billy Ormonde of Lismore taking a long distance free or seventy. If you did you could hardly fail to be impressed. During the late sixties, throughout the seventies and into the eighties Billy was a commanding figure at centre back, the ideal position for the long distance free-taker. Regularly Billy lifted, turned his broad shoulders and struck those frees clearly between the uprights. He never forced the stroke, it was always smooth and controlled. He was often mentioned in chats to the Tallow lads as the exemplar of this free puck, a man whose style was calm, simple and unforced.

Free Taking and Eddie Keher

December 8, 1995

Many performers of this important skill have been mentioned over the last couple of weeks and some I haven't mentioned include Charlie McCarthy and Philly Grimes, Charlie's style I admired, except on those days when he opposed Waterford! His method was the nearest to Eddie Keher's that I can remember. And I have clear memory of how firmly Charlie stroked the ball; no matter how close the free he hit it so hard, that is was accelerating on its way over the black spot of the crossbar. His lift was like himself in full flight: quick and positive. He was so correct in striking hard because even if he made imperfect contact with the ball the forceful follow through ensured that it kept line.

Mention of that follow through always reminds me of my friend and team mate Philly Grimes, R.I.P., whose vast array of hurling skills precluded none that mattered. And when it came to free taking Philly was as fine as we have seen. Philly, of course, was so talented and versatile that he could be played in any position on the field, but generally and most notably he was midfielder or forward of unrivalled class. In those areas of the field a good free taker was essential if concession of frees by the opposition were to be properly punished. Philly regularly exacted the full price from his opponents for any indiscretion of their's within reach of the posts but up to the 1957 All Ireland he used to lift and almost lob the ball softly over the bar rather than whip through it.

In the All Ireland of 1957 against perennial foes Kilkenny, Philly played a great game. Philly played a great game. Waterford, on the day, were a superior team to the Cats and were deservedly ahead well into the second half. A midfield weakness and selectorial indecision allowed Kilkenny to rally and with two minutes left they clung on to a one point lead. Waterford were awarded a free some 40 yards from the Kilkenny goal. Philly stood over it, lifted and struck but the ball was only barely scraping over Ollie stretched his left arm to snatch move and clear away down field. Nobody really blamed the taker of the free, but Philly himself always regretted not striking firmly and following through fully, as he told me a couple of years later in happier times, when Waterford were crowned champions. Ever afterwards he made certain that like Charlie McCarthy, he propelled his frees with vigour.

With all due respect to all the free takers I've seen-and Seamus Treacy and Eddie Condon and Pat Murphy won admiration on their day – one name I suggest stands out from all of the others – Eddie Keher. I have never seen a better man at the job. Statistics testify to his consistency and the greatness of Keher was in that almost metronomic consistency. In club, tournament, league or championship matches he amassed huge totals as he smashed in goals and floated over points. Whenever he was missing from the Kilkenny team they suffered. Injured, and unable to field in the 1973 All Ireland clash with Limerick Eddie had to watch as the Shannonsiders emerged victorious. The following year was a repeat meeting of the same sides on the first Sunday of September and this time the Cats had a resounding victory with Eddie scoring something like 2-9, all but 1-2 from frees (including a penalty).

He more than any other man influenced his team's big match results and he was such a consistent performer, that you knew before the throw in that Kilkenny had at least an eight point head start, no matter who provided the opposition. No one from Christy Ring to D.J. Carey (both of whom I came to know and admire) came near Keher as a score taker and although we are firm friends now, and have been for many years, I hated the sight of him in a Kilkenny jersey especially around 1963.

I first came across Eddie in 1959 when he appeared in the black and amber for the All Ireland replay against Waterford. Although still a minor the Kilkenny mentors recognised his exceptional talents and brought him on for this game. He scored that day and I can still see him as he stood over the ball for a 21 yards free late in the game, with the Decies comfortably ahead. A goal was on his mind and we knew it. He lifted cleanly and drove for

the corner of the net. Alas for Eddie, just as Brian Corcoran did in the league match in Dungarvan a month ago, his shot went whizzing past our left hand post and wide. He was too young then to have developed the technique that would rattle the net so often afterwards and too inexperienced to know how a penalty (because that was the nearest to a penalty in those days) should be taken. In his subsequent long and illustrious career, spanning three decades (1959 to the seventies) Eddie gave a great deal of thought to free taking and invested a huge amount of his time in perfecting the art, so that he played an enormously important role in the Kilkenny success story of that period, setting new scoring records in the process.

I faced Keher pretty often over the next ten years, but the day that remains etched in my memory, bitter memory, is the All Ireland of 1963 which Kilkenny were fortunate to win by a couple of points. Having sailed through Munster that year achieving a notable victory over a good Tipperary team in the Munster final, there was no lack of confidence in the Waterford camp. We had proved in the League, Oireachtas and championship – all of which we won – that there was no other team in the land better than us. We had met Kilkenny in a challenge game on a June evening in Kilkenny and although we respected them we knew after that match that we were well capable of beating them, should our sides meet in a final later on in the year.

As with all teams that emanate from the Noreside county their 1963 team had skill and craft but they were short in two or three positions. Johnny McGovern, a cultured wing back, was placed at centre forward, and we all knew that “ní féidir leis and saol capall ráis a dhéanamh dasal”, donkeys don't win derbies! Johnny was completely underestimated. So, too, were the whole Kilkenny team by most outside of their county. Because of that failure to sense danger the management of the team, or to be more specific the team trainer, failed to prepare Waterford either physically or mentally. We went out stone cold into the final and paid dearly for our collective negligence. In All Ireland terms we were neither physically nor mentally ready for the fray. Besides on the day we were visited by as much ill luck as it is possible to endure.

The story of the game is like the average Irish weather forecast – bright (Waterford) spells and showers (of Kilkenny attacks and scores). It was not that we played very badly. In fact we made a fine start and seemed to be justifying the general confidence which had been reposed in the Decies. But to return to Eddie Keher.

From the early minutes when Kilkenny were awarded their first free Keher pointed everything within sight of our posts and by the final whistle he had put over an incredible 14 points from frees as well as three more and a goal from play and despite all of Waterford's good hurling it was the Cats who were purring at the final whistle.

Keher performed another important task that day. Tommy Murphy (Fr Tommy nowadays, a curate in Callan) and Eddie found time and opportunity to carry out full frontal charge on the Waterford goalie midway through the first half which left him (the goalie) with two fractured ribs. The goalie's distress and obvious, he told the selector that he was injured and couldn't draw his breath, but they took no action. Only when the doctor confirmed at half time that he (the goalie) was unfit to continue was a replacement introduced. Too late. You bet your life that bitter vengeful thoughts exercised the injured man's mind for a couple of painful weeks afterwards.

Time, however, eases aches and heightened passions subside. Eddie and my self became firm friends a couple of years later, and that friendship has endured ever since. I don't know if footballers have that penchant for reconciliation but hurlers rarely harbour a grudge against another player for long. For them, in the words of John F. Kennedy, there are no permanent enemies. Rightly so.

Eddie Keher

December 15, 1995

Last week when indicating Eddie Keher's pre-eminence, in my opinion, among free takers I referred to his style, and suggested that all aspiring free takers should study his method and seek to model theirs on his. His style, therefore, deserves analysis if only to allow all interested parties, to make a private critical assessment of it, and of each of its component parts.

The Keher style is very simple and straight forward really, one of its attractions and one of the reasons why he was successful throughout his long distinguished career. He faithfully followed the same drill every time he stood over the ball within striking distance of the opposition posts. Why more players entrusted by club or county with the free taking duties don't adopt this pattern of Keher's surprises me.

Eddie first of all lined up his shoulders and feet with the target, so that a hurley aligned with his shoulders across his chest would point directly at that black spot on the centre of the crossbar. His feet were a moderate distance apart, he told me, so that he wasn't locked into a very wide stance which would make it extremely difficult for him to move his feet forward, or back if the ball failed to come up perfectly. Every regular free taker will testify to the difficulty of achieving a good lift with consistency. Keher's lifting lapses were rare and there is a story which, perhaps, explains why.

When the shy 12 year old Keher arrived at St Kieran's College, Kilkenny on his first day there Fr. Tommy Maher, the greatest hurling authority and coach I ever met, made a point of meeting his new pupil. Fr Maher, a teacher at St Kieran's, knew of Keher who's under age hurling exploits had preceded him and the coach recognised talent and potential when he saw them. Hurling and St Kieran's were synonymous, still are, so that afternoon after school Fr Maher invited Eddie to fetch his hurley and come out to the field to practice a few frees. Standing opposite Eddie he instructed him to perform just one element of free taking, lifting, while he observed the procedure. Eddie was not to strike any ball, he told the boy, just lift. For ten or fifteen minutes young Keher bent his knees and lifted as his mentor corrected and praised and encouraged. Nothing but lifting. All the while Fr Maher sought to have the boy lift the sliotar to a certain position and height which he knew would allow swing before completing the strike. When this practice and the priests monitoring of it were completed, Eddie joined the other boys for their practice match.

The following evening saw a repeat of that self same lifting ritual, to be followed on the third fine September afternoon by another repetition of the same drill. By now Eddie was becoming most impatient because he hadn't yet been allowed by Fr Maher to strike the ball, the basic reason for lifting it after all. So on the fourth evening his rising frustration overcame his innate shyness and he articulated his growing impatience. "Ah Father", he pleaded "please let me hit it this evening". "You can hit it Eddie", was the calm response, "when you can lift it correctly". And after two further evenings of practice Fr Maher was satisfied with the young lad's lifting technique and let him strike for the posts. Eddie had got the message: a good lift is paramount. Look after the lift and the strike will look after itself. He was also advised to entertain one thought only while rolling up the ball: make sure of a really good lift. Only after the ball has been lifted should the taker allow the strike to exercise his mind.

Eddie learnt from Fr Maher that striking a free was very similar to executing a good golf drive. Good lift, high enough to permit a good shoulder turn, allows time to make a good follow through – vital with every shot. Keeping the head still during the whole sequence is of the utmost importance. After all a head movement has a immediate response from the shoulders also and you either won't strike with the "sweet" spot of the hurley, in your follow through or you will pull the shot left or slice it wide. This actually happened to Eddie in the All Ireland final of 1974 – which Kilkenny won by beating Limerick. A rare aberration from Keher on a day of fine forward play from a superb Noreside forward sextet of which Eddie was the

star. A free for the cats early in the game. Right of the posts thirty-five yards out. Eddie lifted perfectly but just as he was about to drive over the lead for his team he turned his head and shoulders to the left, and the ball sailed straight and true but to the left and wide. The television camera lingering on his face as he trotted out to his position, showed Keher betraying no emotion. You see he knew full well what he had done wrong. And why. And how to correct it. All other frees that day including a penalty were dispatched with aplomb and deadly efficiency.

All of his penalties were exceptionally well taken and rarely indeed was one saved except by accident. Unlike Christy Ring who liked to target a certain point on the lined goal for his attempt at goal, Keher's concentration was focussed on striking the ball as hard as he could to smash it into the roof of the net. The sheer speed of the shot of itself was sufficient to give no time to the defenders to position their sticks to affect a save. His manner of taking the penalty enabled Keher to generate great speed and power.

He carefully placed the ball on the 21 yards line and stood back three paces behind the line, but about one stride to the left. He strode quickly into the ball, jab lifted it high and forward, so that he had time to turn his shoulders as he followed quickly and made a big powerful swing, while still in full stride. His momentum added velocity to the little white missile, which invariably left the net, bulging ominously. This, though, was the only free for which he used the jab lift.

Bet you didn't know that Eddie as a seven years old held the hurley wrongly. He was right-handed and should like all right-handed persons have held his hurley with the dominant right hand on top. But Eddie had his left hand on top with his right hand gripping underneath it. He was swiping away enthusiastically with this grip one Saturday morning on the village green of his native Inistioge when an old man, driving a donkey and cart bearing a solitary churn hove in sight. Observing the lad in action he stopped, "young Keher", he shouted removing the pipe from his mouth, "you're holdin' the stick all wrong. Put your other hand on top and you'll play better". Eddie laughed nervously and resumed his hurling.

Later that evening he told his father about the old timer's advice and his dad suggested that he give it a try. After initial awkwardness he gradually discovered that he had a more fluent, natural swing. And from both sides too.

He never looked back and continued to grow into the great striker he eventually became. All thanks to the observations of a man who could so easily have been ignored. Eddie told me that story when we met in Kilkenny some years ago on the occasion of a hurling instruction course for teachers. I asked him to come in and tell that story to those on the course. And he did.

Eddie's commitment to regular practice ensured that self-confidence was never lacking. He used to go down to the pitch with his son Eamonn plus half a dozen sliotars. There for an hour he systematically carried out a schedule. He started with the easiest frees – from the 21 and then moved right and left of that spot to gradually narrow the angle. After this, the frees were from further out from the goal, again starting from the centre followed by more difficult angles left or right, of that position. On match days he always spent time in the forenoon preparing for what he would be required to do a few hours later. No wonder he was such a deadly marksman.

The Late Ted Carroll

January 5, 1996

It was a shock to the system a week ago to read the obituary of Ted Carroll R.I.P. To some people Ted was Secretary of Kilkenny County Board G.A.A. and a well-known face on all of Kilkenny's big occasions over the last dozen years. To those of us who knew him well for over 30 years he was an opponent and friend and I had the pleasure of his company only last year (1995) when we met in the city where he was as well known and appreciated as the President.

Ted was the gentlest, mildest, most unassuming person you could meet. Soft spoken and most sincere you would find it difficult to visualise him involved in the seething cut-and-thrust of Oireachtas, League, Leinster or All Ireland finals. How wrong you'd be to underestimate the mild mannered unpretentious Ted. And many opponents did. That steel core, which only the most intense hurling clash revealed, was well camouflaged by the Lisdowney he shared with his twin brother Mick a passion for hurling and their early school years saw them develop and refine the scintillating skills which would have a wider audience when the Carrolls donned the black and amber at Under 14, Under 16, Minor, Under 21 and Senior levels. Around 1960 Ted first appeared on a Kilkenny Senior team together with Mick. I remember Waterford and Kilkenny playing a tournament final in Dundalk in March of that year. We made an enjoyable weekend of it and on the Sunday morning of the match the rain poured down to such an extent that Tommy Byrne of Modeligo (a member of our panel) observed: "Tis a wicked day lads, you wouldn't put a bucket out". But the game was played and we had a handsome win, no wonder I can remember it! Ted was centre back and got a bit of a roasting from Tom Cheasty but still did well against what was a dominant Waterford team. This game ushered in Ted's career, a career distinguished by hurling excellence which reached its peak in 1969 (not 1972 as one paper claimed) when he was awarded the game's supreme accolade, Hurler of the Year, the Caltex award as it was then.

Slightly built and serious, Ted was in no way an intimidating physical presence on the field but what a consummate defensive hurler he was. A wonderful tackler, Ted never displayed the flamboyance of Ollie Walsh only a cool control of his area of the field where he discharged his defensive duties with unfussy efficiency. Although he had to wait until 1969 for natural recognition of his greatness I still think that his greatest achievement was in the 1963 All Ireland when he effectively blunted the threat of the great Tom Cheasty. Perhaps Tom thought he was meeting the same raw recruit who opposed him in Dundalk three years earlier or that the gently Ted posed no great problem for the mighty Cheasty. Playing at centre back Ted fulfilled the duties of that position so that Tom never made those devastating break throughs. A great reader of play and with an excellent sense of position, Ted quite often got to the game did he strike a long spectacular clearance or commit a bad foul. He anticipated, flicked, nudged or tapped away or passed to a colleague or foiled an effort to lift with, for Waterford, heartbreaking regularity as our most formidable forward was stymied. If Tom secured possession and attempted to burst past him Ted took three quick steps backwards and patiently waited for Tom to release the ball for a solo run or shut before flicking the ball away to safety. At this particular play Ted had no master. His preparations for that All Ireland was a combination of his own intelligence and timing and Fr Tommy Maher's astute coaching which reaped a bountiful harvest for Kilkenny.

After the 1963 All Ireland Eddie Keher's contribution to his team's victory was lauded and influenced the adjudicators in nominating him Hurler of the Year. But those who appreciate great tackling skills saw what Ted Carroll had done to nullify the Cheasty threat which if given full rein would have ensured a Waterford victory, no matter how great Eddie Keher's scoring feats. Ted did it so quietly and so confidently. Tom hated (in the hurling sense) Ted Carroll after the game. Both Tom and I were on the sideline for another meeting of those same sides afterwards. Tom became very agitated every time Ted beat his marker. "Good God", I said

to Tom mischievously and provocatively, "Carroll is a great player". He's not much good if there's a man on him", was Tom's stinging retort clearly implying who that "man" was.

One tackler of more modern times who came closest to Ted's standard was Eugene Coughlan, Offaly's wonderful full back. He had the same quiet deceptively simple style with the minimum of show or ornamentation.

When Ted slowed he went back into the full back line, to cornerback, where he continued to excel. His forte was the quarter swing when contesting the ground ball or the stroke from the hand. Film clips of his style should be compiled and used as instructional material for coaching. R.T.E. should have ample video material and the G.A.A. (Games Development, perhaps?) need only assign the task of isolating the appropriate clips to some of the many who have a competency in this field. Coaches would love it.

Poor Ted slipped away quietly and without any trumpet fanfare. He was gone before he had time to fulfil his great potential as an administrator. He will be missed by all of us who know him or who have an appreciation of true All Star material and hurling sincerity. He defined the cultural approach to defensive play better than any player I've known. "Ni dheanfar dear-mad ort, Ted, fad a bheas caman a luascadh. I leaba na Naomh go raibh tu".

Ringin The Changes

January 26, 1996

Kevin Cashman had a lovely article about the great Cloyne master of hurling arts, Christy Ring on a Sunday newspaper a couple of weeks ago. It was a celebration of the incomparable Ring and brought me back many years to the man I knew on the playing field and to that other Christy Ring "in civvies" far from the madding crowd. One seemed driven by demonic forces when the hurley was in his hands and the other was the calmest most agreeable companion you could wish for. Ring, the hurler captured, as Kevin Cashman said, the affections and dreams and ambitions of virtually every youngster who knew the shape of a hurley. He inspired paeans of praise and poetic tributes throughout his playing years and afterwards. He evoked admiration and awe from thousands of his own and in equal measure bitter hatred from all of the others to whom he represented the threat of defeat. After a game he had no time for the plethora of backslappers and huggers. I remember after the final whistle of one Cork/Waterford encounter (which we won) the two of us shook hands and as we left the field together he began waffling on about the Cork team especially and ourselves too. His torrent of words continued until we were clear of the fans that cheered him and strove to touch him and grip his hand. It was his way of ignoring the acclaim which, after a match, left him uncomfortable and embarrassed. One sentence only can I remember of his gushing monologue and it amused me "Sure you couldn't play with that crowd", he said referring to his team mates before quickly adding "and ye're not much good either". That was, I suppose, just in case I took too much pride in our success or that a sense of achievements might have given us notions above our station. Off the field he was affable, relaxed and generous. I can recall a few of our team meeting Ring after our team meal in Thurles in July 1959, the day our on-goal victory over Cork set us up for an All Ireland appearance against Kilkenny. "God Ringie", one said, "I thought you might now be heading for your ninth All Ireland". "I would too", he replied with a smile, "only for your man there", pointing to me. Very flattering but not really true because a one-man team has little hope of success and that Waterford team was no one man team. It was generous of him to praise anyone in the opposing team especially as defeat that day denied him his chance of the record number of All Ireland medals. Ring was passionately involved in any match he played be it challenge, tournament, league or championship. The details of each game were incredibly etched on his mind. He craved action and hated being out of the scoring in any game. He was in cranky mood when Cork and Waterford met in the league at the old Cork Athletic Grounds one bleak March day. And all because he was receiving very little ball as the wing forwards with Patsy Harte his Glen colleague showing the way, kept floating over the points. "Harty", he bellowed a couple of times, "what about sending a few in here!" In Fermoy on an evening tournament game, he was placed as he often was, at full forward. Austin Flynn commanded the square from the throw-in denying Christy any score and worse still, Cork's main scorers were Paddy Barry and Richie Brown, two accomplished forwards sharing the full forward line with him. As the game aged Ring became more and more exasperated and in one attack, I got a cut over the eye after clashing with Ringie. That was for the course because he was only attending to some unfinished business from our previous meeting. I had to go off and as I passed him on the way I heard his voice, just loud enough for me to hear. "We're quits now, Ned". The books had been balanced.

