



An Chomhdháil Bhliantúil 2016

2015 Tuarascáil an Ard Stiúirthóra

GAA Annual Congress
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10 January 2015; Former Waterford hurler Paul Flynn, in his role of umpire for the day, chats with young supporters during a break in play, Waterford Crystal Cup Preliminary Round, Cork v University of Limerick, CIT GAA Grounds, Bishopstown, Co. Cork.



Annual Congress

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20 September 2015; James McCarthy, Dublin, is tackled by Colm Cooper, Kerry. GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Championship Final. Dublin v Kerry, Croke Park, Dublin.



Report of the Ard Stiúrthóir Páraic Ó Dufaigh

Introduction

Hurling championships in recent years had dazzled us with their brilliance, so it was to be expected that the first year of a return to more normal competition would slightly lessen the excitement levels. For all that, there were two remarkable features of the 2015 championship. One was the unexpectedly rapid rise of Waterford, who followed their fine Allianz League title with a pulsating charge in the championship. They deserved the admiration they received; their skilful and relentless hurling gave lie to the received wisdom that it takes years to build a team fit to challenge for national titles. We look forward to the continuation of Waterford's campaign in 2016.

What is one to say about Kilkenny? They not only defeated all-comers to win another championship, but they defeat one's ability to say anything new or original about their achievements. Gaelic games may well be amateur, but we all know the intensity that teams bring to their hurling, so it is a genuinely extraordinary fact that Kilkenny continue to find the means to stay ahead of their rivals, almost year after year. It is exactly this latter fact – that they continue to dominate hurling after so many years – that is so remarkable. Kilkenny hurlers never become blasé or complacent; winning one year never diminishes their hunger to win the next year. They have excellent hurlers, of course, but so do (and did, over the years) other counties. There is something in Kilkenny hurling, beyond the great players, tradition, county pride or match tactics, something to do with resilience, with a mental attitude that finds defeat incomprehensible,

unbearable or even insulting, that raises them to levels of performance that other teams cannot match. (Brian Cody probably knows what this is!). Their cumulative achievements have been exceptional, and Gaelic games followers are right to be proud of such brilliant sportsmen. It was wholly fitting, then, that the elegant skills of TJ Reid won for him the award of Player of the Year.

The football championship gave us an absolutely absorbing final. The carping of a few who lamented the absence of silky summer skills surely missed the point: the awful weather conditions determined that this was to be a contest of attrition. There was never a stage where the match did not seem ready to tip in an unpredictable way: a funny bounce, or a slip of hand or foot near goal, could have turned the direction of the game in the opposite direction. But Dublin deserved their victory, as they deserve great credit for a third title in five years. We must congratulate Jim Gavin who has managed Dublin to two of these titles, and Jack McCaffrey who won the Player of the Year award.

Elsewhere on the playing fields, we salute the two winners of the U-21 championships, Limerick in hurling and Tyrone in football, as we do the winners of the minor championships, Galway in hurling and Kerry in football. And in the ferociously contested club championships, where Gaelic games, and indeed the Association itself, are visible in their most vibrant and relevant condition, we applaud the All-Ireland championship winners of Corofin (senior football), Ballyhale Shamrocks (senior hurling), Ardferit (intermediate

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football), O'Donovan Rossa (intermediate hurling), Brosna (junior football) and Bennettsbridge (junior hurling).

The International Rules returned to Dublin in November for a one-match Series, which allowed us to see that, when both countries field their best players, the Series easily justifies its continuation. Those who attended the match seemed to share the opinion that it whetted the appetite for a second match, especially as the Australians were seen to improve considerably as the game progressed.

It is gratifying to record that attendances for both leagues and championships remained strong. Competition for spectator patronage is intense, from inside and outside sport, and we must now promote our competitions vigorously every year. But the games themselves must also be attractive,

and, despite the reservations expressed about modern Gaelic football, there continues to be great loyalty to one's county in inter-county competitions.

There is, however, a feature of the wider context of Gaelic football that does cause concern. A significant number of counties do not have the financial resources, either from commercial income and/or through their fundraising capacity, to be serious contenders to win an All-Ireland title. This is becoming a permanent structural imbalance in competitiveness which, when combined with the unequal population distribution over counties, reduces potential All-Ireland winners to a relatively few counties. This has to be a matter of concern, particularly if we want the championship to continue to draw the strong attendances that we celebrate above.

