

The College GAA Connection

Dunamaggin and St. Kieran's College

On Sunday 16th April last, two young Dunamaggin men contributed significantly to St. Kieran's College defeating St. Flannan's College, Ennis in the All Ireland Colleges Senior A hurling final. That win gave the College a record 14 Croke Cup titles. The crucial score was a fine individual goal hard earned and well taken by Liam Heffernan from Caherleske. He was assisted by Seaghan O'Neill, who also contributed mightily to a famous Colleges victory. These two, of course, have become accustomed to winning championships in recent years with outstanding Dunamaggin underage teams.

In an article of this length it would be impossible to mention every student from Dunnamaggin parish who played hurling and football for the College because there has been a long tradition of students and seminarians who wore the black and white hoops.

Students from the parish of Dunnamaggin have played hurling in St. Kieran's College since the beginnings of the school in the early nineteenth century. However Gaelic Games were not formally organised among the Colleges until 1905 and it was only at that stage hurling superseded rugby as the principle game in the school. St. Kierans first took part in the Leinster Colleges championships in hurling and football in 1922. But it was not until 1941 that a Dunnamaggin player featured on a St. Kieran's winning Leinster side. That was Pat O'Neill of Ballintee who played at wing forward on a team captained by Tommy Maher (later Monsignor). Monsignor Pat, now a retired pastor in California, presented Dunnamaggin club with their Clubman of the year trophy.

His younger brother Dick was next in the dynasty to play for St. Kieran's and he proved to be one of the outstanding Colleges players of his time. As a very young third year Dick played on the first College team to capture the Croke Cup in 1948. Con Kenealy of the Kilkenny Journal described his contribution to the final as a hardworking attacker who did everything but score. The competition was then suspended until 1957. This must have been hugely disappointing to the boys in Kieran's because they had an abundance of talented players. They coasted to win the Leinster finals of 1949 and 1950, the latter side captained by Dick O'Neill. Unfortunately for Dick, he did not have as much success with Kilkenny minors in these years, losing in the All Ireland finals to Waterford and Jimmy Finn's Tipperary. In those years he was chosen on the Leinster Colleges team which was a fine testament to his abilities as a player.

Ollie Harrington was there in 1957 when the All Ireland Colleges series was reintroduced and he played a prominent midfield role in securing Kieran's second victory. The team included Eddie Keher and was captained by the late Ted Carroll. Ollie had been on the losing side in the previous year's Leinster final against a Ballyfin team inspired by Freshford's Sean Buckley. His College hurling career ended in disappointment in 1958 when the College, though hot favourites, contrived to lose to old rivals St. Flannan's Ennis in the All Ireland final.

A very young Danganmore lad played at wing forward on that losing side. Tom Forristal was undoubtedly the finest Dunnamaggin player ever to have donned the black and white hoops. He played on the 1958 Senior team in his second year, won an All Ireland medal in '59 against Abbey

CBS, Tipperary, in his third year, lost a Leinster final against St. Peter's Wexford in his fourth year. But his crowning glory on the Colleges scene came as star of the 1961 All Ireland winning team, one that Msgr Tommy Maher reckoned as the greatest Colleges side of all. Tom Forristal's display in the All Ireland final against Cork's North Monastery was extraordinary. In Fennessy's Field, a history of hurling in St. Kieran's, Enda McEvoy chose Tom's performance as one of the all time greatest of Colleges hurling. The Kilkenny People reporter of the day described the performance of Forristal in glowing terms and predicted a bright future for him. Tom went on to play many times for Kilkenny seniors winning a Leinster medal in 1964.

Tom Holden of Danganmore was a sub on that victorious '61 team but he had little luck in his two remaining years on the College team. In the following year, St. Kierans, captained by Mick Crotty, lost to Kilkenny CBS for the first time since 1935 - no greater shame. Tom was out of luck in 1963, too, when Ballyfin accounted for them in the Leinster final.

St Kieran's next All Ireland final victory in 1965 had another Danganmore player on the panel, Martin O'Neill, uncle of Seaghan. Eamonn O'Keeffe, Kells, played on the Leinster championship winning team of 1966, which was captained by former Kilmoganny curate Dr Fearghus Ó Fearghail.

Dick O'Shea, Croan, had an eventful three years on the College senior team, losing an enthralling Leinster final to St. Peter's Wexford and Martin Quigley in 1968. In 1969 the college defeated CBS Kilkenny in a great final in Nowlan Park but Dick wasn't about at the end as he had been injured by one of his fellow defenders! Unfortunately they were hammered in the All Ireland final by St. Finbarr's, Farranferris. CBS gained revenge the following year when Dick played at midfield and Pius O'Keeffe was a sub. Callan CBS and St. Kieran's clashed several times in Leinster Colleges championship games in the early seventies. Almost all of these matches were played in Dunamaggin and players from the club featured on both sides. Unfortunately they tended to be rugged encounters and reflected no credit on either team.

John Power, Oldcastle, Kilmoganny, was a sub on the 1970 team and went on to win an All Ireland Colleges title in '71 at wing back beside Brian Cody. His younger brother Seamus was not as fortunate in the medal stakes. He played for three years on the senior team from 1980 to '82 and failed to win any silverware. They were defeated in the Leinster final of '82 by a St. Peter's side brilliantly led by Tom Dempsey.

Stephen Martin, Rathduff, Kells, played at wing back in 1976 but Kilkenny CBS proved too strong in the Leinster final. In the following year Raymond Geraghty, Kilmoganny, did win a Leinster medal as a Member of the panel. But St. Colman's, Fermoy, defeated the College in the All Ireland final.

And then came the next generation of O'Neills. It was inevitable they would be good hurlers, descending from the O'Neill-Forristal line! Lorcan starred on the 1984 College team which reached an All Ireland final for the first time in seven years (a strange occurrence in St. Kieran's). However they were devastated by injuries in the week before the final and lost to Farranferris. Lorcan captained the side in '85 but met Birr CBS in the Leinster final. Kieran's lost a marvellous game by one point but the match signalled the beginning of a four year rivalry with outstanding Birr teams featuring the Dooleys, Cahills and Brian Whelehan among others.

Richie O'Neill played at centre forward in the '86 final against Birr, a match which went down in infamy as the battle of Rathdowney when a physical Offaly side rode roughshod over a very young Kilkenny outfit. But it was to be the last time Kieran's were defeated for nine years in Leinster. Richie starred in the '87 Leinster final winning side but an Anthony Daly led St. Flannan's won the All Ireland final.

Sean Ryan, Rogerstown, was a sub on the 1989 College side which defeated Flannan's in the All Ireland final, and in the following year Sean played on a half forward line that included Canice Brennan and Andy Comerford when Kieran's won their third consecutive title.

The youngest of the O'Neill clan, J.P. was joined in College colours by Brian O'Shea for the years '96 and '97. In their first year they played in one of the greatest Colleges finals in Croke Park when Kieran's defeated St. Colman's, Fermoy. Surprisingly, with most of the team on board again in '97, they lost to a fine Good Counsel side in the Leinster final

The reader may have noticed many family connections in this brief narrative. We end with one more. Ned Costello from Goodwinsgarden, Kells, taught Irish to generations of College students. His son Sean, having taught in Dublin for many years, returned to be Principal in St. Leonard's NS in the late 1980's. His work in coaching a new and remarkably successful generation of hurlers for the parish will ensure that the fine Gaelic tradition in Dunnamaggin, Kilmoganny and Kells will continue to absorb and entertain us for many years to come.

Tommy Lanigan