Ring drew the crowds wherever he lined out and celebrated a goal by throwing his hands wide and making a few leaps into the air. In a well attended game at the Park one day I discovered the ideal umpire; one susceptible to hints from the goalie. This poor umpire on my left for the first half didn't even possess the minimum qualifications for the job and was, and looked, confused. He had twice in the first ten minutes waved wide what were undoubtedly seventies. Cork forced another. "Wide again", I observed to no one in particular only for my friend to hastily wave his hands signifying a wide. Ring was furious. He became so agitated that I feared for the safety of my friend in the white coat as Ring, eyes popping, tore into him with a verbal barrage, casting doubts on the man's legitimacy, the quality of his eyesight and expressing a fervent desire to remove him (my friend) from this valley of tears. Affecting a

kind of wounded innocence I moved over to Ring. "Ringie", I said with as much seriousness as I could muster, "don't mind him, the man is mad". He gave me a quick look, glanced at the object of his anger and trotted out immediately to his position without a word. That he accepted, explained everything so his anger subsided. Had a score been in dispute I know that Ring would have taken instant action and done what he had often done in similar situations: grabbed the appropriate flag and waved it lustily for all, especially the referee to see.

Ring's character mellowed considerably as the years passed and his playing came to an end. He had more mind and time to chat. He was much easier to meet and had a wider range of interests including education. As a parent he was always aware of its importance and wanted his children to get the best chance in life. Every year over his last ten on this earth, Christy, his wife, daughter, Mary and son, Christy spent their summer holidays in Youghal and he loved, when the day was sunny, to spend the afternoon in Whiting Bay. Whiting Bay was a great haunt of ours too and allowed us to indulge in a bit of hurling on the beach. Ring's sharp eye picked us out and this led to long chats on the sandy expanse. Even then hurling was a constant topic. So high did he set his hurling sights that he was severely critical of the young up-and-coming players, even his own Glen Rovers. "We have no one", he used to bemoan. "Ah, come on Ringie", I urged, "what about Pat Horgan, Patsy Harte, Tom Collins and young Tomas Mulcahy?" "They're no good", he insisted and no matter how I tried to encourage a more optimistic view of his own Glen his doleful reaction told me that he foresaw no return to the club's glory days. It must be conceded that over the last fifteen years the Glen's star has gradually waned to a point where winning a Senior hurling championship seems quite beyond them. Many there are who still assert that Mick Mackey was a better man than Ring. I couldn't agree. Mackey was of a more powerful physique and exciting to watch on one of his famous solos as he tore through a defence. But he never had the same influence on a team or on the outcome of so many games as the Cloyne man. Nor had he Ring's range of skills or subtleties or uncanny ability to read a game. Mackey relied on strength and courage which he possessed in abundance and always sought to carry the ball despite meeting the fiercest tackles. Physical confrontation he gloried in the excitement he created came from that type of trust of strength. Ring could always mix it but he had so many extra strings to his bow especially in the air. He could double on the ball in the air or on the ground, left or right where another player, Mackey for instance, would seek to lift and handle. When Ring doubled on a ball overhead he always imparted slice to the shot so that near goal, it spun away from the goalie although the actual stroke wasn't made with great force. Any goalie would gladly face a fully hit shot in preference. There's a book-full of yarns to be told about Ring. The career of a great player soon becomes encrusted with legend but even legends have a core of truths and all celebrate an unforgettable wizard of the ash whose likes we most certainly won't see again.

Mistakes and Misfortunes

February 9, 1996

For David Fitzgerald, 1995 was an unforgettable year. His outstanding goalkeeping throughout the year brought excitement to every game he played and was richly rewarded. He won Munster Championship and All Ireland medals with Clare and with his club, Sixmilebridge. He earned a coveted Munster club medal and is now awaiting the All Ireland club semi-final where his chances of another major hurling souvenir must be good., Munster selected David in goal for the inter-provincial series and hurling's stamp of excellence was firmly imprinted on this small man with a big heart when his contemporaries all over the country chose him as Ireland's best goalie, All Star Goalie of 1995. David was a worthy recipient of all of those honours and deserved to be numbered among the game's elite.

But even David had a Homeric nod which was visible to the whole hurling world on hurling's biggest day – the All Ireland Final. Television's all-seeing eye recorded the incident from two different angles so it was well publicised: Offaly's first half goal at the canal end. That score probably looked soft given that it wasn't hit powerfully from close range and that the goalie had clear sight of the ball the whole time. What made it a dangerous difficult shot for David Fitzgerald was that the scorer, Michael Duignan struck it from his backhand or left side. Every ball struck by a right-handed player from his left, his backhand side, or indeed by a left handed hurler from his right (his backhand side) has spin on it and sometimes quite a bit of slice. This backspin is a goalie's nightmare because its trajectory is difficult to gauge and the spin causes it to dip suddenly as it nears its target.

This backspin used constantly in tennis and golf is part and parcel of the John Fenton type sideline cut. It results from hitting down on the back of the ball and through it, an action in tennis and golf and hurling which causes the ball to loft and sets it spinning backwards on its way forward. Many goalies have been the recipients of an unwelcome surprise by the vagaries in flight of this type of shot. I remember a Junior Hurling County Final in 1981 when Tallow faced Roanmore, a powerful junior combination destined to bestride the senior scene impressively afterwards. Roanmore were awarded a free to the left of our goal. Johnny Cotter took it but because he didn't lift it very well, he was forced to strike it hurriedly 'cutting' the devil out of it. I had a clear view of the ball all of the way over the bar, as I thought, until it dipped viciously at the last moment under the crossbar for a goal. I leave you to imagine my disgust and frustration.

In the great Cork and Kilkenny All Ireland Final of 1969, Eddie Keher's fine shot from under the Hogan Stand struck sweetly from his left side, beat Paddy Barry in the Cork goal for a goal which changed the whole trend of the game which Kilkenny went on to win. What compounded Paddy's problem was that he didn't use his hand but tried to stop the shot with his hurley. Fatal. If you try to deal with that particular shot with your hurley (one from the striker's backhand side) it invariably will, because of the run as much as anything else, slice off your stick and find the net. That, too, was David Fitzgerald's undoing against Offaly. He put his hurley to Duignan's shot and brave as David is he had no chance of controlling the spinning ball with his camán as it squirmed off to his right and over the goal line.

Can you recall the Leinster Final, the greatest game of hurling for many years on a day of appalling conditions. Midway through the first half, Daithi Regan, Offaly's giant midfielder, slipped his marker after feinting to go right and drove a left-hander right down on the Kilkenny goal. With no one challenging, Michael Walsh, Kilkenny goalie stayed on his line rather than attack the ball as a goalie should be advancing a step or two to grasp it on the edge of the square. It dipped and sliced its way behind him and over the line. The only way to deal with any ball coming at chest height or higher is with the hand. If the catcher fails to snap it cleanly, it will do no worse than fall down to the goalie's feet where, if time allows, it can be rolled lifted or scooped away left or right under pressure. In last year's All Ireland Final, the critical score for Clare came very late in the game from Anthony Daly's 65. It was

bang on target and the unfortunate David Hughes decided that it might go over the bar when he stretched up his stick. It is easy in hindsight to say now that he should have reached up with his left hand (he's a good six feet in height and the crossbar is eight feet from the ground) but had he done so the ball would either have been caught clearly or fallen to his feet. Or perhaps gone over the bar off his fingers. In the event it crashed off the crossbar as David tried to get a stick to it and came back into the square for Taffe to become the Clare hero by driving a powerful ground shot to Offaly's net. And so it came to pass, Clare's dreams fulfilled.

That incident brought me to casting my thoughts back to 1991 and Waterford's great bid for a Minor All Ireland which we came so near to achieving. The team management that year asked me to give a helping hand to the goalie whose puck out they were anxious to have lengthened. I noticed on the two nights that I was present, that throughout the whole of the training sessions, the goalie never once caught the ball in the air with his hand. He got the hurley to every shot, long or short, high or low, and he did a most accomplished job. I mentioned his complete reliance on the stick to him and suggested that he try to handle the ball in training more often. "You know Pat", I said, "you're brilliant with the stick, sharp and sure, but it could happen on Sunday week that you might have to catch the ball, just one, and it might make all the difference between victory and defeat". Do you know what happened in the second half of that All Ireland? If you were there – I was but had to stand in the rain on Hill 16 having no stand ticket – and I had a really clear view of the Waterford goal which was right in front of where I stood. A Galway midfielder (I can't remember his name) drove in a high ball from his left (his backhand side, be it noted). Our goalie, eyes on the ball, put up his stick and the ball rebounded out into the square where an incoming Galway forward drove it to the net for his team's only goal. We lost by a goal but may I hasten to say that our goalie played very well indeed and that it would be grossly unfair to blame him for defeat. Every other player on the field, even the winners, made mistakes, many of them, but the goalmouth is one spot where attention is acutely focused and where the fate of many games is decided. The goalie who doesn't handle the ball well is neglecting a basic requirement for his position and may have cause to rue it. The high ball from outfield which requires to be grasped doesn't come in too often during a game but when it does the goalie needs the confidence to deal properly with it. That confidence can only be acquired on the training field. A very worthwhile practice routine for a goalie would have two players positioned in the fourteen yard line in front of him, pulling in the air as a high ball drops into the square or perhaps running across in front of him as the sliotar drops. If he can concentrate in training or focussing all of his attention on the airborne ball while being distracted by the clamour of clashing hurleys and moving feet in front of him, he should be quite capable of coping with similar situations in matches. As a rule it is not fear which causes the goalie to drop a catch but failure to concentrate. Mistakes are an inherent part of the enduring appeal of games. They add to the thrills and heighten the excitement and provide proof that even the great performers (and don't forget Packie Bonner) are prone to mistakes, even unforced errors sometimes.

Cork v Waterford

February 16, 1996

You were probably in Ardmore on Sunday week for the Cork/Waterford hurling match. Well there were so many Waterford people in what was quite a big crowd, that I thought most of our hurling followers came out to see how our players got over the Christmas. There were many Cork friends to meet like Terry and Declan Hassett of "The Cork Examiner", Mark Landers and Paudie Power from Killeagh as well as our own ever-faithful followers who were there in large numbers not only to get behind Waterford but express respect and support for the families of those unfortunate fishermen whom the sea so cruelly snatched from their midst shortly ago.

If there is a better pitch in Ireland or one even as good as Ardmore in winter time, I've yet to hear of it. Last Sunday the recently cut and rolled field was just lovely without the slightest trace of mud. A wide for Cork in the second half took the sliotar back to the railing where I stood and it was astonishing to notice how white and clean the ball was with all the markings clearly visible. It wasn't in the least surprising that the game was good, that pulling on the ground ball was invited, that players could pick the ball with ease, that the pace was good for an early year game, that the two teams and spectators enjoyed themselves, that we got great value for money. Ardmore are a very active and progressive club and deserved the fine support which they got.

Another factor adding to our enjoyment was referee, Pat Moore. He was quick and decisive in his decisions, fair and understanding in his interpretation of rules and protective of players in his prompt halting of play if he suspected that a player had been genuinely injured. He was the epitome of courtesy and competence and as usually happens when a referee performs well, we hardly noticed his assured performance. He has two fine sons, Jonathan and Alan, who are imbued with the same love of hurling as himself. Jonathan refereed Tallow's U-16 hurling Semi-Final game against Dungarvan last July and I must say that I can't remember a referee as young doing such a polished job. Dungarvan bashed our hopes in no uncertain fashion but Jonathan gave a first class performance of which he can be mighty proud.

The game was good especially when the cold breeze flowing almost directly crossfield is taken into account because the greatest enemy of hurling, after sodden, mucky conditions, must be stinging cold. Numb fingers struggle to handle or use the hurley and trying to warm them and keep them warm is extremely difficult. Justin McCarthy recommended steeping the hands in very hot water before taking the field. I honestly don't think too much of that because as soon as a player goes out into the cold air the hands quickly become chilled no matter what water steeping has been done. Vigorous hand clapping in the dressing room is an improvement on the water remedy and mostly together with arm swinging, a help because it addresses the root of the problem – circulation. Of course no player on the field suffers on a cold day more than the goalie. For him to have any chance of performing satisfactorily, his hands must have feel, must be able to grip the hurley and ball properly. I discovered one means of genuinely warming up in our present conditions and I'd be interested to hear if anyone else tried it.

Get your team out on the field about ten minutes before the referee comes on to the pitch. The players trot around the perimeter of the pitch at a brisk pace doing two or three rounds until they are puffing. They then get into twos, a ball between each pair and maintain the same vigour with their continuous movement and pucking of the ball as fast as possible. After five minutes of this activity, the hands are still cold but now is the time for all to trot back into the dressing room. They sit down for the team talk (which should never be very long anyway) and while the talking goes on the hands and the rest of the body gradually heats up. Once warm, the body retains that warmth for a good ten minutes after taking the field, no matter how bitter the day. During that important first half the players and the goalie in particular can perform efficiently.

It's interesting what led me to thinking about this cold hands problem and its remedy. One very cold Saturday in the seventies, I was splitting timber and hoping the exercise would warm a chilled body when a caller took me indoors to discuss the following day's U-21 hurling County Final at Dungarvan. My hands were still cold despite my energetic work with the axe, as we sat down. Within minutes my hands began to glow and ten minutes later were quite warm. As usual with conversations we finished chatting at the door for another five minutes. I felt no cold for the rest of the evening as the block splitting continued.

In the following day's County Final against a good Erin's Own team (it included Tomas Maher later to distinguish himself for St Finbarr's and for Waterford Senior hurling teams), Tallow got off to a great start scoring a goal in the first minute. A high ball into the Erin's Own square went off the frozen fingers of the city team's goalie into the net. The goalie Coady, was a good one but the poor chap had no chance with an almost numb left hand. No such problems for Tallow net minder, Stephen Curley as he handled all that came his way with warm hands.

Every Waterford supporter was delighted with the Ardmore game and the result was a badly needed boost for us at a time when we need an injection of confidence as we face some tough league matches. Admittedly relegation is hanging over us, but I'm heartily fed up with the prophets of doom, the reporters who after one or two league losses keep harping at this spectre of relegation hovering over us. Of course we'd rather remain in Division One but what needs to be done more than anything else, I believe is to generate more confidence in players by highlighting their assets and the reasons why they have no need to feel inferior to other teams. There is no player who is not in need of the encouraging word and constant criticism can be destructive and can undermine even the most confident. Praise whatever is good, every successful block down or hook, every pursuit of an opponent to pressurise him, every good scoring attempt which didn't quite bear fruit. When a forward misses a score that is the time for his team mates, forward colleagues in particular, to do what Austin Flynn did for me: share the blame and lift his spirits. "Good man, Billy, unlucky, we'll get other chances." Isn't that what a forward needs to keep his batteries charged? Good forwards should never take a Cisterian vow of silence. The opposite in fact. There should be six voluble leaders in that area, six players who assume responsibility for denying backs the time and space to clear unhindered and to set up scores at the other end as well of course, as compiling a winning total themselves. Constant communication should prevail not obviously about the state of the weather or the peace process and certainly no abuse should be tolerated. Shared responsibility is what is needed.

I'm sure the team management have made a clear assessment of the individual players at their disposal and of the areas which need attention. Hugely encouraging was the spirit of the team and the strong finish was rewarded. What a contrast with the surprise surrender against Tipperary last year. Much work needs to continue on skills, on quickness, on directness and on tactical application. Let's be patient and positive. Go easy on the imposition of pressure and avoid that phrase "we must win", when the word "must" keeps recurring pressure increases mingled with the fear of failing.

Gormanston

March 1, 1996

The G.A.A. National hurling Festival for the nation's U-14 hurlers, Féile Na nGael, will be hosted by Waterford in June this year. That is a big honour for any county and so it behoves every hurling club from the strongest down to the smallest and humblest to make this gathering of young players a really enjoyable one. What a pity we have no equivalent celebration for adult players. The nearest to such a hosting was the Annual Gormanston National Coaching Course in hurling but the main purpose of that was to enable participants to acquire the expertise which would qualify them for coaching teams on their return home.

The Gormanston courses started in 1965 and continued into the late seventies when the G.A.A. bureaucrats decided they had outlived their usefulness. I was there for all of them and will never forget them. Each year seemed to surpass the previous year in enjoyment. Gormanston College is a massive Franciscan second level institution in Co. Meath some 30 miles north of Dublin. The college possesses every possible educational and recreational facility. Besides dormitories with accommodation for over 300, there is ample provision of private rooms, classrooms, television rooms, language laboratory, a large refectory, a magnificent swimming pool and a beautiful chapel where we occasionally responded to the urge to acknowledge God's munificence to us. The outdoor facilities could hardly be bettered with charming walks through the spacious grounds (we hardly took any notice of them!), several fine playing pitches, a handball alley with covered spectator accommodation, an athletic cinder track to championship standard and a testing nine hole golf course within the confines of the college complex.

The priests were fine men whose broadmindedness, warmth, understanding and hospitality enhanced our stay. They became an integral part of our courses whose spirit and thoughts they shared and they contributed towards making the week an unforgettable experience. Fr Fiachra O Ceallaigh was a great favourite. This Clare man concealed his learning and scholarship under a thin façade of good humour and geniality and entered into all the fun and sport which the courses generated. Quite an accomplished hurler and staunch G.A.A. man, Fiachra was destined for high office within his order and sure enough he assumed senior posts of responsibility in the eighties. It was no great surprise to me when he became a member of the Hierarchy at his consecration as Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin in September of 1994. My wife and I were present at that impressive ceremony at St Andrew's Church, Westland Row. His sermon was marked by a lightness of touch and a gentle wit which only pointed up the gravity of the occasion. We attended the reception afterwards at Clonliffe College and it was a source of pride to witness the Clare Hurling defenders elevation to high ecclesiastical office. One advantage of his position is that he doesn't have to join us any longer in the annual scramble for tickets!!! The reception was like a who's who of G.A.A. personalities. By a peculiar coincidence another friend of mine whom I met there Fr Willie Walsh, was later that year consecrated Bishop of Killaloe, another man who has grave responsibility thrust upon him.

Fr Bob Doyle was another member of the community to leave a lasting impression on us. His hurling had more doggedness and determination than finesse but he was an amiable companion with a great liking for debate and discussion. One night Bob, John Hurley, Donie Nealon and myself were joined in discussion by Raymond Smith. Raymond had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the game of hurling, after all he had been writing about the game since his first book was published in 1955, "A Lifetime in Hurling." He had followed that up with "Decades of Glory," "The Clash of the Ash," "The Hurling Immortals" and his popular history of hurling, "Book of Hurling." Raymond was espousing the cause of his native Tipperary and we were determined that he wouldn't have it all his own way. What began at 10pm didn't conclude until 4am the following morning. And even then the subject hadn't been fully explored. Things like that were always likely to happen in Gormanston.

Fr Diarmuid McCarthy was a lovely man, gently and mild mannered, the quiet priest when dressed in full canonicals. With a hurley grasped in his right hand he was a man transformed. His style was governed by impulse and abandon with little regard for the niceties of the game and those who clashed with him on the field of play usually had, in the words of sportswriter of the time, John D. Hickey, "weals to show afterwards". Personal safety wasn't a major consideration when the speedy dervish with the low centre of gravity entered the play and such was his zealous use of the piece of ash that there was no game on which he didn't leave his mark. Coaching made no impact on him as he pursued his own agenda. And he had the engaging habit of responding to his "victims" imprecations with an air of puzzlement and wounded innocence. He was the negation of all our instruction but he loved the game. From the depredations of such as Fr Diarmuid, oh Lord deliver us, was our prayer.

Even those priests who didn't actively participate in the hurling course were so pleasant and affable. I remember in particular and t-Athair, Colmán O hUallacháin, the Gaelic scholar and language enthusiasts whose untimely death saddened all who knew him as an animated vigorous man. His brother is the Franciscan priest who is a chaplain in the Mercy Hospital, Cork.

