



How should we evaluate the year 2018 for Down GAA, how would the report be signed off, would it be a must improve comment, would it be a case of fair to average with more commitment needed, would we say can and must do better, or a case of potential but hard work needed. There were good things happened in Down GAA in 2018, occasions when we hung out our brightest colours and showed how can deliver to the highest standard.

There were other occasions when mediocrity was the norm and we became very good at mediocracy and then there was the ugly when we showed the Country our poor and unacceptable side. Yes, for Down GAA it was a year of mixed feelings and mixed emotions, pride and shame shared equal space in 2018 in the world of Down GAA.

The eyes of the Country and indeed if we take Social Media into account the eyes of the world were focused upon us when images from one of our fixtures went viral and everyone was shocked by what they saw. The images represented all that should not be about the GAA, physical violence has no place in our games or indeed at any level in our

Association. The fact that they might take place within the confines of GAA property is not excuse for acceptance of and turning a blind eye to such incidents, if these incidents were happening on a public street after a Saturday Night out they would be deemed to be assault and Grievous Bodily Harm. They would lead to prosecutions and possible sentencing all of which can have a huge impact on the life of the victim and the transgressor.

Someone will get badly hurt in some of these incidents if they are to continue at our Grounds, The One Punch message has been part of a campaign by the GAA and the Authorities in recent times and it is a very real message. Facts are that One Punch could kill and that is in honesty something none of us would ever dare to dream of happening at a GAA game but reality is that it could. For a moment let us think of the repercussions and the consequences of such for one person it could mean the end of their life and all because they attended a GAA game or they made a throw away comment or were too vocal for someone else and they are struck, they fall to the

ground and lose consciousness.

The perpetrator has in 10 seconds maybe gone from watching a game on a Sunday afternoon or a Friday evening to being someone who now faces a charge of Murder or Manslaughter. That is reality there is no dressing it up or no minimising the damage that can be caused when we forget that we are at a GAA Match. One Punch can have such an effect on the victim on their family, their community and in the reverse One Punch can have a similar effect on the Perpetrator, their family and their community. No one in the GAA should be subject to either, in the North of Ireland the GAA has witnessed enough heartbreak for its members in our troubled history, we do not need to start now to bring this back upon ourselves. Stamping this type of behaviour out at our games is within our own gift, we need now to seriously address the matter, and our Rulebook offers us sanctions that permit us to deal with such incidents at our games. Yes, we might need to take account of societal changes to allow us to fully deal with matters but we need too to look at our Mind-set.

In the GAA world today when a penalty is offered by the CCCC at County, Provincial or National Level the first inclination is to immediately launch a request for a Hearing. Even when guilt is apparent and obvious, even when supported by video evidence, the inclination is to go on the offensive and to find a loophole that gets our Man Off.

We go to arm ourselves with Solicitors and Barristers who will scan the rulebook and also seek to delve in the archives to see if there was perhaps a DRA Judgement that might in some obscure way get our Man Off and sure we will have him the next day and we will win that game. There might also be the defence whereby really it was the CCCC fault in the first instance or indeed the fault of the Match Officials. We have all seen instances of these events happening where something flashes up on the great Arm of Social Media YouTube, we see evidence of wrongdoing and then we hear later that everyone was cleared and any proposed action was overturned.

There is an onus on Counties in the first instance and I say Counties in that I believe that the leadership must come from the top to start to say, No, our man did do wrong and we are accepting the penalty. Counties must be prepared then to say to the Team Manager that the particular player was guilty and that the proposed penalty is being accepted. Do I believe that Counties will take that stance? Well I believe that if we are to be leaders in our Association then we must be prepared to do so.

I am not saying that we just accept everything but I am saying that if we look at the Official Guide and we genuinely feel that we have evidence that would be incontrovertible in overturning an error by a match official then yes, we seek a hearing that is permitted in the GAA Process.

If Counties take the lead in such

then it can follow down to Clubs, the Club Chairperson or Secretary has to be strong enough to say No, we did wrong and we are accepting the penalty. Failure to do this by Counties and Clubs going forward will only mask the situation until that day that none of us want when someone will find themselves facing a custodial sentence for their actions on a GAA Pitch or within the confines of a GAA Ground.

The scenes that we witnessed this year are not what we encourage our young people to see when we look for them to join our Clubs, we have in my mind the greatest games in the world why would we let them become tarnished when all we really have to do is treat people with respect.

The fact that we have the greatest games in the World was particularly evident at the end of June 2018 when Down along with Louth and Meath hosted National Féile. What an occasion that proved to be as the Clubs of Down responded to the call and proved to be outstanding hosts. The fact that Féile was under leadership of the National Chairperson Diarmuid Cahill was going to be a huge factor in its success for we in Down are indeed privileged to have a man of his calibre in our ranks.

Thirty-Eight Clubs played host to visitors from every County in Ireland and Beyond, Contacts had been made weeks and months in advance, clean ups had been organised and all of our Grounds and Facilities were looking magnificent in anticipation.

When it came Friday Afternoon on the 29th of June Down GAA and the Clubs of Down had hung out our brightest colours and were ready to welcome guests and ready to open their homes to fellow Gaels. It was to be a fabulous weekend for the visitors and also most importantly for the Down Clubs who were acting as hosts.



## COUNTY SECRETARY REPORT 2018

No stone was left unturned as everyone rolled up their sleeves and made a he effort to ensure that Féile 2018 would be long remembered as one of the best ever and as a highlight of the GAA year in Down.

Everyone has their own particular memories of that weekend for me visiting grounds on the Saturday and seeing the smiles on people's faces as everyone was genuinely embracing the spirit of Féile, of the Parade in Newcastle on the Saturday evening as we walked along the Main Street on an occasion when the GAA came to Town. On the Sunday in Clonduff where the dimutive Scottish Team were rushing their schedule to make the next boat and this was not the Strangford Ferry they were aiming to catch and at Finals in Burren where teams went toe to toe and there was not a sweeper in sight.

It was an exhausted County Down that went to sleep on Sunday Night but smiling in the recall of a job well done and where once again just like in Congress of 2010, Down GAA showed that we are good at what we do.

Just a few weeks ago we came together in the Canal Court Hotel to host our County Dinner and to

pay tribute to the Men of 1968, 50 years on from their All Ireland success over Kerry. This was a special occasion and with the Ulster Bank Club Awards to be presented it was a night where Club and County were coming together as one. How great it was to have so many of the Team and Management with us and to be joined as well by greats from Kerry and Cavan, we spared a thought to for those of that era no longer with us, Our Captain Joe Lennon, Team Manager Gerry Brown and stalwarts Brendan Sloan and Pat McAlinden all great men who played their part. On the night we were honoured too to have with us Donie O Sullivan, Tom Prendergast and Brendan Lynch from Kerry as well as Gabriel Kelly and Jim McDonnell from Cavan, who I have to say all had no hesitation in wanting to be there, we really appreciated their presence.

Our own John Devaney was an excellent master of ceremonies and there was consensus that this had been a special night where we were able to honour our Club Stars of 2018 and the men of 1968 fifty years on, men who helped make us who we are today. They deserve every tribute that we can give them for they achieved the highest accolades for this County,

back in 1968, they were National League Champions, All Ireland Champions and lest we forget World Champions, they were a breed apart.

So in evaluating 2018 yes we had lows, we were relegated to Division Three, we tamely exited the Ulster Championship and our inter county season was over in June, we lost some great people from our ranks, taken too soon from us. Our lowest ebb as a County was though in the disgraceful scenes in a Club Fixture in October of this year, scenes that should never ever be repeated in our County, we all have a duty to make sure that this never ever happens again.

We had highs though too, as said we hosted Féile and we also hosted the celebrations for our 1968 All Ireland winning team, we had excellent County Finals at all grades and by and large good County Championships. We are focused on delivering Planning Permission in 2019 for our Down GAA Centre at Ballykinlar and we are continuing to make progress in addressing our Financial Commitments.

In Summary 2018 was a mixed report for Down GAA, we have to take everything on board and we have to learn.



## County Teams

If 2017 had been a year of promise for us, then 2018 came with great expectation and we were looking forward to the season ahead especially when we were set to commence the Season with a Home tie against Armagh in the Dr McKenna Cup and add to that a Home Ulster Championship tie v Antrim in 2018. It looked as if now that we were going to get a run of Home fixtures at Pairc Esler and the tide seemed to be turning, we had in 2017 returned to Croke Park and 2018 was looked forward to with optimism.

Alas it was to be a misplaced optimism and was to prove to be indicative of a malaise that has seemingly affected Down Football over recent years, where we take two steps forward and then seemingly three steps backwards. We fail to build on what should seem natural, it is eight years now since we burst out on to Croke Park and were one point away from winning an All-Ireland title. In that time since we have reached two Provincial Finals without success and have had no trophies to show for our efforts on the football field bar in 2018 an Ulster Minor League Shield. We look like we can deliver, we are already fuelled with optimism that in 2019 in May we will play host to Armagh in the Ulster Championship and that we can win. Where does that optimism come from? for we are now in reality a Division Three team, we have not won an Ulster Title for 25 years and really we have been seen to be aristocrats but with a soft under belly, hard work and County success do not seem to be in our vocabulary.

There is a new management team in place our fourth management team now from 2010 and all of the previous in their own style and manner worked very hard to make Down successful again, nothing was spared in Team preparation, anything asked for was delivered upon, no management could tell

you otherwise. Now delivery has to come from within, those players who wear the Red and Black at any level and in any code have to have the desire and the work ethic to want to make success happen, the burning desire must be from within the jersey.

The demands on an Inter County player are said now to be greater than ever but if that is the case to be true then it must also be said that the benefits for an Inter County player are also greater. The welfare of the County player is paramount now, excellent medical cover is in place for all teams, travel allowances are paid and a weekly food allowance is also in situ, top quality gear and footwear is provided and health and well-being matters are also addressed. I have often felt that the only thing to improve about Down County Football and Hurling in recent times has been the lifestyle of the Inter County player and therein lies the challenge- Is the Down Footballer and Hurler really prepared to go that extra mile in 2019? Do they believe that we can and will succeed? And will they do what it takes to get a football team out of Division Three and a Hurling Team out of Division 2B. Our Stock going into 2019 is low indeed across both Codes we are at our lowest point now but let us hope it is a case of the Darkest Hour before the Dawn.

2018 began with a Dr McKenna Cup tie meeting with Armagh in Pairc Esler and the return of Jim McCorry to the Inter County Side-line this time with Armagh, over 1,500 supporters turned up to watch what turned out to be an entertaining 70 minutes of football. On the night, it was to be Armagh who were successful winning by 2-12 to 0-13 with goals coming from Andrew Murnin and Ronan Lappin.

Down gave debuts to Arron Morgan and Ronan Millar and there was definite promise shown by these two men with Millar in

particular kicking three points.

The Weather was to prove a big factor in the next outing v Derry after much debate on the day as to whether the game would actually take place or not, it was finally agreed that after a twenty-minute delay in the start time due to Heavy Fog that the game would go ahead. The delay in the start time seemed to suit Down and with Celtic Park slowly clearing of Fog goals from Sean Dornan and Kevin McKernan put Down 2-7 to 0-8 ahead at Half Time. Derry reacted well in the second half, with Enda Lynn prominent were soon back in the game, and had struck four unanswered points as the game ebbed and flowed. The fog was now turning the game into a lottery and with Down holding on to a two-point lead, the ball was misplaced by a Down defender who seemed to give a pass straight to Niall Toner for the Derry man to put the ball in the net. No one could even see who had given the ball away or who had actually scored but the lights of the scoreboard now read Derry 1-14 Down 2-10.

It was a night that questioned the merit of playing these fixtures at this time of year, a game that was not over until nearly 10.00pm and which saw players finally get home in the wee small hours and everyone had to be at their work early the next morning. Perhaps it would be an idea for the pre-season competitions to be regionalised as opposed to being played on a Provincial basis if we are going to have mid-week fixtures. Would there be merit in Meath Louth and perhaps Sligo being included in a 12 Team Dr McKenna Cup? And being in a group with regional Ulster neighbours. We don't have to reinvent the wheel the old North East Minor Competition involving Meath and Louth would surely give us the template to be innovative with no journey being more than an Hour on a Wednesday night.

Down v UUJ had fallen foul to the frost in Burren on the first Sunday and now we were back again to Burren where Eamonn Burns was hoping that he would get a win under his belt ahead of the Louth clash in the Allianz League. It was a dead rubber game but Eamonn Burns was pleased with the team performance and the highlights were a goal from Connaire Harrison and three points from play by Shay Millar. So on a score line of 1-14 to 0-9 Down overcame the students and could now look forward to the commencement of the Allianz Football League.

It is worth noting that Donegal were the winners of the Dr McKenna Cup when they beat Tyrone in the final. I will be accused of indulging in nostalgia but I believe that we should aim to win the Dr McKenna Cup in 2019. The competition was the first Senior Trophy Down had won when it was captured in 1944, I also recall the late TP Murphy being most annoyed when Down put out a weakened team in the Final of the Competition in the early 90's, he believed you didn't give other counties a sniff of silverware if you were ruthless enough. Donegal and Tyrone who contested the final in 2018 were both in the Super eights, one was a Provincial Champion and one was an All-Ireland finalist yet in January 2018 they both wanted to win the Dr McKenna Cup for they are imbued in a winning culture. We have at all ages to develop that winning culture and no better way to start than with a Dr McKenna Cup in 2019.

Back to 2018 and the Allianz Football League saw us travel to Drogheda for the first game of the League v Louth and a meeting between Eamonn Burns and his former Manager Pete McGrath. The Gaelic Grounds in Drogheda is always a tight ground to get a win in and on a day when there was a strong breeze and a heavy pitch Down had to dig in. The introduction from the bench of

Kevin McKernan, Donal O Hare and Darren O Hagan helped Down build on a half time lead and Connaire Harrison took up where he left off in 2017 by tormenting the Louth Full back and finished with 1-3 to his name. The 2018 League campaign had got off to a good start on the road with Down winning 1-14 to 0-11.

Since 2010 Cork have been a thorn in the side of many Down Teams, our result against them in 2017 had seen us remain in the second Division and that draw in Pairc Ui Rinn had been our best in living memory against the Rebel County. In a tight Division you need to be winning your Home games and especially if you have only three Home games then you do need to be securing two points at home. So with a win already gained on the road it was clear that if Down were to win their three Home games then they should be safe in Division Two.

The performance against Cork was sluggish in the first half and it was largely through the free taking of Anthony Doherty that Down went in at Half time just one point in arrears. We all expected the team to kick on and especially after Shay Millar had brought the sides level after half time. It was not to be however and Cork would outscore Down in the second half by 1-6 to 0-4 with a Mark Collins goal after 55 minutes being decisive. In the cold light of day, assessment would tell you that it was going to be a tough call for Down to stay up if we were not winning our home games.

The snow was on the ground in Dr Hyde Park as Down landed in Roscommon to play the hosts, Match Referee Sean Hurson took account of the thaw in the air and gave the go ahead for the game to proceed. In the first half Down played some of their best football of the year and against all the odds were 0-6 to 0-0 up on Roscommon after 18 minutes. Both teams managed three further points

before the break and Down went in leading by 0-9 to 0-3 to the delight of the hardy Down souls who had braved the elements to travel. The second half was a backs to the wall performance from Down against the breeze and the elements and there was a great boost when Mark Reid produced a great save from a Ciaran Murtagh penalty. Inspired by Darren O Hagan in defence and a great performance from Niall Donnelly at Midfield Down held on to run out winners 0-12 to 0-7. So after three games we had four points all of which had been gained away from home and now we in our hearts knew that a win against Clare next time out in Newry would put us in a good place with three games to come after that.

In 2017, the day in Clare had proved to be one of our darkest days in the annals of Down GAA and in 2018 Clare were once again to be the rock on which we would ultimately perish. The performance that day in Newry was very disappointing especially on the back of the victory over Roscommon, perhaps the focus of the Down players was not on completing the job and all but guaranteeing Division Two status with three games to go. At the outset in my remarks I talked of the reality that in recent time we have taken one step forward and two steps backward and the Clare game was a testimony to that theory.

Down missed 21 opportunities on that day in Newry either a case of wides or a case of the ball into the Goalkeepers hands. Straight from the throw in Clare had a goal as they moved unhindered through the Down defence and by half time they led by four points albeit Down had got back into the game with a goal of their own from Donal O Hare. The second half was owned by Down but they could not finish the chances created, a penalty was put over the bar and close in frees were missed whereas Eoin Cleary was impeccable from placed balls

for the Banner men.

