

# REPORT OF THE FOOTBALL REVIEW COMMITTEE

## PART 1

10<sup>th</sup> December 2012

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## **FOREWORD**

GAA President, Liam O'Neill established the Football Review Committee (FRC) to examine the state of Gaelic football at all levels of the game. The President stressed that the FRC was to consult widely with GAA people from all over Ireland and abroad to establish what the football community was thinking about the state of football and what, if any, changes they would like to see.

This was a very wide remit because of the high level of participation in Gaelic football which spreads into every parish in the country and beyond. The FRC decided at the outset to consult to the maximum extent, so that its findings would be as representative as possible of all those involved in and supportive of Gaelic football. The consultation exercise undertaken was the largest ever conducted by the GAA and accordingly the findings in this report, which are drawn directly from that consultation, should be seen as of pivotal importance to the future of the game.

The FRC is indebted to all those who made their views known to us, whether through completing the online survey, by email or by post, or through the many face-to-face meetings. We hope this report does justice to the efforts of all those involved and that it will stimulate the kind of changes that are generally judged necessary to improve the wonderful game of Gaelic football.

This is the first of two reports by the FRC. The second report, on competition structures and related matters, will be published early in 2013.

Eugene McGee  
Chairman of the Football Review Committee  
December 2012

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are over 300,000 officially registered Gaelic football players in Ireland. There are 9,110 youth teams, 2,545 adult teams and 874 U-21 teams. Overseas there are 450 GAA clubs with a registered playing population of over 16,000.

The GAA is one of the cornerstones of Irish society, providing recreational and social facilities in every corner of the country and far beyond Irish shores. Gaelic football is played in practically every parish in Ireland, rural and urban, regardless of class, creed or political persuasion. In recent years GAA clubs have become the main organisation in many parishes catering for men, women and children of all ages and providing a vital social and sporting outlet for the local population.

Therefore, since the game of Gaelic football is a foundation block for all this activity it is important that the intrinsic quality of the product itself is examined occasionally so that high standards can be maintained and traditional core values preserved. The FRC was created to carry out this work.

When a survey of over 3,000 people was conducted by the FRC, 75% of respondents stated football at senior county level was either Very Good or Good. Public interest in the game, the media coverage given to football and most importantly the very high level of attendance at inter-county games in 2012 provides ample evidence of the validity of that survey. Sport often reflects society and therefore it is necessary to monitor changes in a sport like Gaelic football and examine what trends are evolving and if a response is needed by the governing body of that sport.

### **Changing Trends**

Gaelic football is officially in being since 1884 and in the intervening 128 years the game has changed substantially. Sometimes the change was prompted by adjusted playing rules. In recent years, however, styles of play have been adapted by drawing on such developments as sports science, fitness innovations, medical expertise, psychological input and influences from other sports. The changes in lifestyle of Irish people over the years have also influenced attitudes to football.

Every major sport has a philosophy of its own and Gaelic football is no different. There have always been core values on which Gaelic football was based and on which it has thrived, such as high catching, accurate kicking and scoring points from long range. Also inherent in Gaelic football has been a sense of manliness exemplified by fair play and the absence of malice or personal abuse. Respect for opponents, referees and rival supporters is also at the heart of this philosophy. It ought, therefore, be a function of the rules of the sport to guarantee these tenets of the game, exemplified in part by the phrase, 'play the ball, not the man'.

From our research in 2012 the basic philosophy of the game is well grounded but inevitably some reassessment is required. For example the immense changes in physical and mental fitness methods brought about by sports science in the past thirty years have meant that Gaelic football is much more of a possession game than in the past. The average time for a team to hold possession of the ball is now around twenty seconds, double what it was thirty years ago. The change has been achieved through more hand-passing and a consequential

reduction in long kicking. Many followers of the game are concerned at this development but at this point it is important to differentiate between a permanent change and a temporary trend.

Over the years hand-passing in various versions has periodically dominated the game, most notably in the 1970s when all hand-passed scores, goals and points, were allowed. We have had a similar development in the past few years, which explains the longer periods of possession in the modern game. However, the emphasis on hand-passing goes in phases and already there are signs that many of the teams who were prime users of the hand-pass are now using it less. For this reason, we believe this is not the time to curb the hand pass, as the current heavy reliance on it may be temporary. It is a trend, however, the GAA should monitor regularly. Our match analysis also showed a 43% decrease in foot-passes over 30 metres during the past ten years, with only 10% of foot-passes now going more than 30 metres. This trend should also be monitored by the GAA to ensure that kicking remains a fundamental part of the game.

Another aspect of the game that will require regular monitoring is the amount of time the ball is in play. From the 61 match DVDs analysed, the ball was in play for about 50% of game time, with kick outs and free kicks accounting for around 40% of game time (this is an area where stricter application by referees of the existing rules related to time-keeping, could have a beneficial impact on the amount of playing time). In inter-county senior games, however, the ball was in play for only 46% of total time, so spectators only see 33 minutes of actual game time.

In recent years many football people, as is clearly proven by our surveys, have been upset at the tendency for some players to engage in cynical type of behaviour which is negative by nature and against the spirit of the game. Disrespect for referees, personal insults to opponents, feigning injury, diving, not releasing the ball for frees and such-like behaviours are undermining the good name of Gaelic football. The FRC is proposing certain steps to address these issues.

The survey and the meetings in which we have been engaged have enabled us to focus on the issues of greatest concern to those watching and participating in Gaelic football. We believe our proposals, if implemented, will enhance the game and increase its ability to attract and retain young players. We have a wonderful game and the small number of players who engage in disruptive or unsporting play have no place in the true football fold.

## METHODOLOGY

Having been appointed by the President of the GAA to oversee a study of Gaelic football, Eugene McGee put a committee in place (Killian Burns, Declan Darcy, Paul Earley, Tim Healy, Ciaran McBride, John Tobin, Tony Scullion and Kevin Griffin).

