

1994 - 1997 'The Wonder Years'

1994: 'THE FAMINE IS OVER'

Statisticians will tell us that Dunnamaggin, one of the smallest parishes in Co. Kilkenny won their first adult title in 1994, 97 years after the club played its first hurling game in June of 1897. Defeated by Galmoy in the County Junior Final of 1966 and having lost the southern junior finals of 1968, 1969, 1980, 1982 and 1984, Dunnamaggin at last captured that elusive junior championship on a damp day in September 1994. 'Dunnamaggin at last fulfil rich promise' - summarised the media at the time as indeed the clubs consistent record at underage level during the late 80's and early 90's at last reared its beautiful head. As time was to tell this was to be Dunnamaggins 'one small step for man but one giant leap for mankind' in hurling prowess.

This win had been promised for a long time and a small thing may have helped the club to the top during any of the three previous years as Dunnamaggin dominated the Junior Open draw Championship over these years (winners in 1990, 1992 & 1993). However when it came to the 'real thing' Dunnamaggin's challenge time and time again bit the dust. It was as if the parish had been cursed by some fiendish devil of the past. However the tide was turning.

Dunnamaggin showed their early intent as they walloped Glenmore 5-18 to 2-08 in the southern championship semi-final, their blood was rising. Southern final day dawned and all that stood between Dunnamaggin and their first divisional title since 1996 were the gallant men of Windgap, nearby and close rural neighbours. The final itself, played in Piltown set a new gate receipt of £2,100 as both parishes followed the cause. A brilliant goal by Matthew O'Shea (ironically son of Windgap stalwart, Joe) following good work by team captain Sean Ryan just before the interval proved to be the vital score of the game. On the final whistle Dunnamaggin had ended their 28 year wait for Southern gold as they celebrated passionately their 2-15 to 2-09 win. The parish was alight with excitement as the County Final beckoned.....

The hurlers of Skeoughvosteen trading under the Blacks and Whites banner stood between Dunnamaggin and that elusive prize. Dunnamaggins preparations under the guidance of Brendan Fennelly were business-like and precise. Brendan's brother; Kevin a past trainer of the Skeough men unveiled the Blacks & Whites panel to the young pretenders on the night before the final. The morning of the final dawned grey and unsettled, what lay ahead for the Dunnamaggin men? As the rain set in, 'conditions were not going to be suitable to the light young inexperienced team' exclaimed the public on route to Nowlan Park. As history will record Dunnamaggin celebrated this wet day 'singing in the rain' as they became the 52nd club to win the junior crown and so put an end to the clubs longstanding hurling famine. A Michael Moran goal early in the second half, copper

fastened by a goal from Ken O'Shea in the 55th minute finally broke the Blacks and Whites resolve as Dunnamaggin held out for a 2-09 to 1-10 historic win. THE FAMINE WAS OVER! In the weeks and months that followed the feasting began as this win was celebrated with style.

For good measure Dunnamaggin captured the Open Draw title against the same opposition on a 0-16 to 0-08 scoreline later in the year. County finals at minor and under 21 'A' levels were reached but Dunnamaggin succumbed to the power of James Stephens and Graigue-Ballycallan. Dunnamaggin folk everywhere looked forward to '95 as the club would test their mettle against the might of the intermediate grade.

1995: METEORIC RISE FOR DUNNAMAGGIN'S HEROES

In winning the 1995 Vale Oil Intermediate Championship, Dunnamaggin joined an elite group of clubs that managed to jump from the junior to intermediate and intermediate to senior grades in successive seasons. In fact 1995 was to be the most successful year ever for the club as the Minor 'A' and Under 21 'A' hurling titles were captured at the expense of the powerful James Stephens city sides. Kilmoganny's footballers also captured the intermediate football crown of '95 walking in the footsteps of the hurlers from the junior to the senior grade in just two years.