As time ran out Down were still two points adrift and it was a frustrated Eamonn Burns who shook his head when the final whistle blew and Down were on the wrong end of a 1-12 to 1-10 score line. This was a game that we should have won comfortably and now we were back into a relegation dogfight with two of the last three games away from home.

A Saturday night trip to Kingspan Breffni was next up for Down as the optimists amongst us hoped for a third win on the road. In an exciting first half Down were playing some very good football and went in at half time one point up and showing great character in that first half. Tempers frayed at Half time and the Down Manager Eamonn Burns was sent to the stand for the second half. The game seemed to be slipping away from Down as Cavan with the breeze at their backs kicked on and established a three-point lead, but Down showed great determination and as we moved towards injury time we had got back to level. An injury to Shay Millar stopped play as Down moved in on goal, a hop ball only penalised Down and it was Cavan then who were to get the next three scores in injury time to win by 0-17 to 0-14.

The other results on the weekend dictated that we were now in big trouble and in affect we were now going to be dependent on other Counties doing us favours. The home game v Tipperary fell foul of the snow and ice, what had worked in our favour in Roscommon worked against us in Newry as the game was postponed. All of this meant that we were going to Navan and needed a win against Meath.

The game in Navan was really over before it even got started, with just 10 seconds gone Down should have had the ball in the back of the net but Connaire Harrison's effort

was saved, within 13 minutes we were 2-2 to 0-1 down and the heads were well and truly hitting the ground. It didn't get any better as Kevin McKernan picked up a Black Card and at Half Time Meath were leading by 2-7 to 0-8. Goals win games and in the second half Meath added two more and at the end of the game, there was nine points between the teams on a score of 4-14 to 1-14.

The game v Tipperary now had to be played and we had to hope that Louth and Pete McGrath would do us a huge favour by in turn beat Meath in Drogheda. The bookmakers gave little chance of that happening and as proved to be they are rarely wrong. This was a case of us winning the battle but losing the war, in a game that was largely forgettable we beat Tipperary by 2-11 to 1-11 thanks to goals from Sean Dornan and Donal O Hare.

Reality was that we were relegated, we had six points accumulated in the League, one more than last year when we had survived but fate had in a sense caught up with us. We had lost two of our three home games and when we all reflected the Clare defeat in Newry was the big point.

The focus on that day was elsewhere we were not calculated enough to go out and be clinical and just win the game ensuring that we were in control of our own destiny, days like that and results like that mean that you fail to achieve. 2010 and Croke Park looked a far distant memory and even 2017 in the Athletic Grounds had paled compared to relegation to Division 3 of the League.

Players went back to their Clubs for the commencement of the Club season as we turned our attention to meeting Antrim in the Ulster Championship in Newry. Having an Ulster Championship game at home means a lot to a County especially those of us who have

not had too many such fixtures over the years. There is a sense of anticipation and a pride in getting your ground ready to host a Championship, there is a buzz as people put their shoulder to the wheel and make things happen.

The Provincial Championship, do that they create that sense of pride of place and local rivalry that is unique to the GAA and in the bigger debate, I must say I firmly believe in the Provincial Championships.

The men of 1968 too were guests of the Ulster Council on 26th May in Newry and also for the first time we had an Under 20 Curtain raiser as opposed to the traditional Minor Football curtain raiser. A Kevin McKernan goal before half time set Down on their way and although we always looked comfortable, you do have nervous moments. At half time the lead was one of seven points with Down 1-9 to 0-5 ahead even though Kevin McKernan had been lost to a black card just on the stroke of Half time. Donal O Hare was to amass seven points on the day with Anthony Doherty establishing himself too as a sweet striker of a dead ball with three points from long range frees. It was a case of Job done as Antrim were defeated 1-18 to 0-14 and an Ulster Semi Final beckoned and once again, we dared to dream that momentum would gather and we might yet be on the cusp of glory days again.

Donegal were to be the opponents in the Semi Final and alas, this game was a bit like the game v Meath in the League in that it was over before we even got going.

Fourteen-man Donegal reached the Ulster SFC final with a facile 2-22 to 1-12 win over Down at Clones. Despite the dismissal of full back Neil McGee after just 11 minutes, Declan Bonner's men bossed the contest and were never in trouble against a Down side that failed to push their game anywhere

near the realms of championship intensity. We were flat in our performance; after twenty-five minutes it was 1-8 to 0-0 before Caolan Mooney got a point for Down. It was sad to watch us struggle to even get the ball to a Down player from a Kick out and Clones the scene of so many of our great triumphs was proving to be a big graveyard. The half time break did not bring any respite and with 15 minutes gone in the second half Donegal led by 15 points as Down followers headed for the exit.

For those who stayed to the end we witnessed a thirteen-point defeat and a case where very few if any Down players could emerge with credit. The long wait for an Ulster Title was to continue as we were now in our most barren spell in Inter County Football from prior to our first Ulster Title win in 1959.

The Qualifier draw was awaited as we sought salvation in a Home Draw but alas, that was not within our remit and a trip to Brewster Park and a meeting with Cavan was to be the destination. The display against Cavan was our best since the win over Roscommon in the League, the players showed a determination and a hunger that had been missing since then and at Half time despite losing Kevin McKernan and Connaire Harrison to black cards Down led by two points. An upset definitely looked on as mid-way through the second half Down led by four and the players were leading from the front however, as has often happened in recent times we suffered misfortune. An attempt at a point by Gearoid McKiernan for Cavan dropped through the hands of Shane Harrison into the net and then moments later Ryan Johnston picked up a straight red card. The tide had turned and Cavan kicked on to add further points and their goalkeeper defied a brave effort from Darren O Hagan to leave the full time score Cavan 1-14 Down 0-15. The team had gone down fighting, some

pride had been restored in the Down jersey but the facts don't lie and on the 23rd June it was a harsh reality that all Down Football Teams were out of all competitions.

There was no knee jerk reaction from Eamonn Burns and his management team in the aftermath of the game but it was the following week when the Down Manager announced that he was stepping down after three years at the helm.

Eamonn Burns had done the County some service when against all advice he had agreed to become team manager in November of 2016 at a time when the Down job was portrayed by all and sundry as the poisoned chalice of Gaelic Football. Eamonn Burns had answered his county's call when others had looked at their CV's and thought not, he had given a full commitment to the job and at all times he was a gentleman to deal with whose only objective had been to work for the good of Down.

I was very proud to have stood on a side line beside Eamonn Burns, to have stood with him as he was subject to questioning by the media after games always there when it would have been easy to send someone out and say that we had nothing to say post match. I thank Eamonn and those who worked with him for their commitment to the Red and Black, to Cathal Murray, Aidan Brannigan, Gerard Colgan, Gearoid Adams and Neil Collins at all times you gave of your very best in the cause of Down. I think too of the much used quote that it is better to have a lucky manager than a good one, in his tenure in charge of Down Eamonn Burns did not have much of a rub of the green.

In 2019 we have a new Senior Management team selected out of a process that involved past players in the selection panel, Paddy Tally has been appointed for what will be his third spell

associated with Down having been part of both Ross Carr's and James McCartan's Management Team. I wish Paddy and his selectors every success.

This year we had a new competition as the Under 21 was no more and we now went an age lower at Under 20, also the Under 20 Competition was now to replace the Minor competition as the curtain raiser to Senior Championship Fixtures. The Management team of Conor Deegan, Michael Walsh, Bernie Ruane and Paddy Hardy remained in place and they worked hard from the start of the year to have the team prepared for the Championship.

Antrim were the visitors to Newry and this was a game where both teams went out and played free flowing football from start to finish, there were seven goals in the game and I suppose in these days of analysis the pundits would say it asked more questions than it gave answers. Down were winners by 4-15 to 3-13 and there were fine individual displays by Conor McRickard, Daniel Guinness and Pierce Laverty to name but a few. There was optimism now as people headed to Clones for an Ulster Semi Final double bill with the Under 20s meeting Derry, with the Oak Leaf County team containing players who had won the Ulster Minor in 2017 and who had been beaten in the All Ireland Minor Final by Kerry. For forty minutes of the game Down played sublime football, we saw all the plair panache and style that we had come to associate with Down teams and at half time there was only one team in the game as we led 2-8 to 0-7 at the break. There was only one team in the game as on the resumption the lead was now stretched to ten points and we were daring to dream.

These are after all though only young men, they have not yet the maturity of Under 21s and they





have not yet either experienced winning and all that comes with that and the notion that you have to learn to win. Inexperience allied to a game scenario when a losing team start to get all of the big calls and are brought back into the game, saw Derry convert a soft penalty and then added another goal this time from Callum Brown.

Points followed from the McWilliams twins and by the 53rd minute the ten-point lead was gone and Derry had their noses in front, down got back to level thanks to Liam Kerr but the know-how of winning saw Derry once more go in front to win the game by 2-17 to 2-15.

This was a harsh lesson for Down, it was the verdict of all that they had done the County proud and had played some superb football, it was not to be on the day and it took me back to a similar scenario again against Derry when in 1981 in an Ulster Minor Semi Final a 14 point lead had been surrendered. Football can indeed be cruel but with fourteen players at least from this panel eligible again in 2018 then I am indeed optimistic.

I think though that we have to give our players and management the best chance at preparation and I again make the suggestion that we have an Under 21 League in Down and that we play on alternative Sunday's to Reserve Football. This suggestion is twofold it will allow our Under 20 County players to have a good foundation of Club football behind them before they enter into an Inter County campaign and it will also begin the process of us addressing player retention at Club level.

At Minor level we were now in the Under 17 age bracket and this new age group has to be allowed to develop and people have to accept that these boys are a year younger than previously would have been the case for County Minors. A year is a big time span in the

development of the player and in our overall scheme of things then we need to take that into account when we are developing our Mourne Academy programme. Furthermore, these young men were pulled in so many directions in the past year they were eligible for the County Under 17s and in many cases their Club Under 16s and Minors as well as any combination of School teams.

This just will not work, in 2020 we will move our age groups as a County to be in line with National levels at Under 13, 15 and 17 but in 2019 we have a duty of care to these young men and to their parents to ensure that we manage the demands on them.

James McCartan and his young charges engaged in the Minor league campaign and only for a defeat to Armagh in the Abbey they would have qualified for the League Semi Finals instead they took the route into the Minor League Shield Semi Finals. That Semi Final saw Down easily overcome Antrim in Newry before a Final meeting with Derry that went to Extra Time in Dunsilly. There was reason for hope as Down managed to overcome Derry and the Ulster Minor League Shield was won. It was welcome silverware for the County and we hoped that winning would create a positive habit.

The Ulster Championship beckoned and with a new format where everyone was guaranteed two games, we had a home tie first against old rivals and neighbours Armagh. The equivalent game in 2017 had been a most exciting affair but the game in 2018 was a dour affair and perhaps reflected the real difference in this age group between Under 18 and Under 17, there seemed to be a big fear factor in the play of both teams. Certainly, the respective managements of Paul McGrane and James McCartan would have shared equally the frustration of

their young charges being seemingly unable to follow instruction. Down were winners by 0-11 to 0-8 but in truth, it was a game best forgotten. Next up it was the visit of Tyrone to Newry and in honesty there was a gulf between the teams as Tyrone dominated to win by 2-11 to 0-9.

The new format meant that Down had still another chance to make the semi-finals and on a wet day in Omagh they faced Monaghan this was a very brave display by the Mourne men and with the sides level at the end of normal time they game entered Extra Time. It was only late in the second half of Extra time that Seamus McEnaney's charges pulled away and Monaghan qualified for the Ulster Semi Final winning 1-20 to 1-16.

At Minor level now, there is work to be done and it has to be done before the players actually get to this age group, we are behind other Counties in the conditioning of our Teams, I deliberately have left out the word strength in the belief that we need to work on the first instance in conditioning our teams. This work must be a base requirement for the Mourne Academy and players at 14/15 and 16, we select players for the Academy on the basis of their skill levels and in the belief that they will enter a pathway that will develop them to wear the Red and Black of Down in years to come.

**Now the challenge lies with the Academy to condition the players to ensure that they can best represent Down, we need to be giving our Minor and Under 20 Managements access to finely developed and conditioned footballers who are ready to meet the challenge of competitive inter county footballer. The Minor Management should be expected to continue the work not begin the work of conditioning our players, until we get that balance correct we**



## **will be asking a Minor Management to operate with one hand tied behind their backs.**

On the hurling front, again, there was much promise but we failed to achieve the goals that would have seen us gain promotion and get back to Croke Park in the Christy Ring, it was a mixed bag with some excellent performances and then continued disappointment on the big days.

The Allianz League began positively with a win over Derry in Celtic Park, a Danny Toner goal settled the team and we went in at the break leading by 1-9 to 0-8 with Paul Sheehan in excellent form from frees Down remained dominant. A second Danny Toner goal put Down well in the driving seat and in the end, there was six points between the teams as Down won on a score of 2-17 to 1-14.

Wicklow were the visitors to Ballycran and this would be a good test for Down as in recent years we have faltered against the Garden County. It was a very tight first half with the Down defence working very hard to ensure that the home team led at half time by 0-11 to 0-10. The second half continued to be score for score until the last quarter when Down thanks to an Eoghan Sands goal took the lead and managed 1-8 without reply in those last 15 minutes. The final score of Down 1-24 to 0-16 was a true reflection of the Down dominance. Marty Mallon and his management team were well pleased with the start to the League, two wins from two was setting the team up well. Armagh were the next visitors to McKenna Park in Ballycran and despite making it difficult for Down at times, the Down attack showed their ability to score goals and with Eoghan Sands, Danny Toner and Paul Sheehan all finding the net, to leave the final score Down 3-15 Armagh 0-13.

Reality was to kick in though with

our visit to Donegal, it was one of those weekends where there were clashes with Fitzgibbon and other distractions resulting in a disappointing performance and a first ever win for Donegal over Down in competitive hurling on a score of 0-17 to 0-14. All of this meant that we had now to beat Mayo in the last game of the league and in the same token probably meet Mayo again in the League Final. This was not an ideal scenario but it was in our own hands and more importantly, it was all achievable.

The final game of the League Series saw us win what was a shadow boxing game with Mayo, the odds were all with the westerners, we could not take any chances, we had to go win the game to ensure we made the Final whilst Mayo could afford not to show their hand as they were going to be meeting us in a League Final. The game was played in Portaferry and Down were always on top against a Mayo team that had only six regulars starting, goals from Liam Coulter, Daithi and Eoghan Sands meant that Down were comfortable winners by 3-19 to 0-14.

It was a bitter cold Sunday with snow on the hills as we headed for Kingspan Breffni Park and a Division 2B final v Mayo just one week later. The men from the West shaded the verdict over a Down team that battled bravely to the end, but few could begrudge Mayo their win on this bitterly cold day in Cavan. The Down men got off to a flying start and led by 0-5 to 0-1 after 13 minutes when aided by a strong wind.

Dáithí Sands and Declan McManus landed excellent scores and the tide was flowing strongly in their favour at this stage. However, scores were needed when playing with a strong breeze and unfortunately, the capacity of the Down defence to concede frees came back to bite and Mayo slowly

found their way back into the game. Coming up to half time there was further heartbreak for Down when a ball into the square failed to be cleared and was finished to the net by Brian Morley. This was a huge blow for Down and though Paul Sheehan added a long range point we went in at Half Time only leading by 0-9 to 1-5 despite the aid of a strong breeze.

Mayo seized their opportunity in the second half and with the experienced dual star Keith Higgins dictating matters in their forward line and a defence seeing that this game could be won, Down went 17 minutes without scoring in the second half. The concession of easy frees did not help Down either and Mayo wing half forward Kenny Feeney was top scorer with twelve points nine of which came from frees. Try as they may this was not going to be Down's day and at the third time of asking they once again fell short in a Division 2B Final having previously lost to Wicklow and Armagh they suffered defeat to Mayo on a final score of 1-15 to 0-14.

This was a disappointing end to a League campaign that had promised so much, when we have a season where we have three home games we are always best placed to challenge for a League Title. There is no doubt in my mind that if we can manage to get out of Division 2B then we can manage to stay out of it, I think that the hurdle of getting out is psychologically great for this Down team, once out of it I do believe we would hold our own and not be a yo-yo team in terms of relegation and promotion.

In 2019, this will be a tough task, we will have to travel to Wicklow, Warwickshire and Kildare as well as winning our home games v Derry and Donegal. This can be done though and if one key area, the conceding of frees is addressed then I believe we would make a huge difference. Statistics tell us that 41 points were scored

against us from placed balls in 6 games in the Hurling League, it is an aspect of our game that not just is endemic of our County Team but also persists in our Club games. Talking to referees post our Club championship round robin games they too highlighted the conceding of frees as something that needed to be addressed.