Appendix 1: Committee member details

The Committee met initially on 18th May 2012 to devise an approach and a strategy towards garnering the views of all those who had anything to do with Gaelic football and how it is organised and played.

It was decided to establish a website ([www.frc.ie](http://www.frc.ie)) which would host a questionnaire on the state of the game. This questionnaire was completed by 3,170 people, almost half of whom also provided additional comments and suggestions.

An email address ([frc@gaa.ie](mailto:frc@gaa.ie)) was provided for receipt of submissions. The third channel through which the public could make their views known to the FRC was by letter. In all, almost 350 submissions were received through these two channels. The website and contact details were launched on 25th July with the online survey remaining open until late October.

A further method employed was a detailed study of 61 DVDs of Gaelic football games from the periods 2001/2 and 2010/11. The games studied included Minor Club and County and Senior Club and County. Detailed analysis was conducted of all aspects of these games by a team of graduate students<sup>1</sup> at Dublin City University under the leadership of Prof Niall Moyna. Separately, an analysis of all email and postal submissions was conducted by a research student<sup>2</sup> at DCU, to complement the reading by members of the Committee of all the submissions received.

The Committee also decided to meet representative groups of the various key stakeholders in Gaelic football, with the objective of hearing their views as well as engaging with them as issues arose from feedback or from earlier meetings with other groups.

Appendix 2: Details of the fourteen Stakeholder meetings held.

In order to obtain the views of a cross-section of those with a deep involvement in Gaelic football, a series of focus group meetings was arranged. These meetings proved useful in further developing the responses to the online survey and other submissions received. Focus group meetings were held during October 2012 to which ten representatives from each County were invited, drawn from the ranks of players, coaches, managers, referees, administrators and club members. Each focus group meeting was enabled by trained facilitators and was overseen by at least one member of the FRC. In all there were three such meetings in Leinster, two in Ulster and one each in Munster and Connacht, and also one at Carlow IT.

Appendix 3: Details of the eight Focus Group meetings held

Finally, the Committee also took cognisance of a wide range of relevant reports already in existence.

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<sup>1</sup> David Kelly, Jonathan Cooper, Emma Harris, Cliona Duigenan, Michael Wheeler

<sup>2</sup> Grace Sheridan, DCU, assisted by Claire Shiels, Fitzwilliam Institute

## SECTION 1: THE CURRENT STATE OF THE GAME

When addressing the health and well-being of Gaelic football, it must be understood that the flagship competition is the All-Ireland Championship while the foundation of the game lies within the clubs. A balance must exist between the need to organise and promote inter-county football while treating fairly the vast majority of players, the club players. While it is noteworthy that 75% of respondents rated the game at inter-county level as Good or Very Good, the corresponding figure for club football was a much lower 51%.

Inter-county Gaelic football, with its high profile and wide popularity, inevitably dominates media coverage but it is important to point out that around 98% of players are not involved at inter-county level but devote their energy, motivation and enthusiasm to club football. Their welfare is just as important in the overall football scheme of things as that of inter-county players.

The following is an extract from the Football Development Committee report of November 1999.

“There is clear evidence that the present senior inter-county fixture structures are having a negative impact on club fixtures in several counties. We constantly heard of clubs not having any competitive games for five, eight or even twelve weeks during the season because of the inter-county commitments of a small number of players. This is because many counties set aside club fixtures to facilitate the county team’s progress in the championship. The effect of this is that a tiny number of inter-county players are depriving a huge number of club players of a REGULAR programme of games.”

Some thirteen years later, in 2012, the FRC survey questionnaire was completed by almost a thousand players, with the following outcome:

- 52% said that adult club fixture-making in their county was either Poor or Very Poor
- 60% said that there was a lack of adherence to pre-arranged club fixture schedules
- 64% said that the club season was too long and drawn out
- 54% said there were not enough club competitive games

In summary, it would appear that little has changed and the state of fixture-making and lack of adherence to fixture schedules continues unchecked in many counties.

In an organisation which regards the club as its most important unit, this is unacceptable. Several steps are required in order to achieve the equilibrium between the needs of inter-county teams and players, and the entitlements of club players.

One area which requires study is the structure of the All-Ireland Senior Championship and its impact on club fixtures. This will be addressed in our Second Report. Meanwhile, there are other fundamental changes which could facilitate a more structured schedule and begin the process of showing appropriate respect to club football generally and club players.

County Boards function autonomously in many respects, including fixture-making. Within each county, a CCC body administers fixtures. This committee should, and in virtually all cases does, produce a club fixture master plan. Adherence to these plans must assume a new level of importance, with games being called-off only for the most extreme reasons. There must be a realisation that postponements have been and are being granted for

frivolous reasons, with significant knock-on effects on the fixtures programme. This must change.

The survey findings about the season being too long and drawn out, combined with the frequent criticism that there were not enough competitive games, reflects the inability to produce and adhere to a games plan which provides regular matches when the weather is suitable for football.

There are many examples of sparse club championship activity in summer months, followed by a frantic charge to complete championships in late autumn as the provincial competition looms and county champions are needed. It must be acknowledged that certain counties, many of whom feature regularly in the latter stages of the All-Ireland Championship, manage to run their club championships in a timely and satisfactory manner, not allowing the success of their county teams to hinder club championship progress.

Inter-county managers were cited by many respondents to the FRC as having undue influence over club fixtures and being capable of delaying club championships or having games postponed by their insistence that county players not be released to their clubs.

## SECTION 2: THE ROLE OF MANAGERS

We refer here, primarily, to managers of inter-county teams. Over the past thirty years or so team managers have emerged as substantial decision-makers and influencers of public opinion in several aspects of GAA activity. In general, the presence of managers has been welcomed and their role as people who organise and develop players has added greatly to the quality of football and increased the level of interest. Many previously weaker county and club teams have been beneficiaries of managerial expertise.