After the heroics of 1994 Dunnamaggin gained hugely in self-confidence and fully expressed this boost in their care-free attitude to the intermediate grade. The league campaign saw them qualify for the league final against an unbeaten Bennettsbridge side. True to form the 'Bridge' men collected the league trophy as on the night Dunnamaggin's bubble burst. In hindsight the lessons learned from the league final drubbing (3-11 to 0-10), were to stand Dunnamaggin in good stead as the championship progressed.

Having reached the League Final, Dunnamaggin bypassed the early round of the championship. The draw produced Clara in the quarter-final, who were many peoples fancy for the title. On the day Dunnamaggin literally cut loose and totally outclassed Clara, the 'Fennelly magic' was evident as the perfect combination between abounding skill, confidence and commitment was reached. Dunnamaggin's dander was up. The semi-final against St. Lachtains of Freshford was a close tense affair as Dunnamaggin were supremely tested. By the finish line Dunnamaggin had stuck their nose in front by two points and the final beckoned.

Once again a here-to fore unbeaten 'Bridge' team stood between Dunnamaggin and history. The Bridge entered the final the warmest of favourites by courtesy of their greater experience and league final showing. Dunnamaggin smarting from their league final collapse, combined with the loss of Ken O'Shea, dismissed against St. Lachtains, and compounded by their youthful enthusiasm awaited the final showdown with remarkable hunger. This in no small way was due to the remarkable efforts of the 'boss' one, Brendan Fennelly. The 'Fennelly Formula' of plan, plan and replan whipped the Dunnamaggin men into winning mood.

The county final victory over Bennettsbridge, (2-21 to 1-09), was emphatic and spectacular as ever the most fanatic Dunnamaggin fan had to accept that fate dealt a cruel twist to their opponents. The loss of All-Star full back Liam Simpson was the first blow to befall Bennettsbridge. Shortly afterwards centre back Tim Drea was to receive his marching orders following an altercation with Dunnamaggin's Richie O'Neill who suffered the same fate. Suddenly Bennettsbridge's defence parted like the Red Sea as the youthful Dunnamaggin attack exploited the open spaces and ran riot. The game was over as a contest well before the end and Dunnamaggin had entered the history books as the most recent 'honours graduate to the senior grade'.

The untimely death of Jim "the Link" Walsh in 1995 was a sad occasion for the hurling community in Dunnamaggin. Before his sudden death he was often seen wielding the caman in Hayden Park during the intermediate panels many training sessions. Appropriately captain, Eamon Kennedy remembered "the Link" in his victory speech.

1995 was also a historic year off the field as the club finally got rid of the tag of being the only one club in Kilkenny not owing their own playing grounds. A parcel of land was purchased and with the generous help of all Kilkenny hurling people and elsewhere, developments began. 1995 must go down in the club's annals as an undoubted milestone in the history of the club.

1996: 'A YEAR OF PROMISE'

After the club's outstanding achievements in 1995, 'nobody said it would be easy' as the advertisement of the time ran. Nonetheless, despite the clubs unbeaten run coming to an end at the hands of eventual champions, Gowran, the senior hurlers historic debut year brought great excitement and pride to the parish.

In the senior hurling league, Dunnamaggin encountered a chequered career. They opened nervously against the Fenians - 'Debut boys make Fenians

fight all the way' ran the headlines as the locals wait under a 3-10 to 2-09 scoreline. In the next round Dunnamaggin encountered 'early summer magic in Ballyhale' as the club's developing saga against Young Ireland's of Gowran began which was to conclude in 1997 in dramatic circumstances. The third round was an eagerly awaited affair against the 'auld enemy' John Lockes and on the pitch more akin to a skating rink 'John powered Lockes home' in front of the biggest crowd seen at Piltown in many a year. With interest decreasing in the league Dunnamaggin's final two games saw them draw with Mooncoin and well beaten by Tullaroan. Dunnamaggin's honeymoon period had ended as the 'losers just not at the races' media headline struck home. The scribes proclaimed 'Dunnamaggin looked a sorry sight and unless they improve dramatically they could face a tough time in the championship'.

The championship dawned against a resolute Erin's Own side. On the day Dunnamaggin rediscovered their magic of the '94/'95 and playing their own attractive brand of the 'beautiful game' skipped though to the second round of the championship on a 2-09 to 1-08 scoreline.