The Christy Ring Cup campaign began with a home tie against Armagh in Ballycran and this proved to be a journey that the Armagh men did not like making in 2018. Daithi Sands spearheaded Down's destruction of Armagh with a hat trick of goals at McKenna Park.

After an evenly contested first 15 minutes, Sands opened the floodgates when he turned his marker on the end line before rifling the sliotar past Fintan Woods. His brother Eoghan snatched an opportunistic goal after 27 minutes before Declan McManus was sent clear on 33 minutes to find the corner of Woods' net. Down were also accumulating points, while Armagh could only muster five first-half points, including three frees from Nathan Curry. And when Davy Bridges saw red on 19 minutes for a wild pull on Sheehan, the writing was on the wall, by that stage it was damage limitation for Armagh and although Down eased off the throttle, were sitting back, Daithi Sands completed his hat-trick with two flashing finishes. Down were off to a winning start on a score line of 6-21 to 0-11.

Next up was a trip to London and for me this was the best performance by the Down hurlers in 2018. The new grounds in London are a credit to the Gaels of London and to men like Brendan Brien and Tommy Howell who have guided the new generation of exiles as they ensure that the Gaelic Games continue to grow in the capital city of our neighbouring country. Down and London played

out a thriller over in McGovern Park with the Mourne men just coming out on top.

The game was played in scorching hot conditions, there was even an Ice Cream van inside the ground a sight not often seen in our own grounds these days! With the teams very evenly matched, and the lead changed hands repeatedly in the opening half.

Down got the opening goal on 27 minutes when full-forward Danny Toner buried his effort to give his side a one-point lead (1-6 to 0-8).

London then got in for a goal of their own on the stroke of half time, with Colin Nelson's scrappy score enough to see his side take an interval lead of 1-12 to 1-10. London were very much on top in the second-half and will wonder how they didn't close out this game, but the lead changed hands again in the 62nd minute, with a goal from full-forward Daithi Sands which gave his side a 2-19 to 1-19 lead heading into the final stages.

Pearse Óg McCrickard looked to have won it for Down with time almost up, but London were awarded a close-range free late on which was cleared on the Down goal line, with the rebound going narrowly wide.

It was a great flight home, the form was good and there was a feeling that we could give the Christy Ring cup a good rattle, we were after showing here that we could beat a team who were a Division above us and in their own backyard too.

Down went into the last game away to Derry knowing that they could afford to lose by six points, which was the margin that we had beaten Derry by in the league and still qualify on score difference for the competition Semi Final. This is always a dangerous scenario and when Derry announced that the game would be moved to Maghera and when you saw that Ruairi Convery was named in goals you

started to get the picture that Derry had a plan in mind.

A converted '65 by Cormac O'Doherty, in the fifth and final minute of injury time, dramatically confirmed Derry's progression to the Ring semi-finals at the expense of Down.

O'Doherty, who ended with figures of 1-17, struck his most telling blow at the death to be the Oak Leaf hero. The home side led 0-16 to 1-11 at the break, with Daithi Sands scoring the Down goal soon after Derry had racked up an early lead. For Derry, O'Doherty amassed 0-9 in the opening 35 minutes.

Down had the better restart and pulled level at 0-17 to 1-14 after Paul Sheehan's 40th-minute point. Daithi Sands' second goal handed the Down men the lead for the first time at 2-16 to 0-20. After that, Down would score only three points. Derry hit 1-9, including Meichal McGrath's 69th-minute goal and O'Doherty's late '65.

Derry won on a final score of 1-29 to 2-19, a margin of seven points and reality was that Down were out, our hurling season was over.

The point about conceding frees was not lost on the fact that Derry scored seventeen frees in all so they only managed 2-2 from play and yet won the game by seven points. The statistics do not lie. Late in the summer we learned that Marty Mallon was unable to continue as Team Manager for personal reasons, a man who had been an outstanding servant of Down as a player had as a Manager been a man who put his heart and soul into the role. Again, like Eamonn Burns he had answered the call of the County in less fashionable times when others might have opted to say why.

There is no doubt that there was improvement in Down hurling under Marty and his trusted lieutenant Paul Coulter, pride was

back in the jersey and people were there for the right reasons- the betterment of Down hurling.

**I would like to place on record my thanks to Martin and Paul for their efforts, at all times they were great people to work with and they leave Down hurling on the cusp of a return to better days. In 2018, they had been joined by Ronan Sheehan on the sideline, another man who exudes passion about Down hurling and we are very lucky that Ronan has agreed to take on the Managerial role for 2019. Ronan deserves his opportunity he has worked at Under 21 and Minor Manager in recent times, he knows the players and he deserves the chance to take us to that next level. I wish Ronan, Mick Blair and Niall Coulter every success and assure them of our full support in the task ahead.**

One of the bravest performances by a Down team this year in football or hurling was from the County Under 21 Hurlers in the Leinster Qualifier v Antrim. The game was played in Davitt Park in Lurgan and the Down boys went extremely close to bringing of a major shock. With time up in normal time, Down had a free to win the game and take us into the Leinster Championship proper unfortunately, it tailed wide and we were set then for Extra Time. The physical strength of Antrim carried them through in Extra Time and Antrim were winners by 1-23 to 3-14 aet. This was a very brave performance by Down where people physically put their bodies on the line to defend the goal and where there were also some great scores taken by the forward line.

The small attendance could only but have been proud of the Down performance; the defeat now meant that we proceeded to the All-Ireland Under 21B Competition for the Richie McElligott Cup. The open draw was not kind to us and

we ended up meeting competition favourites Kerry in Round One in Mullingar. Kerry with players who had been playing at McDonagh Cup level were just too strong for us overall and went on to win their ninth title at this grade.

To allow for Counties to make progress at this grade one wonders if there is merit in the suggestion that this competition be organised on a round robin basis. Teams need more than one game at this level, to prepare a team and then go out after one game does very little for the development of hurling in those Counties. The time frame would not necessarily be any different it would just mean that every county would be involved for three weekends then you have the semi-finals and final, so two teams would get a maximum of five games and everyone else a minimum of three. Surely, we can set four/five Saturday's aside to run the Competition and be meaningful about the development and promotion at hurling. If we are just ticking the box and having an Under 21 Competition and running it as quickly as possible then we do the game a great disservice. In 2019, Down will be advocating an All-Ireland Under 21B competition played as a Round Robin format.

The Down Minor Hurling team were probably the most hard done by of our teams this year in that they literally fell between the stools of the Celtic Challenge and the Leinster Minor Hurling Championship. We entered both competitions and this proved to be to our detriment, as the rules took no account of our small base and the reality that we were never going to be able to have two distinct panels. Obstacles were put in the way of what we saw as a good opportunity for hurling development and led to us having to concede a walk over in the Celtic Challenge and then find that the goalposts were being moved and we could take part again. All of this was very unsatisfactory and

really led us to question if the best interests of Counties were being served. There is in terms of hurling development no one size fits all but surely when Counties are trying to better themselves and are trying to raise standards then this should be supported.

The Leinster Championship was a big step up for our Minors and with a lot travel involved it was not going to be an easy campaign. We were in a group with Carlow and Westmeath and though beaten in both games the team were gaining experience and we got a third game against Kildare. Defeat to Kildare meant that we were now in the Shield Semi Finals where we were down to play Meath, this was a mid-week fixture at Abbottstown and unfortunately, logistics were to dictate that we would be unable to field in this game with exams still a factor north of the border. I would like to thank the Leinster Council for facilitating our participation in the Competition and providing us with the opportunity to have meaningful games.

In the Celtic Challenge, we had five wins out of five in the Ulster section and then we fell foul of the regulation where anyone who played in the Leinster Championship could not then play in the Celtic Challenge meaning that we had to concede in the All-Ireland series. We had fallen between the stools as I have previously stated and this is an aspect that the Hurling Development Committee, Nationally and Provincially need to look at for 2019.

The year of 2018 ended on a high note in hurling terms when the Down schools team won the Mageean Cup for the very first time beating St Pats Maghera in the Final to land the Ulster Colleges A Hurling title. Back in 2011 the then Hurling Promotion Officer Mickey McCullough along with the Games Development Manager Conor O Toole and myself felt that a Down

Schools Team could be a good mechanism for the development of hurling in the County. We were going into relatively unknown territory, the experiment had worked successfully in Dublin and we had seen Dundalk Schools compete in Leinster Colleges Football but in Ulster, this was new ground. In our very first match in 2011, we were beaten by 45 points by St Mary's CBS it was a case of welcome to the new boys. Over the year's finals were lost to St Mary's, to Cross and Passion and to St Pats Maghera but still we hoped for the breakthrough.

Fielding a combined Schools team means a lot of logistical work, for every game we need two buses to collect players from schools and to get them back home again whilst at the same time trying to ensure that players are absent from School for minimal periods. I would like to place on record here the thanks of

Down GAA to the Schools for their cooperation in making this success happen, these young men at all times were tremendous ambassadors for your School and you can indeed be very proud to have them in your ranks. We were particularly pleased to have on our panel pupils from schools who do not participate in Gaelic Games. I particularly thank those schools for facilitating our requests and permitting their pupils to be able to represent Down Schools.

I would like to thank all the coaches who came on board to help this Down team be successful, our own Schools coaches Danny Toner and Liam Hardy, the Ulster Hurling Development Coach CJ McGourty, new County Senior Manager Ronan Sheehan and the man who coordinated the project Conor O Toole. History will record that An Dun won the Mageean Cup in 2018 beating St Pats Maghera in

the Final on a score of 5-13 to 1-10, the dream had come to fruition.

In 2019 in a few weeks' time, we will long for the Inter County Football and Hurling seasons to begin, we will once again dare to dream, it will be 25 years since our last Senior Football Ulster Title. A whole generation of people have not seen a Down captain lift silverware. This must change and change soon, 2019 can be the year that we start to make that difference, we must try to win every competition that we enter and we must believe too that we can.

Down is a proud county with a great history and with a pride in our history let not that history and tradition be seen as a burden on anyone's shoulders rather it be the 16th man that drives us to success, let us say that in 2019, the famine is over and Down are back.





## Club Competitions

We can indeed be proud of our Club Fixture programme in Down and the amount of games that we provide in any given season. The one thing we cannot do though is to become in anyway complacent, we have work to do to make our Club competitions the best that they can possibly be. We must always be prepared to rise to the challenges and go one-step further and make things even better.

There have been changes take place in how we organise and promote our games and these have been largely positive, the PR Committee did a magnificent job in promoting our Championships and as a direct result, more people attended our games.

The challenges are there in our urban and rural areas, different challenges yet challenges that must be met and how we meet those challenges will define the future for the GAA in Down. One of the basic challenges that must be met no matter where in Down our games are played is one of the culture of our games. We must change the culture of our games around areas like punctuality, respect, a fixture calendar, facilities and promotion, getting these facets right are key to the success of the GAA in our Urban and Rural areas. Facts are that our competitors have looked at the model we developed five to ten years ago, the Go Games, the emphasis on

Child protection, the blitzes and thought well we can do that to and we could even make it better. Reality is that in some cases they are doing it better, drive out of Newry on a Saturday morning and see big numbers at Newry Rugby Club from 9.00am, drive into Downpatrick on a Sunday morning and again look at the numbers playing at Dunleath Park. Both places are alive with activity, it is organised, it is punctual and it is happening and at all times people are encouraged to show respect.

Now it is obvious too that there are good and positive things happening at our GAA Grounds but we cannot in any way become complacent, we have to all the time be getting better and becoming more innovative.

Can we be proactive and do something to encourage our parents to be respectful on the side-lines, we are delighted that they are in attendance to watch their son or daughter playing but can we provide a suitable distraction that would take their attention elsewhere and thus let their son do what he is doing best. Could a Club provide an outlet that is for parents, tea/coffee stations, activities organised by the Club but for parents taking place at the same time as their sons or grandsons are playing Gaelic Games. We would thus be allowing the Children the space to develop a love for Gaelic Games in an

environment where they were the main focus. There has been some mention of the use of silent side-lines for our Under age competitions, there may be merit in the very suggestion though it could be something that might even lead to confrontation and conflict the very thing that it was supposed to protect against.

We have to try and be innovative in how we create a culture of mutual respect amongst our young people playing Gaelic Games, we have long championed the Give Respect Get Respect slogan but is this in need of revamping and re-inventing, leading question does it actually happen in our games? We have all heard stories of where the two teams were lined up at under 10 or 12 for post-match handshakes only for one of the teams to punch rather than shake the hand of their opponents. Is this what we really want in our games? So how do we make it better, how much responsibility lies with the coaches of the Teams and then who is responsible for the Coaches, at what stage does the Club show leadership and say enough is enough. At senior level in Club games, some Clubs now offer a cup of tea for their own and opposing players post match is this something that needs to happen now at juvenile level, do we share a platter of fruit and some healthy juice post match for parents and children.

Our Clubs are our heartbeat and we need more and more people playing our games and being involved in our association. We need I feel to take a stand too and make it a scenario whereby we are exuding the positive about what we do in our Clubs and we need to be creative in our games to continue to make them attractive as the number one sport of choice in our County. There are simple things we can address, things like ensuring that our fixtures happen when they are supposed to happen, that they happen on time, that Referees turn up for games and that our Clubs and venues are welcoming places to go to and that there is publicity about what we do in our Clubs. We need to let the world see what we are doing and whilst we were victims of the power of Social Media in showing the ugly side of our games this year, we can turn that on its head and use Social Media as a powerful tool for good.

I will address later my suggestions on Fixtures and possible Club Competitions for 2019 and beyond because it will involve discussion on the future roles of some of our Committees.

The Championships of 2018 were the most competitive and entertaining that we have had in recent time. There were good attendances at our games and certainly the work done by Maureen O Higgins and the PR Committee boosted the profile of our Championships. We are though in a strange sense victims of the success of our own Championships as we continue to fail to make a breakthrough at Provincial Level. I think here particularly of our Intermediate and Junior Winners in Football and Hurling, through no fault of their own they invariably meet teams at Ulster Level who are playing Club Football at a higher level. If we take the case of Bredagh, they win a competitive Down Intermediate Football Championship and then

meet Mullahoran of Cavan who were playing in the Cavan Senior Championship of 2017, were subsequently relegated as Cavan play with only 11 Teams in the Senior Championship. The odds are then against Bredagh through no fault of their own, this is more so the case too in the Junior Football Championship where with only 12 Teams in our own Junior our Champions are going to be at a disadvantage again in Ulster.

We cannot do anything about the composition of our Football Championships at the moment and I have to say too that our Clubs are by and large happy with the entries and the format of our Football Championships, so we should leave well enough alone. In the hurling Championships we have though a responsibility to look at the format of our Junior and Intermediate Championships. Again, on the Provincial tier no Down Club has won an Ulster Junior or Intermediate Hurling Title and while the new format in our own Senior Hurling Championship has helped prepare our Senior Champions better for Ulster the same cannot be said of Junior and Intermediate.

I would suggest that in 2019 where we have nine teams competing at Junior and Intermediate Championship level in Down, we organise a league format first involving those nine teams and that they then divide into a Five and a Four for Championship. This is only a thought, the mechanics of how we work this out would be a matter for CCC but we have to produce a better format for our Junior and Intermediate Hurling Championships.

The Senior Football Championship is of course the blue riband of our Club competitions and this year the question on the lips of the pundits was would Kilcoo make it Seven in a Row and set the bar to a new high. The early rounds were competitive though there were no

real upsets, Loughinisland showed progress and intent in the manner of their challenge to Burren in Round One, whilst Cumann Pheadair Naofa were many peoples quiet tip of an upset.

It is Quarter Final stage before in some instances, the Championship gets going and in the Quarter Finals, Mayobridge had a point to spare over Clonduff in a game where they were coasting and were nearly caught, while Kilcoo were too strong for RGU. Burren and Castlewella did battle in a game that only came to life near the end and the South Down men had three points to spare at the final whistle. Loughinisland showed that they will be a worthy Division One team in 2019 as they and Warrenpoint could not be separated firstly in Kilcoo and then in the replay the game again went to Extra Time but with John Boyle outstanding Cumann Pheadair Naofa did enough to allay their Quarter Final bogey and earn a semi-final meeting with Kilcoo.

There was excitement about the Semi Finals and first up was the meeting of Burren and Mayobridge, at Half Time the Bridge were playing all the football and an upset looked likely, however the second half as a different story and Burren claimed their place in the final winning by a ten-point margin 5-12 to 2-11. That was a score line no one could see coming at Half time.