28 February 2015; Delegates, including Australia, during the GAA Annual Congress 2015. Slieve Russell Hotel, Cavan.



Congress 2015

While Congress 2015 was generally described as ‘quiet’, it nonetheless passed a number of significant motions as it considered the reports of the Hurling 20/20 and the Minor Review committees. While both reports contained recommendations that fell within the remit of Central Council for decision, the focus at Congress was on proposals that required a change of rule. In terms of the Hurling 20/20 committee, this meant, primarily, the playing rules, and Congress passed its motion that only one defending player may stand on the goal-line to defend a penalty puck. It also decided that, for free pucks awarded on the centre point of the 20 metre line and on the semi-circular arc, no more than five defending players could stand on the goal-line. Congress also supported the Hurling 20/20 proposal to introduce the advantage rule into hurling, and opted for automatic promotion of the winners of the Christy Ring Cup to the following year’s Provincial Qualifier group. The implementation of the changes to playing rules has gone smoothly and has been to the benefit of the game. The penalty puck has become an exciting feature of the game, with goalkeepers faring better than had been predicted, while, as in football, the introduction of the advantage rule has improved the fluidity of the game.

“The Minor Review committee made significant progress, too, in their step-by-step efforts to address player-welfare concerns by persuading Congress to amend the rule governing age grades. As a result, from January 2017 players must be over 17 years to play at adult club level and over 16 years to play in the U-21 grade with clubs.”

The Minor Review Committee made significant progress, too, in their step-by-step efforts to address player-welfare concerns by persuading Congress to amend the rule governing age grades. As a result, from January 2016 players must be over 17 years to play at adult club level and over 16 years to play in the U-21 grade with clubs. This amendment, along with the rule change that came into effect in January 2015 limiting participation at inter-county minor level to players over 16 years of age, is evidence of the growing awareness of the need to protect the young talented player. There is still much to be done to protect those players from the dangers of overtraining and burnout, but these were, nonetheless, significant changes.

The passing of nineteen motions that brought further clarity to our rules was a reflection of the importance of the ongoing work of the Rules Advisory Committee as a standing committee on the rules of the Association, while the decisions of Congress in addressing concerns about the proposed clock/hooter system, the closed months for collective training and the registration of teams for senior inter-county championship games were sensible and commendable.

Feedback from the five Congress workshops – on our financial reports, working with the media, the work of the GPA, health and wellbeing, and player welfare – was also positive. However, the concerns expressed in the aftermath of Congress about the lack of worthwhile debate at, or even engagement with, the full sessions of Congress need to be addressed. One of the reasons why the feedback on the workshops was positive in 2015 was because the workshop topics were clearly of interest to delegates, which has not always been the case. And the workshop setting is less intimidating,

which encourages participation. The possibility, therefore, of re-structuring the Congress schedule to allow delegates to attend two of these sessions is worth considering. A mechanism for effectively reporting the main issues to emerge at these sessions to the full Congress could usefully be developed.

In terms of the full Congress assembly, it is difficult to know how it might be made more participative. A lot of good work is done each year on rule amendments that is necessary and productive. It is in the very nature of many of the proposals that seek to amend rules (as from the Rules Advisory Committee) that the benefits are obvious and non-controversial, and thus unlikely to generate much debate. For delegates, such deliberations can be a tedious (if necessary) part of Congress. In each of the past three years we have organised a pre-Congress briefing for key county officers on the motions to ensure that delegates understand the details of all the motions before them. And with the Finance and Ard Stiúrthóir’s reports available to units and to the public well in advance of Congress, much informal debate will already have taken place on issues raised.

It may be that one of the effects of this pre-Congress preparation has been to make Congress a less deliberative forum. What was particularly disappointing last year was that, in a year when the playing rules could be changed, there was little debate on the motions submitted by counties seeking to amend the playing rules of football. Given that the way Gaelic football is currently played has generated so much discussion, one would have expected that, for example, motions seeking to limit the use of the hand-pass would have encouraged lively discussion at Congress 2015. But it did not. The same applies to the Friday night session and the opportunity to debate the Ard-Stiúrthóir’s



28 February 2015; Uachtarán Chumann Lúthchleas Aogán Ó Feargháil during his inaugural address to the GAA Annual Congress 2015.

Picture test goes here

GAA ANNUAL CONGRESS CAVAN 2015

report. This session is intended to facilitate a discussion on virtually any issue of concern to delegates, but it is my impression that such discussion has been diminishing from year to year. It may be that the report needs to be presented in a different way to the Friday evening session so as to facilitate a genuine debate on the key issues of the previous year.