The quarter-final draw pitted Dunnamaggin against championship favourites Dicksboro. In a close and tense encounter Dunnamaggin displayed a lethal mix of hurling, hunger and tactical awareness and duly dispensed of the city side on a 0-12 to 0-09 scoreline. To quote one local scribe; 'they are going about their business with a sort of "to hell with you" attitude, and God help anyone who stands in their way'. Dunnamaggin were becoming a force to be reckoned with.

The semi-final drew growing rivals Young Irelands of Gowran. Generally it was a tactical battle with the Fennelly brothers, Kevin and Brendan pulling the hurling strings. Four minutes from the end of normal time, the place in the Sunday, October 6th Final was wide open with the teams locked at 1-08 (Y.I.) to 0-11 and nerves beginning to fray. Then the 'man who might be King was Lord of the Dance', one D.J. Carey grabbed the game by the scruff of the neck and proved the difference in a real 'cat and mouse like contest'. Dunnamaggin's dream had ended in a short four minute spell, eight hours of unbeaten championship hurling from July '94 to September '96 had come to an end. The newspaper summarised succinctly that 'Dunnamaggin cannot regard their 1st year in the senior grade as anything other than a success'. 'With their refreshing brand of devil may care hurling they succeeded in leaving a mark on the competition' - Roll on '97!

The year 1996 also saw Dunnamaggin land the Special Junior 'B' Championship and league titles coupled with the U-21 'A' hurling crown following an exciting final replay against great rivals Graigue-Ballycallan. On the football front, Kilmoganny failed at the final hurdle in achieving a historic Junior-Intermediate-Senior trio of championship wins back to back when going down by just two points to a physically stronger James Stephen's outfit.

1997: 'FROM RAGS TO RICHES, TO KING OF THE CATS'

On Sunday 12th October 1997, Dunnamaggin completed in fairy tale style their genuine rags to riches story, from being the former have nots of Kilkenny hurling to being the high Kings of Kilkenny in an incredible four year spell. The win has to be put down as one of THE achievements in the long and proud history of the GAA in Kilkenny. The Dunnamaggin team with an average age of 21 galloped to their first senior historic title by trampling over defending champions, Young Irelands (Gowran), D.J. Carey and all.

Dunnamaggin got off to a poor start in the League when they were walloped by a rampant James Stephens side - 'Determined James Stephens win easily' ran the headlines. Realising their impending fate Dunnamaggin re-juggled their forces and went on to record successive league victories over Erin's Own (Castlecomer), Mooncoin, O'Loughlin Gaels and St. Martins. The performances of Dunnamaggin in the League led one local scribe to proclaim, 'Dunnamaggin looked fit and hungry - this team is used to winning and a first senior success may not be too far away'. Time was to fulfill this prophecy. The League semi-final draw saw Dunnamaggin rekindle their passion with Young Irelands of Gowran in dramatic circumstances as the Young Irelands men hammered the opposition and really left Dunnamaggin heads in spin as the form team in the County. 'This bubbly C&C tonic gives opponents a hang-over'- as the Carey & Carter duo punished Dunnamaggin to a combined score of 3 - 14. Dunnamaggin's League bubble had deflated with a huge bang. Back to the drawing board for the championship.

The quarter final against Erin's Own saw a 'Slow start, but then Dunna' roast opposition', as victory was achieved on an 0 - 18 to 1 - 07 scoreline. On the night Dunnamaggin rediscovered their free flowing hurling style of 1996 and playing a clever running 2 man full forward line of Ken O'Shea and Sean Ryan they literally blew away the Comer side. 'Dunnamaggin displayed a touch of class that showed us that there was something big happening in the little parish' - the momentum was building.

'Oh, what an awful game' - The semi-final victory over Dicksboro was a torrid affair with both sides amassing a total of 35 wides between them over the hour. Dicksboro hit two scores over the opening eight minutes and then entered a 47 minute drought until they scored two late goals near the finish. Dunnamaggin for their part weren't overly impressive and played the closing 19 minutes without scoring, however they held out to a 1 - 09 to 3 - 01 win in a tough mental encounter. The nature of their win was to prove a blessing in disguise as their final opponents in red and white entered the final the hottest of favourites.