The Gormanston day was long and exhausting. You were very lucky if one of the hurlers didn't rearrange your bedclothes so that it was hard to distinguish it from some kind of maze. Breakfast at 8.30 was followed by the first of the day's talks – I hate the word lecture, it sounds so stuffy and conceited. Then it was out of doors until lunchtime. The weather was invariably bright and sunny – Gormanston is situated in one of the two driest parts of Ireland – so the outdoor skill sessions were always enjoyable and relaxed. Nothing intruded on the even tenor of our ways except the occasional drone of an army plane coming in to land at the nearby airport. How quickly the morning sped by and as lunchtime approached it was customary for one group to challenge its neighbour to a match so that the morning came to a fitting end with a hurling game. The afternoon saw an alternation between the theoretical and the practical and by 4.30, when it was time for the usual match to conclude that session, there were some very tired bodies and aching limbs. What could be more welcome and refreshing than to enjoy the splendid pool before tea?

After tea, there was always some high profile speaker to entertain us. As both hurling and football courses were run simultaneously we had opportunity to listen to and question the leading coaches of both games. Keven Heffernan, famous Dublin player and coach was an entertaining and informative guest and we also enjoyed the views of Mick O'Dwyer, Eugene McGee' Sean Boylan, Fr Michael O'Brien among others. A game of table tennis, handball if you had the energy or a bit of golf took care of the rest of the day. Many elected to pay a visit to the Gormanston Arms or into nearby Ballbriggan where the wheels of conversation could be lubricated. It was always late every night when sleep eventually took over.

Gormanston Hurling

March 8, 1996

When the annual hostings in Gormanston came to an end, there was hardly any reaction in what were designated the strong counties. Many of them knew nothing about it and weren't aware of any necessity to bother with it. It was something barely tolerable, a kind of junket which was never properly understood. Nor was any effort made to understand it. In our own county at that time, coaching was a dirty word which officially Waterford had little time for. A very prominent figure in our county dismissed it contemptuously. "Coaching is all very fine up to about 14", he is in record as saying. So you stop learning at 14!!! There was never any genuine effort made to evaluate the Gormanston course and how our county could benefit from it. In fact when the matter of selecting the Waterford representatives to attend the course came up each year at County Board meetings it was summarily dealt with. A letter was read from Croke Park. The Chairman looked out over his glasses for any response. Usually there was a detached silence. "Anyone interested in going to Gormanston?", he'd inquire. After a few moments a name would be muttered, the Chairman would nod assent and move quickly on to the next business. Thank God that coaching irritant was out of the way. In theory any yob could volunteer and be accepted. His credentials for acceptance didn't matter a hoot. All he needed on his C.V. was that he was prepared to spend a week in Gormanston. There was no obligation to return to his county and use his experience for the benefit of any club, even his own.

One Waterford representative made an annual pilgrimage to Gormanston. Apart from enjoying his week, his main ambition was to win the poc fada competition regularly held on the last day of the course. He made sure to be first always in the line of competitors so that he would have first use of a dry ball. Needless to say with the strategy firmly in place, he won. He never coached but could tell you about how he beat great performers even Justin McCarthy, in his chosen discipline.

Quite accidentally some good men represented Waterford, most notably Tony Mansfield whose life long dedication to the game, work with clubs and county and deep interest are well known. I never actually asked Tony if he derived any benefit from the week but it would greatly surprise me if he didn't. Tony has such an open acquisitive mind that he must have enjoyed meeting hurlers from many parts of Ireland. Their ideas didn't always coincide with his, perhaps, but it was stimulating to be confronted with new perspectives of a game which one is tempted to take for granted.

The whole coaching approach at the time (still is) was one of spurring fellows to think about every aspect of the game, but especially the skills, and how to impart effectively. No attempt was made to spoon-feed indigestible dollops of theoretical principles to those who attended. Rather were they encouraged to masticate all information, to question and probe especially those areas where there was room for divergence of opinion before confirming or rejecting what was being offered. Our attitude was: feel free to challenge, so long as you can give reasons. That "why" was important and still is in regard to any view which I or any other coach might express.

And any player who asserts that his progress as a hurler was entirely due to his own efforts is either a fool or a knave. "Ar scáth a chéile a mhaireann na daoine" reminds us that we are all mutually dependant. "No man is an island" is how John Donne expressed it. Anything I know about hurling owes as much if not more to the experience of others as it does to my own fascination with the game. I would love to attend a hurling forum in the hope of adding to my knowledge or perhaps having a corrective applied to some firmly held view because, like Christy Ring, I know how impossible it is for any one person to ever assimilate all that can be known about the game. And it doesn't require an expert to set you thinking. I have to say that in my experience, there is no more passionate lover of hurling than the north of Ireland man, especially the Antrim or Down hurler. I have met friends from the north

like Jimmy Nelson of Antrim or Jim Kirk from Armagh at Munster and Leinster finals who were almost as enthusiastic as were the most partisan spectator. I've been in Portaferry and Newry, Belfast, Loughiel, Dunloy or the Glens and never met people of greater sincerity for the game. Isn't it wonderful that Dunloy are in this month's All Ireland club final against Sixmilebridge.

Those fine chaps from what we would describe as the weaker counties were the salt of the earth. To them Gormanston was a heaven sent opportunity to escape the isolation of their football county where hurling got minimal support and was regarded as an encumbrance. They came to reaffirm their convictions, to meet with like-minded lovers of the game, to broaden their knowledge but, above all, to recharge their batteries before returning to renew the uphill struggle for proper recognition and support. Those from places like Longford and Leitrim, Derry or Donegal spent a hectic week with us southern hurlers where craic and ceol were wedded to hurley and sliotar. Hurling was associated with fun and joyousness, comradeship and bonding. No wonder at all that no participant ever forgot Gormanston. Gormanston, where friendships blossomed and endured and where hurling showed that it is more than just another game. Unforgettable!!!

The Great Ollie Walsh of Kilkenny

March 22, 1996

Ollie Walsh was the first man of his beaten team to come up to me after the 1959 All Ireland and congratulate me and he was so warm and genuine with his felicitations that the memory of it remains vivid still. I discovered over all the intervening years that this generosity and big heartedness and graciousness were innate virtues which distinguished the pleasant private Ollie from the swashbuckling public hurling hero who adorned the game.

Ollie, it seemed to me, was a contented happy man with a zest for life and a love of hurling and the company of hurlers. The old Latin phrase "de mortuis nil nisi bonum (let nothing but good be said of the dead)" is rightly observed on the occasion of the death of some noted figure and that the faults and blemishes are usually overlooked as an effort is made to eulogise. But quite, sincerely, I have nothing but good to record of the great Ollie, whom I have known for the best part of 40 years.

Ollie was a native of Thomastown, that beautiful serene idyllic spot on the banks of the placid Nore. It was his only great regret that he failed to win a senior championship with that town which gave him birth. It was there he developed the skills which were to be displayed so thrillingly over the next 30 years. As a Minor – he played for three years with Kilkenny Minors – he was never less than outstanding. Even in defeat, he shone like a jewel. After the Leinster Minor hurling semi-final of 1953 (his first year with the county team) which Dublin won, he received a standing ovation from the Croke Park crowd for his magnificent goal keeping. In the All Ireland Minor hurling semi-final against Tipperary in 1955, Ollie came out of goal in the last quarter to play at centre field. He scored 1-3 and displaying his vast repertoire of skills, showed his versatility.

He once told me of his secret ambition: to save a shot on some big occasion, solo out from goal with the ball and drive over a point at the other end. He actually tried to accomplish that feat against us in an All Ireland but because we didn't feel disposed towards accommodating his dream, he wasn't allowed progress beyond midfield!!! I suppose like most goalies, he sometimes felt the confines of the square restricting and yearned for the reduced responsibility and the freedom of an outfield position. That perhaps, explained his flamboyant style when saving. He didn't just catch and clear; he grasped the sliotar, tore past forwards to his right or left, sidestepping gymnastically would-be tacklers until his long quick strides took him clear to launch another mighty attacking clearance. What a man to set the pulse racing and stir the heart of the Kilkenny crowds. No wonder, like the piper of Hamelin, he attracted hordes of youngsters who crowded behind his goal at Nowlan Park for any of his games.

Justin McCarthy, in a Cork Examiner tribute, described Ollie Walsh as the clown prince of goalkeepers. I'm quite certain that Justin meant no offence but it was, I think, an unfortunate choice of phrase. Ollie was no clown but he was a showman, an entertainer, a glamorous performer, a man who enjoyed himself on big occasions, unfazed by the atmosphere, however electric, who wanted to fulfil his love for the spectacular clearance. A master craftsman who revelled in his role, Ollie added excitement to any game he played. Some years ago Liam Kelly of the Sunday Independent invited me to select my best hurling team of that era. I included Ring, of course, that peerless back, Austin Flynn, Philly Grimes, Frankie Walsh and Tony Wall, a great stonewall of a centre-back. But my choice for goal was unhesitatingly, Ollie Walsh. There may have been better goalies, making fewer mistakes (Noel Skehan was probably technically his superior) but I never saw anyone in that position with such flair and charisma, so exciting and inspiring. I hated to see him play so well against us, of course, as he did in 1957 when he more than any other factor influenced the result but I would always support the claim that he was the greatest.

Another quality of Ollie's stands out: his sportsmanship. I never remember him to do a mean or shabby thing in a match. And it wasn't for want of provocation because in his day, the goalie was fair game for any forward who could get in a physical challenge, legal or illegal. Of course he was a big man and could withstand most attempts to slow him down. I remember how Donal Whelan, the Duck used to test his agility and his ability to absorb some physical pressure and how Ollie took it all in his stride. It always amazed me to hear some assert that he was afraid of the Tipperary forwards, especially Sean McLoughlin. That couldn't be true of the courageous Ollie because I became closely acquainted with the same Tipperary attackers and can say in all truth that not one of them was mean, over aggressive or in the least bit intimidating. Nealon, McLoughlin, McKenna, Jimmy Doyle and Devanney were accomplished hurlers, well able to ship legitimate punishment but had no interest in cruelty of any kind. None of those had the abrasiveness of Billy Dwyer, Ollie's teammate who let the goalie know that he was present.

Because of Ollie's patience and forbearance in his role as target man for some unscrupulous attackers, I was very sorry when he received a six months suspension after the 1968 home league final against Tipperary. What a tempestuous game that proved to be. It was the sixth time the sides had met in a league decider since 1950. They had also met in numerous league clashes; one All Ireland semi-final, two Oireachtas finals and three All Ireland finals in that period so a certain bitterness had built up between the counties which all seemed to explode on that May Sunday in Croke Park. After a very unsavoury first half, the referee, Gerry Fitzgerald of Limerick called both teams together at half time and lectured them with the result that the second half was played in a friendlier atmosphere. It was following a Central Council investigation that John Flanagan of Tipperary and Ollie were suspended. How Ollie could be deemed responsible for the bad conduct defies logic but true to his sunny character, this travesty of justice in no way embittered him afterwards.

Ollie the agile, supremely confident, fearless figure on the field was a completely different man to meet socially. Gone was the swagger, the brashness, the apparent bravado. Instead you met the kindest, liveliest, most interesting and entertaining companion you could wish for. I used to meet him every year when doing a hurling course at St Kieran's. Wherever there was hurling Ollie was there and we met often at Nowlan Park in the evenings when Kilkenny were training with Ollie in charge. It was very noticeable how well he related to his panel. They all seemed like one big happy family and there was much banter and laughter interspersing the more serious training. Whenever we met at Thurles or any other venue, there was the warm handshake and friendly smile and the impish humour.

Ollie is gone to join all the household names who illuminated the G.A.A saddened by the shocking suddenness of his death following so quickly on the untimely demise of Link Walsh and Ted Carroll – two of his team mates. It will be very easy to remember him because memories of Ollie are etched indelibly on the mind. Ollie was special and no matter how anyone tries to persuade me even with perfect justification and there were better goalies, I remain convinced that I never met a jollier or sunnier character nor watched a more exciting or thrilling performer than Ollie, my friend.

I bPárthas na nGrást go raibh tú, Ollie.

Hurling Changes

April 12, 1996

It is often claimed that we Irish are a very conservative people, that we are romantic and traditionalist and are suspicious of innovation and change. If it be true and I'm inclined to think that it is substantially true, then equally true it is that changing for change sake has no great intrinsic merit: something which continues to thrive should only be tampered with for very clearly defined progressive reasons. "If it's working satisfactorily why mend it", is the homely phrase which expresses this attitude. On the other hand in this age of rapid change, we must always keep on assessing the present position and striving to anticipate future developments and how best to adjust to them without losing ground in essentials. I'm thinking specifically of the Gaelic Athletic Association whose annual hosting took place last week in London where a considerable time was spent debating new hurling structures for the championship, structures which are designed to promote the game more effectively in this television dominated age.

In the matter of changes in the present format of the Inter-County hurling championship, those opposing change wanted to leave matters as they stood and to continue with the current provincial championships with the All Ireland semi-finals following the well-established pattern. Continuing with the status quo was never going to be satisfactory in this era of the all-pervading television screen because whether we like it or not, sporting fixtures – the showpieces – are now dictated by television stations requirements. We have only to recall the major sporting fixtures in golf, tennis, rugby, athletics, soccer and how their scheduling had to accommodate televisions requirements. It is not too long ago when the timing of weekly soccer matches was sacrosanct; they were on Saturday afternoons. Now games can be fixed for any week day at a time agreeable to the two bosses. Why even one of soccer's prime fixtures on last Sunday week, a Cup semi-final had the quite extraordinary starting time of 1.30, dinnertime, betwixt the soup and the main course. This subservience to the demands of the 'box' is now so well established that it must be accepted as a reality; it is far too late to even attempt putting back the clock.

Hurling and football no less than any other games or spectators sports need to be promoted. The G.A.A. recognised this fact some years ago when falling hurling standards alarmed them and forced a massive coaching campaign throughout the land. They also clearly identified the impact on the general public of live transmission of televised games and readily accepted the necessity to increase the number of such televised occasions throughout the season – All Irelands, the semi-finals, some provincial finals and some other very high-profile matches such as that very long-running Dublin V Meath saga a few years ago. Already for this year the intention is to increase still further the number of specified championship matches to be televised so the association is facing up in responsible fashion to the imperative demands of the electronic age. Even that, I'm afraid, was not enough and the perceived necessity to go a step further in putting hurling more in the shop window was the reason for motions on the Congress agenda seeking support for a radical departure from the time-honoured, knock-out system.

If this Congress motion sought the demise of the provincial championship in Munster and Leinster, very many sincere hurling lovers would balk at giving it a scintilla of support. But it doesn't and in essence, it is an effort to provide the viewing public with two other hurling spectacles, at least, and screening those games nationwide. Why should we not use the most powerful telecommunications medium we possess to enhance interest in the game and give greater exposure to our most exciting and spectacular field game. I see nothing derogatory per se in re-admitting the defeated provincial finalists at a subsequent stage of the competition. They still have it all to do no matter who confronts them and those of us who have experiences of the losers group system know only too well that the winners of any competition only achieve their goal by sustaining a consistently high standard of performance.

At a time when a recent referendum showed an inclination to allow people 'a second chance' in another area of living, we should give this experiment a fair chance. And experiment is all that is claimed for it because two years have been allotted to it after which a reassessment will be made. One other thing gives me great trust: the members of the proposing committee are almost as conservative as those opposed to the experimental changes. They would never, in a manner of speaking, wish to throw out the baby with the bathwater. The committee's Chairman and spokesperson is none other than Frank Murphy of Cork. Frank may not be your cup of tea. He is the antithesis of the rabid radical and no bundle of laughs. For all that, Frank is an extremely capable man whose deep sincere interest in the G.A.A. is unquestioned. And he loves hurling. When a man like him, after many long hours of debate in committee, is convinced of the necessity for change and seeks supports from counties nationwide, we should sit up and take notice. He visited county boards to state his arguments, listened to reaction and answered criticism. For him and the G.A.A. this is a big step and needs a reasonable time to operate before a proper assessment can be made. I'm glad he had the courage and vision to introduce this reform.

Nicky Brennan of Kilkenny was a fine hurler, splendid Chairman of his County Board and articulate in expressing his concerns for the game of hurling. Present Manager of the Kilkenny hurling team, he stood up at Congress two years ago and claimed, on the basis of work undertaken by a special Leinster committee, that "the game was dying on its feet." An alarming statement surely, yet nobody rebutted his claim because every county knows – and we in Waterford have to admit unless we are blind or invincibly ignorant – that no more than half of its senior hurling teams play to a genuine senior standard. Have a critical look at our senior hurling teams and then cast your mind back, if you are old enough, to the 60's and 70's and to intermediate hurling standards of those days. Didn't the standard of intermediate hurling some 30 years ago approximate to today's senior club standard? Even our neighbours Cork at that time boasted magnificent combinations from the Glen, the Barrs and the Rockies. Today Cork, once the envy of us all, struggles to match any opposition in the Munster club championship while Limerick and Clare and Tipperary have in recent years, supplied the provincial finalists and champions.

Hurling needed some radical move to arrest decline and boost morale and at last weekend's Congress, it received two uplifts: the adoption by a huge majority of reforms to the championship and the election of Joe McDonagh as President elect. Joe's elevation to high office is a very hopeful omen. He is young, the youngest ever to fill this prestigious position. He is courageous and he loves hurling. He has been identified with all of those national structures charged with the promotion of hurling and was Chairman of the National Coaching and Games Development Committee for three years in the early 90's. Full well does he realise that without coaching, our games are doomed. Coming from a small south Galway parish – Ballinderreen, with whom he still togs out – he understands the reality of the struggling small club with all its attendant problems.

I made a number of visits to Galway about ten years ago in response to an invitation from Joe and the Galway coaching committee, who were setting up a coaching network in the County. I was astounded at the level of response. About one hundred presented themselves from all parts of their County avidly committed to raising standards and promoting hurling.

Noel Lane, another Ballinderreen man, was there. I remember passing a remark at one discussion which in fact turned out to be prophetic. I was on my regular hobbyhorse, ground hurling and Noel, with Pete Finnerty one of two members of his County team who could play well on the ground, was in the front row. I was pointing out every goalie's detestation of the low ball, how difficult it is to stop, control and clear it, how a forward who moves the ground ball and pulls, gives the goalie no chance. "It might very well happen that the decisive score in this year's All Ireland could come from a ball whipped off the ground from the edge of the square as happened last year." (Noel's ground shot near the end of that All Ireland clinched

victory for Galway against Tipperary), I said. Well you know how the Kilkenny V Galway All Ireland ended with Noel Lane's goal some five minutes from the end putting his team ahead. Yes, you're right, he let fly from the ground at Kevin Fennelly from just outside the square.

Any departure from the usual creates its own bit of excitement so I took forward with eagerness to this year's Munster championship. We have Tipperary at home and who can tell what will happen. One thing is assured: we won't know the All Ireland finalists until we have seen some mighty fine hurling.

The Brothers

April 19, 1996

One of the most regrettable developments over the last 15 or 20 years has been the departure from our towns throughout the land of communities of the Irish Christian Brothers. The order has suffered, together with most religious orders of nuns and brothers, from the dramatic decline of vocational recruits. Their splendid colleges in Booterstown and Marino, where aspiring Christian Brothers used to spend their formative years have very, very few members of Br Ignatius Rice's community left apart from some of the older retired men.

This saddens me because I'm a Christian Brother's product and retain many happy memories of the Brothers of my native Dungarvan, a school which was among the first to be established and from which the order was forced to withdraw a few short years ago. They dominated the educational scene down through those intervening years, such a significant period of our history and their influence on our careers was incalculable. How sad that dwindling numbers of brothers forced the order to withdraw from the scene in Dungarvan and leave it for ever more without a Christian Brother.

I never forget the Brothers. Whatever I am or whatever I have achieved is due mainly, after my parents, to the wholesome Catholic Irish influence of the Brothers. They were extraordinary men of dedication to their Church and to their country and they shaped and formed the character of whole generations. They weren't ashamed to glorify our past nor were they revisionists of our history. They weren't ashamed to glorify our past nor were they revisionists of our history. They gave witness to the God they strove to serve, gave good example in selfless commitment, set high moral standards for us and gave us values to inform our lives. They taught us to be good Christians and good Irish boys and gave a special place to our native language for which they had a special love. They loved our native culture – songs, stories, dances and games and transfused their pupils with an appreciation of our cultural treasury and with a true Gaelic outlook. Poverty was a fact of life for many pupils but the Brothers, with great tact and delicacy, helped all the lame dogs. They inculcated manners and courtesy and respect and taught us to acknowledge our independence on the great source of all our gifts of mind and body.

