



Discussion paper
**Player Overtraining and Burnout,
and the GAA Fixtures Calendar**

Discussion paper
**Player Overtraining and Burnout,
and the GAA Fixtures Calendar**

Introduction

For over a decade the GAA has been aware of two persistent and important issues that it has, as yet, failed properly to address. These are the issues of player overtraining and burnout, and a fixtures calendar that does not provide club players with a fair schedule of matches. Beginning with the Competitions Review Task Force Report in 2004, and continuing through another seven major reports, the Association has investigated, discussed and made proposals to address the overtraining, burnout and fixtures questions, but without, for all that, adopting solutions to the difficult problems that these interrelated issues pose. (The terms ‘burnout’, ‘overuse injury’ and ‘overtraining’ tend to be

used interchangeably by non-specialists in discussions on the effects on players of too much training and playing. Although there is an obvious relationship between them, it is important to distinguish the different concepts they designate. That said, evidence based on observation and expert opinion indicates that talented young players in the 17-21 age group are susceptible to experience all three of these physical stresses.)

In my Annual Report to Congress 2015 I wrote that the findings and proposals of these reports contained within them viable solutions to the overtraining, player-burnout and fixtures-scheduling problems. I promised in my Annual



Report to produce, later in 2015, a paper that would 'draw on all of these proposals and allow the Association to decide how it will address these player-welfare issues and the needs of club players'. This document constitutes that promised discussion paper, and contains firm proposals drawn from the eight previously published reports.

Solutions that will address the problems of player overtraining and burnout and of fixtures scheduling are available to the Association. That we have failed to make adequate progress in the past is due to a combination of factors, notably a failure to implement decisions taken, reversing

decisions already taken, not properly engaging with agreed initiatives, and an unwillingness to change existing competition structures. Yet if we care about the welfare of our players, as we claim to do, and if we want to provide our club players with a fair and meaningful schedule of fixtures, as we claim we wish to do, then we can no longer simply talk about addressing these issues. The time has come to take decisive action. For an Association committed to the wellbeing of its members and which recognises the club as the heart of its community-based endeavours, it would be neglectful and a retreat from our values to continue to ignore problems that harm the welfare of some of our members, however unappealing some of the necessary changes may be.



Player overtraining, player burnout and fixtures scheduling: the problems

Eight reports, published between 2004 and 2015, identified two persistent problems that are a direct consequence of the way the Association organises its fixtures throughout the year:

- (i) *at certain times of the year, talented players in the 17-21 age-group (who have come to be referred to as elite players) are being asked to train too much, to play too many matches for too many teams, and are afforded too little time for rest and recovery, leading to significant physical and psychological strains;*
- (ii) *the great majority of club players, specifically those not involved in inter-county teams, are not offered a fair, evenly-distributed and planned schedule of club matches throughout the year due to the scheduling of inter-county fixtures, and, more generally, due to the greater influence that inter-county competitions have come to enjoy and exercise in recent years. In many counties, indeed, the latter stages of club championships are played off in a compressed period of time after the end of inter-county competitions.*

The task facing us, therefore, is twofold: (i) to significantly ease the burden on young elite players by providing a more measured progression of playing and training for them, taking account of their age and development; (ii) to develop a revised calendar of fixtures in which a better balance between inter-county and club fixtures is established.

Two factors need to be borne in mind concerning the overtraining and burnout questions. Firstly, as competition structures in hurling are not as congested as in football, the level of risk of overtraining and burnout is lower in hurling; for that reason, certain proposals outlined here are made in relation to football only. That said, some of the changes proposed will also benefit young elite hurlers, for example in reducing clashes with Leaving Certificate/A-level examinations and existing minor competitions. Secondly, we must never forget that underage competitions (U-17/-18/-19/-21) are meant primarily to be developmental rather than immediate success-oriented ends in themselves.

As for the fixtures question, the problems here are intensified by certain features of inter-





county competitions – the length of the senior championships, which last about four and a half months, thus consuming the period of the best weather and playing conditions; the quite lengthy gaps between matches, notably in provincial championships; the need, in dual counties, to avoid clashes in the scheduling of matches involving the football and hurling teams; and the allowance for replays rather than extra time (the most striking examples of the consequences of this practice were the replays of the All-Ireland Hurling Final in recent years, which extended the championship by three weeks). The combined effect of these factors is that counties that progress to the latter stages of the championships find it difficult to schedule their club championships, and are often forced to squeeze their championships into restricted periods at the end of the inter-county season. This, in turn, has unwelcome consequences: it is very unfair to club players, depriving them both of regular and summer football; it sends a signal to club players that they are not as valuable to the Association as inter-county players; and it diminishes the in-county promotional value of the club championships, and possibly the very status of club championships themselves, run off as they are in a rushed manner in a restricted period of time.

In the context of overtraining and burnout, before and after a certain age-group the risk of burnout is much lower: before the age of 17 and after the age of 21, players fall into well-defined and relatively easily-managed categories in terms of the teams they play for. But, at a certain time of the year, elite players in the 17-21 age-group are called upon to play on too many teams and in

too many competitions (and, as a result, to do too much training). The effects of this have been well documented and have been discussed at length over many years.