Central Committees

Uachtarán Aogán Ó Fearghail invested considerable time and thought into the process of populating the Association's key central committees. It was time well spent, as was a meeting last March when the Uachtarán and I met with the Chairperson and Secretary of each committee to establish the protocols and strategies that would direct the work of each group. The terms of reference of each committee were revised to meet current needs and goals, and were co-ordinated to meet the requirements of the 2015–2017 Strategic Plan. This work was helped by a report on a review undertaken in late 2014 by Deloitte, at the request of our Audit Committee, into our Committee Governance and Structures. The report issued twenty-seven recommendations in areas of committee activity such as structure, terms of reference, committee effectiveness, succession planning for committees, and induction processes for new and re-appointed committee members. Among the key recommendations were:

- *the need to review succession arrangements for committees so as to avoid corporate memory loss and to improve continuity of committee membership;*
- *the ongoing need to evaluate the number and size of committees;*

- *the importance of matching the skillsets of members with needs of committees;*
- *the constant assessment of progress against strategic objectives.*

The advice on succession arrangements for committees is timely and easy to implement. It is particularly important in terms of the committees with responsibility for discipline; the CCCC, CHC and CAC. Recent practice has been to replace all of the personnel on committees dealing with discipline at the time of a change of presidency. However, it is difficult in such a transition to ensure consistency in decision-making. I would suggest that we require that at least two members of the outgoing committee be retained when these new committees are established. Indeed, it is a principle that could be established to good effect on all our committees.

Review of Structure of All-Ireland Senior Hurling Championship and National League

2016 is the final year of the current structure of the Allianz Hurling League and the All-Ireland senior hurling championships. It was right to review the structure of both in tandem. Once again, the issue relating to the number of teams in and the structure of Division One of the Allianz Hurling League proved quite divisive. A wide range of proposals were received covering all divisions. These advocated several variations within Division One, among which were two groups of six, seven and eight; there was also a proposal for one group of eight and one of seven. CCCC presented a strong case in support of the view that groups of six – with quarter-finals – have benefited hurling, arguing that such a structure has created an

extremely competitive Division 1A and 1B, guaranteeing each of the teams at least six very competitive matches, and also that it has reduced the number of 'dead rubber' matches. The difficulty, in the past, with two top divisions of eight was the huge variation in standard between teams in the second tier of eight, leading to too many one-sided games. The CCCC argument – that it is important that teams compete in leagues at a level appropriate to their potential each year – was compelling. Moreover, it was the view of Central Council that, while there may be just about twelve teams capable of competing at a high level, that degree of competitiveness would be lost if extended to fourteen, fifteen or sixteen teams.

It is regrettable that this issue has proved so divisive. There are valid arguments on both sides of the debate. I can appreciate that there are benefits for the stronger counties in a top division of eight, but the structure of two divisions of six seems to provide the best opportunity to help a few more counties reach the elite level. It does mean that some counties that believe they belong in the top tier are being asked to accept what is, for them, a less than ideal structure in order to assist in the long-term development of hurling. It is a debate that is likely to continue for some time.

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Beyond the discussion on the Division One structure, Central Council made some adjustments to the structure of Division Three and to the process for deciding promotion and relegation. Time will tell whether these changes prove to be positive.

The review of the All-Ireland senior hurling championship was much less contentious. Twenty counties had made proposals on the structure of league and championship. Where the All-Ireland senior hurling championship was concerned, it was the view of most that the present system should be retained. Galway had proposed an open draw rather than a provincial-based system, but accepted that the consensus was that the current structure should be retained. It was agreed that Central Council will recommend the present system in a motion to Congress 2016 and that any proposals for minor amendments from counties could be addressed through individual motions.

The Allianz Football Leagues

The 2015 Allianz Football Leagues proved to be extremely competitive and drew good crowds to the regular programme of games in all divisions. It is clear that counties attach great significance to retaining or improving their league divisional status, manifested in the increasing intensity with which the competition is played from year to year. The final Sunday in each division is generally quite dramatic; however, the intensity seems to diminish when the semi-finals and finals of each division are played, and especially so in Division One. The obvious solution to this issue – that the team with most points wins the league – would free up some additional weekends/Sundays for club matches, but the financial benefit of these extra games is attractive to counties. While I understand the criticism of the play-off aspect of the leagues, there does not appear to be a desire to dispense with finals. However, I think we ought to give serious consideration to dropping the semi-finals in Division One and to playing the finals of all divisions on

the weekend after the final round of games. The momentum of the final round would, hopefully, carry through to the finals and would free up valuable time for the playing of club games.

The State of Gaelic Football

While attendances at football matches remained healthy, criticism of the current manner and style of, and tactical approach to, playing the game continued in 2015. There are concerns about the perceived negativity of football today, often expressed in apocalyptic predictions about the ‘death’ of football due to the ultra-defensive approach of teams. However, it is important to keep a sense of perspective and proportion. When one looks at films of major games from the past, one sees that our current elite players are fitter, more skilful and more creative than at any time in the history of the game. It is also the case that the level of scoring is higher than it has ever been, that there has been a drop in the number of fouls committed and cards shown, and that the quality of long-range point-taking in this year’s All-Ireland senior championship was exceptionally high.

