

## The Under 21 Success Story

In years to come when the people of Dunnamaggin review the victorious decade of the 1990's there is no doubt that some of the most vivid memories will be of momentous Under 21 victories that brightened up dark winter evenings. Who will ever forget the replays against James Stephens and Graigue Ballycallan for the first two Roinn A titles, (never mind the drawn games), the goal spree against Graigue Ballycallan in the final replay of 1996, and the last gasp points in 1995 and 1999 to beat James Stephens by the minimum margin?

Until 1993 Dunnamaggin had never had very much to get excited about when it came to the Under 21 grade but a remarkable journey was begun in the winter of this year which yielded five championships in seven years. The first step was taken in winning the South Roinn B title by defeating Kilmacow. This set up a county final meeting with St. Martins in Nowlan Park a venue which would have been viewed with some trepidation by previous Dunnamaggin teams but not this one which hurled with incredible confidence to run out the easiest of winners on a scoreline of; Dunnamaggin.....6-19 St. Martins.....2-6. This was a major step forward for the club as it had now put an adult title alongside the juvenile victories which had gone before and the core of this team were involved with the historic victorious junior team of the following year, 1994. The reward for the 1993 victory was a place in Roinn A the next year and following a successful campaign in the South there was a return to Nowlan Park for a county final meeting with James Stephens. This was to be the first of a number of thrilling encounters between these two sides at Under 21 level over the next five years. It turned out to be a case of first blood to the city side when their experience of hurling in Roinn A stood to them as in a very evenly contested game two late points gave them victory on a scoreline of;

James Stephens.....0-13, Dunnamaggin.....2-5.

The same two sides won through their respective ends of the county to set up a county final rematch in 1995. As James Stephens sought their third title in a row the question was would Dunnamaggin have learned from their experience of the previous year to gain revenge and along with it their first ever Roinn A Under 21 championship. The game was played in Ballyhale and proved to be an extremely close contest throughout, but whereas in the previous years game James Stephens were the ones to wrest the initiative in the last few minutes this time it was Dunnamaggin who scored the last three points to grab an unlikely draw at the death. A large crowd travelled back to Ballyhale for the replay and witnessed an intense battle in blustery conditions and once again the game was in the balance until the final whistle was blown. Dunnamaggin found themselves in arrears by five points at half time and were six points behind early in the second half. However the defence played magnificently for the final eighteen minutes to keep James Stephens scoreless to the end. The forwards piled on the pressure and the scores to equalise the match with three minutes to go. Then with little over a minute left a wonderful free from the middle of the field from Ramie Cahill gave Dunnamaggin the lead for the first time which they held on to in a dramatic finale for a famous victory. There were scenes of unrestrained joy when the final whistle sounded and the players were swallowed up with celebrating fans invading the pitch.

The hunger for titles had not been satisfied with the 1996 victory and Dunnamaggin once again captured the Southern title in 1997. There was a new enemy to be faced in the county final though in the shape of Northern champions Graigue Ballycallan. These teams had a history of meetings at juvenile level over the previous three years and the final was eagerly awaited. The venue was Nowlan Park and an action filled game appeared to have been lost as Graigue Ballycallan led by three points going into injury time. Then a long ball dropped in the Graigue Ballycallan square and quick as a flash Ken O'Shea flicked it to the net to carry Dunnamaggin through to their second replay in two years. Back to Nowlan Park we all went and Ken O'Shea carried on from where he left off the first day netting two goals just before half time to leave the side leading by seven points at half time. Graigue Ballycallan mounted a period of sustained pressure midway through the second half and reduced the arrears to four points but once again the defence played heroically to protect their goal and two more goals in the dying minutes, one from Ramie Cahill and a second giving Ken O'Shea his hat trick. So the double had been achieved and this Under 21 team had proven themselves to be a great one.

1997 proved to be an unsuccessful year at Under 21 level when Dunnamaggin were defeated in the Southern Championship by Rower Inistioge with the club having scaled the highest pinnacle earlier in the year winning the Senior County Championship for the first time in their history.

The winter of 1998 dawned brightly once again at Under 21 level however and with another South Championship added to the list Dunnamaggin progressed to meet Graigue Ballycallan once more in a county final. The match was played on a perfect pitch in Danesfort on what could have been mistaken for a summer's day on the Sunday before Christmas. Dunnamaggin took command from the start aided by the breeze and Niall McComack had goaled within three minutes and built up a lead of seven points at half time. Immediately on the restart however they were rocked back on their heels when Graigue Ballycallan goaled. Within five minutes though Niall McCormack had raced through the Graigue Ballycallan defence to score a great goal which settled the team and from there to the finish stout hearted defence ensured that there was to be no comeback for the northerners and Dunnamaggin had regained the under 21 Roinn A title on a scoreline of 2-9 to 1-8.

The final year of the millennium wasn't long about coming around and as the long winter nights beckoned so too did the Under 21 championship. It had been a pretty disappointing year in relation to previous years for the club but once again this team did not fail to produce the goods and give everybody within the club a sense of renewed optimism for the future. After stern resistance from a talented Graiguenamagh side Dunnamaggin won through to another county final with a solitary point to spare in the Southern final. Old rivals James Stephens were victorious in the Northern final and the scene was set for another epic final at Callan in early December. It proved to be an extremely tense battle with James Stephens gaining the upper hand in the early exchanges to lead by four points at half time. Scores were traded throughout the second half as play went from end to end. Midway through that half in a five minute spell Dunnamaggin had two unanswered goals from Niall McCormack and John Hickey which appeared to have tilted the balance in their favour but James Stephens goaled on 55 minutes to equalise the match. Both defences hung on grimly for the next few minutes but with the final whistle imminent J.P. O'Neill gathered a ball in the middle of the field and from sixty yards hit a shot which changed course on the wind at least three times on route but after what seemed a lifetime dropped over the black spot for the lead score. The whole ground

seemed to explode when that point went over and the players dug deep for the last two minutes to maintain the scoreline of ;Dunnamaggin....2-7 James Stephens.....2-6.

Another historic double had been achieved and an incredible final seven years of the millennium for Dunnamaggin Hurling Clubs Under 21 team ended with another Roinn A title. Considering the turnover of players which occurs with underage teams this was an incredibly successful time and the statistics show that over a seven year period the Dunnamaggin Under 21 hurling team was only beaten twice. On numerous occasions the various teams came back from the dead to pull matches from the fire, and it's due to no small amount of skill, determination and teamwork that Dunnamaggin has had an extra reason to celebrate Christmas in the recent past.

B.M.