That fixtures scheduling is a major contributory factor to the pressures placed on young elite players is clear from a review of the range of competitions that take place in the most problematic period of the year, from January to the end of April:

- *Provincial tournaments (McKenna Cup, Walsh Cup, etc.): January.*
- *Sigerson Cup, Fitzgibbon Cup: January-February. (It should be noted here that third-level competitions cannot be held during most of the month of December and in January as some colleges hold their semester-one examinations in December, while others hold these in January).*
- *All-Ireland series of junior, intermediate and senior club championships: January-March.*
- *Allianz hurling and football leagues: February-April.*
- *U-21 pre-season football tournaments: January-February.*
- *U-21 football championships: February-April.*
- *Club competitions: early rounds of county leagues.*

To these, one must add the concluding stages of the provincial and All-Ireland second-level college competitions, which take place from January to April, and the minor leagues in provinces, which often begin in March.

The concentration of competitions in this period of the year creates significant problems:

- *there are too many matches and too much training for the good U-21 football player, which greatly increases the risk of overtraining, overuse injury and burnout. (It should be noted that some counties breach Rule 6.44, which prohibits collective training for U-21 players until 1 January of the competition year.)*
- *there is a great variance in the levels of physical conditioning required to play at different stages of the January-April period, leading to contradictory demands being placed on players. For example, the good footballer aged 20-21 may wish to be in peak condition to help his team win the U-21 championship, but such conditioning is incompatible with the conditioning demands of the early rounds of the Allianz League;*
- *the excessive demands on young inter-county players attending third-level colleges can have a negative impact on their academic performance, but also on their physical and psychological wellbeing;*

- *clubs in this period are unlikely to have their senior inter-county players available to them, a situation that is aggravated by the fact that inter-county training panels of up to forty players are now quite common; as a result, up to twenty very talented players get little club or inter-county football. And, increasingly, clubs are unlikely to have their talented U-21 or minor players available to them either.*

These, then, are the problems that need to be addressed. To provide solutions, the Association has, in several reports, concluded that it must:

- re-examine our age grades at inter-county level to provide a more measured and gradual degree of playing and training for elite players as they move through the 17-21 age-group;*
- set aside a greater number of weekends in the annual calendar of fixtures in which club competitions are given precedence, with the objective of offering club players a fair and planned schedule of matches over the year.*



Proposals

Remarks

It should be noted that some measures are already being introduced or considered as part of the overall set of proposals that will achieve the objectives outlined above. Central Council has expressed its support for the principle of completing the All-Ireland club championships in the calendar year, while the minor inter-county championships will not begin until the second weekend in April, i.e. until after the completion of the All-Ireland Post-Primary Schools competitions. In addition, several counties are currently preparing to engage in an age-grades pilot and research project in 2016 that will explore the potential for alternative age grades at club level. This project is being conducted to measure the impact of alternative age grades on player welfare and player dropout.

These are important and necessary developments. However, greater reforms are needed if the Association is to achieve the aims outlined above, and in so doing re-establish the club as the primary unit of the GAA and give club players their due as the mainstay of the Association. From the array of proposals and suggestions made in the eight special reports published on the overtraining, burnout and fixtures issues in the past decade, three distinct and recurring areas of our games' organisation that create the problems identified above and that need specific and different solutions can be identified, as follows:

- (i) *multiple eligibility of inter-county players for teams in competitions in the 17-21 age-group;*
- (ii) *the predominance of inter-county fixtures in the January-September period;*
- (iii) *the need for a calendar-year fixtures schedule.*

The proposals (outlined below) to address each of these three areas of our games' organisation are neither new nor original; they have been made and, in some instances, repeated in previous reports.

- (i) ***Multiple eligibility of inter-county players for teams in competitions in the 17-21 age-group***

Proposals:

- (i) *at inter-county level only, the minor (i.e. U-18) hurling and football competitions to be re-graded as minor U-17 and to be played alongside the senior championships, as is the case with the current minor championships;*
- (ii) *the U-21 football championship to be discontinued. (It is not proposed to change the U-21 hurling championship as its scheduling does not encourage players to play on multiple teams simultaneously.)*



Effects:

- *the elite U-17 player will be able to play at inter-county minor level (U-17) in a year when he is less likely to be sitting life-defining Leaving Certificate/A-level examinations;*
- *U-17 inter-county competitions will not affect the playing of adult club fixtures;*
- *the elite U-21 footballer will not have the added pressure of playing at the same time in third-level championships, at inter-county U-21 level and, in some instances, at senior level; this will reduce negative effects on their academic performance and on their physical and psychological wellbeing;*
- *the surfeit of competitions in the January-April period – and therefore of training and matches for young elite players – will be substantially reduced. As a consequence, the chances of young players experiencing overtraining, overuse injury and, ultimately, burnout are minimised.*

An U-19 football championship?