Given these positive features of the current game, it was all the more surprising to hear calls for the removal of the black card. I repeat the arguments I put forward in my report to Congress 2014. There, I expressed the view that teams that played football in the correct spirit had nothing to fear from the introduction of the black card, that there was some inconsistency in the application of the rule by referees, and that work remains to be done in communicating the precise nature of black-card offences to spectators. There is still work to be done in each of these areas, but instances of players being dragged to the ground are now rare, while the body-collide, an ugly and destructive foul that marred the game, has been virtually eradicated.

It remains the case, however, that spectators are often frustrated by the use of a ‘blanket defence’. The Standing Committee on the Playing Rules to

improve Gaelic football brought some interesting proposals to the November meeting of Central Council, including a limited use of the mark. It also presented a programme of work for 2016 that includes experimenting with placing a limitation on the number of successive hand-passes. It would be wrong to respond in knee-jerk fashion to the current emphasis on defensive play, and we must never forget that the playing of a team field game such as Gaelic football is a dynamic and evolving affair, one, therefore, subject to permanent innovation and change as coaches seek to develop new tactics to win matches and outmanoeuvre opponents. That said, it certainly makes sense to look at ways of making our games a more attractive spectacle.

Every year, it takes but a single one-sided result in the provincial championships to spark a demand for an overhaul of the structure of the provincial and All-Ireland football championships. In 2015, Dublin’s easy victory over Longford in the Leinster senior football championship was the signal for the criticism of the provincial structure to begin. Coiste Bainistíochta invited counties to make submissions on a revised structure, from which a few points clearly emerged. There was little appetite for removing or downgrading the provincial championships, nor was there a consensus on how the present championship model might be improved. There was recognition that there are some counties that cannot realistically aspire to winning either a provincial or an All-Ireland title, yet no suggested amendments to the current structure offer credible solutions to address this situation. After a lengthy period of consultation, three proposals on the restructuring of the championship were put before the 16 January 2016 meeting of Central Council, and the preferred option from these goes before Congress for consideration, along with motions from Ros Comáin and Ceatharlach.

Playing our games fairly

It is a matter of regret that, in 2015, the term ‘sledging’ was invoked with

greater regularity than ever before in conversations about Gaelic games. Many would say that verbal intimidation has always existed. What is different now, though, is the allegation that some teams are engaging in nasty, personal abuse on a systematic basis. This is a breach of rules that is difficult to deal with as, very often, offensive comments are made out of the hearing of match officials; in such cases, it becomes a matter of one player's word against another's. Such behaviour has no place in sport and reflects poorly on those who indulge in it. Ultimately, it is our players who are best placed to eliminate it. In this context, the launch in July of the GPA Fair Play Campaign, aimed at encouraging and rewarding good on-field behaviour among inter-county players, was most welcome. Consultation with the GPA membership had revealed a concern among players at the rise in

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incidents of verbal abuse and at a general breakdown in sporting play as it relates to the dishonest winning of frees, to diving and to feigning injury. Efforts to deceive referees are now much too common in our games, notably in football. It is this unsporting behaviour that led the GPA to establish a Fair Play Awards scheme, which rewards players for positive actions, in the belief that the most effective way of tackling and isolating the issue of

negative behaviour is to focus on displays of sportsmanship. It is too early to judge whether their campaign has had an impact. There were few initial signs of a change in behaviour, but it is encouraging that the players' body is determined to create the right playing environment and playing philosophy in our games.

The blight of unsporting behaviour is not, of course, solely the responsibility of players. Managers and coaches who encourage or ignore diving or verbal abuse of opponents also have a responsibility. And it is important to remind ourselves that this behaviour is not confined to the inter-county game; there is adequate anecdotal evidence to suggest that initiatives to rid ourselves of this behaviour need to extend to club level too. The vast majority of players, officials and supporters want our games to be played in accordance with the values of our Association. If we need to change our rules in order to achieve this, then we should do so.

One of the most disappointing events of the past year arose from incidents in an Armagh v Dublin challenge match in early July. Dublin footballer Davy Byrne received nasty facial injuries, an incident which, it would appear, led to a brawl involving a number of players, and which led also to Davy Byrne being hospitalised. The efforts of CCCC to investigate the matter followed an all too depressing pattern. Even though the name of the player alleged to have been responsible for Davy Byrne's injury was in general circulation, no assistance was forthcoming from the counties in

bringing the player to account. When the injured player, along with officials from both counties who were present at the game, attended a CCCC meeting called to investigate the incidents prior to throw-in at the game, nobody could (or would) provide any information that would have allowed appropriate disciplinary action to be taken. Given the unwillingness of either county to co-operate in identifying any of the guilty parties, the only option available to CCCC was the proposal of a fine, a penalty that was subsequently imposed at a hearing.