Because the role of Team Manager has not evolved in a methodical manner but rather in a haphazard way, it is largely a position that exists outside the normal systems of administration that pertain to all other units of the organisation such as county boards, club committees, etc. Inter-county managers are not members of the County Executive, County Board or the County CCC, the body which normally decides club fixture-making, yet there is evidence that problems frequently occur with club fixtures following an intervention by the manager of the county team. It is understandable that such situations might occur where a county is involved in the latter stages of the All-Ireland Championship, in August. However, the evidence from our meetings, reports and focus group discussions is that this type of disruption may occur in some counties at any stage.

County boards must show greater leadership by strictly enforcing club fixture schedules. If the serious problems that have been clearly identified regarding club fixtures are to be alleviated it shall be necessary for the GAA at central level to take some steps. We believe the central organisation should work with all county boards to ensure a degree of uniformity regarding club fixtures and the availability of county players to their clubs. It would be difficult to overstate the level of frustration and anger among club players all over Ireland with regard to the manner in which they are mistreated regarding fixture making.

### **Proposal 1:**

The FRC proposes that with regard to club fixture making, the CCC rather than the County Board shall have ultimate control in each county, thus mirroring the CCCC at national level.

### **Inter-County Manager's Charter**

The shared objective and purpose of the Manager's Charter, binding both the County Committee (as the representative of clubs) and the Inter-County team manager, is to provide agreed protocols to ensure that both the clubs and the inter-county management interests are equally respected. It is also to ensure that the requirements of the rules of the Association relating to club and inter-county fixtures are implemented within the county in a manner which is mutually beneficial.

The County Manager's Charter is abused by not being strictly adhered to by county managers in many counties with regard to fixture making and availability of inter-county players to their clubs.



**Proposal 2:**

To protect the club and club players, the FRC is proposing that the existing Manager's Charter become a formal agreement, submitted to Croke Park by 1st week in January each year, with Croke Park reserving the right to audit the agreement to ensure compliance.

This formal agreement must emphasise the strict adherence by county managers to the following:

- Full compliance with the 13 day rule (Rule 6.21) which allows for county players to become exclusively available to the county team for that period prior to an inter-county championship game.
- A commitment to allow inter-county players to play a majority of club league games and also provide for a time-frame for availability for club championship games.

These measures are necessary to assure club players that the annual fixture programme will be adhered to and club competitions can be completed at the correct time of year.

**Coaching Qualifications**

Coaching for Gaelic football is now as sophisticated as for any other sport in this country as a result of prolonged major investment by the GAA and structures devised and implemented by the Association. However there is a serious anomaly in that people who take positions as managers at either club or county level are not required to have any coaching certificate and indeed many do not have such. This is in contrast to other sports and is something that needs to be addressed.

**Proposal 3:**

The FRC proposes the phased introduction of mandatory coaching qualifications, particularly for managers/coaches of adult teams at club and county level. The appropriate mandatory coaching qualification should be set by Croke Park. A reasonable time period should be allowed for implementation but by 2015 at the latest.

## **SECTION 3: THE REFEREE**

The history of refereeing in Gaelic football has never been a series of logical progressions from 1884 to the present day and perhaps that is a factor in the image refereeing has to this day. It is long past time when refereeing needs to be repositioned at the heart of Gaelic football rather than on the periphery.

### **A Philosophy for Refereeing**

Like the GAA itself refereeing needs to have a philosophy which clarifies its role in the GAA family. That should include:

The fundamental beliefs of refereeing built around fair play, respect for players, high standards of integrity and honesty and impartiality at all times.

Specifically in Gaelic football, the principle of “play the ball, not the man” should be a core value. This principle should run through coaching courses and educational literature and enshrine the philosophy that fouling should never benefit the team that has committed the foul.

The authority and status of referees depends to a large degree on the support they receive from GAA officials at all levels of the Association as only then can referees take their proper place in the GAA with confidence, esteem and self-belief.

### **Refereeing consistency**

In over 3,000 replies to our questionnaire the second highest rated ‘dislike about Gaelic football’ was Refereeing Inconsistency. In addition, the fifth highest dislike was ‘Disrespect of Referees’. Injury Time Inconsistency also featured in the dislikes. In all our focus groups and discussions with stakeholders, including inter-county team managers, Inconsistency and Lack of Respect also featured among the leading issues.

Some of the more common examples of inconsistency include:

- A referee applying the same rules differently during the course of a game, eg issuing yellow cards early on in the game but less frequently towards the end. This is evidence of more tolerance towards unsporting behaviour in the final quarter of a game.
- Referees consistently interpreting and applying the same rules differently to each other, eg the referee who lets the play flow as opposed to the referee who blows fouls more frequently. Some referees are very particular about the pick-up or four-steps rule but others exercise much more leniency

At present, the task of the referee is extremely difficult and in some cases impossible if we measure success as clear, decisive, uniform action by referees officiating at games at the various grades from underage to All-Ireland championship level.

In our deliberations we focused on two main criteria to improve the position of refereeing:

- (i) Consistency in decision-making by referees
- (ii) Simplification of the task of refereeing.

### **Playing Rules & Refereeing**

There should be a clear distinction between Accidental and Deliberate fouls, with only the latter attracting disciplinary measures. Referees should clearly indicate to players and spectators whether the foul is judged Accidental or Deliberate.

#### **Proposal 4:**

The FRC proposes that a distinction between Accidental and Deliberate fouls be written into the Rules, with only Deliberate fouls invoking a card punishment.

There is a widespread lack of understanding of many of the rules among sections of the GAA including players, managers and followers.

#### **Proposal 5:**

The FRC proposes the publication of a laypersons guide to the playing rules which aims to explain the most common rules but which would not carry legal or formal standing. This publication would incorporate any changes arising from this report. As an aid to bringing clearer understanding of playing rules to the wider audience, individual rules should be published in match programmes throughout the 2013 Championship.

The delays and aggravation often caused by players not releasing the ball immediately when a foul occurs should be punished by bringing the ball forward at least 30 metres as opposed to the present 13 metres. This would also apply to dissent and while our proposal in this regards is covered elsewhere in this report, it is worth stating at this juncture that if implemented, it would, in our view, go a long way towards eliminating dissent, thereby improving the lot of the referee.