The second Semi Final was an exciting affair with the young kids on the bloc from C.P.N taking the game to Kilcoo, a Goal from Alan Davison brought the crowd to their feet as the Blues led by two. Kilcoo though are a team of real pedigree and they do not do defeat easily, a Ceilum Doherty goal and accuracy from frees by Niall Kane got them home with four points to spare 1-13 to 2-6.

The County Final day in Pairc Esler was one of our best events in a long time, we had two good games



of football, we had the opportunity to honour our 1968 Team and we had our biggest attendance in years, we also had the weather! Kilcoo came in search of a Seven in a row whilst Burren the team of the 80s and 90s came to make sure that their proud boast of a previous six in a row was not surpassed. This repeat of last year's final was a dogfight from the start but it was persistence that saw Burren through in the end. The first half finished all-square at 0-09 to 2-03, thanks to goals from Ceilum Doherty and Jerome Johnston for Kilcoo. Goalkeeper Cathal Murdock was inspirational for Burren when he travelled up the field and planted four monster frees between the sticks, three from 50 metres.

It was a tight first half with Burren leading by a point before super interplay between Paul Devlin and Miceal Rooney set up Doherty for the first goal. Burren kept in touch before Johnston hit the net on 21 minutes to make it 2-02 to 0-05, but the St Mary's side kept plugging away and scored four-in-a-row to level proceedings at the break.

A Donal O'Hare penalty helped Burren's cause early in the second half putting them two in front, but it was level again midway through the half at 1-10 to 2-07.

An O'Hare goal put three points between the teams with ten minutes left on the clock and Burren kept the Magpies to within two until the final whistle.

For Donal O Hare the game was a personal triumph and he was a worthy winner of the Man of the Match Award sponsored by the Mourne Observer. Kilcoo were megamenus in defeat, they showed themselves to be true champions by the manner in which they accepted the disappointment of their fate.

The records show that the last time

Kilcoo were beaten in a Senior Football Championship Final was 70 years ago back in 1948, this new generation of Kilcoo players have served their Club, their Parish and their families outstandingly well and have already stated their intent by their recent Managerial appointments. We are already looking forward to 2019 and the battle for the Frank O Hare Cup. At the recent County Dinner Burren were named Club of the Year after their successes on the field and their developments off the field, they are worthy County Champions and they too will have an eye on 2019.

The Intermediate Football Championship was of an equally high standard and it was no surprise then that two of its most fancied sides would come to meet in the Final. Saul and Darragh Cross had shown Championship pedigree in reaching the Semi Finals and both sides made a big effort to get there. Darragh Cross have had the better of Liatroim in recent Championship meetings but on this occasion, the Fontenoy's were too strong and made it back to an Intermediate Final. Saul had a great year winning Division Three but just found Bredagh a step too far in the other Semi Final where the class of Donal Hughes was evident.

Bredagh dug deep to hold off a late Liatroim surge to deservedly win their second Down Intermediate Football Championship title in three seasons at Pairc Esler on Sunday.

The pace and power of Parador man-of-the-match Conor Francis, the accuracy and leadership of skipper Donal Hughes (who scored 1-10), the doggedness of the defence led by Tommy McElroy and Kevin Dorman all played a key part for Bredagh. But a determined and talented Fontenoy's outfit refused to submit and gradually clawed their way back into contention to set up a grandstand finish and an anxious final few

minutes. A nervy start saw both sides miss chances, but Liatroim did find their range through Miceal McCartan and Liam Doyle to go 0-2 to 0-0 ahead after six minutes. Two minutes later a sublime Cormac Hughes score off the outside of the boot settled Bredagh, and quickly afterwards Francis surged through the heart of the Fontenoy's defence before deftly hand passing across for Donal Hughes to palm to the net.

Liatroim did have a fisted effort come back off the crossbar, and two more scores from McCartan brought matters level by the 18th minute, Another McCartan free on 26 minutes cut the deficit to a point, 1-3 to 0-5, but 60 seconds later Francis once again cut through at pace after taking a fine catch, and his pass to Sean Blaney was superbly dispatched to the bottom corner of the net. Two more Hughes frees extended the lead, with McCartan closing out the half with a score to leave Liatroim behind 2-5 to 0-6 at the break. On the restart, Bredagh were dominant and scored 1-4 without reply and it looked like the Willie John Farrell Cup was on its way to the Ormeau Road. The goal on 35 minutes was a great finish from Declan O'Hara after yet another surging foray up field from Tommy McElroy had cut open the Liatroim defence. But Liatroim sparked into life and showed all their battling qualities from then to the final whistle. Within the next 10 minutes, they had notched up five points in a row through McCartan, Conor McCrickard, PJ Davidson and two from the impressive Pearse Og McCrickard – his second point a shot on goal, which just cleared the bar.

McCrickard was unlucky a minute later to see his effort somehow come back off the inside of the post when the fierce shot seemed a certain goal. The crowd audibly gasped as Pearse Óg's effort seemed destined for the back of the net. Another Davidson score



was followed by a goal bound drive from the great Liam Doyle, brilliantly pushed round the post by Odhran Devlin.

With seven minutes of normal time left Davidson added his third of the afternoon, bringing Liatroim within six points, 3-10 to 0-13. The irrepressible McElroy capped an impressive display with a fine score but Pearse Og McCrickard was by now 'in the zone' and added two more points to bring Liatroim within five. The Fontenoys were making a supreme effort now and Bredagh were struggling to get out of their own half, Donal Hughes showed real leadership and lifted the siege with a point but back came Liatroim and 1-2 in injury time left on the minimum between the sides.

The next score was crucial and it fell to Bredagh to leave two points between the teams and the Cup heading to South Belfast, it had been a final that was a credit to the game and both teams deserve credit.

The Junior Football Final had been postponed from its original date due to a sudden death in the Teconnaught Club and the game was played on a wet Saturday in St Patrick's Park with Teconnaught aiming for a League and Championship double. The weather conditions were very poor for both teams but there was no shortage of effort as Kilclief rose to the occasion and put in a superb effort.

The Semi Finals had seen Kilclief come back with 14 men to overcome Aughlisnafin in the first of a double header in Drumaness and in the second tie, Teconnaught were too strong for Ardglass.

The Final itself ebbed and flowed and an upset looked on the cards as Kilclief driven on by Conall Magee who would later win the Ulster Bank Player of the Junior Championship, really put up a great challenge to Teconnaught.

However, spare a thought for a gallant Kilclief side who took the game to their much more vaunted opponents and on another day would have emerged victorious, but they were left to rue a number of chances that got away.

Kilclief had done everything right. They got their tactics spot on and negated the influence of danger men Ciaran Carville and Paddy Grant, but they simply lacked a killer touch in front of goal. This showdown was an enthralling encounter that kept a large crowd on the edge of their seats from first to last minutes.

Neither side took a backward step throughout 60 intriguing minutes with sweeping counterattacks the order of the day. Of course, there were a lot of handling errors, misplaced passes and attempted points falling short, but the combatants must be applauded for the football served up in poor conditions. Teconnaught winning 0-8 to 0-7, the finest of margins when on the day again the winner was Gaelic Football. This was a great achievement winning the League and Championship by a Club with great plans for development on and off the field. Ballyholland Harps won a second ever Minor Football Title when they turned on a brilliant second half display to blow Burren away in a final of the highest standard in Pairc Esler. There were no sweepers in sight as two well-coached teams went out and played Gaelic Football at its best with the Collie Curran Cup making the short journey up the road to Ballyholland on a score of 6-11 to 2-10 amidst scenes of great jubilation.

Michael Linden became a You Tube sensation as his remarkable point in the Premier Reserve Final went viral and the great man showed that Class is Ageless in Mayobridge's victory in the Reserve Championship Final as the Bridge did the double winning

the Premier Reserve also.

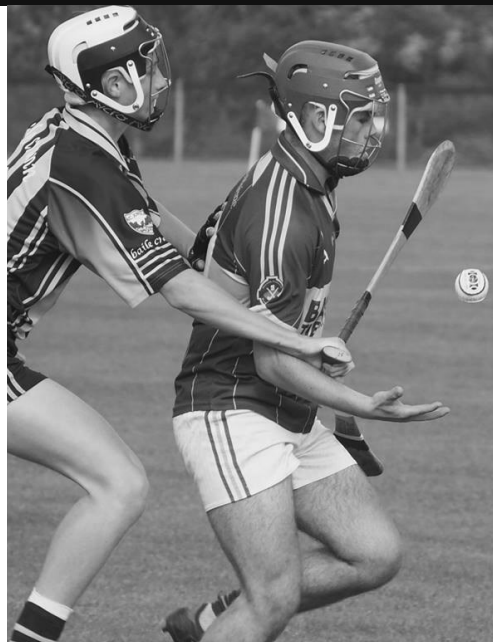
Burren got some compensation as they won both the Under 16 and Under 14 County Titles, a representation of the work being done at under age by the Club.

In Ulster alas our Football Teams all exited at the Quarter Final stage Burren didn't get going until too late against Scotstown, Bredagh were denied in Extra Time by Mullahoran whilst Teconnaught one week after winning in Down went out to a Limavady side that had Callum Brown in their ranks.

The Hurling Championships were again of a high standard and we had a great finish to the Senior Final with Ballycran pulling the game out of the fire in the closing moments. The new format of Round Robin games does I believe work well and now next year we will have Liatroim competing in the Senior Championship which will give everyone three games before the Finals. As I have already stated it is good preparation for our teams trying to win Provincial honours and in the past two years, our County Champions have got to the Ulster Final.

Ballycran had won their first two games and thus were waiting in the final for the winners of Ballygalget and Portaferry, Portaferry finished the stronger in the game with the accuracy of Ronan Blair from placed balls a big help. The great warrior Gareth Johnston put in a great shift for Ballygalget but at the end of the day Portaferry did enough to come through. As with previous years, we took in outside referees to officiate at the Round Robin games and I again believe that this helps to add an edge to the games it helps raise the standard too and so far, there are no issues with this policy.

In the final itself it was a most exciting finish, when Conor Woods shook the Portaferry net four minutes into added time, the classy



forward applying the most dramatic of finishing touches as Ballycran pulled off a remarkable smash and grab raid to land a first county title since 2015. They didn't score at all from the 11th minute until half-time, shot a succession of wides after the break and trailed from the 20th minute until well into added time. There was little to suggest this was going to be Ballycran's day.

But when referee Colin Murray awarded a close-range free against Portaferry goalkeeper Karol Keating who, seconds earlier, had spectacularly denied Cormac McAllister a second goal of the day, Ballycran's chance arrived. Trailing by two after gradually clawing back a deficit that had once been seven, and in the final minute of the four allocated for added time, the only decision Woods had to make was where he wanted to put it.

Woods slammed the sliothar low to the right of the 'keeper, somehow avoiding the Portaferry bodies on the line. And when Woods, carrying a nasty-looking finger injury from before half-time, sent over a point less than a minute later to extend their lead to two with the clock ticking down, the Ballycran support was in dreamland.

It was impossible not to feel sympathy for Portaferry. Defeated finalists last year too, they had been the better team for long periods. That late, late Woods free swung the game. With a huge wind at their backs, it was the Ports who had stolen a march at the break, although Ballycran were the first to settle. They adapted well to the trying conditions, their short, sharp passing game causing problems for Portaferry early on. And when McAllister lashed to the net to put them 1-2 to 0-2 ahead with 11 minutes on the clock, Ballycran looked in control.

But they were architects of their own downfall at times as some poor tackling gifted Portaferry plenty of opportunities, and the dead-eyed Ronan Blair was in no mood to pass them up, sending just one wide all afternoon. Blair also gobbled up the one chance that came his way in front of goal, lashing beyond Stephen Keith as Portaferry took control, with a point from sub Tom Murray sending them in 1-9 to 1-2 ahead at the break.

Ballycran were a bit panicky in front of the posts as they attempted to close the gap, registering three poor wides in the opening 10 minutes after the restart. With the driving runs of Eoghan Sands

doing damage and the experienced Paul Braniff sprung from the bench, the Ports looked well placed to bury the memories of last year's Down decider. But back came Ballycran, chipping away at the lead, with Woods pulling the strings. History shows that Conor Woods delivered and Ballycran were winners 2-13 to 1-14 and Jeremiah McVeigh Cup was for McKenna Park.

The Intermediate Hurling Final saw Liatroim win the first of their two Intermediate Finals against Bredagh when they were always in control in St Patrick's Park. Both Clubs had been the strongest teams in the competition and on the day, Liatroim inspired by Ruairi McCrickard had six points to spare 2-19 to 2-13 on the day and now having retained the title move up to the Senior Championship in 2019.

The Junior Hurling Final was an emotive occasion with Clonduff meeting Newry Shamrocks and Clonduff a Club still feeling devastation and loss from the untimely death of Pearce Branagan in the summer. Pearce was a young man steeped in Clonduff hurling and making a career for himself as a Primary School Teacher when he was taken much too soon from us on a Saturday afternoon in August. On the day of



the Junior Final there was never any doubt that Clonduff had a 16th man as the spirit of Pearce was very much in evidence in St Patrick's Park it was one of those occasions when you feel that the result is just meant to be. Clonduff had a point to spare at the finish 1-13 to 2-9 and Shamrocks were once again on the losing side in a Junior Hurling Final.

The Minor Hurling Final was won by Bredagh and this was a sign of the growth of the game in the greater Belfast area and shows good promise for the overall future development. Portaferry were best at Under 16 level, winning the Championship, with Ballygalget on top at Under 14.

The Down Hurling reps entered Ulster and again we have to report there was no success, in the Junior Clonduff overcame Naomh Colm Cille but were then beaten by eventual winners Castleblaney, Liatroim were beaten by Keady whilst in the Senior Ballycran gave us all a boost as they brought the reign of Slaughtneil to an end in the Semi Final.

Ballycran prepared for an Ulster Final against Cushendall with real optimism and there was a great buzz about McKenna Park in the build up to the game.

Unfortunately, the Down men came up short, the physical presence of the Cushendall team was just too much to deal with but they had been great ambassadors for the County and there is no doubt that Club Hurling is on the march again in Down, it is so to speak a work in progress. It is often a fact missed but there were over 450 Hurling games played in Down this past year and on this front, I must thank Liam Quinn and Conor Watson for their work in relation to fixtures.

As I write the Under 21 Competitions in Football and Hurling are not yet complete, I wish to congratulate Carryduff on retaining the Patrick Dinsmore Cup whilst we wait on the other finals coming to fruition.

The Football Leagues in Down in 2018 were going to involve a degree of pain for Clubs as we try to work to have ten team leagues in place for 2020. Burren completed a senior Double when they won the O Neills Division One Title, with Loughinisland almost going through the League unbeaten in Division Two and gaining a much-deserved promotion to Division One.

There was great joy in the East of the County with Saul winning Division Two, good work and good

structures has now paid off and the team will be able to test themselves now in what will be a competitive Division Two. In Division Four Teconnaught gained promotion with an unbeaten run in the League and with a development project underway this is a Club with serious intent. In the Hurling Leagues Liatroim were winners of Division One whilst Ballygalget Seconds took the honours in Division Two.

In 2019, Clubs will again be feeling a degree of pain as we try to get to a position where we have Divisions with ten teams in three cases and then a template for Division Four that allows for meaningful competition. We do believe that getting to this end will be for the betterment of Down Football at Club and County level. We need to maintain a watch on the Hurling Leagues and see that we are providing the best for our Clubs, we may well in 2019 have to be open to the fact that some Clubs in Armagh might well be seeking to participate in Down Hurling Leagues.

## Sponsors and Sponsorship

In 2019, we move forward with our County Team Sponsors EOS IT Solutions continuing to be our Official and Main Sponsor. We are very lucky indeed to have EOS as our Sponsors, they are not just sponsors, they are also advocates to others to do business with Down GAA. They sponsor all of the County Teams in all Codes showing that they as a family business are very conscious of the Down GAA Family.

**EOS are leaders on a global stage and Daniel and Brendan Strain have been extremely supportive to the County throughout the year, they are passionate Down men who want the County to be successful in the first instance as Down supporters and in the second instance as Team Sponsors.**

**They have also provided employment opportunities for many young people in our County as they too try to offer support to the best of local talent in their workforce.** There are a lot of young GAA players in employment in EOS and this all adds to the economic contribution of the company to the community.