It will probably be considered naïve on my part to criticise the position taken by the counties, but the misguided loyalty that protects players who engage in violent behaviour on the pitch can only be seen, by those concerned with the good of the game, as a failure of leadership. Group solidarity is one thing; a code of silence that condones violence is quite another. And this is not just an issue for the counties involved in this incident. While a county may be pleased at avoiding the consequences of ill-disciplined behaviour, the reputation of the GAA suffers on such occasions. Moreover, a very negative message is sent to clubs and players at all levels about the need for discipline in the playing of our games. Is it really too much to expect that a player or official in these situations will stand up and say, 'Sorry, I did it and I accept the consequences'? We have all witnessed how elite professional sport has lost much of its integrity through a loss of genuine sporting values. Codes of silence and cover-ups remind us that Gaelic games are not immune to such damage.



20 September 2015; Michael Foley, Kerry, in action against Tadhg Fitzgerald, Tipperary. Electric Ireland GAA Football All-Ireland Minor Championship Final, Kerry v Tipperary, Croke Park, Dublin.

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Our Disciplinary Structure

In 2015 the decisions of the Central Hearings Committee to clear Kevin Keane to play in the Mayo v Dublin All-Ireland senior football championship semi-final, and of the DRA to clear Diarmuid Connolly to play in the replay of that drawn game, led to calls to abandon our disciplinary structures, and to the familiar refrain of ‘they are not fit for purpose’. Much of the commentary came from individuals who, as is often the case, clearly didn’t understand how these structures operate, but one would have expected more from some of our own members who should have been capable of distinguishing fact from fiction. For my part, I do not believe that there is any fundamental weakness in our disciplinary structures. I may have been surprised by the decisions announced in the specific cases mentioned, just as I have often been surprised, as we all have been, by decisions made by disciplinary bodies outside of the GAA, and even by the courts. But we are surprised in these cases only because we are not privy to the debate or to considerations taken into account in reaching a decision. And, sometimes, too, decision-makers, as fallible human beings, will just get it wrong. The lesson

is simple: a wrong decision in no way indicates an inadequate structure. Let me explain our disciplinary process again. The Competitions Control Committee proposes a penalty, which is either accepted or rejected. If it is rejected, a hearing is granted. The Hearings Committee (decision-makers) either imposes a penalty or exonerate, based on evidence presented during the hearing. If a penalty is imposed by the Hearings Committee, and the defending party is not willing to accept the imposed penalty, an appeal can be lodged with and heard by the Appeals Committee. If the appeal is unsuccessful, the penalty remains and all avenues of appeal within the GAA are, at this point, exhausted. (The appeal can be successful only where there has been a clear infringement or misapplication of Rule by the Hearings Committee, or where the appellant’s right to a fair hearing has otherwise been compromised to such an extent that a clear injustice has occurred). However, if the defending party is still not willing to accept the imposed penalty, a request for arbitration may be lodged to the DRA (Disputes Resolution Authority), which represents an *external independent body* and whose decisions are binding.

6 September 2015; Ger Aylward, Kilkenny, in action against Daithi Burke, Galway. GAA Hurling All-Ireland Senior Championship Final, Kilkenny v Galway, Croke Park, Dublin.



This disciplinary system is very fair to the player, allowing him every opportunity to have his case dealt with fairly. It also reduces the likelihood of an injustice being done to a player. A statistical analysis of the decisions emerging from this system confirms that it works well. In the past five years (2011–2015), the CCCC has proposed 1,132 penalties arising from inter-county games. Arising from this, 146 players have sought hearings in order to challenge proposed penalties. In 50 instances, the proposed penalty has been overturned. Three cases have gone all the way to the DRA. In only one of those cases over the past five years – that of Diarmuid Connolly in 2015 – has the penalty been overturned. From the outcry that greeted the decision in the Diarmuid Connolly case, one might conclude that players are routinely going to the DRA to have penalties lifted. The facts tell us otherwise. Commentators were entitled to question the DRA decision in respect of Diarmuid Connolly (although one wonders if the outcry would have been as great if the player was someone other than Diarmuid Connolly), but it was nothing less than lazy headline-seeking commentary to use this to suggest that our disciplinary structures are not fit for purpose.