### **Referees and GAA Administration**

We met two types of referees face to face: club referees and elite inter-county referees. In addition several referees of all grades took part in the focus groups around Ireland.

There should be strong and visible backup by top GAA officials, national and local, so that referees can be confident that they have the full public support of GAA leaders from the President down. Otherwise some referees may be fearful that they will be isolated if unpopular decisions are made.

In some of our face-to-face meetings it was pointed out that the quality of training of referees is less than satisfactory in some counties. This apparent deficiency needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency with the national referees' body having a more active role in ensuring that standards of refereeing at club level are constantly improved.

**Proposal 6:**

The FRC proposes that in the interest of improving refereeing standards at all levels the direct link that currently exists between the head of referees in each province and county and the Chair of the Referees Committee should be considerably strengthened, to work towards greater consistency on a national and local basis through communication/discussion/seminars etc.

**Club Referees**

A drive needs to be made towards improving refereeing standards at club level. We are aware of GAA educational seminars planned for 2013 specifically aimed at club referees which is to be welcomed. However, players at club level appear to have very poor knowledge of the playing rules which adds greatly to the problems of club referees. At club games referees can often be left vulnerable to all sorts of pressures and may have no neutral officials to help them. By a combination of publishing and widespread distribution of key playing rules and the introduction of rule changes proposed within this report, we would hope to see a greater respect for referees.

**Field Incursions**

Unauthorised incursions onto the field are undermining the authority of referees. For instance the rule about injured players states that play should continue except for a serious injury but this is not generally happening.

The FRC has been advised that the Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee and referee representatives are actively discussing field incursions relating to injuries.

Field incursions at club level often lead to more serious rule-breaking, occasionally of a very grave nature which besmirches the good name of Gaelic football. The inability of some bodies controlling games to strictly limit the numbers on the sidelines of pitches has often led to violence at matches. A harder line in imposing sanctions on offenders must be taken by the controlling bodies.

**Proposal 7:**

The FRC proposes full and proper enforcement by referees of the rule governing field incursions. This is absolutely essential for the good of the game and such proper enforcement would go some way to address the issue of time-wasting.

**Respect for Referees**

One of the most disturbing aspects of refereeing right now is the lack of respect shown to referees. This is ingrained in many GAA people but must be remedied if referees are to make further progress at all levels. The FRC firmly believes that respect will be achieved through referees strictly enforcing the rules and by players accepting refereeing decisions without question.

Officials and mentors also have a key responsibility in displaying the correct behaviour towards referees.

**Recruitment of referees**

The FRC received a number of submissions suggesting a concerted attempt should be made to recruit recently retired players to be fast-tracked through the referee training system as it is felt their reputations would boost the image of refereeing. This would still entail an extended period refereeing at lower levels.

**Proposal 8:**

The FRC proposes that a recruitment drive for referees among recently retired players be pursued with some urgency.

**Communication: Referee & Players**

At the FRC focus groups there was strong emphasis on the need for communication between referee and players.

**Proposal 9:**

The FRC proposes that before all club and county games, referees should go to each team dressing room to introduce themselves to the players, in the interests of building rapport and respect.

## SECTION 4: PROPOSALS FOR CHANGES TO THE GAME

### Disciplinary Sanctions

Breakdowns in discipline continue to affect Gaelic football and the GAA in a very negative way. Although there have been improvements, it is clear that there is a demand that any reasonable steps which might improve the game, both for participants and spectators, should be pursued.

Issues around discipline arose in the majority of submissions via the online questionnaire, emails, and letters, in meetings with stakeholder groups and in the focus group meetings held around the country. The highest ranked “dislike” was cynical and tactical fouling.

The FRC’s conclusion is that there is strong demand for the introduction of enhanced disciplinary measures. Allied to this was a conclusion that fouls needed to be clearly categorised as either Accidental or Deliberate. With such an approach, an Accidental Foul is only ever punishable by a free and not by a card. It is proposed that referees clearly signal to all present when a foul is judged Accidental, to avoid any kind of contention or controversy.

Consideration was given to introducing a “sin-bin” rule which would require that a player in receipt of a yellow card would simply leave the field for 10 minutes. It is our belief that any change of this nature should be applicable across all grades at both club and county levels. As one of the Committee’s primary objectives is to try to simplify rather than complicate the task of the referee, we have concerns about attempting to operate a 10-minute sin-bin at club level. It must be borne in mind that at many club games the referee is isolated, relying on the participating clubs to provide linesmen and umpires. Also, in the absence of a public time clock, determining such a 10-minute sin-bin period could lead to enormous contention, eg if stoppages occurred during this time etc. It is our view that trying to operate a sin-bin as described could be fraught with difficulties in this type of situation.

#### **Proposal 10:**

The FRC proposes that:

- Players issued with a Yellow Card should be subject to mandatory substitution for the remainder of the game
- After a team has been given three Yellow Cards, any further Yellow Card will mean the player going off with no substitution
- For inter-county competitions a cumulative total of three Yellow Cards for an individual player in any one grade in the same year should lead to a two-match suspension
- To be fair to all concerned, the number of substitutes permitted should be increased from the present five to six, to coincide with the introduction of this proposed change

The above proposed changes should be introduced within the current rules and implemented from 2014.

## Moving the ball forward

The Rulebook details a number of offences which attract the penalty of the ball being moved forward 13 metres, eg interfering with a player taking a free kick.

The Committee has looked at the existing sanction and found it to be inadequate as a deterrent. This conclusion is partly based on detailed discussion with referee representatives. When a foul is awarded, play should resume as quickly as possible. The phenomenon of the player or team penalised seeking to slow down play for tactical reasons leads to frustration for the other team and often unsightly bunching, shoving and other delaying tactics.