"Mens sanus in corpore sano" was a Latin tag advocating attention to soundness in body and mind. Well the Brothers took care of our minds during class time and during recreation hours, they promoted the games of hurling and football. In a traditional hurling area it was the stick game which received their best attention. Few in those days could afford the full price of a hurley but the Brothers always maintained a supply of good quality camans which were subsidised to place them within the reach of the poorest pocket. I have an indelible memory of a beautiful hurley I bought when I was in fourth class. It had a far higher value than the six pence (21/2pence of our present coinage) which I handed over for it. It was a beautifully, balanced piece of craftsmanship, bearing one hoop on the bas and generously coated in linseed oil. My prized possession undoubtedly and the longer I had it, the more attached to it I became. No money would prevail on me to part with it and it had quite a long life before meeting up with a stronger caman in a school league and sustaining fatal fractures. An honourable death surely. How I mourned its passing.

Apart from supplying the essential raw material for hurling, the Brothers coached and trained us and infused us with a measure of their own ardent enthusiasm. They devoted their time to training on a daily basis so it was no wonder that champion college teams emanated from Mount Sion, Dungarvan, North Monastery, Cork, Marino in Dublin and Thurles C.B.S.' – all Christian Brothers strongholds. Examine the Intercounty hurling teams of the last 40 years and you will find that a preponderance of their players were Brothers graduates. To come up to date, consider the rise of Lismore hurling over the last dozen years and unless you were domiciled on another planet, you couldn't fail to note the correlation between Br Dormers trojan work with the young boys in Lismore at every age level of competition. No doubt

Lismore people fully appreciate Br Dormers immense contribution and remember him every time a black and amber team takes the field. Even more certain is it that Br Dormer never forgets Lismore or the pupils he taught because a Brother has a strong attachment to all of his pupils wherever fate decrees that he be based.

One Christian Brother I've never forgotten is Br Rogers. I was lucky enough to have him in fourth class or maybe fifth. Br Rogers was a Dublin man, a detail which you could easily overlook (he had no pronounced Dublin accent) except on Mondays when he unashamedly flaunted his origins by glorying in a Dublin match (usually football) of the previous day. We looked forward to that afternoon because he came in the classroom door armed with the "Irish Press" or "Irish Independent" or both. He sat into one of the desks at the back of the classroom, placed a good reader in his chair (we vied with one another for that single honour) and we all listened to the account of the match. Br Rogers role was far from a passive one. The narrator suffered frequent interruption by a Rogers' explanatory note, interjection of censure for poor play, subdued exclamation of approval or muffled gloom of despair. He visibly identified with every ball kicked and every score taken (or missed). He endured all the twists and turns of the Dubs fortunes as if he was physically present and involved. Our heads swivelled regularly to espy what a football-loving Goldsmith might have described as "the day's disasters in his morning face." We all sighed happily when Tommy Banks (Dublin's free taker) punished a foul with another immaculate point. Or when Gerry Fitzgerald or Bobby Beggs recorded a crucial score.

Corporal punishment was an integral part of schooling at that time and the Brothers leather strap was standard equipment. Br Rogers was as well armed as the rest of the staff but he made frugal use of his instrument of torture and I can't recall ever having to extend the left palm in his classroom. Not, I hasten to add, because I was some paragon of virtue, far from it. It was that Bro Rogers was an extraordinary placid man. He loved every boy in his class and took a personal interest in him and understood him, not just in the context of being a pupil but as a person. He radiated a kind of joy and contentment and sought to motivate us by love and kindness rather than fear or compulsion. He never stood on his dignity or placed a halo on his head. He never demeaned us. We would do anything for him and fell richly rewarded by his warm smile and word of praise on encouragement. When he wanted our full attention, perhaps after some moments of levity, he assumed a very serious mien and let his gaze sweep the classroom before uttering in a deep sepulchral voice: "look up at the holy brother." The mock gravity of his voice used to tickle us because we knew that this animated, light-hearted, witty man was completely without vanity or pomposity or human respect.

I met him only once since those long-lost magical years and was delighted to note how little he had changed in demeanour and how he still possessed that captivating good humour and charm, which age had barely diminished.

Where is he now? I'd love to know. I know that, moved by generosity of spirit, he volunteered missionary work in Africa where his special gifts and endearing personality were given full rein no doubt. Perhaps, he now enjoys a rest which he barely allowed himself when I was 11 or 12. I still think of him, that wholesome, happy Christian Brother who was way ahead of his time. What, I wonder, would he make of today's lads, products of the television age whose lack of home discipline imposes such an unfair burden on teachers? Maybe his warmth and charisma would enrapture their young hearts as he did ours some 50 years ago and that they would succumb to his magnetism. Br Rogers, wherever you are, thanks for happy schooldays, whose memory remains fresh after half a century. And may the good God, who so richly endowed you as a teacher and inspirer of the young, reward all your goodness.

Waterford V Tipperary

May 24, 1996

Well, the day of destiny is almost upon us when we face Tipperary in the Munster Senior Hurling Championship. For the second consecutive year, our near neighbours provide the opposition but this time we are at home in Walsh Park and despite other reservations about our worth, playing at home is a big advantage. A home fixture in itself is no guarantee of success but it does tend to make the home team's approach more confident, more positive. They are better able to shed the burden of anxiety and self-doubt, the better to express themselves. It's a bit like winning the toss and then taking advantage of using your choice to put immediate pressure on your opponents. If your choice is the positive one, your team will play with the wind, the sun or whatever factor enables you to make a good start. "Tosach maith leath na hoibre" Br Murray's seanfhocal reminded us long ago and a good start should always settle a team quickly and boost their confidence. A good start need not necessarily mean putting up a big score. More important that the opposition isn't allowed make too great an early impact. Try to recall, all of you when you have played, how confident and positive your reactions were on match day when you discovered that you had won the toss and were to have first use of a strong breeze. If on the other hand your team has to face the elements, a protective negative attitude predominated very often and there was a reluctance to go for ball, to attack the ball; a tendency to react rather than initiate.

The Waterford/Tipperary match in Cork in 1959 was a good example of the response of two teams to winning the toss. Complacent Tipperary won the toss and decided to hand over the strong wind advantage to poor lowly Waterford. From their lofty eminence as All Ireland champions, they (Tipperary) would absorb the Waterford pressure in the first half before administering a salutary hurling lesson in the second. Fortunately for Waterford, we were not privy to their script and even if we had been, we were too preoccupied with pursuing our own positive agenda which had two central elements: move the ball quickly on the ground and attack the ball in every position on the field. History records how effective the Waterford tactics were (halftime score Waterford 8-3 Tipperary 0-0) and how Tipperary's arrogance was punished. Those present on the day can vouch for the brilliant quick sweeping ground striking of Seamus Power, Grimes, Guinan, Frankie Walsh, Donal Whelan, John Kiely and Mick Flannelly. Tipperary had powerful defenders but the constant quick switching of play gave them no chance to use their strength.

But to return to the matter of home venue. Do you know that when Waterford qualified to meet Tipperary in a Munster Final the previous year 1958, that for some inexplicable reason, the match was fixed for Thurles. Why any sane Waterford official agreed to this venue baffles me. It is at variance with fair play and common sense. It is hardly necessary to add that Tipperary had a big win. Wonderful hurling venue as Thurles is and always was, playing at home made a massive difference to Tipperary.

Sunday week, Walsh Park hosts the meeting of ourselves and the league finalists. Our league form admittedly wasn't very impressive but we have Tipperary a very good match in that same league and our showing in Dungarvan against eventual champions Galway gives us reason for optimism. I'm never impressed too much by those tournament games leading up to the big game and everything really depends on a team's state of preparedness.

Hurling men always claim anyway that there is a huge difference between winter (league) hurling and the summer (championship) variety. If we accept that promise (enough good hurling teams seem to have proved it) why is there such a big difference? Two at least come to mind: the condition of players and the playing conditions. Players, even the most dedicated, are far from real fitness during the October/March half of the year and the generally slower pace of games can be coped with. When a team prepares for the championship, every aspect of preparation must be quickened and without a vigorous physical preparation, they stand a poor chance of maintaining momentum in a game and

finishing strongly. Tipperary's gallant battle against Kerry footballers last Sunday exemplified this very clearly. Kerry's superior fitness won the day once their midfield got on top and Tipperary's hard-earned lead slipped away. Finishing strongly, Kerry out sped and outscored the brave Tipperary men.

The present ground conditions influence the standard of play as well as the type of play to a great degree. Christy Ring always looked forward to hurling "when the daisies are up," that is this time of year. Sure every player and spectator knows as well as Ring did, that trying to hurl on heavy muddy pitches is difficult and not enjoyable. The constant lifting gives a marker a better chance to dispossess his opponent and the whole game is slower and fragmented. The dry hard sod that prevails just now is ideal for the game, racing to the ball is easier, lifting done properly is much easier and above all, present conditions are most conducive to ground hurling.

I hope the Waterford team realise what a great opportunity they have at Walsh Park. Few commentators, if any, give us a real chance. Yet already in the sixties and seventies, Cork came to Walsh Park wearing the champion's crown only to have Waterford send them away licking their wounds. In 1967, All Ireland champions Cork came to Waterford for a first round championship match. Parading their star-studded winning team of 1966, they expected to teach the Deciemmen a lesson. Before the final whistle sounded that July day, they had received as good a drubbing from us as they ever got and had a man sent off (full back O'Donoghue) into the bargain.

When next Cork came to visit us for a first round match (was it 1974? – I'm not sure), they had only the previous Sunday gone to Limerick and defeated a good Limerick team by a large score. I have a very clear memory of that sunny day: Cork players stretched out and relaxed in anticipation of the expected facile win, giving me a friendly languid salute, patronising us ever so lightly and treating the whole affair as an irritant which had to be endured for an hour. The big crowd present, predominantly Waterford, got the thrill of their lives as they watched unfancied Waterford put the Corkmen in their place. Once again Cork lost a man when goalie, Paddy Barry was sent off and they made a shock exit from a championship they were expected to win.

What message has all of that for Waterford players and supporters? Why of course that we have nothing to fear except fear itself and that anything can happen if we make it happen. But only if a team is both mentally and physically prepared. I'm taking it for granted that the physical work has been done well and that the team is not just fit but sharp and fresh as well on the day. That sharpness and freshness is most important. Without it, the alertness and quickness which defenders and forwards need will be absent. Overdo the heavy work or extend it too close to the game and all the snap and bubble are absent. Much better to err in training by doing a little too little than to do a little too much. I had experiences of overdoing it before some club and county games. The 1962 Munster Final was a very good example of a Waterford team leaving most of its strength behind it on the training grounds. Ironically our severe fitness regime bore fruit later that year when we had a fine win over Tipperary in the Oireachtas final, a game which Donie Nealon asserts was the best he ever played in.

The mental preparation is more difficult and far more important. Babs Keating or Cyril Farrell, say, would have no trouble getting a response from any team because of their high profile and record of achievements. There's an inbuilt eagerness to listen and learn. At the same time, the coach doesn't necessarily have to be as much in the public arena to do an effective job. He must be honest and truthful with his panel and try to deal with their worries and anxieties. What he tells them must be within their capacity to perform, be in accordance with common sense and advance the team's cause. He must lift the weight of responsibility off individual shoulders by stressing the collective responsibility of all fifteen, point

out that avoiding all mistakes isn't possible but how one reacts to a mistake is. The team best able to cope with set-backs comes out on top.

So now my dear Waterford coach, players, trainer, doctor, physio, bottlemen let's not look back for too long but set our gaze on the clash with Tipperary. Remember where Clare came from until they became convinced that they had as much right and as much talent as any Cork or Tipperary, Galway or Offaly man. Let us adopt the tactics which suit present ground conditions, take our courage in our hands and play positively and at pace. We will all be very proud of you because you won't dishonour the jersey which taught manners to many a team whose self-importance was greater than its ability.

Féile Na nGael 1996

June 14, 1996

The convocation of U-14 hurlers from each of the 32 county units and from Britain to celebrate the game of hurling in competition over one weekend annually was the inspired concept of Jim Ryan or more formally Séamus O'Riain, Uachtarán Chunamm Luthchleas Gael, that quiet, gently, genial Tipperary man who led our association so well during his tenure of office. Jim loved hurling, played it, supported it, nurtured it over very many years. Féile Na nGael stands as a fitting memorial to this great man's love of hurling and of young people.

In 1971, his dream became a reality thanks to the pioneering zeal of those in Tipperary who shared his vision and a mighty hosting of young hurlers gathered in Tipperary for a glorious few days – Thursday to Sunday, when hurling was played, watched and discussed by thousands. The young boys were thrilled with themselves and still, many years later, retain many happy memories of those blissful days and now love to recall them in their adulthood.

Of course none of this would be possible without generous sponsorship. Fortunately this financial support was readily forthcoming from that powerful international bottling company Coca Cola whose business tentacles have penetrated every area of the world and yet they have continued year after year to pour considerable resources into this national festival. They have been wonderful and their extraordinary generosity has ensured the continuing success of Seamus O'Riain's original idea. Féile Na nGael sponsorship by Coca Cola is an expression of their commitment to the development of young people and to the promotion of hurling. Many of their employees are hurling men and Donal Hickey and Jim Whelan are enthusiastic G.A.A. men as well as being personable and efficient executives of Coca Cola.

Each year since 1971 some new development has been linked to the basic idea, giving the festival a wider appeal and attracting more young people to active participation in the various events. Nowadays as well as hurling, there are camogie competitions for the girls, schools' quizzes are organised, visits by leading G.A.A. personalities are made to the schools, handball (great game) gets rightful recognition, skills competitions in camogie, hurling and handball are presented and the colourful and spectacular Féile Parade of all teams takes place on the Saturday, this year on June 22nd in Waterford at 3.30p.m. So Féile has itself grown and developed into a celebration of our distinctiveness, our Irishness, with the spotlight firmly focussed on our youth. And our young boys and girls have no hand ups, no inhibitions, so we got from them genuine sincere effort which, with its complete absence of cynicism, endears underage hurling to everyone.

There are four divisions in the Féile with all of our county's clubs being assigned to the division appropriate to their strength. The visiting team becomes quickly assimilated into the local community and there is a strong bonding between visiting and local hurlers.

The teams in Division One include Fourmilewater, Lismore, De La Salle and Mount Sion. They compete for the Christy Trophy, the premier award, one that any club would love to win. This impressive trophy is a representation of the Tower of Cloyne hand fashioned in sterling silver with the figure of Christy Ring worked in gold. It is only fitting that the great Christy should be commemorated because apart from his legendary place among hurling's immortals, he played a significant role in the staging of the national Féile finals in Cork in 1975 and 1976. This beautiful trophy commissioned in 1979 honours Christy's deep commitment to hurling and to Féile Na nGael.

The Canon Fogarty Trophy goes to the Division Two winners. Ballygunner, Roanmore, Dungarvan, Abbeyside, Cappaquinn and Colligan will be among those striving to get hands on this fine symbol of success, a tribute to the Tipperary priest who devoted so much of his life to hurling and to young people.

We have a special interest in the trophy which goes to the champions of Division Three, the Michael Crusack Trophy, presented to honour the memory of one of our association's founders. We compete in this division which includes Kill, Clonea, Tramore and Passage from the east who will battle it out with ourselves, Ballyduff, Ardmore, Ring and the teams representing Kildare, Derry, Meath, Carlow, Louth and Donegal.

The Dr Birch Trophy is presented to Division Four winners. Dr Birch was a Kilkenny man whom I met in St Kieran's on one occasion. He was a warm, caring man who had an informed interest in and genuine love of hurling and those who played it. He was convinced of hurling's efficacy in developing the character of youth and had a high regard for Féile Na nGael. Féile champions of Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim, Fermanagh as well as Ferrybank, Kilrossanty, Stradbally, Ballysaggart, Brickey Rangers and Shamrock's will try might and main to take away the Dr Birch Trophy.

The winners of Division Five will be presented with the McMahon Memorial Trophy and this section of Féile has an international flavour with the participation of London and Warwickshire. I'd love to see our English visitors playing but sadly it won't be possible because all the games in this small section, comprising Sacred Heart, Mount Sion 'B' and the two English teams takes place in Poleberry, Waterford. Still isn't it great to know that hurling is alive and well across the water and without the slightest disrespect to their hosts may I wish well to the hurlers from across the Irish Sea.

Féile in Waterford meant the setting up of a Féile Executive Committee as far back as last autumn and it was most fortunate to appoint as its Chairman, Stephen Power, Coolnasmear. Stephen has all the attributes of the ideal cathaoirleach and he is singularly committed to making Féile a success. He has familiarised himself with the work of every sub-committee and has maintained regular contact with the chairman of each, encouraging, supporting, facilitating and motivating. His innate courtesy and quiet efficiency are both impressive and highly effective. You could not fail to respond to Stephen's gentle urgings if there was any shred of decency in you. At meetings, he never adopts a hectoring autocratic tone. He always ensures that every viewpoint receives a sympathetic hearing and he conducts meetings with patience, understanding and decorum. Only God and Telecom Eireann know how many dozens of phone calls he has made in the discharge of his Féile duties. We are all proud of our Chairman and grateful that he so willingly shouldered the burden of what is a most demanding co-ordinating role.

This man's job description is national secretary Féile Na nGael but Pat Guthrie has a far wider brief than that of secretary. He, in fact, is Féile Na nGael, nationally and is recognised throughout the land as the heart of Féile. After his 25 years as national organiser, there is no aspect of Féile which is new to him. Any conceivable problem that could arise, he has already experienced it and dealt with it. He has attended many meetings with our club representatives and with the County Executive Committee over the last nine months which has entailed long drives and late hours because he lives in Templeogue, Dublin where he keeps those voluminous Féile files and other relative material. Pat is a stickler for punctuality (thank God) and chairs those big meetings with great skill and expedition. A hard task master, he makes stringent demands on himself and expects equally high standards of others. Being a highly organised fellow himself, Pat possesses brilliant organisational skills and a vast knowledge of all that Féile entails. His control and key involvement guarantees the success of Féile Na nGael 1996 in Waterford.

Féile Assessment

June 28, 1996

Last Sunday at approximately 4.30 at a time when Offaly were well on their way at Croke Park towards dismissing the challenge of Laois, Coca Cola Féile Portlárge 1996 came to an exciting end at Walsh Park with renowned James Stephens, Kilkenny edging in front of a brave and spirited Kilmallock, Co. Limerick champions, to capture Féile's premier hurling prize – the Christy Ring trophy.

It was a fitting climax to a memorable weekend, one which our County's people will remember for all of the right reasons. The challenge of hosting Féile Na nGael was responded to with eagerness and enthusiasm by our County Board and by our 34 clubs who pulled out all stops to show the nations that Waterford can do it. So may I salute and congratulate all of our club units for their considerable part in making Coca Cola Féile Portlárge fit to stand with the best ever such Féiles.

A high level of organisation ensured that hitches were few and minor. Painsstaking meticulous preparations had gone on for months with regular meetings at club and County Executive level. Targets were set, progress continually assessed, clubs motivated, difficulties tackled and overcome, problems solved.

In G.A.A. affairs, one irritating bad habit has too often persisted – a cavalier attitude to time keeping. The meeting time for 8.00p.m. rarely starts before 8.15 and if 8.00 sharp is specified, then the attendance may have to wait until up to nine. Similarly at local level, training scheduled for 7.35 may witness the late comers arriving up to eight while games generally start after the appointed time. Féile set new standards of courtesy in regard to time. Every game started right on time and all Féile events were right on schedule from the outset.

Saturday last was a wonderful day for the G.A.A. for our country. Up to 5,000 hurlers, camogie players and handballers participated in the highly spectacular Féile Parade. Assembling and controlling such huge numbers of young people was a daunting undertaking. But with careful planning and stewarding, willing club co-operation, this whole massive operation went off like clockwork. The buzz of excitement increased as each team took up its station along The Quay from 2.00p.m. onwards. The 16 bands were in readiness, the teams neatly turned out in their club colours and ready as time ticked away towards 3.30p.m. the famous Artane Boys Band swung round the corner of Barronstrand Street leading the huge parade as it marched towards Walsh Park, followed by the serried ranks of striding boys and girls with their beautiful, colourful banners. Every imaginable colour was on display providing an exciting kaleidoscope and making this the most spectacular outdoor event of Féile. Clubs vied with each other in their imaginativeness, inventiveness and resourcefulness and gave glorious witness to their pride in themselves, their club and county. No outdoor spectacle could exceed the splendour of last Saturday's Parade which literally brought traffic to a standstill and held spectators spell-bound. Remarkably traffic was back to normal some ten minutes after the Parade had passed.