We in Down GAA and in the GAA in general have to be conscious of our Sponsors and how we cater for their requirements, they in the case of EOS are investing in Down GAA, they are allowing us to make things happen by their generous sponsorship. We are very lucky to have a good professional relationship with EOS and to know too that they are committed to Down and to the brand that is Down GAA. I hope that in 2019 we can bring some success and plenty of media exposure to EOS and that their business will continue to grow. The new Wi Fi system in Pairc Esler has also been installed by EOS and this in kind sponsorship goes beyond the financial commitment of the firm to Down.

We have now Eighteen companies who directly input into Down GAA with Sponsorship in different forms and I want to place on record our thanks to those companies for their support throughout the year. Their Contributions help to ensure that all of our teams are looked after and that we can organise our games and improve our facilities.

Our Associate Sponsors are as follows:

- Morgan Fuels who sponsor our Senior and Minor Championships in Football and Hurling
- The Parador Lodge Belfast who sponsor our Intermediate and Junior Football Championships
- O'Neill's Sportswear who sponsor our All County Leagues
- Eamonn Rooney Coach Hire who sponsor our Reserve and Premier Reserve Championships
- Autoline The Insurance Partner of Down GAA
- O Hare and McGovern Associate Sponsor
- The Quays Shopping Centre Newry Associate Sponsor
- Modern Tyres Road Safety Partner of Down GAA
- McAvoy Construction Associate Sponsor
- The Murdock Group Associate Sponsor
- Fegan Transport Associate Sponsor
- The Milestone Rathfriland Associate Sponsor
- Canal Court Hotel Hospitality Partner
- Tullyraine Quarries Associate Sponsor

- Mc Cartan Bros Official Clothing Partner Down GAA
- HMT Shipping Associate Sponsor
- KN Group Associate Sponsor
- Highline Construction New York

We also have one anonymous Sponsor and whose contribution is also very much appreciated. We can only offer our sponsors three real benefits, Access to tickets, Access to players and Advertising in Pairc Esler and Online. There are though great opportunities to be associated with Down in 2019.

We need to broaden the Sponsorship base, Down is a big county yet in the list of companies just mentioned only three are outside a 10-mile radius of Newry.

So if you think that you or your company would like to come on board as an Associate Sponsor for Down we can tailor the package to meet your need. Or if you know a company that might be interested then please let us know and we will establish contact with the Company.

In 2019, we hope to organise a major event that will act as a fundraiser for the County whilst at the same time also acting as a fundraiser for Clubs. If we organise one event for the County in any given twelve months, then that leaves lots of opportunities for Clubs to undertake their own events. We need to plan events, there needs to be coordination and communication. The County needs to set out its calendar of events early in the year to avoid the clashes with Clubs and sister organisations.

The Race Day this year was beneficial to those Clubs who took the opportunity to sell their tickets and with all of the monies they generated going to the Club this was an opportunity not to be

missed. The day itself was an excellent day and night and we hope that when we announce our event for 2019 then more people will join us and let us make it a win win for County and Club. **I thank Michael McArdle and his team for all of their work in coordinating the Race Day we always have to be creative in our thoughts and be that bit imaginative, there is an idea for 2019 that might work and we hope to take it to you early in the New Year.**

### Fifty Years Ago

In 1968 the world was a changing place and nowhere more so than in the North of Ireland and in the midst of that change there was a Red and Black rising as once again Down showed that they were indeed the team of the 60s. This year we had the opportunity to honour those great men who won the National League, The Sam Maguire and the World Trophy, it was a year when Down were kings.

At the Ulster Championship Game in Newry v Antrim the Ulster Council paid tribute to the Team and Management and the crowd gave them a great welcome. These men stepped again on to Pairc Esler where fifty years ago it had been Pairc an luir or the Marshes as we knew it and they had an epic battle with then All Ireland Champions Meath in the National League. That game then put down a marker that this team was on a mission and that was months before the battle of Ballinascreen.

The GPA honoured the surviving members at a function in Croke Park before the All Ireland Football Final and I have to say I found it disappointing to say the least that only the surviving members of the panel were invited. I had naturally assumed that the widows of the deceased players the Captain Joe Lennon and defender Brendan Sloan or their representatives would have been included but this

was not the case and this was something outside of our control.

For me it was another example of where the GPA leave us with more questions than answers.

The next day those players and Management who wished to attend the All Ireland Final were facilitated in doing so as the County Committee managed to accommodate the ticket requests.

On the 14th of October the patrons of Down gave a great welcome to the Team and Management as they were our guests at the County Final, there was a genuine warmth of feeling as the stand in Pairc Esler rose to applaud the players and management as they were introduced at Half Time in the Senior Final. Only a couple of weeks previous we had lost another member of the squad with the passing of Pat McAlinden it was very nice that he was represented by his family on the day.

On the 2nd of November, we hosted the County Dinner where the men of 1968 were our guest of honour and this proved to be a very special occasion. We were joined too by Tom Prendergast, Brendan Lynch and Donie O Sullivan from Kerry as well as Jim McDonnell, Gabriel Kelly and Oliver Galligan from Cavan who all travelled to join us on the night. It is a great thing about the GAA that when you make contact with these men and tell them what you are doing, they are half way up the road before you are finished on the phone! John Devaney did an outstanding job as the host on the night and it was just a marvellous occasion as the County as One paid tribute to men who fifty years ago lit up our worlds and made us all believe we were six inches taller.

**People in recent times and sadly from within our own County have chosen to beat us up in**

**relation to our pride in our history. We are after all Down and bar Dublin and Kerry I am sure that there are many Counties who would love to have our history, it is not a burden, it is no “hand of History” but it is most certainly part of who we are and what made us who we are. The five stars on our Jersey’s include the year of each All Ireland Win and rather than this be a burden or a perceived burden let this be the challenge to the next generations for there is room on the collar of the jersey for a 6th Star. Down GAA is proud of our heritage, proud of how we do things, the Down way has been slated but having seen some of the alternatives in operation at Club and County level I am more than happy to advocate the Down Way.**

At the County Dinner we inducted the great Seán O Neill into the Hall of Fame, in 1968 he had been the player of the year and there is no doubt that he was our greatest ever Gaelic Footballer. Sean O Neill joins Pat Rooney and Dr Martin Walsh as recipients of the Down GAA Hall of Fame, which this year was sponsored by Ulster Bank.

In my treasure throve of Old Newspapers relating to 1968, I often times get distracted reading up on match reports though I came across one Headline which I thought was very amusing and reflected the changing world and the role of Down in that change in 1968. It came from the Evening Press of the time.





## Mourne Academy

Now in its third year the work of the Mourne Academy could be said to be a work in progress with their being a need for ongoing evaluation and achievement of goals. There is no doubt that there has been improvement in the coaching of our Development Squads but it is only a work in progress. As stated previously we really need to develop a programme of work in relation to the conditioning of our players and it needs to be developed in conjunction with our Academy, our Schools and our County Teams at Under 17, Under 20 and Senior. I welcome the fact that a meeting between many of these groups has been put in place through the Offices of our Games Development Manager Conor O Toole but this needs to be the beginning of a process not a case of another box ticked.

The way forward may well be that we follow the lead of other Counties and appoint a head of Strength and Conditioning whose responsibility it would be to ensure that all squads are following a high calibre programme, where people know what they need to do to reach the next level. There had been previous discussion of a High Performance Director but I feel that this post is something that may come to fruition at a later stage, a post of that status needs more evaluation of the need and it would need to complement existing posts

not lead to them becoming obsolete.

For now, I think that the Mourne Academy needs to address the deficit in our approach to strength and conditioning and the Down County Committee need to act on those recommendations. We need to upskill Down people to be the very best in this speciality rather than all of the time having to rely on people from outside the County to develop our players. The problem then is when a Team Managements term comes to an end we have to start again and reinvent the wheel, that only stymies progress and we lose ground another case of one step forwards and two steps backwards.

We need too to develop our whole recruitment process and talent identification for the Academy, there needs to be a full process of engagement where Schools and Clubs can input into the process at varying stages. We have to develop a network of scouts whose opinions are regarded and valued all working to identify talent and hand it over to the team of top-level coaches. There are a lot of people in the County who if asked to take on a scouting role would be very happy to make a contribution to the betterment of Down Football or Hurling. We should never be afraid of opinions, and never be afraid too of keeping the door open and being prepared to take a chance on a particular player if it works

great, if it does not what really have we lost. It is after all better to have tried and failed than never to have tried.

**So in 2019 I would like that Down GAA and the Mourne Academy are moving to the position where we are appointing a Strength and Conditioning Coach with responsibility for working with all squads at all levels. The job might seem huge but if it can be done in Cavan by ironically a Down Man Andre Quinn then surely it can be done in Down. Financially it can be funded and sustained, we are already paying individuals for work on a part time basis and if we looked at the Budget and sought to procure less material goods and invested in a person then the post can be created.**

I thank Paddy O'Rourke as Chairperson of the Academy and the other members of the steering group for the work that they have undertaken, I laud in particular the engagement with parents and guardians of the young people entrusted to our care as part of the Mourne Academy. We have work to do all of us, the Steering Committee needs too to be refreshed and strengthened, the County Committee need to engage fully with the Academy, only as one will real progress be made.



## Urban Challenge

In truth progress has been slow in relation to addressing the Urban challenge and in particular the challenge identified with Gaelic Games in Newry. It was a sad statistic to read in the County Final programme and sadder too for me to have to write it that it was 50 years from a Newry Team was last in a County Senior Football Final let alone won a County Title. That though is reality and we all shoulder a degree of blame for such, the County, the Clubs of Newry, the surrounding Clubs of Newry, the schools and local government. These stakeholders all have a role to play in the solution, too much time has already been lost, if I take you back to 1985 there was a commission report produced in relation to Gaelic Games in Newry. The commission was led by Hugh McNamara and included Ciaran Rafferty as Secretary, the remarkable thing is that many of its findings are as applicable today as they were back in 1985. The problems remain the same, the issues have not yet been addressed and in fact the situation with Gaelic Games in Newry is worse than it was in 1985.

The Standard of teams has dropped, the numbers playing our games has dropped, yet the population figures for Newry are set to increase, in preparing documentation for Ulster Council as a first step hopefully on the pathway to funding I stressed that it was a Time to Act and a Time to Deliver. There was genuine surprise and shock amongst the Ulster Coaching and Games Committee that the situation in Newry is as bad as I had outlined, Dr Eugene Young has been asked to work with us to prepare a presentation to take to National Level. The aim of the presentation is to obtain if possible two Gaelic Games Development Officers for Newry, people who will work with Schools and Clubs and all interested parties. We refer to the

posts as Gaelic Games Development Officers, as there is work to be undertaken with Clubs as much in terms of planning and development as much as there is a coaching brief to be fulfilled.

Newry would be the pilot project in a Down GAA Plan to address the Urban challenge, if we get Newry up and running in 2019, then the target would be to do an analysis on the need in Downpatrick and North Down for 2020 and 2021.

For now, we need to put our energies into working with Dr Eugene Young and producing a sustainable plan that will attract funding and support at National Level. Gaelic Games in Newry needs a response from the greater GAA Family, in 2019 it will be 25 years since DJ Kane a proud son of the City lifted the Sam Maguire we need to develop the next generation of DJ's, for history shows when Newry is strong Down is strong.

## BREXIT

It would be remiss if we were not to mention Brexit and its possible implications for the GAA indeed anything which adversely impacts on the economic life of the community has obvious implications for the GAA. The GAA and its community needs an economy north and South, East and West that is thriving and where industry and job creation is allowed to blossom. I hope that the agreement currently on the table even in its present format which is not without concerns is delivered upon for no agreement and a hard Brexit and a subsequent hard border would have implications for people playing our games and involved in our Association. We do not on this island of ours need a Hard Border in the first instance and thankfully that is a consensus that seems to be evident amongst the majority of people. The GAA follower in particular travels the length and

breadth of the County following his or her County or Club and for the past 25 years nearly that has been largely and unhindered journey.

We all recall the days when Checkpoints seemed to just appear on the days of Ulster Championship games in Clones and Middleton became a place to be avoided. We do not need a return to checkpoints at borders, that might be an outcome of a No deal or Hard Border. In the old saying too much water has flowed under the bridge for that to happen again.

We need to keep our young people at home and in employment and to protect those industries that might now be subject to unnecessary checks and regulations, keeping our young people at home means the future of our Clubs is secure. Those very same local businesses and Industries are the very same people who provide the sponsorship and support that also helps to keep our Clubs and Communities alive. The North of Ireland is in a unique position in regard to Brexit and we need that to be recognised by all and we need an agreement that reflects that position.

We need to think too of the people we call "The New Irish" for they have come and settled in our communities, they have worked hard, they have had children born here and they are playing our games. Look now at the Team Sheets for Club and County Teams throughout the County and at all levels now we are having names appear for which there is no Irish translation. This is great to see where these young people and some not so young have embraced the culture of the GAA and are now fully engrossed in our fabric. Do we want these people to potentially have to leave us and return to a place that is no longer seem as Home, because we would have no agreement on Brexit and they could be subject to a Hard Border

and other legislation especially those now domiciled in the North of Ireland?

Think too of the practicalities of how the GAA organises its Inter County Fixtures where we see London, Warwickshire and Lancashire participate at Inter County Level and where would a Hard Brexit leave those fixtures, they could become logistical nightmares.

So the GAA needs an Agreement on Brexit and not just for the Counties in the Six Counties but for the units in Britain and beyond. We need to be prepared for whatever might come and though it might seem far removed from us a No Deal and a Hard Border would have a big impact on the GAA. We need to use all and any influence to make sure that the GAA position on Brexit is well articulated to both Governments.

Another factor that could also be affected is the GAA funding currently paid to every County in Euro, we need to see post Brexit how the currency is affected in regard to the current grant of €175,000.00 to each County. If there was a great disparity in the Sterling and Euro could have a detrimental effect again on Counties in the Sterling Area. This is something that will need to be managed centrally as well.

### **One County - Ag Obair le Chéile**

Down GAA County Committee was founded back in 1903 with a first meeting of the new body taking place on the 26th April, with James Denvir of Ballynarry Kilclief in the Chair. By 1925 new divisional areas were being defined and a South Down League and an East Down league coming under the remit of divisional Committees.

Dare I say on researching, it seems as if the structures were nearly along the lines of the FA

and the Football League. The County Committee looked after the County Teams and the County Championships whereas the Divisional Committees looked after the Adult League Football in their divisions. This was the case up to 1950 when the late Maurice Hayes became the first secretary of the All County Senior Football League. Divisional committees then catered for those teams not yet competing at All County and then as Gaelic games grew through the 1960's the Divisional Committees addressed the need to provide under age structures below Minor level.

**That is the historical perspective and I outline it because I wish to address what I feel is a need once again form unity within our County. At present in Down I feel we are operating at times as Three Counties, we have Down and then we have East Down and South Down each of whom have carved out their own identities and entities within the County of Down.**

In the past 12 months Scór has been organised on a County basis by the County Scór committee and the County Dinner was held where there were Down GAA Awards.

This I believe was a very important step previously we have had Supporters Club Dinners, Club Down Dinners, East and South Down Dinners now in 2018 we once again had a County Dinner where Down GAA and the family that is Down GAA came together as one. We are geographically not big enough now to have division, people now have easy access to all locations and in Down it is sometimes easier now to go to Clubs that previously were not in your natural hinterland. Is it right too that we should have two entities within the County who are financially stronger than the County and who are generating income streams that could be better directed to the common good of Down GAA.

In recent years we have had All County Leagues at Minor and Under 16 level as well as Championships on an All County basis at this level too. I feel that the time is right to now broaden the base and have Fixtures body responsible for the organisation of Juvenile fixtures on an All County Basis. The County CCC would then have two constituent bodies under its remit, one responsible for the organisation of Fixtures at Adult Level and one responsible for the Organisation of Fixtures on an all-County basis at Juvenile Level. I would suggest that this change happen in 2020 at the same time as we are committed to a change in our Age Groups.

You will rightly ask how will it work well I would propose that if we take the year 2020 for example, we will be organising competitions at the following age groups Under 13, Under 15 and Under 17. So we agree that the Competition is played on an All County basis and is either 15 a side or 13 a side, teams are seeded based on their previous two years' performance and are then placed in the suitable league at All County. It would be envisaged that there would be Four Divisions in each age Group at All County Level and as such that could potentially mean more games for our young people, with games Home and Away teams could have as many as 18 games in the League. The Top Two Divisions would be games of 15 a side and the next two Divisions would be for teams of 13 A Side.

There would be no 11 a side or 9 a side competition, I think that for the long term future of our Clubs we need to be having our competitions at either 13 or 15 a side. Yes, the challenge maybe numbers but the challenge of numbers is more a case of working to get the numbers out and not just cherry picking and thinking well we would be comfortable at 11 or 9 a side.