### **Proposal 11:**

The FRC proposes that all offences currently attracting a 13-metre sanction should attract a 30-metre sanction. The FRC also proposes that, in addition to the existing rules, if the player who commits a foul has the ball he must place the ball on the ground immediately and retreat the required distance. Failure to do so should attract a 30-metre sanction.

## The Tackle

In our survey findings, 73% of respondents who addressed the issue of the tackle identified the 'lack of a clearly defined tackle' as the main source of concern

There is a long held tradition and belief among GAA people that the word tackle equates to making physical contact forcibly with the man in possession. However, the Committee believes the tackle needs to be presented as a key skill of the game, which should be centred on the principle of 'play the ball, not the man' and encapsulate, as proposed within this report, the distinction between Deliberate and Accidental fouls while in the act of tackling.

### ***The current rule on the Tackle:***

Definition 15 of Rulebook: "Any attempt to dispossess or reduce the advantage of opponents within the Rules of Fair Play. With the exception of the charge (fair), the tackle is aimed at the ball not the player"

Note: the charge (fair) refers to the shoulder to shoulder charge.

Many referees have not been able to implement this rule consistently due to a lack of clarity around the current definition, which is the cause of a great deal of trouble in our game.

The only way to reposition the tackle is to emphasise that last sentence in the current rule which promotes the 'play the ball' principle. Success in the tackle means the tackler dispossesses his opponent, prevents his opponent from successfully playing the ball or from continuing his progress with the ball within the rules of fair play. It does not mean making deliberate physical contact with the player in possession.

The tackler has several options to achieve that success such as standing in the player's path, using his body movements to prevent the opponent gaining ground, flicking the ball out of opponent's hands as he plays it, narrowing the angle of an attempted shot, blocking his attempted kick or hand-pass, forcing him to overplay the ball and intercepting his foot-pass or hand-pass to a colleague.

**Proposal 12:**

The FRC proposes that correct tackling be promoted and emphasised as a key skill of Gaelic football within all GAA coaching manuals. Also, the FRC recommends a fuller definition of the tackle rule be introduced which will reduce misinterpretation among players, spectators and referees.

***Proposed new definition of the Tackle:***

"The tackle is a skill by which a player may dispossess an opponent or frustrate his objective within the rules of fair play. The tackle is aimed at the ball, not the player. The tackler may use his body to confront the opponent but deliberate bodily contact (such as punching, slapping, arm holding, pushing, tripping, jersey pulling or a full frontal charge) is forbidden. The only deliberate physical contact can be a Fair Charge i.e. shoulder-to-shoulder. More than one player can tackle the player in possession.

## **Advantage Rule**

Advantage Rules exist already within the game (Rules 4.36 and 5.35). However, it is generally considered that these rules are deficient in not conferring genuine advantage on the player fouled, and could in fact advantage the player who committed the foul.

Of all issues addressed in the online survey, this was the topic which drew the highest percentage response in favour of changing the existing rules. This was further confirmed in our meeting with stakeholder groups, including referees, and in the focus group meetings we held.

Our conclusion is that there is majority support for a change to the current rules along the lines of allowing the advantage to run but with the option of awarding a free if the advantage does not accrue within a prescribed period.

***At present, the advantage rule is governed as follows:***

Rule 4.36: When a team commits a technical foul, the referee may allow the play to continue if he considers it to be to the advantage of the opposing team. He shall signal that advantage by raising an extended arm upright. Once he allows play to continue, he may not subsequently award a free for that foul. He shall apply any relevant disciplinary action.

Rule 5.35: When a team commits an aggressive foul, the referee may allow the play to continue if he considers it to be to the advantage of the offended team. He shall signal



that advantage is being played by raising an extended arm upright. Once the referee allows the play to continue, he may not subsequently award a free for that foul. He shall apply the relevant penalty.

**Proposal 13:**

The FRC proposes the following new Advantage Rule to replace Rule 4.36 and Rule 5.35, for implementation in 2013:

“When a foul is committed the referee may allow the play to continue if he considers it to be to the advantage of the offended team. He shall signal that advantage by raising an arm upright. If he deems no advantage to have occurred he may subsequently award a free for that foul, from where it occurred. The referee shall allow the advantage to run by maintaining his arm in the upright position for up to 5 seconds after the initial foul or for less time if it becomes clear that no advantage has accrued. He shall apply any relevant disciplinary action.”

## **The Mark**

High catching has always been one of the great skills of the game of Gaelic football and is one of the spectacular skills which attract spectators to games. Many people want to see more high catching in the modern game but feel that there is disproportionate emphasis on breaking-ball tactics to the detriment of high fielding. It is generally felt that the introduction of the Mark from kick-outs would act as a reward which would encourage greater emphasis on the development of the skill of high-fielding, leading to an increase in the number of high catches in the game.

In the online survey respondents ranked Catching skills as Number 1 in order of preference of all the skills they most liked about Gaelic football, and a majority were in favour of the introduction of the Mark.

Many of those who communicated by letter or email expressed a clear view that the rules of the game should reward skilful play, and highlighted the introduction of the Mark as a way to reward and encourage high fielding skills. In addition it was suggested that it would help to reduce group tackling after a catch has been made which would also make the referee's role easier.

Analysis of the sixty-one match DVDs showed that at club and inter-county level, 80% of kick outs cross the 45m line, with the primary outcome being a breaking ball.

The results show that 50% of all kick-outs in inter-county games resulted in a breaking ball compared with 15% which are caught cleanly overhead. At inter-county level approximately 21% of all kick-out >45 m in length are contested overhead, with an average of six overhead catches per game in both inter-county and club games. In almost all cases the player who performed the catch was successful in disposing of the ball or winning a free.

In an attempt to increase the number of high catches per game and improve the game as a spectacle, a significant majority of those consulted supported the introduction of the Mark for kick-outs caught cleanly on or over the 45metre line.