The Féile Mass at Walsh Park was equally impressive. The orderly manner in which each team filed into its position, the disciplined attentiveness of the young people to the ceremonies and the delightful singing and playing of Cór Chnoc Síon, Mount Sion Silver Band and the Artane Boys Band contributed to enhancing a great community occasion graced by the presence of Most Rev. William Lee, Bishop of Waterford and Lismore; Canon William Moynan, Church of Ireland and many members of the clergy who concelebrated. It recalled in many ways the Papal visit to Ireland in 1979. There was the same sense of oneness and solidarity, the same burgeoning pride in ourselves and what we stood for. It would uplift any drooping spirit. It was great to be there.

What most people found so remarkable was that every single final started exactly at the time advertised. The ball was thrown in to get Division One Camogie Final underway at precisely

2.30p.m. not one minute before or a minute after. That game was a great struggle between two good teams. Templemore and Glen Rovers with the issue in doubt until late in the game. One Templemore girl caught the eye and this outstanding player was a difference between the sides. I saw an old friend John Grogan (the Cashel stylist who so often represented his county and who once played for Dunhill chatting with the Tipperary girls. "Are you with Templemore, John?", "I am", "Will you tell me who is that No. 12?" "Oh," he laughed, "that's my daughter." Sure enough this girl of exceptional ability scored almost the entire team total. Also one of the other forwards was her younger sister. What a wonderful day for those girls and for their parents. Is dual athair dóibh bheith go maith.

Precision also marked the final of Division One in hurling and all the formalities associated with it. The flag sheet of Féile, it was the climax of all the weekend's competitive striving. Both teams were out on the field and the presentation of trophies to Glen Rovers and Templemore proceeded. No sooner had that ceremony finished than the Artane Boys Band led the traditional parade of finalists. "Amhrán Na bhFiann" increased the tension and right on cue at precisely 3.30p.m. Michael Wadding was throwing in the sliotar to start the final event of 1996. The raucous roaring, the deafening din and the fluctuating fortunes of the contestants kept the huge attendance enthralled until the final whistle brought exultation to the famous city team from Kilkenny, James Stephens, alma mater of Fran Larkin, Brian Coady (they were there, I met them), Mick Crotty and Matt Ruth whose son David was on the victorious team. James Stephens richly earned their All Ireland because of the many adult members who devote an enormous amount of time to coaching the young and nurturing their natural hurling talents. Another club member is John Grace of Tramore who was there in support. It was great to meet Mick Jacob outstanding centre back for Wexford and Leinster some years back whose son Rory was a sweet striking forward with Oulart the Ballagh, in Division Two.

Tallow hosted Ballinscreen from Derry, Tony Scullion's club. From their first match on Friday morning until they met the Carlow champs at 12.30p.m. on Sunday, they remained unbeaten. They were a fine team, good strikers, great tacklers and were good on the ground ball when it suited. Not a huge team by any means, there was a competitive edge to all their matches and had a big following of Tallow people with them on Sunday at Walsh Park. Their All Ireland victory over Carlow was enjoyed by Tallow almost as much as they enjoyed it themselves. They had a hectic few days with us and won't ever forget Féile '96. Féile duties obliged me to be in Waterford for the three days and I saw no match until the Division Four Final went on at 11.30a.m. on Sunday. I was especially keen to watch Derry, a place I know and where I have many friends including Phil Stuart and Jim McKeever of older times and the Brolly's of Dungiven, Francie and his famous footballing son Joe, once an accomplished hurler until football took over. So on Sunday I saw Derry's determination sweep them past Carlow and will always remember how excited and emotionally involved their followers were. Do you know that when word came through from Tallow on Saturday evening, that the wee lads were in the final, 60 from Ballinscreen made the 253 mile journey by coach to cheer on their young heroes. Boy did they make themselves heard!

I was given charge of the All Ireland Féile Skills Competition held on the Friday afternoon and thanks to the expertise of Peter Power, Alan and Jonathan Moore, Paul Flynn and Shane Aherne it went off very smoothly indeed. Nicky Keane from Our Lady's Island (not the most fashionable club in Wexford) was the winner with a total of 42 marks out of 56, a 75% success rate. Nicky was a very good clean striker.

In the very first skill (striking two sliotars from the ground and sending them between two flags 5 metres apart, a distance of 20 metres away, first from the right and then repeating the operation from the left). Nicky recorded maximum points. His striking of the two 45 metre frees, one from opposite each goal-post, was impeccable, giving him full points. Lofting over the bar from 20 and 23 metres was no trouble to him as he earned the full 12 pts. Taking penalties was his only weak spot but then the intimidating presence of Michael Beresford had a big influence because Michael stopped some great shots. He could do nothing about the

missiles fired at him by Tony Fox of Meath and Conor McMahon of Clare whose bullet-like drives to the corner of the net left Michael helpless.

Vincent Leiters from Antrim was second with 40pts and Kevin Cleere, Kilkenny third on 38pts. I was astonished that neither Cork nor Tipperary was present. John Fitzgerald, Cork's representative arrived for the finals on Saturday! Gives the term, the late John Fitzgerald an entirely new meaning.

Jim Ryan among many past presidents, the realisation of whose dream Féile became, was in Waterford for the three days. He must surely be astonished, even now after 26 years of continuing development, how highly sophisticated and streamlined his original concept has become. That's without a doubt a tribute to the national executive but we in Portlárge can be pardoned our justifiable pride in this the latest chapter in Féile's great success story because we showed ourselves and our visitors that Waterford can do it when it's put up to us. The official compliments extended to us afterwards gave us that pleasure which derives from a job well done. Araghaidh linn go 1977.

Hurling Skills

July 5, 1996

Hurling's enduring attraction is a composite of many things: the speed of the game, the frequency of scoring, the manliness of the exchanges, the excitement it generates, the ability to control and use possession profitably which it exhibits. Above any other of its characteristics it is the 125 (roughly) individual skills of the game which set it apart from all other field games. It is extremely unlikely that any present day player in the country has even half of them. No hurler does and it would be virtually impossible to find time to practise them. Far better to give adequate attention to say, eight or ten skills which must be used in every game and master them. But even that takes up a big proportion of training time so it is only those hurlers who practise outside of the regular team sessions who achieve a high standard.

What promoted those reflections was the All Ireland Skills competition of Féile na nGael. It is just possible that some counties (though they would need to be removed from the mainstream of civilisation) don't know about it even though it has been an integral part of every Feile for 26 years. Every county in Ireland was contacted well in advance of Feile and issued with all relevant literature. It seems that 13 counties care little about skills since only 19 counties were represented at the finals. Can it be possible after all the years of promotional work nationwide and the setting up of coaching structures within all counties that hurling skills have such little or no appeal for the boys in Cavan, Cork, Derry, Donegal, Leitrim, Longford, Louth, Mayo, Monaghan, Roscommon, Sligo, Tipperary and Tyrone? I have been in most of these counties at one time or another and know only too well that their hurlers, their young hurlers especially, have as much love of and interest in the game as those of the other nineteen. In fact there is no county in Ireland, even the weakest, where a handful of skilled performers can't be found.

I know Patsy Murphy of Dundalk, as fluent a striker of the ball as I've seen. Playing with Louth he could pick off points from a variety of ranges and positions and would shine in any company. Joe Henry was a brilliant forward with Mayo who showed in a League match in Dungarvan some years ago why he was such a celebrated hurler. Peter Stevenson of Derry won an All Star award at football before falling in love with hurling and distinguishing himself in the hurling teams of Derry and Ulster. No, it is an indictment of over 40% of our County Boards or Bord na nOg that lads were denied the chance to compete against their peers in a test of hurling skills. It was the Board's responsibility to encourage and promote the primacy of skill and to allow some by the significant honour of representing his county on a national stage, an honour which any young lad would treasure.

Isn't it incredible that Cork and Tipperary for all their record number of Munster and All Ireland titles in minor, under 21, junior and senior hurling, for all of the generous sponsorship which they enjoy, for all of that huge investment which they have made in coaching and for all of their high profile nationally couldn't ensure that one boy was in Waterford on one afternoon in June to uphold the honour of his county? Surely this must constitute a serious dereliction of duty or are they so insensitive to a boy's love of skills and the enjoyment he derives from exercising it.

Waterford, whatever its other failings, has always been represented at the Feile Skills Competition and has done pretty well over the last quarter of a century. Shane Aherne, Ferrybank, was our first winner before David Kiely, Melleray, later defeated all comers to prove himself the most skilled hurler in Ireland. We came very close a few more times and Tallow lads Stephen Curley and James Murray were the unlucky ones in recent years; they failed narrowly in their bid for All Ireland success. The point anyway is that no boy should be denied this distinction because of official indifference or lack of interest. To think that our most northerly county, Antrim, sent Vincent Leiters the best part of 300 miles while two of our honours – laden near neighbours ignored the whole affair.

Speaking of Antrim and Vincent who represented them didn't he do very well, being second, just two points adrift of the winner. But then that should be no great surprise because anyone who was ever in Antrim knows of their passion for hurling, the warmth of their welcome for hurling men, their pride in their native game and their eagerness to learn more. They like the game seriously and always did. I have very clear recollection of a National League game, Antrim V Waterford many years ago in Loughill (the most northerly pitch in Ireland, near Ballycastle). We had an almost full strength side and had no intention of allowing Antrim to beat us so we didn't lack ambition or motivation. At the call of time only a goal separated us after a close hard game. In fact, the defence was quite busy and the goalie lucky to thwart Seamus Richmond right on time. Seamus found a gap, soloed in closely pursued by Jackie Condon until he was on the edge of the square. He elected to make a handpass into the corner on his right only for the goalie, diving to his left to turn it round the post. A forward in a similar situation nowadays would boot the ball giving the goalie no chance. Later that year Waterford brought the McCarthy Cup to the Deises for the second time.

Vincent Leiters standard-bearer of Antrim didn't hail from Cushandall or Loughiel or St John's. He was from what would be regarded as a very unfashionable club in Antrim, Tir na nOg (no, Oisín wasn't his great grand uncle) but he was a lovely striker of the ball. He secured full marks in Skill 3 and again in Skill 4. Skill obliges a player to lift, catch and strike over the bar. Two sliotars are placed on the 35 metre line. The competitor runs, jab lifts the sliotar, catches it in his hand and strikes for a point. This sequence is performed from the left and from the right, six marks for each successful attempt. Each sliotar may be placed by the competitor, one opposite each goalpost. The crucial element in the performance of this test is that he must run and keep running until he has struck. Some lads jogged, others halted in their stride just before striking so in those cases no mark was awarded. Hurling coaches should advise lads to always strike across the ball. Hitting under the sliotar imparts backspin and slice so it slows and misses the target. Another reminder to competitors is to use their 4 steps profitably while the ball is in the hand before striking it. Those 4 strides give time to look at the posts something you will notice every good hurler doing before shooting. Vincent's two frees were lovely efforts and in each case he made sure to follow through. Had he succeeded with one more lifted sliotar (sideline cut) or penalty he would have won the competition.

Skill 4, freetaking, earned Vincent maximum marks also. Here the taker places two sliotars on the 45 metres line, one opposite each goalpost. Four points are awarded for each point scored. Each time Vincent's lift was good (essential), that is high enough to allow the shoulders to turn thus enabling a full swing to be made. His follow through was smooth and high. Many competing players lashed the ball too hard, an obvious temptation and drove it right and wide. Interestingly, Mike Hooligan of Limerick was in splendid isolation around midfield in the second half of that momentous Clare/Limerick game, when he snapped a clearance. Under no pressure he lashed, it unmercifully and it sailed high and wide to the right. On the Tallow team of 1984/85 was a powerful hitter of the ball. Mick Beecher, centre back. Mick was an immensely strong fully, committed performer who often hit the ball too hard. Whenever he took a 70 I tried to position myself near enough for him to hear me. It isn't a long puck, Mick. Lift it well, hit it early, have a big long follow through and keep your head still. Free takers could do worse than follow that advice whether Billy Ormonde of Lismore, Mick Jacob of Wexford, Tony Keady of Galway or any other master of that skill, they all had that calm controlled striking of what is not, in truth, a long puck anyway.

Another thing about free taking or just lifting is the absolute necessity to concentrate on each constituent part of the skill properly. Unlike lifting the ball all attention should focus on that alone. Only when the ball is well lifted can the other movements be properly executed. Remember Gary Kirby's fluffed lift when his mind raced ahead of the action? A missed free resulted. Kevin Cleere of Kilkenny, third in the Skills final would almost surely have won if he hadn't allowed his concentration to lapse. He jab lifted the ball perfectly and then took his eye and mind off the next step, catching it in his hand preparatory to striking it. The ball fell to the ground. Six marks gone. We all remember some instance of this lack of concentration

perhaps the Laois/Offaly Leinster Senior Hurling Semi-final a fortnight ago providing the most recent example. The whole nation saw on television how Laois defender John O'Sullivan conceded an own goal by failing to keep his eye on the lifted ball until it was in his grasp. Concentration has to be total and we are all so very very fallible.

A Northern Light, U-16 Hurlers Visit to Tyrone a Huge Success

July 12, 1996

There have been many great occasions in the famed and illustrious history of our club. This was one such, and will be recalled with pride whenever great sporting moments are recounted.

The dawn had barely broken on Friday morning as we began the long journey to be amongst our hurling friends in that part of our country where the promoting and nurturing of all our aims and ideals is an integral part of everyday life. Coalisland, in the beautiful County of Tyrone was our destination to participate in the Sciath Buan Lios an tStruthain (Lisnastrine Shield) tournament. Our host club for the weekend was Cumann Iomana Naomh Columcille, Cluain and Oileain. A fledgling club, being in existence just ten years, it represents all that we love and hold dear within our association. Its primary objective is to promote and develop the game of hurling in an area renowned for its football prowess and believe me they have already made remarkable strides towards this end. Bearing in mind the infrastructure and tradition of hurling which we are fortunate to have inherited in our part of our land it makes it all the more remarkable what the boys and girls of Cumann Iomana Naomh Columcille have achieved in theirs.

So, this weekend was the bringing together of the lads from (a) Naomh Columcille, (b) Eire Og – an Charrraig Mhor, Tir Eoghain, (c) Ruairi Og, Bun Abhann Dalla, Aontroim (Cushendall, Co. Antrim), and ourselves to – the words of Liam Mulcahy, Cathaoirleach Naomh Columcille, “celebrate the ancient game together in friendship on an occasion full of all the unique endeavour that goes to make hurling the wonderful art form that it is.”

Run in conjunction with a multi-cultural music festival the atmosphere which prevailed in the town was one to be savoured and will linger in the memory forever. Marching bands from Poland, Russia, Lithuania, Croatia to mention but some, was a sight to behold. I will never forget the sight and the feeling as the boys and their mentors of Cumann Peil agus Iomana gullach an Iarainn, proudly displaying the blue and gold marched in unison through the streets of Coalisland to the applause of the thousands of people who lined the route. I have been witness to many a spectacle over the years through my involvement with hurling but this was something special and I know that it made a lasting impression on our young lads to be part of such an occasion.

We were met on arrival by Liam and his family Niamh, Ciara agus Donnachadha. Jimmy, Eamonn, Justin and bus driver Colin were also on hand to make us welcome and following a short rest and some refreshments the boys retired for the night to the homes of their host families. To these families we are extremely grateful.

On the Saturday morning it was down to business and the hurling began in earnest. From the throw-in of the first game at 10.30a.m. right through to the final whistle at 6p.m. that evening the pitch reverberated to the sound of the clash of the ash and the standard of hurling was a joy to watch. I have often remarked on the passion and fervour with which Northern teams approach their games and this occasion was no exception. What some may lack on the finer skill points is adequately compensated for with effort. This is not to suggest that there are not skilful hurlers there because there are many, but it is the intensity of their play that I admire. With four teams involved each team played one another with the top two teams going through to the final.

The boys from the famed Cushendall club in the glens of Antrim were our opponents in the first game. As Liam Mulcahy was later to remark when paying tribute to this Cushendall club – “You were a beacon of light in the dark days of Ulster hurling” – and we all remember that

day in Croke Park in 1989 when many of their representatives did battle with Tipperary for Antrim in the Senior Hurling All Ireland Final. A fitting reward for many years of endeavour.

At the end of a closely fought game (our own one) we emerged winners on a scoreline of 2-4 to 2-1. Our next game was against Eire Og and this we won by 3-7 to 0-0. Our host club were our next opponents and this too was another highly entertaining game. A closely fought match we eventually won on a scoreline of 4-5 to 2-1. Liam, Damien, Jimmy, Justin, Ann and the rest of their mentors can be justifiably proud of their charges. The work that they are doing is already showing through and with further support and encouragement from neighbouring clubs and local individuals they will be a force to be reckoned with in time to come.

And thus we qualified for the final with the boys from Cushedall coming through their section. A game that we eagerly looked forward to and weren't to be disappointed. From the throw-in it was championship stuff all the way. Barry Power in goal showed many fine touches. A name that was mentioned more than once over the weekend the Power name is as familiar in that locality as it is here at home. Your many friends up there send on their greetings to you Ned. Barry brought off some marvellous saves all through.

At this juncture, I had better point out that over the course of the four games, we played, all the twenty-one boys on the panel and all played their part equally. It was difficult to pick who would be on the first fifteen for the final.

In front of Barry we had Mossie McGrath (what a match he played) Maurice O'Brien and Thomas Donovan. Maurice O'Brien's last-ditch tackle and clearance in the final minutes of the game was a classic by any standards. Thomas Donovan from the Shamrock club was excellent all through and continues the camaraderie developed over the years between our clubs. We had three boys in all from the Shamrocks, John Baldwin (a delightful striker of the sliotar) and Pdraig Tobin, who took some great scores when the pressure was on, completed the trio. Their contribution was magnificent.

Our half back line consisted of Martin Ryan, whose first time touches and clearances were brilliant, and William McDonnell, once again shades of yore, who knows no fear and is a joy to watch. At centre back the commanding and powerful presence of Sean Slattery. This fellow is captain of the present team and is a model hurler. His effect on the lads as a leader couldn't be overstated and his performance would grace any occasion.

Lar na Pairce stood the mighty cousins Shane McCarthy and David O'Brien. Their love of hurling knows no bounds and the many hours they have spent practising their craft was evident to all. I couldn't separate these two. Both equally adept in the air, on the ground, left or right and always the maximum effort. That David was selected as overall player of the tournament was right and proper and hugely deserved. The cheer he received was something else. Well-done David.

Our half forward line was John Baldwin, Paul Murray and Ronan Cronin. John gave a mighty performance in the final and is another one to watch in the future. At centre forward the sweet striking and equally powerful Paul. All through the tournament this fellow showed the way by example. He scored some delightful points from far out and was referred to by many of our northern friends. On the other wing a lad who came close to being player of the tournament, Ronan. Referee Sean Quinn was particularly taken by him and his work rate was also magnificent.

On the edge of the square stood Pdraig Tobin and as I've said this fellow was a powerhouse. No fear and no nonsense attacking which yielded some great scores. In the corner we had the top scorer of the tournament in William Henley. Over the course of the four games we scored a total of 13 goals and 22 points and William was responsible for a lot

of those. One in particular in the final few minutes sealed our victory which had hung in the balance for so long. Top of the right in the other corner, young Paul O'Brien. Remember me mention the skills competition for Feile some weeks back – well here was one from the array. Paul, a ball coming in at speed, running out, doubling first time, roof of the net. That in the match against Naomh Columcille and a classic by any standards. Completing our line up over the four games were Seamus Mills, Paul Kearney, Aidan Kearney, Alan Tobin, Michael Norris and Kevin Keating. Each of these lads played their part at various stages and did us proud.