It is not too long ago when all competitions were 15aside and Clubs were able to participate because people within the Clubs made great efforts to get teams out on the pitches. I think of men like Seamus Faloon driving around Newry in the Mitchels Minibus to ensure that he had at least 15 players for a trip to Longstone, Seán O'Rourke in An Ríocht who had to get Diarmuid Cahill out to make up numbers, failure to do so would have meant that young men would have been lost to our Association.

There have been record numbers at our Cúl Camps year on year, so the numbers must surely be there, enough for each Club to field either 13 or 15 players at Under 13, 15 and 17 in 2020, to me this is a target that is worth working to. If and when we achieve this, we will be setting down a marker to our competitors for we will be making games available to our young people on an increased scale with a minimum of 18 league games and at least 4 Championship games.

The Fixture programme would be set out centrally and the games would happen at the times proposed and there would be a new dimension in that the fixtures would be on an All County basis.

Clubs would get to play against Clubs from outside of their normal hinterland and they might even get to play against a neighbouring Club who they never get to meet these days because of the divisional boundaries. Clubs would be playing at their own level and we would be removing the language of A B C and D competitions, we would have Division One to Four, we would be playing within rule in all of our Competitions. I refer you here to Rule 2.1 of section 2 of the Official Guide part two where by a County Committee may reduce the number of players on a team from 15 for non-championship games.

So this would mean that the Teams who compete in the Leagues at 15 aside would play in the County Championship and the teams participating at 13 a side would play in a Cup Competition, the format for these competitions would be decided by the CCCC Juvenile Committee.

You will say that this is the end of the Divisional Committees and a further dilution of their roles and responsibilities and yes that may well be the case. Divisional committees are sub committees of the County Committee under the rules of the Association they are so and are not Divisional Boards.

Down as a County operates far better as one unit, the County Dinner this year was a fine example of how we do things well when we are operating as one, in Scór this year the County Scór committee were responsible for the organisation of the competition and there was an improvement in key areas. We quite simply cannot have divisional committees who are organising competitions which are at odds with the rules of the Association, we cannot have divisional committees which are vying with the County Committee for sponsorship opportunities and for grants. This cannot continue on any of the above fronts and Down GAA cannot allow this state of affairs to continue ultimately to the detriment of the Down GAA brand.

We need in my opinion as Runaí Coiste Chontae to have our games and our organisation under the direction of one body not as is presently the case three different bodies, we are only creating division and ultimately under achieving. There should be one entity responsible for Gaelic Games and Culture within the County, one brand- the Down GAA Brand and a unity that says we are Down. I acknowledge that there are many good people involved in the Divisional committees, I really would love that those people were

channelling their energies and talents into achieving for Down GAA as a single entity, united in a common purpose of seeing the GAA continue to grow in Down to be the number one sport of choice in our County.

Time changes everything and just like the establishment of the All County League in 1950 there comes a time when change happens and the roof does not fall in, 2020 is I believe our time for change. I urge that the debate on such change should begin now, I have set out my rationale, it will no doubt be upsetting to some but it is a debate that has to happen on logical not personal grounds and as a part of a vision for the future. I have no personal axe to grind with the Divisional Committees I just feel that there is a better way of administering our juvenile fixtures and of ensuring that the GAA is the number one sport of choice in our County.

## Finance

The Convention last year saw a presentation by Feargal McCormack on how the commitment by our Clubs had improved our Financial position and how this needed to continue to allow us to operate successfully.

Diarmuid Cahill was elected as County Treasurer and with the assistance of James McGrath they set about bringing a new impetus to the management of the County Finances. Ulster Bank became our banking partners with a strong emphasis on IT support. The issue of our outstanding loan with Croke Park had also been raised at last year's Convention and it was addressed in 2018 becoming one of the financial good news stories for the County. When it had first been mooted about making repayments on the Loan in one of my past Secretary's reports where I said that we needed to be paying back the loan it was projected back then in 2012 that the loan would be

paid in 2032. In fact, I did not envisage any of the present Officers being in post when the Loan would eventually be paid. In 2018 we renegotiated the loan with Croke Park and now we are in the position where the loan currently sits at £ 1,444,421.51 and we are paying £15,000.00 per month and at that rate the loan will now be paid off in 2025-26 season.

We have reduced the loan through negotiation, converted the payments to sterling and thus avoided fluctuating exchange rates and the real good news saved the County €247,000.00 in repayments. **For all of those out there who have historically castigated the County Officers for their management of the County Finances I think that the time has come to dispel the spin that money given to the County was only going to fill the black hole of debit.** In recent times the County Officers have been transparent about the Finances and rightly so for we have nothing to hide, so I say to those who have plied the spin - Back the County, good things are happening and get on board to make Ballykinlar happen.

The continued support of our Clubs is vitally important to our future well-being and in our fundraising for 2019 that initiative must present the option for our Clubs to generate income for their own activities. The Continued success of the Clubs Draw has seen the

model now being adopted by other Counties in Ulster. When one reflects on the battle that it was to get the Draw adopted by our Clubs I am content too that our 80/20 split in favour of our Clubs was the right model. We are very generous in that split compared to other Counties but I feel that this was the right decision for our Clubs, we need to ensure that our Clubs are financially sustainable and the Clubs Draw provides the opportunity for such sustainability.

**The 2018 Down GAA Clubs Draw generated a total income of £732,000.00 with 6,100 tickets sold and this was an increase of 11% on the year previous. A record £632,000.00 which is in fact 85% of the revenue will be shared with the Clubs and the County Committee. Some Clubs again made a phenomenal effort and raised in excess of £30,000 in cases for their finances, this is all a great benefit to Clubs and all before the season really starts. Remember that you cannot buy a ticket for the Clubs draw in March, so you are talking about Clubs making a big effort in December and January in a short time span the rewards can be great. You need to ask the question Can your Club afford not to promote the Clubs Draw?**

The Race Day at Dundalk on July 12th was another success for Down GAA, given that all Down teams were out of the respective

Championships at this time, it was not an easy sell but Michael McArdle and his team worked very hard and ensured that the day was a success socially and financially. Again there was a win for Clubs of a minimum of £1000.00 per Club if they had embraced the idea of selling tickets for the event and retaining the income from any sales that they made.

For a week at the end of September everyone in Down and the GAA world in general became avid supporters of Limerick as the very generous contribution from JP McManus of €100,000.00 made its way to each County. I have to admit that for 30 seconds I thought all of my Christmas's had come at once as I opened the envelope and saw a cheque made payable to Down GAA FOR €100,000.00, I then read the accompanying letter and saw that the Money was indeed for our Clubs.

This was a magnificent gesture by JP the man quite simply did not have to do it but he knows the value of the GAA in its community and in contributing to Clubs JP was ensuring that it filtered down to the Clubs. To be fair to our Clubs I have heard of various ways in which the money was going to be used to address particular needs which perhaps had been down the list of priorities but none the less were going to need to be done at a stage, the JP money became that stage.



The gates for our Championships were up and this was a result of good financial management in ensuring that the right venues were selected to host games and in relation to our County Finals that we were not clashing with fixtures in our neighbouring counties. I do though still feel that we need to have a nominal admission charge for Under 16s, it still amazes me in the lengths that people go to in order to obtain entry to a ground and game without paying or if paying then doing so at a discounted rate that clearly does not apply to them.

The people who work at Pairc Esler in selling half time draw tickets make a valuable contribution to the ground and the County, under the leadership of Michael McArdle they have generated nearly £15,000.00 this year and I just want to place on record my thanks to them especially the elder statesmen Martin and Columban.

Under the Chairmanship of Ross Carr Club Down initiated a Youth Draw this past year with again benefits going to Clubs who managed to optimise sales. The focus for Club Down's income is the funding of the Mourne Academy project and as this is a very necessary project for the future development of our footballers and hurlers so people should be taking the opportunities presented to join Club Down. I appeal in particular to the parents and guardians of the young people who will benefit from participation in the Mourne Academy to join Club Down, your son will get far more benefit than the £10.00 a month that is asked of you in membership. On membership I believe that there is an onus on Club Down to develop a membership base, by its very name Club Down that suggests members.

**We need more members contributing to Club Down and**

**making a difference, now too with Charitable status granted your contribution as a tax payer means additional benefits from the Government. So to Club Down I say you need a membership strategy. You need more members contributing but you need to be actively asking people, me writing here will not necessarily have the required effect but the personal touch and the ask of someone to join Club Down may bring the greater reward.**

### **The Ballykinlar Project**

The hopes of many will take a further step forward early in 2019 as we move to appoint a Planning Consultant and a Design Team for our centre at Ballykinlar. The past year has been spent being careful to ensure that all of the right steps were being taken to hopefully obtain full planning permission by the end of 2019.

We have secured the purchase of the additional land and have agreement from Newry Mourne and Down District Council to have their facility transferred back to the MOD who will then in turn transfer the lease to ourselves as part of the overall project. We have presented our vision to the National Infrastructure and Finance Committee at Croke Park to the obtain their approval to move to the next stage of appointing the various consultants. A similar presentation has happened also with the Ulster Council as we seek to ensure that we have the full Association backing at Provincial and National Levels before we make any financial commitments. We have also been in discussion with bodies in relation to the historic nature of the site and how that can be incorporated in our development.

A Project Manager will also be appointed and a Project board formed, a timeframe has been approved and we will now be

following a road map of milestones that hopefully will all be completed to get us to the stage of full planning approval by December 2019. We want to come to Convention in 2019 with Planning Approval guaranteed for the Down GAA Centre at Ballykinlar.

To the Ballykinlar Club and Community I wish to state that you have nothing to fear with this development, we in Down GAA recognise that the past few years have been difficult for you as a Club and for the Ballykinlar Community in general. We believe that the development by Down GAA can be a catalyst for good in the Club and in the area in general. **We want to be good neighbours to each and every one of you, we want you to feel a part of the project.** The vision envisaged by Down GAA will include facilities that will be for the use of all of the people of Ballykinlar, there will hopefully be links too with education authorities and health and well-being initiatives all for the benefit of a community. There will be opportunities too for employment in the construction stages and when the project is complete there will be positions that need to be filled too. This is a good news story for Ballykinlar and the surrounding area, together we can all make it happen and I look forward to early 2020 and the Down GAA offices being located on site.

For years' people have criticised us for not having a base of our own and for having as mentioned previously the Black Hole of Debt, well now we are well on the road to having our own base and the Debt is well reduced. So now as we in 2019 move forward to make appointments and to commence work I ask you to back us, make that contribution Financial or In Kind that helps us to build the home that Down GAA needs and deserves since our inception.

Let us the new generation ensure

that the current and future generations of players who wear the Red and Black have access to the very best facilities to allow them to be the best that they can be. 2019 will be 60 years from our first Senior Ulster Title and 25 Years from our last one and from our 5th All Ireland let it now be the year when Down GAA gets its own home and can build for future generations. We owe it to the men of 59, the men of 94 to make it happen and more importantly we owe it to the boys and girls of the future, the inheritors of our great tradition to make the vision happen. You can play your part, speak to any of the Senior Officers to see how you can make a difference and make the vision a reality #ballykinlar2020.

### Coverage of our Games

I must set out my stall having in previous reports raised issues about the printed media on this occasion I have no issues with the printed media and indeed I commend our local media for their coverage of our games. The profile in the County Down press for Gaelic Games is very much appreciated and I thank the local correspondents and the editors for their coverage of Club and County fixtures. The Club PRO's who submit Club notes do a great job too in providing a resume of how their Club is performing at all levels of activity, we should never be afraid to hang out our brightest colours.

I am though concerned about the Coverage of our games by the two channels particularly based in this jurisdiction BBC and UTV. In a sense here I am revisiting old ground as back in 1982 the County Communication Committee under the Chairmanship of Feargal McCormack had surveyed the GAA coverage provided by these two bodies. Arising from that report changes started to filter through and there was coverage of National League games

undertaken before in 1990 the BBC broke new ground with The Championship Programme. This was all brought back to me when I looked at the TV Guide for the week ahead and saw that on BBC 2 on Friday night Coleraine v Newry City in the Irish League is being broadcast live. The Ulster Club Football Finals will take place this weekend too but we will only be offered perhaps a glimpse on a news bulletin or extended coverage online! I would not hesitate to place a bet that the attendance at any one of our finals will be greater than the attendance at the game on Friday Night in the Irish League.

This also happens where BBC give live coverage to the fortunes of Ulster Rugby during the season and when the Allianz Leagues start in the last week of January neither broadcaster would appear to be interested in the provision of Match Coverage or being innovative and providing a Sunday or Monday night programme of highlights. Yes, RTE and TG4 will have rights of coverage but it would hardly be beyond the powers of all the broadcasters to come to an agreement and thus improve coverage of Gaelic Games in the six counties.

There is an imbalance and this imbalance gives scant recognition of the fact that Gaelic Games are the best attended sporting events in the North of Ireland and also have now the greatest levels of participation by male and female participants. I do not wish this issue to become a political football whereby MLA's try to outscore each other on the back of an imbalance. I would prefer that this matter was championed by Ulster GAA and the GAA nationally to improve the coverage of our games we need at the very least parity in terms of live and deferred TV Coverage by BBC in particular and a better recognition of our games by UTV.

### Irish and Cultural

It is with a heavy heart that I write in my report about Irish and Culture in this year when we in Down GAA lost one of our favourite sons with the untimely death of William Smith our Irish and Cultural Officer on May 29th. There was great shock when the news broke that William was gone from us, a man of the Mournes had been taken to his heavenly home all too soon. We knew him as William or William James to those with longer memories, a man who always gave of his very best for his Club and his County. We talk with pride of Mournes Granite and William was a man fashioned out of all that is good in Mournes, he had the strength of Mournes Granite and he had the pride in his place and the love of his people. William Smith was a good man in every way, he was one of those people who said I will do that and he did it. William epitomised the GAA as the Give All Association for he himself gave all to his Club and his County, more than anyone could have asked.

The history books of Down GAA will record that William served his County as a member of the South Down Committee and then as Vice Chairperson and later as South Down Chairperson. Prior to that William had a keen interest in the then vibrant Down GAA Youth Board being a delegate back in 1981. William saw the bigger picture, he saw that the County was an extension of his club and he could best serve his Club by giving commitment to the County and in turn then to his fellow Clubs throughout the County. On Coiste Bainisti William served as Vice Chairperson, as delegate to the Ulster Council and for the past four years as Irish and Cultural Officer.

To each of these roles he brought commitment and dedication, with the desire to make a difference to the GAA in Down. In these roles William did indeed make a difference, as Vice Chairperson and thus Chair of CCC William

oversaw the change in the format of our Championships and was always keen to improve the presentation of our Championship fixtures in particular. Over the Club Championship weekends William was always on duty be it monitoring a side line or ensuring that a singer was in place for Amhrán na bhFiann, he was happy when we were presenting our games well.

Serving on Ulster Council led William to enjoy friendships with people from other Counties but also to fight the corner for the Clubs of Down to ensure that they got their entitlements and their representation when the need was there. There is no doubt that his love for all things Irish and for our Culture in particular meant that the post of Irish and Cultural Officer was a post made for William. He took to the task with passion and quiet persuasion in a remarkable way that he had of mixing both attributes to ensure that Scór was to the fore of GAA activity in the County.

As Irish and Cultural Officer he oversaw All Ireland titles being won in Solo Singing twice and in Ballad Group twice, his record in the annals of Scór in Down will not be easily surpassed. Yet there is one moment that gave him the greatest pride of all and that was then Niamh McDowell from his own Club was crowned All Ireland Scór na nÓg Champion in 2017. I do not think there was a prouder man in the Waterfront Hall when the result was announced and Glasdrumman had an All Ireland Champion. Scór was where William was happiest, he enjoyed the Competitions at all levels within Down and then at Provincial Level, he enjoyed the friendships he made, friendships that took him throughout Ireland to Provincial and National Finals.

He was a Down man at heart, on the Saturday night he had made his way to Pairc Esler to watch

Down record a win over Antrim, less than one week before he died, he had only been three days out of hospital but the lure of seeing Down play was too great and he watched the game from the Boardroom in Newry. Happy with a Down win and proud to see Connaire and Shane Harrison wear the Red and Black, William was in good form.

Glasdrumman was so important to William, it was his parish, it was where he was from and it was his Club, the Club he played for, the Club he served as a committee member and as a Chairperson. The Club where he oversaw the development of a new ground and Clubrooms, a Club where he had pride in his place. The people of Glasdrumman were Williams people, here he had built a successful business, created jobs and at all times looked out for the good of his community.