In the days and weeks that followed to the final, Dunnamaggin folk everywhere rallied behind their team. In the early hours of Saturday 20th September, the countryside awoke to the hum and roar of 'Operation Clayload' as a huge convoy of over 30 tractors and trailers moved a mountain of clay from the Slatequarries to the pitch development in Dunnamaggin. Thanks to the encouragement and efforts of the ladies of the Supporters Club, the parish was swamped in a sea of green and gold sheep, cars, teddy bears, bikes and even the Kipper Whelan's beard. The excitement of Senior Co. Final day was mounting.

Wearing the underdog shirts Dunnamaggin entered the history book as the 24th club to win the Kilkenny Senior Hurling Championship as they toppled red hot favourites Young Irelands of Gowran by 2 - 10 to 2 - 07 in front of 13,000 observers on Sunday October 12th 1997. The clubs stunning victory as rank outsiders was due reward for a magnificent parish effort. It was a victory for self confidence and belief as Dunnamaggin ascended to the pale position in Kilkenny from being a lowly Junior side just three years previously. The fairytale story was complete. In the game itself, Dunnamaggin got off to a tonic start, goaling from 70 yards through Eamon Kennedy and moments later a vicious dipping shot by Sean Ryan deceived the Gowran guardian. Dunnamaggin built on the two goal start and were 2 - 4 to 0 - 2 ahead when Gowran's Charlie Carter pounced for a goal in the 25th minute. Dunnamaggins cause and self belief received a massive boost shortly afterwards as Anthony McCormack made a brilliant point blank save from D.J. Carey, who put everything he had into a low shot. Dunnamaggin retired at the break on a scoreline of 2 - 06 to 1 - 03 to the good.

The second half saw Dunnamaggin sustain an aerial bombardment as Young Irelands tried to work their magic. The defence stood firm and despite a late goal from a 21 yard free by D.J. Carey Dunnamaggin carried the day. The win marked a remarkable sequence for the club; in four years they had lost only one championship match - the previous years defeat by Young Irelands had been truly annexed. The win also marked an impressive record by manager supreme Brendan Fennelly. Since 1993 the former Ballyhale Shamrocks man led the club to two county minor, two U-21, one junior, one intermediate and now a senior title. The intrigue was heightened by the presence of his brother, Kevin, the incoming Kilkenny manager of the time, on the opposite sideline as manager of Young Irelands.

In the weeks and months that followed Dunnamaggin enjoyed the thrills and spills of new county champions. The parish was now securely located on the Kilkenny hurling map as journalists nationwide told the world of the clubs amazing exploits. Indeed many found the spelling a struggle, n's and m's being the problem.

As holders of the Kilkenny crown Dunnamaggin's next task was to represent the county in the Leinster Club Championship which brought further nationwide exposure and pride to the club. In

the quarter-final a 'tired' Dunnamaggin nervously overcame a resolute Naas side on a 1 - 11 to 1 - 06 scoreline. The semi-final drew club giants Birr on a muddy Portlaoise sod. Backed by a strong wind Dunnamaggin got off to a promising start and led by 1 - 05 to 0 - 2 at the interval. No one was prepared for the awesome Birr display that followed in the second half. The Offaly Champions inspired by a brilliant Brian Whelehan, showed all their experience and class as they chalked up the remarkable tally of 1 - 17 in 30 minutes. Dunnamaggin were shell shocked and concluded their Leinster aspirations on a 1 - 19 to 1 - 07 final scoreline. Dunnamaggin's historic hurling crusade of 1997 had ended.

Following the heroics of 1994 - 1997, 1998 was to prove a disappointing year for the club as the slip occurred from the senior to the intermediate grade. Nonetheless the game is alive and strong and Dunnamaggin's return to the top flight is eagerly awaited.

Pat Moylan