**Proposal 14:**

The FRC proposes, for implementation in 2014, that:

- The Mark should be introduced for any catch from a kick-out where the ball is caught cleanly on or past the 45 metre line.
- The referee will blow his whistle to signify the player has caught the ball cleanly and earned the Mark. The player has the option to play on immediately or if he intends to avail of the Mark he must indicate this to the referee. If he elects to take the Mark he must then kick the ball from his hands
- Once he indicates he is taking the Mark, the opposition must retreat 10 metres to allow the player space to take the kick.
- If an opposition player deliberately blocks or attempts to block the kick within 10 metres, or if an opposition player impedes the player while he is taking the kick the referee will penalise the opposition and bring the ball forward 30 metres.
- Once the player indicates he is taking the Mark the Referee will allow up to 5 seconds for the player to take the kick.
- If the player delays longer than 5 seconds the referee will cancel the Mark and throw the ball up between 2 players.
- If the player gets injured in the process of taking the Mark, and is unable to take the kick, his nearest teammate may take the kick but cannot score directly from the kick.

## **The Pick Up**

The clean pick up was introduced on a trial basis in the 2005 season and was piloted initially in the subsidiary competitions. However the amendment to the pick-up rule was defeated in Congress in 2005.

There were mixed views from survey respondents on allowing the clean pick-up, with stronger support for its introduction in the focus group meetings. It was supported in particular by the overseas representatives we met, and is already allowed in a number of overseas competitions. This is a not an insignificant factor in light of the GAA's stated ambitions in respect of growing the game overseas.

It is our view that allowing the clean pick-up would help reduce refereeing inconsistency. Thirteen per cent of all frees occur around the pick-up. Seven per cent relate to pick-ups which referees adjudge illegal while six per cent are called for fouls on the player picking up the ball. We believe virtually all of the seven per cent category fouls would be eliminated while in time the six per cent fouls could also reduce as players could effect the pick-up more quickly when not required to apply a toe to the ball.

**Proposal 15:**

The FRC proposes that in addition to the existing rules on picking up the ball, a clean pick-up should be permitted, subject to the player being in an upright position, with at least one foot on the ground, while making the pick-up. Implementation date: 2014.

**Scores from the Hand**

Currently the rulebook states that an attacking player may score a point by fisting the ball, but cannot score a point with the open hand. In practice, however, it is accepted that a high percentage of the 'fisted' scores are executed with the open hand.

From our discussions with referees it is clear that they find it too difficult to make an accurate judgment from a distance, on whether the score was executed with the fist or the open hand.

At all the focus group meetings there was strong support for the retention of the fisted point but also to allow hand passed points, in effect legalising what is happening at present. The view is that if the hand-pass is allowed as a pass then it should be permitted as a score.

Allowing hand-passed points would also help to reduce refereeing inconsistency.

**Proposal 16:**

The FRC proposes the amendment of rule 3.1 to allow a point to be scored with the open hand as well as the fist, with implementation in 2013.

**Public Time Clock**

There has been a strong demand for the introduction of a clock which would enable the public to know at all stages of a game, how much time is left for play. This would take the responsibility for timekeeping out of the hands of the referee.

In our online survey a very sizeable majority of 80% of respondents favoured the introduction of a public time clock at inter-county level, with 49% favouring it at club level. Key stakeholder groups such as referees were in favour of a public time clock for inter-county games. Discussions at the focus group meetings confirmed the desire for a public time clock at inter-county games. It was not deemed practical to propose this change at club level, at least at this juncture.

The time clock should therefore be introduced for inter-county games. The two requirements are:

- (i) technology, which already exists where electronic scoreboards are in place, and
- (ii) the availability of an additional official to operate the clock

These requirements would preclude mandating a public time clock for club fixtures. In respect of the impact on refereeing, those referees the Committee has consulted confirmed their willingness to work with a public time clock.

**Proposal 17:**

The FRC proposes that a public time clock be introduced in Croke Park and in all grounds used for Provincial and All-Ireland series games in 2013 and rolled out thereafter as practicable. The clock should be stopped for injuries, with the clock stopped and re-started as indicated visibly by the referee and also audibly where possible (if wired up) to the official in charge of the clock. When the game time has elapsed this would be signalled by a hooter, with any ball in flight allowed to complete its journey, and if that resulted in a score, that score would stand.

**Duration of Adult Club Games**

FRC match analysis revealed that at club level the ball is in play for just over 50% of game time. Kick outs and free kicks account for approximately 25 minutes or 37% of a 60 minute game with the remaining minutes taken up by injuries and substitutions.

It's widely acknowledged among relevant stakeholders that committed adult club players reach very high levels of strength and fitness to withstand the intensity of the modern club game.

**Proposal 18:**

The FRC proposes that the duration of the adult club game be changed from 60 minutes to 70 minutes for all adult club competitions. It is believed this time period is more in keeping with the fitness level of the modern-day adult club players. Implementation date: 2014

## SECTION 5: OTHER AREAS OF THE GAME REVIEWED

### The Hand-pass

By its very nature Gaelic football is a dynamic fluid game that requires the player to make the best possible decision when in possession of the ball. At any given time there will be a combination of factors that will influence that decision. One of the most significant changes in the nature of the game has been the decrease in the number of team possessions and a corresponding increase in the duration of each team possession.

The average number of team possessions at inter-county senior level was 158, 146, and 138 in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, respectively, and the average duration of a team possession was 9-10 seconds. Regardless of age category or level of competition, the average number of team possessions is now 95-100 and the average duration of team possession is 18 -20 seconds.

The view was expressed, in particular at focus group meetings, that to put a limit on the number of hand passes would be equivalent to playing a conditioned game. While it may have the desired effect of increasing kicking, there was no solid evidence that it would improve the quality of Gaelic football. Since the creation of the game certain styles have emerged and more recently these styles have evolved through the ingenuity of the coach/manager. These patterns are transient in nature and are contingent on factors such as:

- Skilful competence of the players
- Number of players at one's disposal
- Physical characteristics of the team
- Coaching philosophy of the manager

A further concern was the extra burden that such a change would cause to the referee. A much shared opinion is that we need to make the job of the referee easier. The overall opinion of a critical mass is that the hand-pass should be left untouched.