At his stage, on behalf of our club I wish to pay the highest compliment to the twenty-one boys with whom we travelled north. You were a credit to your parents, families and our Gaelic Athletic Association. Back in 1884 a one Michael Cusack and other Founding Members met in Hayes's Hotel in Thurles to form our Association. One of their aims was to unite the people of Ireland through sport and a love of all things Gaelic. The bonding of a people, forming an identity through hurling, football, camogie, handball and Irish music and dance. They could hardly have envisaged their success to date. Today you are part of that dream and you upheld it with honour.

Equally, we pay tribute to all the boys we met and played against over the weekend. You too are a credit to your families and our games. We look forward to a return visit.

We won the final on a scoreline of 4-6 to 3-3. There were great scenes of excitement as the lads were presented with the victor's trophies. A magnificent trophy in the design of the Celtic Cross I know they will be cherished forever. At the reception Liam Mulcahy thanked everyone for their participation and help. It was an emotional Liam who bade us farewell on our return journey. We greatly appreciate your hospitality and your work in promoting the game Liam and we thank you for inviting us up. To Mr and Mrs Noel Gillis we say thanks for your welcome at the Brackaville G.A.A. club and to all the ladies who served us tea and sandwiches. We know that no effort was spared over all and our thanks to anyone unintentionally overlooked. A special word of thanks to Ann O'Neill. Our best wishes to Bainisteori, Bun Abhann Dalla, Alec MacDonald and his team and the boys and mentors of Eire Og as an Charraig Mor. Well done to Damien O'Neill Mor for his excellent programme, of which there are now many by the Banks of the Bride.

Our sincere gratitude also to Sean Quinn who refereed all the games on the day. Mile Buiochas a Sheain.

This report would be incomplete without a special word of thanks to Rachael Ryan and Colin Cunningham. The organising of the trip and the preparation of the lads was top class and went without a hitch. A job well done. Club Chairman Sean Sheehan, juvenile officers Johnnie Geary and Fin McCarthy and myself completed the six adults who were in tow and all helped to ensure the smooth running of the venture.

Sunday was the day for relaxing even if our time was short. Following Mass at 9.30a.m. we travelled to our newly – found friends from Feile, Baile na Scrin in Derry to play a practise match. A diplomatic draw was the outcome here and great to meet up again.

Back to Coalisland for the parade and then preparations for the journey home.

It was a weary but satisfied bunch who got into Cork train Station in the early hours. The only crib was that Mossie had the best seat in the house for most of the journey!! Other little bits of news along the way was that having met up some of the crew from the giant J.F.K. American warship there is now a sliotar nestling in some crew members quarters on board somewhere on the high seas. It is also now common knowledge that the Chairman wakes with the dawn just when others are beginning to sleep and god help any who may lay claim to the banner when Finn is in possession.

Before our departure Rachael Ryan, Secretary Juvenile Committee presented Liam Mulcahy and his club with a beautiful piece of Waterford Glass to mark the occasion. Sean on behalf of the overall committee thanked them for their kindness towards us and wished them the best for the future.

Our thanks to everyone concerned. To our own ladies committee for their donation, to the people who supported our walk to raise funds and to Austin O'Brien who sponsored his bus to and from the train station. To Richie Pratt for being on hand to deliver us safely and to everyone who supported us in any way. As Muller himself said – "ar aghaidh leis an iomaint."

More Provincial Final Thoughts

July 26, 1996

Apropos my comments on half time last week, a few more instances of the use (and maybe the misuse) of this interval, come to mind. Whether at club or inter-county level, the mid-match break had better be utilised to your team's advantage and actually needs one's thoughts to be organised and one's demeanour to be calm. If the coach's temperament isn't good he may have let his heart rule his head in the first half, too emotionally involved to enable him to read the game properly and to isolate those areas which need attention.

Time out is allowed in basketball but no such luxury is permitted to hurlers, footballers or camogie players. Given the speedy nature of hurling it would be hard to imagine such sudden unscheduled breaks in play which would ruin the gathering excitement of a close game.

Quite a number of years ago, I was a Waterford senior hurling selector. Waterford were playing Limerick in a league game at Dungarvan. The first half didn't go too well for us and trooped off at half time 4-1 to 1-9 in arrears. Our coach, for want of a better word to describe the man, rounded on the team, abusing them wholesale for conceding sloppy goals and recording five wides. He posed a few inane rhetorical questions such as "when are ye going to wake up? What do ye think ye're doing? Have ye any pride in Waterford?"

I suppressed my disgust and impatience until he had finished and then as calmly as I could, I said something like this. "Hold on a minute lads, I saw that first half too and things aren't so bad really. You've outscored them two to one, four lousy fluke goals and a point (5 scores) to a goal and nine fine points (10 scores) for us. We had five wides. Our striking is better than theirs. We have had more possession than they, are just one point behind and playing into the road goal (the scoring goal). Trust yourselves and believe in yourselves. Keep shooting for points and I promise you this game will be yours." I can't say what effect that mouthful had on them, but we won and recorded 2-9 in the second half.

I referred a couple of weeks ago to "the hump on the road." That jolly or unexpected development, which can disconcert him who isn't prepared for it. I wonder what, if any, affect the pre game Wexford positional changes had on Offaly last Sunday week. No one, including Billy Dooley, expected him to be on anyone else except Larry O'Gorman. I suppose an experienced chap like Billy wouldn't be put off by that little detail. But what about Larry's opponent at midfield? Surely it never entered his head that he would be facing the left full back. What it all adds up to really is that your mental preparations should include providing for any deviation from the obvious or predictable course of a game and that your preoccupation with your own preparation would not exclude having to face a different formation to that announced and published.

On many a pre-match occasion, Tallow were cautioned to beware of the opposition lineout, not to be too surprised at unexpected repositionings. We tried to anticipate such moves and our reaction to them. One game, a county senior hurling semi-final, in 1976 I think, showed how it paid to ponder on this matter in advance of the game. We were playing Lismore in Cappoquin and, of course, Ducky Ormonde, their great score-getter, got serious consideration in our discussions. We expected that he would start in his county position at right full forward. If so we agreed that we were not going to move our centre back Liam O'Brien back on Ducky. We had every confidence in left full Richie McNamara and the other backs to deal with the Lismore attack.

Our midfield was strong and we stressed to our half forward line their vital role in pressurising one of Lismore's greatest supply sources to the attack, that half back line whose clearance so often gave good ball to Ducky. If matters worked out for us, the fitful supply of good ball would compel Lismore to send Ducky outfield where it happened that we were very strong.

Easy now to tell you that our thinking was right, but really that is precisely what happened to enable us come out on top and go on to appear in a county final against Portlaw.

Switches are great when they work, especially when those involved are mentally prepared for them. Ideally, players likely to be moved should be made aware of that possibility beforehand. Not easy I admit, but hugely beneficial to those involved in the changes, a huge boost to their confidence. The first thought to cross the mind of a player ordered to switch is the hollow feeling that he was not doing the business and this depressing thought puts extra pressure on him. Switching Ciaran Carey and Mike Houlihan in their games for Limerick worked a treat this year because Tom Ryan prepared them for this move.

In the second half of the 1957 All Ireland, Waterford were in trouble. Star midfielder Johnny O'Connor was not at his best and Kilkenny were getting on top in this area. Twelve minutes remained when the selectors decided to move Johnny and bring out John Kiely. The way to do that effectively since it hadn't been discussed beforehand was the Paddy Leahy way. One selector should have run in to O'Connor with a message: "Johnny, go in there to the square and tell Kiely to come out – we need a goal." The other selector would simultaneously rush in to John Kiely with an urgent plea that he was needed at midfield.

Do you know what actually happened? One man, a mild and gentle fellow too, dashed in and called Johnny O'Connor aside. "Would you like to go in full forward, Johnny?" he asked. "I would in my -----," was the snappy reply, "-----off!" I was a sub and witnessed the whole thing. We lost by one point. I haven't forgotten the episode nor the lessons it teaches about player management.

To be honest, it was Paddy Leahy who first prompted me to see the efficacy of his method of preserving the dignity and self esteem of those involved in a switch. Paddy was a wonderful character, droll, roguish and shrewd whose understanding of human nature with all its quirks and foibles, was legendary. He was Tipp's greatest coach and this incident is but one of many where his handling of two prickly individuals was superb. The two were Ossie Bennett, masseur to Tipp teams and Gerry Doyle, sadly deceased, who was with every Tipp team of the fifties and sixties.

They had an obsession with being in the team photograph and some of the team complained that the subs never got a look in with the two gents hogging the limelight. "Leave it to me," drawled Paddy, who drew Ossie aside one night at training. "Look Ossie, Doyle tries to be in every photo. Would you mind engaging him in conversation next Sunday while the team picture is being taken." Ossie agreed. Seizing his chance the following night, he said to Gerry: "Bennett has to poke his face into every camera and some of the lads had enough of it. Would you ever mind keeping him talking while the photographers are busy next Sunday, like a good man. "Paddy must have chuckled softly on the Sunday to see the two in deep and earnest conversation as the cameras clicked in the middle of the field!

The Munster hurling final proved beyond doubt that the common perception of Limerick as a one-man scoring team was well wide of the mark. In that game, Gary Kirby was particularly quiet, contributing only one point and that from a free. This was the best possible thing for the other Limerick forwards. Now they know they can contribute and a big weight has been removed from Gary's shoulders. Besides, with Gary restored to his brilliant best, Limerick will be even more formidable in the future.

Have you noticed the gradual change of style in Wexford's hurling? Before Liam Griffin took over, Wexford's story was one of heartbreaking disappointment, of self-destruction and failure to measure up, especially on the big occasion. Their style and the type of player they selected combined to a big extent to shape their game. That game imposed a style on the team which never allowed them to realise their full potential. Picking, handling every ball, trying to catch everything in the air and solo-running were features of that Wexford game, as

was lashing in every ball high to the forwards. No variation. Predictable. How Kilkenny and Offaly loved playing them!

Patiently and persistently, Liam Griffin changed that and even yet he has to keep drumming in the message and structuring the training so that the ball goes in to the forwards quick and low, that the whip on the ground facilitates this, that you move to make room before attempting a score, glancing at the posts. Eamonn Scallan did this to perfection in the first half.

In the Leinster final the solo was used selectively. Larry Murphy headed for goal once he had outstripped his marker and forced a penalty in the first half and left Kevin Martin in his wake in the second half before shooting a beautiful point on the run. Wexford are now far more direct and aware. They are also more composed and confident. It will take a very good team to beat them.

Born Hurlers

February 7, 1997

We have all heard the expression "he's a born hurler" and I'm not sure what precisely is meant by it. Taken literally the statement isn't true because at birth no person is predestined to be a hurler or footballer, a soccer or rugby player, a cricket or tennis player. Few would deny that parental influence is a major factor as a child's home environment has a positive or negative effect during those early formative years of a child's life. For some games, it is not too important that the player should start young but for camogie or hurling, the old Irish saying, "tosach maith leath na hoibre" is very apt indeed, With those games, a high degree of co-ordination is required so the younger they start the better so long as the caman is the correct size, small and short enough to allow little hands to control its use and facilitate the acquisition of a wristy stroke. Giving a young player a hurley at a tender age of 4 or 5 promotes the development of their wrists and prepares him or her too for playing badminton and tennis later on. Every good hurler or camogie player can strike quickly, a trait which derives from that flexibility of wrist which cannot be cultivated if the player is introduced to the game too late. And too late means 10 or 11 or 12 years of age by which time suppleness of wrist is too difficult to achieve.

Tom Cashman and Tony O'Sullivan were Cork's most skilful artists since Christy Ring. They first caught a hurley when very young. Cashman, in particular, was a joy to watch. His speedy hands and whiplash strokes were breathtaking as all who ever watched him in full flight will testify. His style and class lit up any match he played. With his polish and poise, he made it look easy to many thousands over the span of his career. And the extraordinary thing about players of Tom's class is that he still retains in those hands of his that same artistry which adorned many of the great games he played. The speedy wrists survive the ravages of time but the high level of agility, the supporting stamina and mental alertness have all succumbed to the eroding influence of the years.

Tony O'Sullivan was expert at hitting a right-handed shot, on the run, from the right wing over the bar. A difficult stroke to make because there is a strong tendency to hit up under the ball thus back-spinning it to the right and wide. Tony's supple wrists allowed him to hit the ball squarely and accurately and to record many spectacular points.

I wasn't born into a hurling family, into a family with a hurling tradition or history of hurling success. My parents viewed hurling with tolerance and sympathy and no little affection. But I was reared in a hurling stronghold, Dungarvan, and in my schooldays I had hurling heroes to inspire me – Willie Barron, Christy Moylan, Jimmy Mountain, Declan Good, Tom Greaney, John Keane, the great Tallowmen, Mick and Sonny Curley, John Hartigan, the Sheehans. I watched them whenever I got the chance. In those days we young lads, had no money so we used to park ourselves outside the small gate at the Gaelic Field on match days and wait for the gatemen to take pity on our penury and beckon us in. Mickey Wise was the gateman and we tried to soften his heart as early as possible so as not to miss much of the match. Many a frustrating day we stood impatiently and waited as the cheering rose and fell with the fluctuating fortunes of the contestants and we willed Mickey to take us out of our agony. Once inside, it was bodies pressed against the railing, eyes glued to the players as we identified them and their heroics. How we would have, then, scoffed at and derided any suggestion that one day we would share in the glory and acclaim of big successful days toggled out and playing in the same field. Unknown to ourselves, the tiny seeds of ambition were being sown on those exciting Sunday evenings in the Gaelic Field, Dungarvan.

The chief interest of our young lives was hurling and a major influence in developing it was the school, Dungarvan C.B.S. Here our love of the game was nurtured and we received plenty of encouragement and support. The Brothers, as they have done everywhere they taught, ensured that there was a regular supply of suitable hurleys and sufficient games on a regular basis to nourish our passion for the game. Br Rogers, a wonderful facilitator and motivator

whom I referred to already in a piece about the Christian Brothers (I had a lovely letter from him lately, he's 80 with the same acquisitive mind he always possessed) focused our attention on the games of hurling and football and inculcated a healthy competitive attitude in us when we were 8 or 9 year of age. He enthused us to the extent that we hurled a lot outside of matches.

We hurled especially on the road and on a piece of roadway with a store at one end. This tobacco warehouse belonged to a local merchant on O'Connell Street, Jim Barron. The large main door of this store provided a ready-built goal, being 18 feet wide by 10 feet in height. The lower half of the door was of solid timber (it needed to be) but unfortunately for Jim the top portion consisted of a number of neat square panes of glass, the purpose of which was, I presumed, to allow light into the store. Determined as we were to keep the shots low, I'm afraid our enthusiasm and boyish exuberance overcame our best intentions so that more than light entered Jim's store, as the tinkling of glass announced.

Before the poor goalie could be attacked for incompetence, there was a mass disorganised retreat from the front leaving only a broken pane and a lost ball somewhere in the silence of neat boxes of the best Virginian leaf.

Unfortunately for Jim Barron the tobacconist, this scenario had a habit of repeating itself as Jim's tolerance of the game of hurling declined in direct proportion to the number of broken panes. Finally in the light of the increasing high casualty count of shattered glass, Jim finally saw the light (sorry about the pun) and made a pragmatic decision: he would reduce his ever-soaring blood pressure and restore some measure of stability to his fretful life by covering all the apertures in the top half of the door with wooden panels. Had we been present when this momentous decision was taken, we would have greeted it with warm applause, the triumph of the sensible over the meretricious. Peaceful co-existence ensued.

With regard to hurling on the street (the decline, nay, the disappearance of this regular feature of the thirties, forties and fifties is a major reason for the sharp drop in hurling standards) our only source of distraction and interruption was the sudden appearance of a member of the Garda Síochána. Our local man Bill Giblin was a kindly man who, in the interests of safety, was anxious to discourage ball playing on the public road and in pursuit of that aim made regular cycle patrols of the area – that is after experience had taught him that patrolling on foot left him at a disadvantage against speedy law-breakers. Had he asked our opinion we would have told him that the bicycle was more of an encumbrance than an advantage. When we espied the uniformed figure on the bike, plan A was speedily implemented. Snatching the ball, the teams scattered into the houses of Keating Street – McGraths, Moylans, O'Sullivans, any port in a storm. Meanwhile back at the ranch, Garda Giblin had dismounted, propped his bike against the kerb of the footpath and made for the nearest escape route. But by the time he had completed the preliminaries, the trail was cold. You see by going right through, we exited via the back door into the rear of St Brigid's Terrace where safe havens abounded. Poor Bill, he always drew a blank but I'm sure the exercise was good for him.

So it seems a "born hurler" has somehow to be made. Jackie Power was one of Limerick's greatest hurlers, a man who not alone won All Ireland medals in his county's green shirt but whose versatility saw him star in a variety of positions. He also became a key member of a succession of Munster Railway Cup teams. Jackie and family moved to Tralee in the fifties and his young son, Ger grew up surrounded by football and footballers with scarcely a hurley in sight.

Ger Power went on to be a winning All Ireland, League and Inter-Provincial footballer and won numerous other awards including the All Star memento and his name will ever be associated with that era of unprecedented success for Kerry football in the seventies and eighties. Had the family not left Limerick, isn't it most likely that Ger would have been a hurler

like his father and, given his natural athletic attributes, achieved the same measure of success as a hurler as he earned with Kerry as a footballer.

Many years previous to the Ger Power era, there was a very good young Tipperary hurler who became a shining star of Tipperary Minor hurling teams and Thurles C.B.S. teams of the forties. Many people found it extremely hard to either spell or pronounce his name because it wasn't Irish.

His name was Vilhelm Steiglitz. You see the Steiglitz family came to Thurles from Czechoslovakia and Steiglitz Snr took up a position as a sugar cook in Thurles Beet Factory. Vilhelm grew up in what was then a hotbed of hurling and became an accomplished exponent of the game. You can best imagine yourself what the standard of Senior hurling in Czechoslovakia was like yet despite his origins, Vilhelm did his family proud on the hurling field. His usual position was right half forward and I have very clear remembrance of his low centre of gravity, his speed, strength, ball control and accuracy. With a name like his, Vilhelm fascinated us and then tormented us as we tried to come to terms with the bizarre notion of the "born hurler" from mid Europe.

Rewards And Awards

March 14, 1997

There is no greater reward or satisfaction from any endeavour than the knowledge of having given one's all after investing one's best efforts in thorough conscientious preparation. If that success stems from it – shared generously by team-mates bonding together in pursuit of a goal the joy is greatly increased and shared. Team games have that social element which the game for individuals hasn't got and the good team player is, I think, a very wholesome, community orientated individual – generous, understanding, co-operative and keenly aware of the importance of shared responsibility. He is only too well aware of the fragility and fickleness of what we call success and is consequently never triumphalist in victory or completely despondent in defeat. Well adjusted in other words.

There are players who regard training as a kind of barely-tolerable imposition, a necessary evil to be endured. I must confess that I loved training and derived more enjoyment from it than from actual games. Training brings to players a sense of well being and strength, physical and mental, which increases confidence and enables them to face the stiffest challenge. The collective strength of the panel is greater than the sum total of individual fitness. Seldom enough can a player claim to enjoy an important game except in retrospect when he has played well and his team has won. Games of a serious nature place too much responsibility on the participants to allow them the luxury of self-indulgence. Only in training may a hurler or footballer make mistakes without having to pay the price, to identify weaknesses in his game and apply the remedy, to discover more about himself. Training provides time for perfecting skill and building those reserves of self confidence which are by-products of careful preparation. The shared hardship, sweat, pains and aches mould any bunch into a formidable team. Even the highest-numbered sub identifies with and integrates with the most valuable first team player.

I well remember that glorious 1957 which ushered in an exciting Waterford hurling era. Luckily for me I was invited to join the Waterford panel. Quite frankly I was thrilled to have been chosen as one of the 25 who would don the white and blue to, we hoped, worthily represent our county. It never even entered my head that I had any right to a first team place. I was one of twenty five, expendable, at the service of my county and the selectors with responsibility to manage the team. But I ensured that my training was done with the same diligence as was Frankie Walsh's, Tom Cunningham's or Tom Cheasty's, no shirking or dilution of effort but full commitment in pursuit of our aim of putting Waterford on the hurling map. No one training session did I miss, nor want to miss. Neither did any of my colleagues. I sat on the sideline knowing full well that my chance of a game depended on another's injury or misfortune but also in my mind was the firm conviction that if ever the call to action should come I was mentally and physically prepared. That shared comradeship among us led me to bemoan any failing or injury suffered by one of my colleagues. Metaphorically speaking we were blood brothers having been through so much together. Yes we were a happy family and I still feel a kinship with these lads whenever we meet.