This is not to say, as in every aspect of GAA work, that there are not things that we can do better. We need to focus on the education of members of our disciplinary bodies at every level and to devise an education programme that will be an annual requirement for members of committees. Members must be fully familiar with the rules in the Official Guide, not an easy objective to realise. Our rule book is complex, which underlines the need to educate those who are overseeing the implementation of the rules. It is a task that should probably be overseen by our Rules Advisory Committee, with the organisation of courses resting with the Provincial Councils. None of these proposals suggests a need for structural change; they merely stress the need to ensure that our relevant committees are properly equipped to make decisions consistent with our rules.

Player overtraining and burnout, and our fixtures calendar

Since 2004 the GAA has made a number of attempts to address the issues of player overtraining and

burnout, and a fixtures calendar that does not provide club players with a fair schedule of matches. Beginning with the Competitions Review Task Force Report in 2004, and continuing through another seven major reports, the Association has investigated, discussed and made proposals to address the overtraining, burnout and fixtures questions, but without, for all that, adopting solutions to the difficult problems that these inter-related issues pose.

In my Annual Report to Congress 2015 I wrote that the findings and proposals of these reports contained within them viable solutions to the overtraining, player-burnout and fixtures-scheduling problems. I promised in my Annual Report to produce, later in 2015, a paper that would 'draw on all of these proposals and allow the Association to decide how it will address these player-welfare issues and the needs of club players'. That paper was duly circulated as a discussion document in November and offered a number of proposals drawn from the eight previously published reports. The report was made available to every unit of the Association and meetings were held with county officers in each province.



21 November 2015; Bernard Brogan, left, and Eoin Doyle, right, Ireland, celebrate with supporters after the game, EirGrid International Rules Test 2015, Ireland v Australia. Croke Park, Dublin.

I hope that all delegates will read the discussion paper carefully before making decisions that will have a major impact on the Association, our players and clubs. Without re-stating all of the arguments outlined in the discussion document, I would like to remind everyone of the two key issues that need to be addressed:

- *(i) at certain times of the year, talented players in the 17-21 age-group are being asked to train too much, to play too many matches for too many teams, and are afforded too little time for rest and recovery, leading to significant physical and psychological strains, and a negative impact on the academic performance of players at second and post-second-level education;*
- *(ii) the great majority of club players, specifically those not involved in inter-county teams, are not offered a fair, evenly distributed and planned schedule of club matches throughout the year due to the scheduling of inter-county fixtures, and, more generally, due to the greater influence that inter-county competitions have come to enjoy and exercise in recent years. This is a source of great frustration to clubs.*

The discussion paper argued that the task facing us is twofold: (i) to significantly ease the burden on young elite players by providing a more measured progression of training and playing for them, taking account of their age and development; (ii) to develop a revised calendar of fixtures in which a better balance between inter-county and club fixtures is established.

In relation to the first of these points, the discussion paper proposed that, *at inter-county level only*, the minor (i.e. U-18) hurling and football competitions be re-graded as minor U-17. If passed, it will mean that the elite U-17 player would be able to play at inter-county minor level (U-17) in a year when he is less likely to be sitting life-defining Leaving Certificate/A-level examinations. For example, in

2016 only 2,991 boys sitting the Leaving Certificate would be eligible to play at U-17 inter-county level (i.e. are U-16 or U-17), while 16,366 boys are eligible to play on an U-18 inter-county minor team (i.e. are U-17 or U-18). In addition, minor (U-17) inter-county competitions would not affect the playing of adult club fixtures as U-17 players are not permitted to play in adult club competitions.

The discussion paper also proposed that the U-21 football championship be discontinued on the basis that the elite U-21 footballer would no longer have the added pressure of training for and playing in, simultaneously, third-level championships, at inter-county U-21 level and, in some instances, at senior level. The proposal aimed to reduce the negative effects on their academic performance and on their physical and psychological wellbeing, and would have had the effect of substantially reducing the surfeit of competitions in the January-April period, thus reducing the levels of training and number of matches imposed on young elite players. As a consequence of this proposed change, the chances of young players experiencing overtraining, overuse injury and, ultimately, burnout would have been minimised.

Valuable feedback was obtained from the consultations with counties and provinces. As a result of that engagement, amendments have been made to three of the original proposals to go before this Congress for decision. First, there was a widespread concern at the gap that would be created in an elite football player's development pathway by ending age-based inter-county competition at U-17. This has led to the revised proposal to create a developmental U-20 competition that would eliminate some of the difficulties currently facing elite players in the U-21 grade. The revised proposal envisages a new U-20 football championship, starting in 2018 and to be played primarily in July. The competition would begin in the last week of June in

Leinster (the first round) and Ulster (the preliminary round) and in the first week of July in Connacht and Munster, with the All-Ireland Final taking place on the August Bank Holiday weekend. Under the rules, all games will finish on the day – there will be no replays. Extra time, if inconclusive, would be followed by a 'sudden death' free-taking competition. Eligibility would be restricted to those players who are overage for U-18 and eligible for U-20; players who have featured on a team list submitted to a referee for an inter-county senior championship game in the current year will be ineligible to participate.