The feedback from the questionnaire identified the overuse of the hand pass as an issue, but of a lower order than many other issues highlighted. An interesting observation from the information received through the survey is that whilst 68% of under 25's are in favour of retaining the present hand-pass, the percentage decreases with age to 24% in favour of retaining the status quo, for all those over 65. The overall percentage seeking change was below 50%.

There were many different opinions expressed in the correspondence received. Some felt that the overuse 'vastly reduces the game as a skilful game of football' or 'slows down play' or makes the game 'very boring to watch' while others expressed the very opposite opinions.

The match analysis conducted illustrates the changes in the hand-passing to kick-passing ratios over time:

Time	Ratio Hand-Pass/Kick- Pass
1970's	1.1 : 1

2000	1.8 : 1
2010	2.3 : 1

In the 2012 All-Ireland Championship, the ratio drawn from matches played by the top eight teams was 2.1:1. This slight reduction in the hand-pass to kick-pass ratio is evidence of the changing trends referenced earlier in the report.

**Consideration 1:**

The FRC is not recommending any limit to the number of hand-passes but as stated earlier, we believe this is one aspect of the game that should be carefully monitored.

### **Rewarding Long-range points**

It was suggested by some focus group attendees and a minority of stakeholders that a zone be created thirty five to forty metres from goal, so that points kicked from outside this zone would be doubly rewarded, ie. a ball kicked over the bar from outside that distance would be worth two points rather than one.

The Committee considered the video analysis which showed that the percentage of successful scoring opportunities between twenty and forty five metres has increased between 2000 and 2011.

Furthermore, it was felt that such a change would:

- (i) Encourage teams to work the ball out to try to achieve the higher score and that this could slow play considerably
- (ii) Devalue goals and lead to fewer goals

**Consideration 2:**

The FRC concluded that it is not necessary to seek to give additional reward to long-range points because of other proposed changes to make the game more positive. The FRC had also asked in the survey whether a free kick put over the bar should attract two points. This was strongly rejected by respondents so the FRC is not recommending it.

### **Tap and Go**

The question of whether a tap-and-go option should be introduced was included in the online questionnaire, and it was also a topic for discussion at the focus group meetings. The objective of the tap-and-go was to allow a player who was fouled to take the free to himself, thereby allowing play to continue immediately and giving the advantage to the offended team.

The idea elicited a mixed response. However, because of a number of other changes proposed earlier in this report, the FRC is not proposing its introduction. The proposal that a player who commits the foul, and has the ball in his possession, has to leave the ball immediately on the ground will ensure play is not delayed (as is it proposed that failure to leave the ball on the ground immediately, or interfering with the ball if the fouled player has it in his possession, will result in a 30-metre sanction). We also attached a lot of weight to the argument that the tap-and-go would eat further into the number of kicks in the game.

**Consideration 3:**

The FRC is not proposing the introduction of a tap-and-go option.

### **Thirteen-a-side games**

Many commentators on Gaelic football in recent years have suggested that moving to mandatory 13-a-side games could create more space and make for a better and more open game.

The question of moving to 13-a-side games was therefore included in the online questionnaire and was also covered in the focus group meetings. The idea was overwhelmingly rejected in the online survey, by the key stakeholder groups and in the focus group meetings.

**Consideration 4:**

The FRC is not proposing the mandatory introduction of 13-a-side games.

## SECTION 6: SPREADING THE WORD

One of the many influencers of public opinion in this country in relation to Gaelic football has been the media through the vast amount of coverage the games receive. It was for this reason the FRC invited about 20 leading media representatives from local and national Press, Radio and Television to outline their views on the game from an interested but detached viewpoint. Most were football activists themselves and from a GAA point of view it was informative that they were so knowledgeable about the game and the manner in which it is organised nationally and locally.

In the head-to-head competition nowadays between Gaelic football, rugby and soccer the role of media people is important from the perspective of the FRC. Their views, like all other stakeholders, were listened to carefully. The GAA will achieve the best returns from media coverage when both parties accept that each achieves more when cooperating together than when they operate in isolation.

There are aspects of public relations from some GAA units that are punishing the GAA as much as media people, such as not announcing accurate team lists or delaying them to the end of the week. The fans also lose in situations like these so more attention to such matters makes sense and would add to the enjoyment of the games for all involved in football activity.

### **Recommendation:**

The FRC strongly recommends that the issues raised above be addressed by all the relevant parties.



## **Appendix 1: Football Review Committee Members**

### **Eugene McGee (Chair)**

Eugene McGee is a native of Longford and is a Journalist. He wrote on GAA affairs for The Sunday Press, Sunday Tribune, Evening Herald and currently Irish Independent. He was Managing Editor of The Longford Leader newspaper for 23 years. He managed University College Dublin to win seven Sigerson Cups, two Dublin and All-Ireland club championships and the Offaly Team that won the 1982 All-Ireland final against Kerry. He was manager of the Ireland team against Australia 1987 and 1990.

### **Killian Burns**

Killian Burns has played Gaelic football with his native Sneem, South Kerry and Kerry at all levels, winning a Hogan Cup in 1992 with St. Brendan's College, Killarney, two U-21 All-Irelands in 1995 and 1996, a National League title in 1997, two senior All-Irelands in 1997 and 2000, Junior and Senior Munster Championships and two senior county championships with South Kerry. He continues to play with his local club Sneem/Derrynane. He is a communications consultant with over 15 years' experience in marketing with relevant experience working across soccer, GAA, rugby and minority sports with brands as well as sporting bodies.

### **Declan Darcy**

Declan Darcy was Captain of Leitrim 1994 senior and U21-winning Connaught championship teams. Declan won senior Leinster championships with Dublin and St Brigid's. He also won four county senior club titles with Aughawillan in Leitrim and one with St Brigid's in Dublin. Declan was a member of the coaching team that won two All-Ireland U21 titles and three Leinster titles with Dublin. He is currently looking after 4-6 year olds in Clanna Gael in Dublin, manager of Under 9 girls in Clanna Gael and their Intermediate men's team.