Occasionally I meet Mick Lacey of Cappoquin and Mickey O'Connor. Tom Cunningham, John Kiely and Austin Flynn are in Dungarvan, but I don't know when I last saw Joe Harney or John Barron. Sadly Donal Whelan and Philly Grimes are no longer with us. Tom Cheasty is still hale and hearty as are Seamus Power, Frankie Walsh, Larry Guinan and Mick Flannelly. It would be a nice idea if we could all meet once again. Not for training, you understand, but in a more social context.

Our hard work bore abundant fruit with three Munster championships won, All Ireland appearances, league, Oireachtas and tournament successes. Even if we had never experienced the heady joy of success I would have been sorry for my county but certainly not for myself. We, the players, got immense fulfilment from meeting, training, sharing and playing together which comprised a huge slice of our life. We were well rewarded in having

the honour to represent our county and regarded the big day successes as properly belonging to the whole county. We players were the lucky ones, the honoured ones. Our All Ireland medals are County Waterford's, as much the property of our faithful supporters as ours. How could any player be arrogant enough to think that he alone won success for his team? Where would he be without his team-mates and all who assisted in making that success possible? How could victory have otherwise been inspired if not by those legions of supporters?

Some players give a lifetime of dedication without experiencing success at the highest level. Pakie Flynn, Gerry O'Malley and Dermot Early in football come to mind easily enough. Thankfully those men's talents received recognition throughout their careers when their exceptional gifts saw them honoured regularly by their provincial selectors when the Railway Cup teams were chosen. The other, and most prestigious award, was selection on the All Star team.

For over 25 years many fine players, including Mossy Walsh, John Galvin and Jim Greene, have had the annual All Star accolade bestowed upon them, players who have won no All Ireland or other national competition but who distinguished themselves on the playing fields despite their county's absence from the highest rankings. This All Star award is the nearest we can get to a players' honours list and is a coveted distinction sought and appreciated by every good player. Any player, hurler or footballer, who is honoured by becoming one of the year's All Stars should be the example of all that is good in his chosen game and a yardstick by which all other players would measure themselves. This past year has seen a radical departure from the strict criterion laid down for those who nominate the Stars, because in 1996 nominations were allowed even if the players were suspended.

Last year was the second year of the Players' All Star Awards. The methodology of the selection invited players to vote for the best six forwards and backs, two best midfielders and best goalie. Very democratic indeed and quite objective. I have no quarrel with such a system but it is the disciplinary area which bothers me. It mattered nothing to the selectors whether a nominated player had been sent off and suspended and, more surprisingly, no distinction was made between the player who was sidelined for two bookable offences and the culprit who was guilty of violent or dangerous conduct.

It was, I think, a serious lapse of judgement to give an award to any one of those who indulged in fist fighting, kicking and viciousness during the tribal warfare which characterised the early minutes of last year's All Ireland football final replay. They had sullied the image of the GAA before a huge viewing public of thousands and had clearly brought their association into disrepute.

It was right that the issue of discipline and awards should have been raised by Seamus O'Brien our county delegate to the Munster Convention at Adare recently. He was absolutely right to state that those players who had discredited the association should not have received awards and he supported fully Munster Council secretary Donie Nealon's criticism of the awards scheme in his secretary's report. Seamus deplored the inexcusable lowering of standards and the message it sends to our members, especially the most vulnerable and impressionable of all, the young. The awards rules should insist that nominees be of impeccable behaviour and role models for all in this matter and revert immediately to the former emphasis on good disciplinary conduct. That same convention had to listen to some small-minded and unfair criticism of the press as if the press were the creators of this problem. The Tipperary and Limerick delegates want such lapses to be covered up, it seems, and would like us to pretend that we live in some fantasy land where we see no evil and hear no evil. Those people conveniently forget that while our games provide copy for journalists, without the press our association could hardly exist and that exposing wrongdoing does a service to the GAA and to that society of which we are all a part.

Tactics

March 21, 1997

By definition tactics has clear military connotations meaning the art of drawing up soldiers for battle or the science of disposing military or naval forces in order for battle. Tactics always involved the manoeuvring of these forces in the presence of the enemy or within range of his fire.

The tactics of Rommel or Patton or Eisenhower are now obsolete because the word no longer has relevance to military or naval affairs, or at least nothing like the same relevance in this nuclear age. But it is a word very common to sport and it is well understood by participators in sport, by spectators of live action and by very many viewers of recorded sporting occasions. After the acquisition of fitness and skill it is a most important area of team preparation. Tactics in games could perhaps be defined in simple terms as the team's approach to the successful use of its combined gifts and strengths in order to achieve success.

An intelligent successful professional man expressed the opinion to me lately that, to him, hurling was a fast, even frenetic game, very exciting, played in a helter skelter fashion full of hustle with no little confusion where no clear tactical pattern was discernible.

To those with no deep knowledge of the game or understanding of it such a viewpoint is to be expected. Those, however, with an analytical mind, students of the game, concede that great benefits can accrue to the team whose trainer has a good knowledge of tactics and how to use them. An effective coach can stimulate players' thinking on the game and devise tactics which suit the players at his disposal. All players haven't got the same level of intelligence so no player should be required to use a ploy which he is not comfortable with. And I'm not talking about great intellects here, only about ordinary intelligent cop on. Mickey Whelan, Dublin's manager, has a master's degree in physical education and has a long career in coaching. But even those impressive qualifications are no guarantee the Dublin will win this year's All Ireland if the tactics he employs don't get the best out of his squad. The good coach will insist on his players taking the simple sensible option rather than seeking individual self-satisfaction and gratification. He will have a vision of the type of game he wishes his team to play and that by no means should lead to a rigid system which excludes individual flair. If his discipline is good – without it no progress is possible – all of his players will respond positively to his urgings and the team will play to its potential in matches.

There are certainly team tactics in hurling. Good coaches formulate them in consultation with the panel and unless that panel is comfortable with the broad lines of the coach's policy the players won't play with confidence and conviction. There must be lengthy discussion followed by meaningful practice where the coach's ideas are implemented. Practice matches offer an opportunity to assess progress and critical discussion afterwards should be rewarding. Small constituents of a match day such as the toss to determine sides or the throw-in should receive careful consideration. Often enough they determine the result in close matches.

Winning the toss gives a team an advantage. It should also give confidence, by a morale boost. Should you play with or against the wind or sun or both? I happen to believe that you should take every advantage which winning the toss offers. Others disagree. My view has no more validity than any other person's and many, I'm sure, could justify to themselves anyway, the decision to hand over to the opposition that advantage gained by calling the toss correctly. The real point is that the captain is quite clear on what decision to make if he wins the toss.

A good start to a game helps settle a team down. Winning the throw in will help. What way does that particular referee throw in the ball, high or low, short or long? Depending on the

opponent do you pull or tip it away? Do you spoil his pull by putting in your hurley in the path of his pull or shoulder him as he is about to whip? In other words which option should be taken? When Cork played Kilkenny in the 1983 All Ireland hurling final Tom Cashman was placed at midfield. Marking him was Frank Cummins his team mate with Blackrock. Both stood for the throw-in. I couldn't believe that Cork's management would permit the small, lithe Tom to trade pulls with the massively strong Frank. They did, and guess who won the throw-in?

A wet day calls for some more decision-making. The emphasis in the backline should be on stopping the ball, tipping it out of danger and then deciding if it is safe to leave it. On a slippery pitch the whole team should play a more direct game with the minimum resort to lifting and solo running. And yet a corner back in possession near his own goal would be well advised not to stand and try to strike the ball. Rather he should solo out from the goal towards the wing before attempting to clear. If closely pursued he then has the option of catching the ball, lifting his eyes to survey the scene while he takes the four steps allowed by rule and then passing to a better placed colleague. So even on a wet day the solo has its place in defensive play – just as any skill has.

At the other end of the pitch a corner forward could, and in some instances should, solo right across pitch from his position to make a better angle for his shot at goal. Or a full forward in possession could use his four steps to move out from the goal, ball in hand eyes seeking out a team mate to pass to, thus opening up the centre and allowing a colleague facing the goal to have a shot. No matter what tactic is employed the emphasis must be on quickness and accuracy. And, of course, players of tactical awareness only too well appreciate the absolute necessity of good support play, of players moving off the ball, of the creation and utilisation of space, of taking a score when within range rather than, as John D. Hickey used to write, "embroidering his effort." By the way in reporting on one of those games when I hadn't enjoyed the best of good fortune John D wrote: "he seemed to think that all his swans had suddenly become mere geese." After all those years I still don't quite know what he meant but he sure had a florid style.

Tactics, stratagems, ploys, call them what you will are neglected a lot by very many hurling teams. Oh I know the usual tactical diet of many a team is the address to the troops before going out to battle, full of trite verbiage and as far removed from the real thing as it could be. "First to the ball and let them know you're there. Pull on everything that stirs. Take your points (you'd be almost tempted to say "and drink 'em slowly"), you have as many bones in your body as he has", etc., etc. Still and all that is the staple diet of many a junior hurling team. In junior grade and more especially in junior B hurling, enthusiasm and physical fitness play a larger role than skill and tactics. This is where it is given a "lash", where the ball is propelled with more vigour than thought. It is not my wish to disparage junior hurling clubs at all. Ach má oireann an caipín caith é. It is just that far too many junior clubs have a motley assembly of the young, the aging, the rotund, the unfit, all enthusiastically plying their ambitions. While some would never aspire in training to anything more strenuous than "a few pucks, a few sprints and a bit of a match" I know for certain that there are junior teams which would respond to coaching on the tactical side and who would derive increased enjoyment and benefit from playing but haven't the services of a Peter Power who could stimulate their thinking and broaden their range of skills.

Proper use of the puck out is a tactic which is not usually given thought. Analysis of the puck out carried out some years ago over a big number of major championship games showed that the team with the puck-out benefited in only 40% of situations (even on their own puckout, mind you, the free when the striker has the ball in his hand, can look, think and take all the time in the world before dispatching the sliotar). Perhaps no team discussion ever seriously addressed the issue. Then again maybe the main problem is the goalie's urge to gain maximum distance rather than attempt to place his stroke in a particular area. Another problem is the Ollie Walsh puck out beloved of Michael O'Hehir "It's gone high and long

dropping down on the 21". In other words a stroke of high trajectory which takes longer to drop and falls down at too steep an angle allowing bunching under it resulting in the ball, breaking to a loose man. Limerick's splendid goalie Joe Quaide, hit most of his puck-outs into the Wexford half back line, dominated by Liam Dunne and his wingmen. On just one occasion in the second half, when Limerick were enjoying a numerical advantage over Wexford, Joe sacrificed length for precision and placed Ciaran Carey with the puck allowing the Patrickswell man to send over a good point. The puck-out does not necessarily have to be a haphazard stroke and those receiving it can devise plans for using it to their advantage.

Under – 21 Hurling Thoughts

August 1, 1997

It is over a fortnight now since our one remaining county team, our under-21 side, made an inglorious exit from the Munster Championship at Thurles. There was a big representation from Waterford at the match. They travelled in strength, in confident expectation of not alone a good performance but perhaps even eventual victory. Hadn't Waterford minors performed pretty well over the last 4 years, apart that is from the Munster finals of last year and 1995 when good Cork and Tipperary teams put our performances in perspective. Those two finals underlined our lack of ability to perform basic skill quickly or with any consistency and yet had we not beaten what was essentially the same Tipperary team 3 years ago? Having mastered them in 1994, we should be well able for them now. What in heaven's name has happened to us, to them, in the meantime that there should now be such a huge disparity in scoring between us.

We have only to cast our minds back to the Munster minor final of last year, when our opponents were also the blue and gold. The simplicity, pace, power and craft of their hurling was in a different league to ours. Last year's All Ireland winning team from Tipperary supplied this year's under-21 team with three of its stars – Eugene O'Neill at the fulcrum of their attack, John Carroll at midfield and Michael Kennedy at centre-forward. For lads of 19, those three were as exciting a trio as I've seen for quite some time and left an indelible impression on the scoreboard and on the game. O'Neill is an exceptional talent and will continue to amass scores against any opposition but sure didn't we know about him since last year. We were well aware of his style and capabilities but it appeared that we devised no means of tackling and limiting him.

Victor O'Shea was the man deputed to mark him. Victor is a good promising hurler who played very well for our minors at centre-back in Fermoy this year even though he is inclined to be easily drawn out of the centre thus leaving a clear pathway to goal which fast forwards can exploit. He is definitely not a wise choice full-back. Experience in fullback play is essential for the position because without experience, confidence is in short supply. Pulling on the airborne ball is a risky strategy for a fullback unless he is built in the Pat Hartigan mould and the player without enough confidence in his own inability is reluctant to play his opponent from the front, vital where O'Neill was concerned. The fullback who allows the half forward away in a run without chasing him speedily is failing in his duty. Far too often did we see this happening. That unmarked unpressurised forward upsets the whole defence, every one of the backs plus the goalie. Tipperary's half forwards didn't dominate the scoring but contributed handsomely in the build up to scores and have great potential. I saw Andy Moloney two years ago in the Tipperary Under-21 Championship match Cahir v Fr Sheehy's, Clogheen. Until he retired injured after 20 mins this big strong talented lad was outstanding and central to all that his team were achieving. Tipperary senior selectors have come to recognise his talent and he has already played in the league. Although out of position, Liam Cahill is a great forward and so is Phil Dwyer so the Tipperary half line of attack was a potent unit. As a consequence our halfback line was under continuous pressure because of the supply of ball emanating from midfield and the Tipperary halfback line.

Our midfield was a major disappointment. Our hurling was never simple and direct and quick. The curse of the present day game – picking and handling, running and trying to strike or pass, all from the Cyril Farrell School of Excellence – seemed to be our only approach. And this criticism applies to all Waterford teams from under-14 to senior. The double on the ball is scorned. Why? That is one question easy to answer. It is never practised properly. You play as you train. We have club training week after week where no priority is given to this skill and there are many coaches, far too many who encourage hanging on to the ball, solo running and passing to the virtual exclusion of ground hurling. "Go!!!" "Take them on!!!" are the battle cries of the jennet express brigade. Not, of course, that a player should never solo or break past his marker. There are occasions when such tactics are to be recommended but my

objection is to what I see as a deliberate over-emphasis on one tactic, a tactic which is the only one employed making the opposition's task so very much easier because the marker knows what to expect.

It was unfair to the player himself and a disservice to his team to place David Bennett at full forward when he wasn't going to get low quick ball in to him, the kind of ball which results from quick whipping on the ground in the midfield and half forward areas. This was David's only hope of securing possession and escaping the clutches of Shelley, Tipperary's shining defensive star in the Munster Senior Final against Clare.

David is a good hurler of excellent skill whose talents are better employed on the wing. He hadn't the slightest chance, the way Waterford played, against the abrasive Shelley. Wouldn't a switch between Shanahan and Bennett have benefited both and their team? Significantly U.C.C. selectors position David in the half-forward line for the college and he has been scoring freely.

Dan Shanahan is blessed with fine physique, always was since he first caught a hurley but he always tries to grasp the ball in his left hand and when he does – and at this level you can't guarantee that your marker is a moron or an innocent abroad who will stand admiringly as you catch the sliotar every time – he always turns left before striking. There is no variation, it is wholly predictable. The problem really stems from his advantage in height, weight and strength throughout his early career. He was bigger than all others and could put up his hand unhindered every time. So of course he never needed to strike the ball on the ground or to develop his right side or to vary his play as all good adult forwards must when they reach inter county level. He is young, ambitious I'm sure and willing to respond to effective coaching. He needs proper direction to enable him develop into a potent forward and when next year's championship comes around, he can, if he so wishes, be a serious scoring threat to any team. Who is going to motivate him to think about his game and work on his weaknesses?

I met Willie John Daly last week. It was so refreshing to meet the Carrigtwohill man with the zest for life. He is now in his 72nd year and all the vigour and enthusiasm which characterised him are still undiminished. A most animated and interesting conversationalist, Willie John has a great interest in and knowledge of hurling, not just Cork hurling but club and inter county hurling at a national level. Chatting with him is a stimulating and rewarding experience. He doesn't hide his great admiration for the brand of hurling played by Waterford teams at their best. To be honest what appeals to me most about Willie John is his conviction, which I share, about direct, quick economical striking which good teams possess. Even in his day, the forties and fifties, a solo run wasn't scorned when it seemed the correct option but every member of his Carrigtwohill and Cork teams could strike the ball well in the air or on the ground no matter what the circumstance.

In 1952 All Ireland Senior Hurling Final with Cork, Willie John had a most productive and rewarding hour. I was right in line with one of his points struck from the left wing. It was a shot from his left side, under pressure. Now most right-handed strikers have difficulty avoiding a slice on a strike from that side. Willie John's soaring points from a spot near the sideline on the 50 yard line that day was like a shot from a rifle. He recorded points from his right too and on one occasion when he failed to find Ring with a pass after rounding his man, he soloed forward to the 21 before striking off the stick over the bar. I remember him whipping on the ground, left and right and doubling in the air with such ease and grace and effectiveness that he made it seem the easiest thing in the world. And it was, too, for Willie John whose training every evening – that's right, every evening, it is the only way to acquire his level of skill – consisted of practising a wide variety of skills with a preponderance of first time striking. "Do you know," said Willie John, "what Timmy Ryan, the Limerick midfielder said when he was asked by an interviewer about his game plan?" This was the incomparable Timmy, prince of midfielders during the thirties and forties, a man rarely mastered in that position. I never

forgot Timmy's answer and reminded myself of what he said every time I took the field. His answer, like his hurling, was simple and direct: "when a ball came in the air, I doubled on it and when it was on the ground I whipped on it. In that way I was never in trouble." How absolutely and stunningly simple. He was "never in trouble" because the ball was gone in to his forwards. No hardships were imposed on his body nor did he slow up play.

What is the relevance of Willie John's story about Timmy Ryan? Why, of course, that the modern craze to catch everything in the air can be stymied by well-drilled opposition as can a policy of lifting, handling, running and attempting to strike under pressure. A midfielder should be an accomplished ground striker and be a competent doubler of the air ball. Not, as some might think, that the midfielder should stand under it waiting for the ball to drop. That's quite useless. The good hurler, whatever his position, will never wait for the ball, he will always go for it whether he is stopping it or doubling on it. As Ring stood under the dropping ball, he waited until the last second before moving forward, jumping in the air and making a high, short, wristy swing which had the effect of slicing the ball. This imparted spin and made it difficult for the goalkeeper to stop. One of Cork's goals in Thurles in 1961 in their Munster hurling semi-final game against Waterford came from Ring's aerial pull on the edge of the square. It ended Waterford's chance of victory and promptly obliged the selectors to justify their existence by replacing the goalie!!

I can't remember either of Waterford's midfielders or either wing forward of our under-21 team pulling properly on the ground in that Thurles game. Did they do it in training? This team, remember, held out our greatest prospect of success in 1997 and have been planning since before Christmas last. Do the selectors understand the value of this simple direct style, a style for which former Waterford teams were renowned and which struck a responsive chord in the heart of Willie John Daly and all others who cherish good hurling. Has any other effort been made to analyse our games and learn a little each time? Do you think we must endure a further chapter of failed opportunities next year? Does anyone care as year follows year while our wonderful loyal band of supporters travel far and wide in support of teams which, apparently, over many years haven't been properly prepared? Who is going to do something to address this major problem and when?

A Tale of Two Managers

August 15, 1997

There is no hiding my admiration for Kilkenny nor my envy of their ability to take full advantage of any situation where their craft and pride and self belief are tested. Last Sunday fortnight was the latest example of what they can do when dire straits left them nine points adrift of Galway at half time with just 35 minutes left to salvage the last of the Cats' nine lives. I don't know what their manager Nicky Brennan said to them at half time or how precisely he utilised those precious 10 minutes. Certainly he wasted no time uttering inane clichés about his team having as many bones in their bodies as the Galway lads, nor did he call for more use of ash. I rather fancy that he was calm and positive pointing out that they hadn't played badly but needed to up the tempo, that they didn't deserve to be nine points in arrears. He surely stressed the need to attack the ball in every area of the field in a more determined focused fashion from the restart, point every opportunity, that there was no need for anxiety or panic as they had 35 wind-assisted minutes to do it. They got a reminder that this game offered neither team a back door, that all the training, all the hard work ideally prepared them for this moment of truth when their match practice would see them through against a team sipping its first taste of 1997 hurling.