If, on foot of the above proposals, the Association decides to discontinue the U-21 football championship, then the possibility of replacing it with an U-19 championship, as part of the development of elite players between the ages of 17 and 21, may well receive renewed attention. It can be argued that an U-19 football championship would provide an attractive midweek competition at the peak of the summer. However, it also raises a question: can an U-19 championship, beginning in the last week of June, be played without having a negative impact on adult club fixtures? Given that an U-19 competition would be played on a knockout basis, that its provincial finals would be completed by the end of July, and that it would be played at the same time as the provincial championships and All-Ireland Qualifiers (i.e. when few club championship games are played), it can be argued that it would have little negative impact. However, all of the players on an U-19 inter-county team would be playing on club adult teams, and many would also have played on second- and third-level teams earlier in the year. Given the level of overtraining and the time spent on the preparation of underage teams, the dangers of simply replacing one competition with another are clear. While, for the purposes of illustration, provision has been made for such a championship in the calendar for 2018 (Appendix 3), the needs of club players must take precedence over elite inter-county players.

On balance, I believe that the potential disadvantages of an U-19 competition outweigh any potential advantages it may appear to offer.

(ii) The predominance of inter-county fixtures in the January-September period

Remarks

In terms of in-county games' promotion and financial benefits, the club championships in each county remain the most important competitions staged by county committees.

At present, it is extremely difficult to play club championships while a county is still involved in the national leagues or in provincial or All-Ireland championships. Most counties will comply with the wishes of team managers in not asking clubs to play club championships in the period between inter-county championship matches, particularly where the gap between such matches is three weeks or less. And although the protracted nature of the inter-county championships has a significant promotional value for the Association, it also has a negative impact on the playing of club championships. Our overall objective must be to support club players by creating more space for the playing of club games and by condensing our inter-county fixtures programme.

One important principle that needs to be established is that counties must accept the responsibility to provide, throughout the year, an ongoing programme of county league or cross-county inter-club games that can be played with or without their inter-county players. We underestimate the importance of a strong programme of county league games and other non-championship games that ensures that all club players have a regular schedule of matches. Counties can easily provide players with regular matches from March to July if they accept that inter-county players will not always be available. While counties may try to play some championship matches during the March-July period, the focus should be on playing as many league games as possible before the beginning of club championships.

Other changes that will alleviate the fixtures problem is bringing forward the All-Ireland senior football and hurling finals by at least two weeks, and moving the All-Ireland U-21 hurling final into August, which would mean that most counties, in this newly freed-up period, could play much of their club championships after the elimination of their inter-county senior teams. It will be noted that my support of the proposal to bring forward the All-Ireland senior football and hurling finals runs counter to what I have argued in the past. The important promotional value of the September All-Irelands that I advocated previously now seems to me to be outweighed by the magnitude of the problem of compressed and rushed club championships in the more successful counties, and the unfairness of this on club players in these counties. I refer here to 'more successful counties' as the problems identified



above are different for different counties: counties eliminated from the championship by, say, early July have no difficulty in scheduling their club championships, whereas this scheduling becomes increasingly difficult the further counties advance in the championships through August and September. An extra layer of difficulty is added to the scheduling of club championships in dual counties where, for example, a minor hurling match (club or county) is as likely to delay a club football championship match as any other match.

At present, there is the possibility of changes being made to the structures of the All-Ireland senior championships at Congress 2016. It is important that any revised structures allow for the completion of the inter-county championships within the timeframe outlined here. We cannot, under any circumstances, adopt structures that make it more difficult to play club games. Indeed, we need to take every opportunity to free up more time for club games. We can help to achieve this by reviewing the scheduling of games in the national leagues and by reducing the number of replays of inter-county championship games.

Proposals on National Leagues:

- (i) *increase the number of two-code weekends in the National Leagues (i.e. hurling and football played on the same weekend);*
- (ii) *discontinue the National Football League Division One semi-finals;*
- (iii) *establish in rule that players who are not in the inter-county match-day panel of twenty-six must be available to their clubs on the weekends of National League and senior inter-county championship games.*

Effects:

- *the reduction in league (inter-county) weekends will free up weekends for club competitions in April and May;*
- *inter-county players who are not in the National League and championship match-day panels are available to their clubs.*

Proposals on Championships:

- (i) *bring the All-Ireland senior football and hurling finals forward by playing the All-Ireland Hurling Final on the second-last Sunday in August and the All-Ireland Football Final on the first Sunday in September;*
- (ii) *complete the All-Ireland U-21 hurling championships before the All-Ireland Senior Hurling Final;*
- (iii) *replays in the provincial and All-Ireland senior championships to take place only after extra time has been played;*
- (iv) *discontinue the All-Ireland Junior football and Intermediate hurling championships.*

Effects:

- *earlier All-Ireland final dates will give all counties at least two additional weeks in September to complete club championships;*
- *this, in turn, will allow the provincial and All-Ireland club championships to be completed in the calendar year (see below);*
- *the use of extra time and the elimination of some rounds and competitions will reduce fixtures congestion and create greater provision for club games.*