This proposal, with its eligibility restrictions, will have several beneficial effects: (i) it will meet the player-development need for an inter-county championship to bridge the gap between U-17 and senior competition; (ii) it will avoid the simultaneous and intense pressures on players of coping with inter-county U-21 competition and preparing for and sitting vital school or college examinations; (iii) it will end the clash between third-level, senior and U-21 competitions; (iv) it will reduce the surfeit of competitions in the January-April period, and therefore the burden of too much training and too many matches for young elite players; (v) it will have no impact on the playing of minor club competitions; and (vi) it will have minimal impact on adult club championships, few of which games are played during June and July; and (vii) it will allow the U-20 championship to be played in better weather.

Overall, moving to a structure of U-17 and U-20 competitions as outlined here would represent a significant step in addressing the pressures facing talented footballers in the 17-21 age-group. Under these revised proposals, a relatively small number of (U-17) players would play inter-county minor football in the year when they sit Leaving Certificate/A-level examinations, and when most *do* sit



21 November 2015; Michael Quinn, Ireland, in action against Nick Riewoldt, Australia. Ireland v Australia. Croke Park, Dublin.



LEFT: 21 November 2015; David Mundy, Australia, in action against Jack McCaffrey, Ireland. EirGrid International Rules Test 2015, Ireland v Australia. Croke Park, Dublin.

these examinations (U-18), they would be playing with their clubs only. As U-19 and U-20 players, when the majority of this age-group attend college, they can play in an All-Ireland U-20 championship without the pressure of playing in and training for, simultaneously, third-level championships, at inter-county U-21 level and, in some instances, at senior level. While a smaller number of players eligible for the new U-20 category will potentially be Leaving Certificate or A-level students, the competitions would not start until after the examinations period (the last week in June for a small number of counties and the first week in July for most), a period currently used to complete our inter-county provincial minor championships.

The second concern expressed during the consultation with counties related to the abolition of all replays in provincial and All-Ireland senior championship games. While there was an acceptance of the impact of replays in provincial and All-Ireland senior championship games on club championship programmes, there was also a strongly expressed view that finals should be excluded from the proposal. There is no doubt that the opposition to the original proposal was partly dictated by financial concerns, but there was also a sentiment that the status of provincial and All-Ireland finals merits a replay when the first game ends in a draw. The revised proposal leaves open the possibility of a replay on nine occasions after drawn games, whereas, currently, there is potential for a replay on fifty-four occasions after drawn provincial and senior championship games.

Finally, the counties in Britain were unhappy with the proposal to abolish the All-Ireland Junior Football championship which, for most of their counties, is the only opportunity to compete for an All-Ireland title. A motion has been drafted for Congress that meets their need in this regard and that also has the potential to meet a developmental need

for some of our less successful counties. I recognise that some of the changes proposed, particularly the replacement, at inter-county level, of minor U-18 by minor U-17, and the discontinuation of the U-21 football inter-county championship, may prove difficult for some to accept. Yet we have reached a stage in our competition structures where something has to give, and, as I stated in the discussion document, I believe that tradition and precedence are insufficient arguments for resisting change in the face of the challenge to our values posed by the issues of player welfare and the denial of fair competitive activity to our club players. We must take action as part of the necessary process of adaptation to which a vibrant organisation must be open, an openness that, in the past, has been one of the GAA's strengths.

Interprovincial Championships

In 2012 Central Council spent an inordinate amount of time discussing the future of the Interprovincial championships. A committee, under the chairmanship of Jarlath Burns, produced a report laying out the options for the staging of the competitions. Despite abundant evidence that the public had little interest in the competitions, the enthusiasm of Central Council members for them remained undiminished. The familiar arguments for the case to revive and renew the competitions were brought to bear: play them over a single weekend, launch a major marketing campaign, let spectators in without an admission charge, etc. Following that Central Council debate, however, the cold truth made itself known: the 2013 competitions (six games) attracted total gate receipts of €12,220, a figure that fell to €7,126 in 2014.

The Football Review Committee (FRC) offered a further kiss of life in 2014 in the second part of its report to Central

“For the last two years the International Rules encounter has been a one-game competition, so devised to see if it could meet these necessary standards.”