I know Nicky Brennan for many years and his Kerry wife Mairead who live in Conahy. He is a very genuine chap with high standards in his professional life as an executive of Avonmore Creameries and his uprightness in his dealings with people. He has brought those qualities of honesty and sincerity to the position of manager of the Kilkenny senior hurling team and his integrity is unquestioned. We know how insistent he is on discipline and how he suffers fools neither gladly nor patiently.

What surprised me this year was how long it took him to settle his team. His indecision about the goalkeeper is still unresolved and Ronan in my view is not a better choice than Dermody. Pat O'Neill at full back always seemed to be a case of wishful thinking, or trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole. Perhaps he thought when throwing the no. 3 jersey to Pat that a good hurler can play anywhere. But then Pat O'Neill has always played centre back, all his hurling days since I first laid eyes on him as a 12 year old with Gowran. I remember a great game in the county under 12 championship between Graigue/Ballycallan and Gowran. O'Neill at centre back marking Ronan with the sparks flying. D.J. Carey was there too, in the Gowran jersey but at that stage Ronan was the star attraction, the main source of scores, and at the same time very egocentric with an attitude problem. Even in those early years Pat seemed to have the physical requirements for the full back position but not once do I recall any jersey on him but no. 6. Pat is still comparatively young and may one day be the man who will stand in front of the goalie at the edge of the square but not yet. Luckily for Nicky Brennan Pat was in his old familiar position against Galway whose big strong centre forward wasn't allowed to dictate matters after the early exchanges. Of course the movements of the Galway centre forward, whose main play was to try catching the air ball, were greatly curtailed in the second half.

Nicky Brennan learned from the Leinster final experience of the necessity to select only fit players. In the Leinster decider John Power was at centre forward still not fully recovered from the affects of a hamstring injury. Any player who experiences pulling a hamstring muscle knows how extremely difficult is it to quantify the healing time and it is so easy for a player's strong desire to play to overcome any reluctance to jeopardise his team's chances by fielding out in a less-than-match-fit condition. There are too many examples of allowing the heart to rule the head in this matter and a short time ago on T na G we watched one to the great Kerry/Dublin All Irelands where a Dublin player's foolish decision to play cost his side dearly. I refer to Kevin Moran who despite pulling a hamstring some days before the final strapped up his thigh and took his place at centre back. Dublin did very well over the first quarter of the game but the immobility of Moran when it came out covering and chasing his marker, Ogie Moran, led to the concession of one goal and was a significant factor in the

exchanges which led to the infamous Mikey Sheehy chipped goal from the close in free. Keven Moran struggled painfully to get back to a through ball and Paddy Mullins knowing that Keven wouldn't reach the ball in time, dashed out to save but clashed (for the second time that afternoon) with Ger Power. You know the rest. Kevin Heffernan erred in fielding the unfit Moran. Had a fit man worn the no. 6 shirt, and Fran Ryder was a worthy choice for it, perhaps the game would have gone differently and Dublin emerged victorious. An unfit man in a vital position, centre back and centre forward, are key areas – hamstrings (if you'll pardon the pun) the whole team.

Bringing on John Power in Thurles was more positive than selecting an unfit Power for the Wexford match and having to take the negative step of withdrawing him after 35 minutes or less. Of course it very much depends on the type of injury. A small niggling injury, to a finger or hand for instance, in no way inhibits the otherwise fit player. The muscle or ligament injury is slow. Injuries such as a slipped disc are fine in a very short time once an expert in that field deals with them. In 1963 I was crippled completely and unexpectedly by disc trouble and visited Jimmy Heffernan at his home in Drangan outside Fethard, Co. Tipperary. Going up to him I was bent over and in pain. After a few moments of manipulation by Jimmy's gifted hands I could stand perfectly straight and he promised me that the pain would disappear in two days. That was Tuesday and Waterford had a tournament game with Cork at Buttevant on the following Sunday. "Do you think could I play next Sunday Jim?" "Oh yes, but don't go crashing into any forwards or you could unsettle the disc again". Well of all days I never had such a busy time because Waterford had a very weakened team. Not that I took the initiative against red-jerseyed forwards. Rather was it that they came in waves to visit me bumping and thumping and occasionally flattening. Nothing vicious or mean-spirited, just the inevitable consequences of a poor defence and all most enjoyable. From which you will rightly deduct that I had one of my better outings. Better still the disc never moved.

Cyril Farrell has worked tirelessly for Galway hurling over very many years and without him the All Ireland victories of 1987 and 1988 might not have been a reality. A very personable fellow, Cyril is infectiously enthusiastic about hurling, Galway hurling in particular. His pride in his native county is very clear. Once more after a few years absence he is again in charge of the Galway senior hurling team and his record in the role entitles us to expect that Galway will be a major player in the All Ireland stakes over the next few years.

My friendship with him, however, will never inhibit me from expressing a wholesome disenchantment with his hurling philosophy. I just don't agree with Cyril's obsession with the possession game, nor with his strong emphasis on handling to the almost total exclusion of simpler more direct hurling. Cyril's theory is that you control the game more effectively if you get the ball in hand and only play it to pass or score. Hence the proliferation of Galway solo runs. Which would be fine if it were possible to guarantee opposition devoid of pace, guile or craft. Intelligent opponents with a coach committed to a more varied type of play can cope with that one-dimensional approach and so the 1986 and 1990 Cork teams overcame talented Galway teams who failed to match their scoring rate. Despite their great speed and ball carrying ability Galway's shooting was sub-standard. Joe Cooney's non stop running in 1990 wrecked Jim Cashman but for all his massive superiority in the first half Joe never gave Galway a lead commensurate with it. For the second half, and in the final 15 minutes in particular, Joe looked completely burned out, at a time when he might profitably have run at the Cork backs (the Cork forwards did this to the Galway defence over the closing period) and secured winning scores. Galway had one very direct forward, Noel Lane, who would have capitalised on early low ball. Instead he had to endure the role of spectator for much of the game while Cooney, Naughton, McGrath and Cunningham and Eanna Ryan ran and ran expending massive amounts of energy and missing more scores than they got.

In 1990 too Farrell dropped Conor Hayes figuring that Jimmy Barry Murphy would expose the full back so he placed Sylvie Linnane at full back, a position Sylvie hadn't filled before for his

county. The experiment failed because Sylvie didn't strike the ball once in the 70 minutes, got possession on one occasion and had room only to kick the ball clear. He adopted a negative role all that afternoon and, for such a good hurler, did nothing for his team, nor derived any enjoyment from the game. Cyril hasn't changed. This year he dropped Tom Helebert, right full back and current All Star, the outstanding defender in last year's semi final, a man for the big occasion. He put last year's successful full back Brian Feeney in the left full position and gave the full back jersey to Willie Burke. So he had what was virtually a new full back line which put pressure on the half back line in front and the goalie behind. Padraic Kelly was omitted from the half back line. When the polished constructive attack-minded Kelly came on in the second half he made a big difference.

Of course, it was unfortunate for Cyril that he had no meaningful championship match to discover his mistakes and also that he had no second chance such as Kilkenny had. All he had was a charade dignified by the description Connacht final which cost him his main target man, Joe Rabbitte the victim of a harsh assault by a player whose subsequent one year suspension was totally inadequate.

Bringing on a clearly unfit Michael Coleman seriously lacking match practice was a bad decision. It was not that Michael did not try, of course he did and always does. Rather it was a case of the weak flesh failing to match the ever-willing spirit. He reminded me of John Power in the Leinster final, more shadow than substance. Cyril should have learned from Nicky's mistake. Nicky Brennan proved himself the more astute manager. This time. How I wish for Galway's sake that Cyril would promote a more expansive game, give a greater share of training time to shooting practice and the simple basic skills and get a better mix of those skills rather than an over emphasis on running. Perhaps he will and then with the abundance of fine young talent at his disposal the West will indeed be awake once more. Is maith an scealai an aimsir.

Refereeing

August 29, 1997

Without referees there can be no games played. Players are expendables, but like players, referees have good and bad days and this year the bad days have outnumbered the good. In trying to officiate without bias, every referee tries to control the game by a fair implementation of the rules and by dealing courteously but firmly with both teams. At every level of the game of hurling and football the appointment of the referee is a most important function of the promoting body, be it divisional, county, provincial or Games Administration where the All Ireland is concerned.

Not always is the correct choice of referee made. It is sometimes influenced by the politics of the GAA and more than once in our own county a county final referee was appointed "because he never refereed a county final before."

The referee has all the power invested in his role as the sole arbiter of right and wrong and is the only one entitled to decide the precise duration of the game. His influence on the standard of player behaviour and of the enjoyment of spectators is central.

The good referee is unobtrusive and discharges his duties with such quiet efficiency that he scarcely merits mention in match reports. He is pleasant and courteous, firm and fair and earns the respect of players who despise weakness and inefficiency. No matter what his social standing, his academic qualifications or his knowledge of the rules or how richly experienced he may be, he will never be a successful official if he hasn't got common sense. Common sense is that quality which allows a good referee to ignore technical breaches of the rules if by so doing he gives advantage to the team fouled and allows that team to maximise possession.

The good referee puts the bully or intimidator in his place and ensures protection for the skilful players from the depredations of the "hard man." He ensures that the punishment fits the crime in all circumstances and that crudeness is not, by his inactions, condoned in any way.

I have previously addressed this refereeing problem, hoping at the time that there would be some official response to what I view as the Association's biggest problem. Sadly, there was no reaction, no recognition of the worrying state of affairs causing right-minded Gaelic people much concern: the severe shortage of personnel and the generally poor performances by the men with the whistle.

I know that refereeing is a difficult job and although hurling is the faster game making big demands on a referee's fitness, it is the game of football which is the more difficult to control. The solution? You heard it from me before, but reiterating it in no way invalidates it. Punish every foul, technical, personal or aggressive. Let every player who repeats a personal or aggressive foul be sent to the line immediately. I'm convinced that players would quickly get the message, making the referee's job far easier and producing cleaner games.

Despite all protestations to the contrary, recruitment of referees, a subject alluded to annually in divisional and county board reports, is not carried out in an effective manner. Oh yes, year after year the secretary thanked and praised "our wonderful referees" before then pointing to the serious shortage of referees and appealing to clubs to submit names of suitable personnel whose recruitment would assist the already overburdened réiteoirí.

What kind of way is that to attract recruits to such an onerous task as referring? Is there any assessment made of the type of individual who offers his services? Any interviews? Any suitability criterion? The prospective referee might be completely unsuited to the job. He might very well be the type of chap who in time might know most of the rules but lack cop on, common sense.

Wasn't common sense badly lacking at Croke Park last Sunday week when the referee refused point blank to allow the Wexford team doctor treat the obviously concussed Rory McCarthy? Who monitors a referee's performance with a view to offering constructive analysis which could advance his career?

I refereed quite a bit and as you groan, let me freely admit that I'm quite certain that I wasn't a good referee. Some of the spectators, and indeed some players (mostly from the defeated team admittedly) cast doubt on my parentage or queried my eyesight or told me to do something unmentionable to myself which is physically impossible and morally wrong.

My career with the whistle had an unpropitious launching. No fanfare, just a simple question over the phone: "Any chance you'd do a match for us next Sunday?" No question of submitting any CV or doing an aptitude test. When my answer was yes, I was now in a position of immense authority with, it could be claimed a little blasphemously, more power than God! There was no literary, numeral, sight or hearing test (although it is a huge advantage for a referee to be tone deaf and stone deaf). And I had the effrontery to adjudicate on months and months of team preparation by two teams for whom victory wasn't just a matter of life and death but more important than that!

What I always felt to be most unsatisfactory was that I, the referee, was answerable to no one. I was above any criticism, any redress, any challenge to my behaviour with that whistle which enveloped me in an aura of invincibility. I could do literally what I liked, unhindered. No matter how obvious or genuine the grievance, the referee's judgment was sacrosanct and his report dare not be challenged.

One evening I refereed a football match in Cappoquin between the Brickey Rangers and, I think, Ardmore. It was an ill-tempered game and on the evidence of what I saw I ordered a Brickey player to the line for what I considered a serious breach of the rules. Some time later as sportsmanship deteriorated, I sent off another Brickey player, a brother of the chap already dismissed and when the final whistle sounded the irate brothers strode purposefully towards me with a view to letting me know in practical terms what they thought of my refereeing. I can still see both, red-faced with rage and frustration, being restrained by cooler heads and hands from offering me what I thought might be a couple of knuckle sandwiches. I escaped.

At the subsequent Co. Board meeting my report was read setting out the circumstances of the dismissals. Up shot the spokesperson of Rodairí na Bríce, a man destined to attain high office later on, to dispute the report. I was present so I appealed to the Chairman, Jamie Moloney, to permit me answer any query the Brickey Club might have in regard to the game. The chairman however was adamant: there would be no questioning or discussion of the referee's report. Now, what I'd like to know is why is the referee so cocooned that nobody, even the chairman of the board, is allowed question him, on the field or off it.

I felt absolutely confident that I could explain my decisions to any reasonable person, that the aggrieved team deserved to hear the reasons for those decisions and I was convinced that had they listened to my version of events they would see that they had been treated justly. Everyone else in the GAA is accountable to someone but the referee has no accountability.

I was discussing refereeing lately with one of our leading referees and sharing his concern for the perilous state of refereeing, even at the top level. I asked him when last he attended a seminar on the matter. He couldn't remember. Did other referees discuss his games with him in a helpful way? No. Apart from notifying him of games to be refereed, had any official made contact with him for his views and recommendations on the subject? No. So he was

left in virtual isolation to plough a lonely furrow, unaware of weakness, if any, in his performances and with perhaps a low self-esteem as a referee.

The ideal referee should be a man of character, aware of his limitations, conscious of his enormous responsibility, possessed of moral courage. I know one referee whose persona incorporates all of those qualities, Tipp man John Moloney from Bansha to whom the term gentleman could truly be applied. Of course he made mistakes, many of them, but he never, I venture to assert, intentionally wronged any individual or team and he was so humble, in the strict meaning of that word.

"Tell me, John, why do you allow friend Ray Cummins seven steps, ball in hand, and mere mortals like Waterford hurlers are blown on the fourth (only 3 were allowed by rule at that time) and a free awarded against them? Not for John an indignant pose and flat denial. "Do I really? I don't count steps at all, but judge distance travelled. I must count in future." Honesty and integrity.

I know another referee from a Leinster county who lacked almost all of those attributes which John possessed. I got to know him quite well over a couple of weekends in his native county when his role was to talk about refereeing as part of a hurling instruction course. He had a weak personality and spoke on his subject without any conviction or self-possession. His refereeing, for all his county and inter-county experience, was as weak as his shallow character.

In a very important hurling match at Croke Park he sent off two players from the eventual losers of the game. The game had its controversial moments but it wasn't until well after it was over that it was discovered that this man had a vested interest in the dismissals and in the match result. Significantly, he officiated at no further big games at inter county level.

The vast majority of referees fall into the category in between those two extremes and very many of them are models of honesty, sincerity and dedication. They are the unpaid heroes of the GAA. They never have deliberately wronged a team. As matters stand they are grossly overworked with such a huge number of matches falling on the shoulders of so few. If they were professional people they would reject out of hand a workload of such excessive proportions as well as seeking increased remuneration. But, the Lord be praised, they are amateur and have families from whom refereeing divided them for many hours each week.

Is it not time those men were shown appreciation in tangible, practical terms? There should be a substantial honorarium for each big game as well as generous expenses for each championship game, no matter what its status. In return, the referees should as a body be obliged to meet at least monthly in a social setting, sharing a meal, followed by an hour-and-a-half discussion of problems and difficulties encountered in refereeing. New referees should be nurtured and guided and receive training and advice and encouragement on an on-going, regular basis. Video material should be used to highlight both positive and negative aspects of the referee's work.

Frankness and honesty should pervade those sessions and if this continuous assessment is done regularly, morale among the men with the whistle would be boosted and the fruit of this concerted effort would be evident on the playing fields throughout the GAA playing season and both the games and the status of the men who control them would be enhanced.

Hurling Styles

Do you think that every county has its own distinctive hurling style? Its own combination of skills and attitudes and approaches to the game which distinguishes it from its rivals? Or that some counties share the same style?

Waterford's style, at its best is a very attractive and entertaining one. It combines good ground hurling, speed, neat combined forward play, fine accurate striking and a vigorous approach. An effective mix surely and one which Cork men, Tipp men, Kilkenny men, Wexford men have admired over many years, who have lauded the spectacle produced by a well drilled Deise fifteen. I have happy memories of the warmth of the welcome afforded a Waterford team whenever we played in Croke Park. One Dublin official among others was a confirmed fan of ours. "Tis great to see the white and blue jerseys" he used to say in greeting, "ye don't come up half often enough". When again I wonder?

Tipperary's style was (is), shall we say, rather abrasive. A great Tipp star and a friend of mine Donie Nealon admitted to me once, their backs didn't stand on ceremony but they stood on everything else! Ground hurling was an integral part of Tipp's style and, to my mind, the most powerful and effective aspect of their play in 1987 when they made the great break through after years in the hurling wilderness. That year, and for a couple of years afterwards, they were the best ground strikers in Ireland. Then I noticed a departure from that style with greater emphasis on lift, handle, run, pass which I respectfully suggest didn't suit their temperament not bring them success.

I must unashamedly confess to a great regard for the Kilkenny style. Economy of effort, that's what it is. They have a broader range of skills than other counties can muster and are astute readers of play. Nowadays Offaly can be equated with Kilkenny's best because there is no noticeable difference between the types of hurling played by those great neighbours and rivals. One has only to think back on this year's Leinster final to see how Offaly outplayed Kilkenny at their own game. The assured tackling great vision, little touches, flicks, nudges, calm control, legitimate use of physical presence, awareness, ground striking – all Kilkenny characteristics – were exhibited to perfection by the faithful County. The bigger the challenge the more Offaly responded. Eamonn Cregan has stamped his mark on them – firm discipline and meticulous attention to basic skills like ground hurling – just as Kilkenny man Dermot Healy's influence on them was huge when he first crossed the border and took over some 15 years ago. What both men have done – and Ger Loughnane has achieved it with Clare too – is to come to an appreciation of their own intrinsic worth by the players, get them thinking deeply about their game and seeking to improve every aspect of it. The quickening up process underlines every skill drill and practice. They have learned when to use the hand pass and hurley pass to their advantage (Clare's third goal last Sunday exemplified this with the "Sparrow" driving a fine ground shot to the Galway net) "Showing" for a pass, moving before attempting to play a ball from the hand. Not for them the slavish worship of the asinine "go" where the player in possession seems possessed by demons and goes careering off in the general direction of the opponents goal to indulge his headless chicken instinct. Mind you Clare are still inclined to do a little too much running, carrying the ball straight on and into trouble against good half back lines and only Galway's limitations as a team last Sunday allowed the Banners occasional ill advised sortie to go unpunished. Tighter marking which they can expect from Offaly backs in the All Ireland may force Clare to shoot from further out if they wish to crown this historic year on the first Sunday in September. Wexford always played manly hurling and I had great admiration and affection for their strapping athletic hurlers of the 50's and 60's – the Rackhards, the Morrissey's, the Kehoe's, English, Wheeler and Flood were fine exponents of hurling. From the 70's up to the present day their game has involved into an over-reliance on lifting, running and passing with the ground strike almost completely ignored. The simple option is seldom taken and it would seem that basic skills don't get a high priority. For all their penchant for lifting even that particular skill has often betrayed them. Martin Story's failure to execute it and lift a ball near the Kilkenny goal

when the game was theirs, with only a minute left set a series of swift Kilkenny counter-attacking moves which culminated in D.J.Carey scoring a precious goal to snatch the Leinster Cup from the Model County's grasp. Remember? A simple basic skill, lifting, was all that needed to be done to send Wexford on their way to Croke Park on All Ireland day.