We in Down GAA have lost a good friend, a decent man who served his County and served it well.

William was indeed the epitome of all that is good about the GAA, he gave of his time, he sought no reward, he chose to try and make a difference and to so many people he achieved just that. We have great memories of the days that we had, days and nights when William's smile lit up a room, the phone call with a word of wisdom and wise counsel, the genuine concern for the wellbeing of others. William Smith was a good man and we in Down GAA are the poorer for his passing but richer in the strength that he gave us when we had him with us.

The loss of William was a heavy blow for the Scór community within Down and it was indeed a very hard task to lift the mantle and look to organise Scór na nÓg for the 2019 year. It was done for it would not have been in keeping with the memory of William Smith that we would not all have put our shoulder

to the wheel and made it happen.

How fitting too that Glasdrumman would win the Ballad Group title in Castlewellan on Sunday week past and that a granddaughter of William and Aileen would be representing the Club. It was as if the great man himself was smiling and watching over everyone.

Scór is a vital cog in our organisation and there is no doubt that in honesty it brings out the best and the worst in people, I would only wish that we could bottle the very best of what it brings out for then we would have a most vibrant, energetic body that would take some stopping. There is a passion about the followers of Scór that would do well on a football or hurling pitch and is very commendable, let us try to channel that passion in a positive vein and recognise the good that all people can bring to the table. It is easy to knock and within the Scór family that happens too easily, let us recognise what people bring to the table and let us go forward accepting the good and channelling it in the best way possible to the benefit of all of our competitors. In simple terms let us see the good in people and not look for the ulterior motive if we do that we can build something great and 50 years on let us look forward to many more years of Scór. Let our strength be our Unity.

To Paula Magee who as secretary of the County Scór Committee puts in a huge effort to ensure that every fine detail is in place before a competition starts and who represents Down at Provincial and National level, I say thank you for the work that you undertook this year in personal circumstances that must have been very difficult for you. When you need a job done you ask a busy person and they ensure that it is done, in the case of Paula no task is too small and no task is too great.





To all of our National Anthem singers I say thank you for enhancing our games in particular at County and Club level in 2018, to the mummy's and daddy's who drove you to games, thank you too it was much appreciated, and to Plunkett McConville and his team of announcers I thank you all for making yourselves available even if at times this was at short notice.

## Youth

My football career with Newry Mitchel's was a case of playing on the Club Senior team when I could not get my place on the Club Under 16 team – the rationale being that we had a good Under 16 team whilst people were not turning up for the Seniors so you got a game standing in the corner and being told not to get in the way! You were there because we had to have 15 and we had to field and by the time I was 16 I was then the Club Secretary and that was where my administration in the GAA started and my football career was ending. I then got to join the Down Youth Board where Dan McCartan would collect me from my house and take me to meetings in the Savoy Guest House or Score meetings in the home of the great Sean Magorrian. I got to be involved with great people, Dan McCartan, Donal McCormack, Feargal McCormack, the two John Farrell's, Sheelagh and Michael Murray, in 1980 at the hosting of Congress I was a bookies runner! as the Grand National was on the same day as Congress in Newcastle. It was great you were involved in Down GAA and you were learning from people and you were meeting new people and you were still at school.

Now in 2019 we need to resurrect our Bord na nÓg, we need to recruit new people and we need to involve them in administration in this County, we need to give them wings and allow them to grow. Senior Officer ship in the County contains people who either served

on a Youth Board or were officers of a University Club, they were not all footballers or hurlers on the pitch but as the saying goes we need too the best teams off the field.

To this end we will be hosting a Down Youth Forum on 26th January 2019 with the aim of listening to our young people and seeing where we can find a place for their undoubted talents in County Admin going forward. I would hope that we will have a beneficial day where we will as the older brigade listen to the new millennials and we will be enthused by them and we will hopefully get them engaged. They will be given the opportunity to play meaningful roles within County Administration out of the day on the 26th, the canvas will be blank, they can draw the map, and the future can be great.

## Referees

Seamus Walsh as chair of Referees Administration has submitted a report on Refereeing to Convention, I would just like if I may address a couple of issues. We need to give priority to the recruitment of Referees and in particular to the recruitment of Hurling Referees. There is a real danger that we will be unable to fulfil fixtures in 2019 if we do not attract more referees. Attracting referees has to be an ongoing process, I do not believe that we can just decide that this is a process for the winter months, if we get someone in May or June putting up their hand and saying I would like to referee then the onus is on us to make it happen.

We have to be prepared to ask people too to take up refereeing, we have to make the pitch to that person, it may well come in the first instance from within the Club or if help is needed then existing referees should be asked to speak to the potential referee or referees admin to talk to the person too.

All of this brought me then to the train of thought that led me to think well why would you referee and when one looks at the sums of money that some Clubs are paying trainers or managers do we need to increase the payment to referees. Would a better scale of payment make it more attractive for some to take up refereeing? There would be an extra cost to Clubs but on the reverse would we get more referees and would we get quality with the quantity. Currently each club pays £15.00 towards the match fee for a referee if that was to rise to £25.00 per Club per game would refereeing become a more lucrative proposition for the retired player or the person who would like to take up officiating. It might well be the elephant in the room but it is worth discussing, with an increased fee would bring more accountability for referees so it is a double sided coin.

I congratulate Ciaran Branagan and Paul Faloon on their performances at Provincial and National level in the past year, Colin Murrays progress at these levels has been hampered by injury and hopefully he too will make progress in 2019.

To all our referees I say thank you for the role you played in making games happen in our County and I ask only that in this quiet off season you might be a persuader and recruit a new referee who in 2019 might make a difference.

## Lost Lives

At Convention each year we take a minute to remember those who are no longer with us, who we have lost in the past year and for each of us there is always someone that we remember at this time of year. The people we think of have touched our lives in some small way perhaps and in many cases gave us the love of the GAA that we now have. For that we thank them and we remember them.

It was just before Christmas in 2017 that we lost Maurice Hayes a man who had filled my own role most successfully in the late fifties early sixties. Maurice always had a quiet pearl of wisdom to offer whenever you met him, his involvement was always genuine and always to try and be of benefit to the GAA in Down. The fortunes of our County were foremost in his thoughts, he had an understanding of the working of County Administration and he was always available for County Officers to discuss in confidence concerns that they might have or to offer possible solutions to a problem that might arise. He never lost either his love and admiration for the players who donned the Red and Black of Down at all levels, Maurice going back to the late fifties was in reality the man who identified player welfare as a key ingredient in the success of any County.

Widely regarded as the architect of the Down history making successes of 1960 and 61, Maurice had begun his career as a County Administrator in 1949 as Assistant Secretary to the late great Peadar Barry and it was not long before his influence was starting to show, the Convention of 1950 set up a football selection committee of no less than five and no more than seven to select the County Teams, a task that had up to then been the duty of the full County Committee. There was to be no jockeying to get your own man on the Team in Maurice's world. That same year Maurice filled the role too of secretary of the new All County Football League and would have been very proud when Downpatrick defeated Newry in a playoff to win the League.

In 1956 when Peadar Barry retired as Runaí Maurice was unanimously elected County Secretary, a superb organiser Maurice did not spare himself in furthering the interests of the GAA in the County bringing people with him by his great enthusiasm,

imagination and a desire to make things happen. Maurice had the vision and most importantly he had the belief to make it happen, together with Barney Carr he worked diligently to create the idea a Down Team could in five years' time win an All-Ireland. In 1958 Maurice floated the idea of a Team Manager being appointed, yet it was to be another year before the concept would be adopted by the Clubs of Down.

In 1959 Down were to win their first Ulster Senior Title and Maurice as County Secretary was a selector along with Brian Denvir, Danny Flynn was Team Trainer, Martin Walsh was medical adviser and Barney Carr was now in the role of Team Manager. The dream driven by Maurice from the mid-fifties was now in sight of fruition.

Player welfare was the key point for Maurice and there was great solidarity among the men of the 60s which still exists today, for Maurice it was simple " you stick by us and we will stick by you ", a man really who was ahead of his time in recognising that the County Player and County Team was key to the success of a County.

1960 saw the vision of Maurice Hayes realised as the men of Down took the Sam Maguire across the border for the first time, it had taken time for Maurice to bring the plan to its conclusion, it was now ten years since the selection committee had been established and an All County Football League introduced, he had the qualities to maintain the focus on the goal of making Down the best in the land and that was shown again in 1961. When one was in the presence of Maurice and the players from that era you could never help but witness the mutual respect that each held the other in, to Maurice they were his men and to the players Maurice was very much their man, there



was a bond there that was perhaps unique in GAA terms.

1964 saw Maurice stand down as Joint Secretary of the County Committee, due to pressures of his work as Town Clerk of Downpatrick and so a most influential voice was lost to administration in Down, his ability as a brilliant administrator had been recognised at Provincial and National Level within the GAA and he had given so much to the County of Down that is still so relevant to us today, we take our All County Leagues for granted yet today they are a testimony to the vision of Maurice Hayes.

Over the years then Maurice took on various tasks in a quiet but most efficient manner he led the commission into Hurling, when Club Down was formed to assist the County in the development of Pairc Esler Maurice again put his energies into ensuring that we had a ground worthy of our status as a County. In recent years too when a football review was being undertaken which ultimately led to the establishment of today's Mourne Academy Maurice was only too willing to help, he attended meetings and made a positive contribution to the review.

Maurice's enthusiasm belied his years as when Maurice spoke we all listened, we are lucky in Down that Maurice Hayes was one of our own, that he was our friend and our wise counsellor, a man who gave great service to his County and his Country, known throughout Ireland

and the World for his diplomacy and gentle manner, we in Down owe Maurice a great debt for he helped make us the proud GAA county that we are. He had the vision, he lived the dream and he left us the memories, the history and the belief in our County, he truly was a proud son of Mourne. A man we were privileged to have known and to say he made a difference to our lives.

John Smith of Ballykinlar an All Ireland winner in 1961 passed away in 2018, John was left half back on the team of 1961 where he formed a great partnership on the left wing of the team with his club man Paddy Doherty. Against Kerry in the All Ireland semi final and again against Offaly in the final John was the essence of soundness right through both games. John was prominent in the great Ballykinlar team of the 60s, a team deemed to be amongst the best never to have won a County Championship.

Pat McAlinden, a member of our All Ireland winning panel of 1968 passed away a few weeks before we would gather to celebrate the achievements of that great team. Pat, a great servant to Club and County was a Down championship winner with Newry Shamrocks in 1961. He was goalkeeper on the Ulster Championship winning team in 1963 when Down beat Donegal. Pat won further Ulster medals in 1965 and 1966 and then in 1968 was understudy to Danny Kelly, winning National League, Ulster Championship and All Ireland medals.

During the year we lost two young men with bright futures ahead of them who were starting off in teaching careers where no doubt they would have been great assets to their communities. We lost Karl Heaney of Newry Mitchels, killed as he was returning from Club training on a most dangerous stretch of the A1. Karl was one of those people committed to Newry

Mitchels and to trying to sustain the Club. He was a teaching assistant in Aquinas GS in Belfast where he was also involved in the promotion of Gaelic Games. Down GAA should be lending their support in whatever way possible to the Heaney family as they seek to address the safety issues on this stretch of roadway.

The Gaels of Clonduff were shocked by the news of the sudden death of Pearce Branagan another young man dedicated to the GAA with a love of hurling and who was teaching just down the road in the home of his neighbours and cousins in Kilcoo. It was a sad summer evening as the hurlers of Clonduff sat in the garden of the Branagan homestead at the wake for their friend and fellow Gael and as you left the house that evening you could only be struck by the power of the GAA in a community. Clonduff won the Junior Hurling Championship and there is no doubt Pearce played a part.

Another great servant of Clonduff and hurling in particular Sean Cairns had too been taken from us in the past year, Sean did all the wee jobs that you need a man to do in any Club and in Clonduff he was passionate about hurling. His legacy remains today with his wife Goretti and the family still looking after the Club shop and ensuring that there is always something available for patrons on match days.

Seamus McGrattan was a man of the Ards, a hurling man and a Man of Down who had a lifetime of service to the game. An excellent administrator Seamus was Secretary of the Hurling Board from 1972 until 1977 and then went on to serve as Ulster Hurling Development Officer. Seamus was also a referee who officiated at County Finals. Seamus' time as Runaí Coiste Iomana coincided with the term as Chairman of Coiste Iomana of his father Paddy, a situation that would not be

equalled too often at County level today.

Oliver Morgan from Downpatrick was a man who gave many years' service to County Sub Committees and in particular what was then the Development Committee. Oliver was meticulous in his approach and had a great desire to help Clubs and to see them improve on and off the field. He loved his annual trips to Kerry and then he would update us on what was happening in the Kingdom and what we needed to be doing to keep up.

Pat Watterson was a man who gave great service to two Clubs, RGU in Downpatrick and Kilclief where he was the School Principal, in this role as a Principal he was also an outstanding administrator with Cumann na Bunscoil. Pat had a wonderful way with him and gave a love of Gaelic Games, football and hurling to so many who passed through his school, he has left a great legacy in the area.

There are few footballers who had as short a playing career as Gerry Butterfield but are still talked about in revered tones more than 60 years later. Gerry, who emigrated to the US while still a teenager, built up that reputation in a short time with his home club Mayobridge and very briefly with Down, but particularly in the colours of Abbey CBS Newry. At just 17 he was a key member of the Mayobridge senior team that went through the 1953 season undefeated. And later that year, Abbey coach Gerry Brown would select him as captain of the MacRory Cup side that was to write itself into the history books by becoming the first school exclusively for day pupils to lift the famous trophy. Gerry Butterfield emigrated to Cleveland Ohio and played against Down on their tour to the USA in 1962 ironically if he had stayed at home it is more than likely he would have played on the Down team of 1960.

Just days after County Convention last year we learned of the death of Harry McEvoy, Harry was chairman of Coiste Chontae and Dúin in 1977 and had also served as County Treasurer for a period in the 80s. Harry McEvoy was a man who gave a lifetime of service to the GAA, as an administrator with his beloved Down and his club Carryduff. It is over 40 years now from Harry was elected as County Chairman in 1977 a year in which the County won its first All Ireland Minor Football title. Harry served just one year as County Chairman but being the faithful servant of our Association that he was, Harry continued to be to the fore of many initiatives within Down. One such initiative was the production of 'Score' a magazine which was in Harry's own words an attempt to fill the void and as he said in the opening article of the magazine in reference to the contributors **'May their efforts be a source of inspiration to us all not only in County Down but throughout the whole of Ireland'**.

That quote indeed would fittingly be a tribute to the contribution made by Harry McEvoy to Scór which under his leadership at Provincial and County level has indeed been a source of inspiration to people throughout Ireland. Indeed as we look to the role of Scór within the GAA, the role of men like Harry in keeping our cultural identity alive was vital in sometimes often difficult circumstances. Scór was given a place and a platform through the vision of men and women like Harry, who through their work with Scór allowed the GAA family to grow, to keep us focused on our ethos of the preservation and promotion of Gaelic Games and pastimes.

Harry McEvoy served this Association well in his lifetime from the founding of a Club in Carryduff back in 1972 when it was not easy nor fashionable to have Gaelic Games played in that part of

County Down. He led his County in the same decade, and served as Treasurer in the 80s and always retaining that pleasant and humble demeanour that he espoused whenever one met him, his gentle manner often calmed difficult situations. Harry truly has left a great legacy in the continued growth and success of Scór and the growth of his Club Carryduff are testimony to the man.

Harry McEvoy was an outstanding servant of the GAA one of those people who typified that we are **'The Give All Associaton'**.

To all who have lost loved ones this year I extend my deepest sympathy, we are but the inheritors of a proud and great tradition within Down GAA. The men and women whom we have lost are the very people who shaped us and made us who we are for that we will always be grateful.

### Reflection

In my Convention reflection last year, I suggested that there was an excitement about 2018 in Down GAA circles and that good days were ahead for footballers and hurlers. My optimism did not find any excitement or success for Down teams in 2018 and now we look to 2019 with new Team Managements in place and with no guarantees of success. We have to believe though that indeed the corner will be turned and as we look back to 25 years without Inter County Senior success in football there is surely a catalyst there for players to say they are going to make it happen. For it must come from within us all, players must want to make it happen in their efforts in training and on match days, administrators have to make sure that the environment is right for Down teams to be successful. If both of those two forces can come together then I do believe that we can be successful again.

I have been ten years now in the

post as Full Time secretary of this great County of ours and it is an honour to hold such office. The role is a great one and it is also an ever changing role and I will always endeavour to give of my best in that role.