### **Paul Earley**

Paul Earley played at all grades for Roscommon and captained his county to win Minor and Senior Connaught championship titles, and won an All Star award. He was the first player to play first grade Australian Rules football and maintains a close association with the AFL. Paul played his club football with Michael Glaveys in Roscommon. He is a Level 2 GAA Coach and Tutor Trainer in the GAA Coach Education program. During the championship season Paul works as co-commentator on the live championship games with TV3, and during the National League with Setanta Sports.

Professionally he runs his own independent financial planning business 'Earley Consulting Ltd'

### **Tim Healy**

Tim Healy played Minor Football for Cork and Senior Football for Wicklow. He was educated at Coláiste Chríost Rí where he captained their first Corn Uí Mhuirí winning team, later graduating UCD's Smurfit Business School with an MBA. He has managed Senior Gaelic Football Club teams in Wexford and Dublin as well as managing the Wicklow U21 Football team. He is the author of "Can You Manage?" the guide to managing teams in Gaelic Football and other team sports, published in 2011.

**Ciaran McBride**

Ciaran Mc Bride has played both hurling and Gaelic football for Tyrone at all levels, winning All-Ireland U-21 medals in 1991 and 1992 and also holds three Ulster Senior Championship Medals. He is Head of PE and Sport at Omagh CBS and managed them to Hogan Cup success in 2007. He has worked for the Sunday Independent, Setanta and BBC as a football pundit and currently manages his adopted club Carrickmore's underage teams.

**John Tobin**

John Tobin is a former Physical Education teacher and currently Provincial Coaching and Games Manager for Connacht. John is a former Galway player and All Star. He has managed, coached and played at all levels - Colleges, Club and County. He is a winner of a Minor and U21 All-Ireland and was an All-Ireland Senior finalist on three occasions. John has also managed both Galway and Roscommon at senior level.

**Tony Scullion**

Tony Scullion was a dual player and played football and hurling for both his Club Ballinascreen and Derry for a long number of years. In his football career he won an All-Ireland Senior Medal with his County in 1993, beating Cork in the Final. He won 3 National League Medals, 2 Ulster Senior Championship Medals, 6 Railway Cup Medals playing for Ulster and 4 All-Star Awards. He captained Ulster to one of those successes and captained Derry to National League success. He played for Ireland against Australia in 1987 and 1990 in the International Rules Series. He is employed by the Ulster Council GAA as the Football Development Officer for the province.

**Kevin Griffin (Secretary)**

Kevin Griffin has worked as Director of Registry in University College Dublin since 2007, having previously held the same position in Dublin City University. Prior to that he worked for 13 years in education policy and management in England. Kevin chaired the Elite Athlete Entry Working Group while at DCU and the Elite Athlete Implementation Group in UCD, and currently chairs the UCD Institute for Sport & Health Strategic Board. Kevin has played club football in his native Mayo (Davitts, of which he remains a member), England (London and Herts) and the US (Boston) and represented Mayo at underage.

## Appendix 2: Stakeholder Meetings

The FRC met representatives of the following stakeholder groups during the consultation phase:

1. Provincial Coaches: 23 June 2012
2. Senior Referees and Club Referees: 23 June 2012
3. Gaelic Players Association (GPA) – 4 July 2012
4. Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee members – 15 September 2012
5. Committee representatives on Fixtures – 15 September 2012
6. Inter-county managers – 15 September
7. The Media/Journalists – 15 September 2012
8. Overseas Representatives – 20 September 2012
9. Senior Referees Group – 27 September 2012
10. Coiste Bainistí/Management Committee – 28 September 2012
11. County Chairmen (31 present) – 12 October 2012
12. President and senior staff of Croke Park – 17 and 24 October 2012
13. Higher Education Council/Comhairle Árdoideachais – 24 October 2012
14. Senior Referee Representatives – 28 November 2012

### **Appendix 3: Focus Group Meetings**

**Connacht – Saturday 6 October 2012**, McWilliam Park Hotel, Claremorris, Co Mayo

The FRC member in charge was John Tobin, with Eugene McGee and Kevin Griffin also in attendance.

*Facilitators:* Martin Carney, Kevin McStay and Denis O’Boyle

**Leinster – Saturday 6 October 2012**, Marriot Hotel, Enfield, Co Meath

The FRC member in charge was Paul Earley.

*Facilitators:* Sean Dempsey, Cyril Kevlihan and Sean O’Toole

**Ulster – Saturday 6 October 2012**, Four Seasons Hotel, Co Monaghan

The FRC member in charge was Ciaran McBride, with Tony Scullion also in attendance.

*Facilitators:* Garrett Coyle, John McArdle and Michael Kerr

**Carlow IT – Monday 8 October 2012**, Carlow IT

The FRC members in attendance were Paul Earley and Eugene McGee.

*Facilitators:* Paul Earley, Colm Clear and Sean Dempsey

**Dublin – Wednesday 10 October 2012**, Croke Park

The FRC member in charge was Declan Darcy and Tim Healy and Eugene McGee

*Facilitators:* Sean O’Toole, Ger O’Connor, Declan Smyth, Al O’Donoghue

**Ulster – Saturday 13 October 2012**, The Elk, Toomebridge, Co Antrim

The FRC member in charge was Tony Scullion and Eugene McGee was also in attendance.

*Facilitators:* Roger Keenan, Terence McWilliams, Dr Eugene Young

**Leinster – Saturday 13 October 2012**, Seven Oaks Hotel, Carlow

The FRC member in charge was Tim Healy and Kevin Griffin was also in attendance.

*Facilitators:* Eamon Barry, Colm Clear and Brendan Harpur

**Munster – Saturday 13 October 2012**, Kilmurry Lodge, Co Limerick

The FRC member in charge was Killian Burns.

*Facilitators:* Donal Fitzgibbon, Pat Flanagan, Pat Moroney, Joe Redington