In the first instance I am here to support our Clubs, to be there for Club Officers if any guidance or help is needed, my role is only an extension of a Club Officers role. Sometimes too both roles can be lonely roles and it is my job to support Club Secretary's or Chairpersons or any such officer to allow them to do the job that they were elected too. I also have a duty and responsibility to help and support our Clubs when they are in engaged with Provincial or National bodies or any outside agencies. We in Down GAA have a duty of care to our Clubs all 48 of them.

It is my role too to support every Team Management that goes out to represent Down in football and hurling, my role has never been to interfere or input in team affairs but rather to ensure that the environment is right for teams and managements to be successful. The fact of the matter is that this is part of my role, at times it appears to be acceptable that the Runaí in 31 other Counties fulfils a role on match days on the side-line but my presence seemed to be a botheration for some. Well I have a job to do on Match Day and I intend to fill that role. Every previous Team Management at any level in football or hurling will only confirm that I was nothing but supportive to them as they did their job.

It is my role too as Runaí or CEO of Down GAA to generate commercial income and to be the point of contact for sponsors, in today's world business wants only to deal with one person in an organisation, they want to deal with the person who can and will deliver on their requirements. In Down we have boosted our Commercial

Income again for the year ahead and I will continue to work to deliver on those commitments that then go to ensure that Down GAA can deliver on all of its commitments.

There is a legal aspect to the role as well in that I am the designated person for Health and Safety at all of our grounds but with particular reference to our County Grounds. With statutory bodies and local government ever more mindful of legal requirements in relation to Sports Grounds, they want to deal with one person who has authority to act. This is to protect the volunteer from possible legal actions and means that the County assumes accountability for what happens at its grounds. An example of this is in regard to Parking at Pairc Esler, if we are to have a projected attendance of in excess of 5000 people then we have to put in place a Coning requirement, it becomes a legal obligation.

In my role too I have overall responsibility for our staff and their welfare, so to this end we have now ensured that all of our staff are contracted and all of them have their full pension entitlement in place.

These are just some of the Roles that I fulfil in my day to day work as Runaí, over the next twelve months I expect that the role in relation to Ballykinlar will become more evident and more demanding. This will be our flagship project, our biggest undertaking in our history and I am determined to insure that every step we take has the support of the full GAA family, Our Clubs, Our County Committee, Provincial and National committees. Only by following that path will we know that we will have the full support of all bodies and only by following that path will Ballykinlar happen.

To each and every member of the Down County Committee I say thank you for your support and I

say thank you for the work that you do on an ongoing basis for your Club and your County you are making a difference in a very positive way. Let us all continue to make that difference.

Martina Maxwell has worked extremely hard to ensure that the new Microsoft Dynamics Package is operational and of benefit to us going forward. This year we have seen transition in the Office where we have gone from three staff to one in our Administration and Martina has taken on that additional workload and for that I thank her very much. Martina is also a help to Clubs on a daily basis and continues to work diligently for the good of Down GAA. We are indeed very lucky to have Martina amongst us and Conor and I both know she is the real boss!

Our Games Development Manager Conor O Toole is responsible for our coaching staff and for the organisation of the Cúl Camps the fact that our numbers continue to grow year on year is a tribute to the work of Conor. This year over 6,000 young people attended our camps and that could be a logistical headache but to be fair to Conor he has a well tried and tested system in place and we let him work away. It is improving year on year and it is working why reinvent the wheel. The timing of the Cúl Camps over eight weeks means that Summer Holidays don't happen for Conor and that is an indication of the hidden aspects of our jobs.

In 2018 Conor also acted as the servicing officer to the Mournie Academy and also manages our Coaching Staff on a daily basis, this was a busy year for him, on the playing field he was part of his Club Team that gained Promotion back to Division One while he was also part of the Mageean Cup management team. We didn't know whether to nominate him for player of the year or Coach of the year so

we just sat on the fence!

To all our Schools coaches, our own Kyla, Liam, Benny, Ambrose, Mark and Danny along with the DENI coaches I say a big thank you for the work that you do in our schools as ambassadors for Down GAA. You are the Team that makes it all happen in our Schools and we take great pride in the positive feedback we get from our Schools about your performance. The situation of uncertainty around the future of the DENI coaches is not a welcome scenario for these young people and is not good either for the boys and girls that they are working with in schools. I hope that a solution will be found, I fail to see how the Finance required cannot be made available for this project that benefits all communities.

To all of those who lost loved ones throughout the year I extend my deepest and heartfelt sympathy, tonight at Convention we remember everyone in a prayerful minute before proceedings begin. The idea of including names of deceased members in our annual Convention booklet is I feel a nice chance of showing to us all that we are acknowledging the work of those who have gone before us and helped to make us who we are. Ar Dheis De go Raibh go Raibh a anam.

To my fellow officers I thank you for all of your work during the year and for your help and support shown to me at all times. The mantra now for The County and Club Officer Training Programme is that **the best Teams are those off the pitch** and in Down GAA we are lucky in this regard. When people take up County Office they do so in the desire to serve, to make things better, to give freely of their time and to make a difference.

We in Down GAA should be proud of the people we have and the work that they do, they are your people, put in place by the Clubs of

Down. Yes, there will always be something to say about the County Board, history shows that they are always the bogey men and women, it's only a different set of people but for some the County Board will always be the problem. That has been the scenario in Down for over 50 years now and I had to think about it when I read some former players comments in the press earlier this year and I thought well it's not personal it just the County Board- it wouldn't matter who the members were it would still be the County Board.

Our Chairman Sean Rooney enters now his final year as Chairperson and he will hope to advance the planning application for the development at Ballykinlar to bring it to a fruition if possible in his term of Office. Sean has led from the front and has shown that he is willing to take on any task for the good of Down GAA. It would be great for Sean Rooney if Down were to lift silverware in 2019, for it is every County Chairman's dream to see their county win and Sean deserves to live the dream. I thank Sean for all of his support as Chair and look forward to continuing our work in 2019.

As Vice Chairperson John Devaney also chairs CCC and in a difficult year has shown real leadership, good engagement with Clubs delivered a league programme that very nearly met its objectives of being finished ahead of Championship. With us entering now year two of the transition to reduce the number of Teams in our Divisions, John is now working with myself on the preparation of a Fixtures Calendar. At the recent County Dinner John also displayed his real talent as an MC as he ensured that the presentation on the night was excellent.

Our treasurer Diarmuid Cahill had an extremely busy year, he took on the role of County Treasurer and brought to the post great organisation and a professional

approach. He has been there to support Clubs and also has adopted a firm line when it was needed. Diarmuid is someone who makes things happen, he has the courage to deliver on projects that might not be the most palatable to Clubs but he delivers them in a fair and honest manner. After year one Diarmuid will want to build on the systems that have been implemented and he will ensure full transparency in our Financial governance.

This year too he was chair of the Host Féile Committee and I have spoken earlier of the great success that Féile was, Diarmuid's talents were also recognised when he was appointed to Chair the National Youth Committee and recently hosted the National Youth Forum. We need though to ensure that we alleviate some of the burden on Diarmuid and one of the first things we should be doing is finding someone to fill the role of IT Officer. Our Finances are in a good structured place now and we need to allow Diarmuid to continue that work, if we do then Down GAA will have a secure future.

Brendan Fitzpatrick has been a good support to Diarmuid and has continued with the responsibility for the management of our gates and ensuring that we maximise our Income from our Championships. Brendan and his team of men are often the public face of Down GAA for many of our patrons, they are the first people that you see at a ground and I thank them for their efforts in all weather.

It is sad that we are losing Jarlath Tinnelly from the role of Assistant Secretary, at all times Jarlath made a willing contribution to Down GAA and I would like to thank him for his support to me in my role. We will also need and would welcome Jarlath's advice on community matters in the year ahead and we know that he will always give his best for Down GAA.

I would like to thank too Liam Quinn and Conor Watson who did excellent work in looking after the hurling fixtures both men gave selflessly of their time in a fair and honest manner as members of CCC. As I said earlier over 450 hurling games were played this year.

Willie Gribben combines the role of being chairperson of his own Club with being County Development Officer and has supported our Clubs every step of the way with Development Projects. At Convention Willie becomes our first appointed Development Officer in line with National Guidance and whilst the role will marginally change Willie is still the best placed person for the job.

Our two Ulster Council reps Maureen O Higgins and Michael McArdle make sure in the first instance that the County is best represented at Ulster and then they take on other roles too, as Integration Officer Maureen has once again raised the profile of Integration and ensured that it is working at a practical level in Down. This year Maureen wanted a new challenge and we asked her ahead of the Championship if she would take on the role of leading the PR Committee. Well the answer was yes and what a difference that made to our PR, new people were recruited, they had their own what's app group and word had it that they were ambassadors for the Tea Drinkers of Ireland! The end result was a huge boost in our PR and good gates at our Championships, Thank you Maureen

Michael McArdle heads up our Events team and in 2019 we had a very successful day at the Races and Night at the Dogs on the 12th July in Dundalk. Michael is a man who gets things done, he looks after the Half Time in Pairc Esler as well and will be planning now for 2019 and a major event. In 2019 too we are endorsing the

candidature of Michael for the position of Ulster PRO, we have no doubt that Michael would be the best person for the job. We in Down would welcome a person in an officer ship position within Comhairle Uladh, the last person we had in such a role was the late great Danny Murphy. We wish Michael every success.

Fiona Murphy as County PRO has ensured that there are good channels of Communication between Down GAA and all of our units. Fiona worked well in liaising with all County Teams this year and ensured that Team Managements were available to Media as required. In the summer she too became one of Maureen's team and played a key role in making sure that programmes were in place for all of our fixtures.

Seamus Walsh continues to represent the County well at Central Council providing reports from all meetings and also internally chairing Referees Administration. Seamus has been active in assisting referees at all stages and it is a role that he is proactive in, we hope that in 2019 Seamus's task is made a bit easier by the recruitment of some new referees.

Tom Potter as Coaching Officer has been active in ensuring that we deliver a high standard of coaching programmes for our Clubs and is also involved in the steering Committee for the Mourne Academy. Tom is also chair of the Coaching and Games committee and is keen in the year ahead to develop coaching standards within our Clubs.

Donal McNally and Ger Connery play vital roles as Chairpersons of their respective Divisions East and South Down and they do vital work in the organisation of juvenile and adult reserve fixtures. I do think that people like Ger and Donal would be ideally placed to provide leadership in my thinking stated

earlier about a committee with the sole responsibility of administering Juvenile Fixtures.

Conor Watson is our County Hurling Officer and has been new to management this year. Conor brings to the table a passion about Down hurling and also a great knowledge of the needs of our hurling clubs. In 2019 Conor will grow more into this role and with his work on CCC will no doubt ensure that hurling is given a status within Down in keeping with its much deserved UNESCO status.

So that is the Team Off the field in Down GAA , a team I am proud to be a part of and a team that works well together, there are many others who play a key role and none more so than James and Mary McGrath who coordinate the Clubs Draw. The Clubs Draw continues to grow, it is the envy of other Counties and the difference it has made to Clubs who have embraced the scheme is there to be seen in the development that has taken place at their premises. The bottom line is that Down GAA could not survive without the Clubs Draw and quite simply we do not have the personnel like James and Mary to manage it. They do a tremendous job month in month out and all on a voluntary basis for the good of the County. The Draw takes over their home in January/ February and I cannot thank them enough for all that they do.

James has also been invaluable to us in the past twelve months as a support to Diarmuid and myself in managing the County Finances. He has given of his time voluntarily bring his professional experience to the table and in the transfer of business to the Ulster Bank the interests of Down GAA were well protected with James overseeing the transfer. James McGrath has been a huge asset to Down GAA in 2018.

Seamus Ryan selflessly puts his own business at our disposal to ensure that we are fully compliant with all regulations; this is the type of hidden work people do not see. The GAA is deep in the genes of Seamus Ryan and Down GAA in particular.

Mark Fitzsimmons has taken on the role as County Children's Officer and Mark had a busy year with our hosting of Féile in 2018 and now has the challenge of ensuring that compliance is in place in all of our Clubs. I have no doubt that Mark will ensure that our Clubs are protected in these times when voluntary organisations are continuously in the spotlight.

Gary Doherty quietly fills a key role for Down GAA as our Health and Wellbeing Officer and as society changes we too need to be aware of the societal changes that affect our members. Gary has a good team in the Health and Well Being Committee but he needs more help too. There is a lot of work to be done here and although we are for the large part a games based organisation we have a duty of care to all of our members. Gary delivers on this for us quietly and efficiently.

There is good work being done by a whole lot of people all for the betterment of Down GAA and it is our failing that we don't shout it enough from the rooftops and we don't thank people like Michelle Pollock, Sheila Kelly, Tony Burden, Donal McCormack, Paul Rooney, Richie Reynolds, Paula Magee, PJ Quinn, Ross Carr, Anita Brannigan, the Down Supporters Club and Dr Eddie Harney enough for the jobs that they do on our County Sub committees, to each and every person who does anything for Down GAA I say Thank you, you help make a difference. You are all part of the great Down GAA family.

To the people who serve on Sub Committees nationally and provincially, I thank you very much

for the work you do, you are representing your County and giving of your time to ensure that Down GAA plays a central part in the affairs of our Association.

There are great people in Ulster GAA, Geraldine McKavanagh continues to be the person who people look to in the Office in Market Street and she is always at hand for any of the County Secretary's with support and advice. Thank you Geraldine for being you. We were delighted to host you and the Marathon Team in Pairc Esler and facilitate your donation to the Air Ambulance Fund. Bernie Fox was ready with the offer of help as soon as word broke that we were hosting Féile and in 2018 that help was invaluable. It is people like Geraldine and Bernie who make us very proud to be part of the GAA family.

In Michelle McAleer the Director of Finance we have a lady always willing to support us in our endeavours to address our Finances and in our presentations at National Level we knew that Michelle was also championing our cause. On behalf of Down GAA I thank Michelle for her work on our behalf throughout the year. Paul Sanders has been very supportive to our Clubs in terms of assisting developments and works closely with Willie Gribben while Stephen Donnelly is a guide for us all in terms of fixtures and match programmes.

To all the staff of Comhairle Uladh and to the Provincial Director Brian McAvoyn I say thank you for all your help and support to me in 2018. Brian as a former County Secretary will always have the best interest of Down GAA at heart.

In Croke Park we have a new Ard Stiuthoir in Tom Ryan and Tom has quietly settled into the role, Tom was always a good support to Down over the years and in particular too with the development of Pairc Esler and we wish Tom well and assure him of our support.

To all the staff in Ulster and in Croke Park I say thank you on behalf of the Gaels of Down, this is the great strength of our Association we are a family of equals. You get as County Secretary to meet great people in our Organisation the Staff in Ulster and Croke Park, I can only speak highly of, like us all they are all part of the great GAA family that continues to go from strength to strength.

For me to do this job and fulfil the role as I see it I need the support at home for this job great as it is no 9-5 job, it's a bit like Ronnie Barker yes we are open all hours. As I said before there is no day when you are not the County Secretary but I would not have it any other way.

John and Fiona are in their own right setting out to make their mark in the GAA. John enjoyed the experience of his involvement with the County Minors this past year and now in his role in Aquinas is making a positive contribution to Schools Football, for Aquinas to be competing at Corn na nÓg level is great progress in South Belfast.

Fiona is now teaching in the Nai Scoil in Kilkeel and playing for the Laochra Team in Belfast, the GAA and our language are very important for her and I am indeed a very proud father of both. They will develop their own roles and niches

within Down GAA and I hope that they will be seen on their own individual merits and strengths.

To my wife Teresa who is always supportive in the tasks that I undertake and who accepts that the GAA operates on a different holiday and leave calendar than the Department of Education, I say Thank you for being there for me. In June of this year Teresa showed who had the real power, as GAA President John Horan was diverted to visit St Malachy's High School on his visit to the Primary Schools of Down for Féile. Diarmuid Cahill even had to admit he had lost that one!

It is best to conclude on an optimistic note and as we look to 2019 there are reasons to be optimistic, a home draw against Armagh in the Championship, new team managements in place, underage structures starting to show shoots of growth and hurlers with a real chance for promotion and a renewed energy. There is Ballykinlar and the goal of obtaining planning permission in 2019.

**Yes, Down GAA can be a great again, let mediocracy be a thing of the past I have no doubt about that we can make the difference. If we want it to happen, it will and it can, from the youngest to the oldest, from the players to the supporters, from the team managers to the administrators, from those who criticise us, to those who are there for us, we need you all with us on the journey.**

**Bealach an Dúin: Ag Obair le Chéile the Down Way: Working Together.**