Council. They suggested a re-launch of the Interprovincials as a weekend competition played over two days in a town or city with a strong GAA base, supported by live night-time television coverage and as part of a well-promoted weekend mini-festival, aimed particularly at younger audiences. Free admission should also be considered. Central Council discussed the recommendations at a meeting in June 2014 and, although the then-Uachtarán, Liam Ó Néill, and I expressed a contrary view, gave its support to the FRC proposal. It was subsequently decided that Ulster would host the 2015 football competition, with Connacht taking responsibility for the hurling equivalent. Enthusiasm for the idea of a weekend mini-festival, however, seemed to dissolve very quickly. In the absence of any more suitable date, both competitions were scheduled for December 2015. Weather conditions led to their postponement. But, in any case, given the number of elite players who had already indicated their non-availability, the signs for a renewal of public interest were not good. Maybe now is the time to accept the inevitable: our crowded playing calendar and a lack of interest among players and the public tell us that the competitions have no viable future.

International Rules

I wrote last year that the criteria for evaluating whether the International Rules Series should continue would be the interest levels of players (in Ireland and Australia), the engagement of the public in both countries and the ability of the teams to produce a high-quality match, free from over-physical play.

For the last two years the International Rules encounter has been a one-game competition, so devised to see if it could meet these necessary standards. In Perth in 2014, and in Croke Park last November, it was clear that, based on these measures of success, the Series certainly does have



23 August 2015; A young Tyrone fan. GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Championship, Semi-Final, Kerry v Tyrone. Croke Park, Dublin.



7 January 2015; Dublin supporters make their way to Parnell Park. Bord na Mona O'Byrne Cup, Group A, Round 2, Dublin v Offaly, Parnell Park, Dublin.



a future. I would like to pay tribute to Joe Kernan and his team, outsiders on the morning of the game, for overcoming what was possibly the strongest Australian team yet assembled for the Series, and for doing so with a display of traditional catching and kicking that did much to restore belief in the basic skills of our own game. The result will have hurt the Australians' pride, which sharpens our anticipation of the 2016 Series.

We have held initial discussions with the AFL on the possibility of playing a future Series in a neutral country, and further discussions are planned for this spring. We have agreed, subject to the approval of Central Council, that there should be a Series next November; it remains to be decided whether it will be held in Australia or in a neutral country.

Relationships between players and County Committees

The issues that arose in Mayo and Galway in the final months of the year drew a weary response from (and sense of déjà vu among) many people. It was the now-familiar procedure of players calling for the removal of managers or management and the inevitable melodrama that has to be played out, leading, inevitably, it seems, to the management team stepping down. Inevitable, too, is the aftermath of anger, bitterness and broken friendships such upheavals produce. And it has yet to be proven that such internal turmoil leaves teams in a stronger position to realise their goals. Further, these heaves against management teams have an impact in other counties too, as they breed concern among administrators that a similar situation could occur in their county. The wider effect is to diminish trust between county administrators and the GPA, creating an atmosphere in which many people are quick to attribute all blame, unfairly, to the GPA. As ever in human affairs, the truth is more complex than that. Without revisiting what happened in Mayo and Galway and commenting directly on the breakdown in relationships that took place there are some general observations that can be made:

- *All of us have a responsibility to try to do things better in the future. We need to remember that our players are amateur, that they make a free choice to play our games and that they can walk away at any time. They are not contracted and, as a result, are entirely free to leave panels if and when they so decide. Whereas a professional player has to make the best of any dissatisfaction with a team manager, our players can simply withdraw their services. There is nothing we can do about that.*

- *Players are entitled to expect that they will be given the means to realise their full potential, as individual players and as members of teams, and that County Committees will provide the optimal resources they can afford to achieve this. They can also expect that team managements will provide the coaching and man-management skills necessary to cope with diverse talents and personalities.*

- *Administrators have a responsibility to ensure that a forum exists in which an ongoing and open dialogue takes place between county officials, team managements and players. Where that honest interaction takes place, difficulties can be addressed before they create a state of crisis. The County Teams Management and Panels Sub Committee, required under rule, is intended to provide a forum for open dialogue. Its function is to manage the relationships between the County Committee, county senior team managers and panels. However, it seems to me that its operation in many counties is dictated by a narrow interpretation of its role and that it tends to focus on day-to-day concerns relating to the payment of expenses, travelling arrangements, meals, team weekends, holidays, etc. County Committees have a responsibility to broaden the scope of the work of this sub-committee and to ensure that problems are identified and addressed as quickly as possible.*

- *Players, too, need to consider how they handle relationship problems with team managements and to be aware of the huge personal pressure and distress it creates for team managers when their*

competence is called into question in a very public manner. Players have the comfort and protection of being part of a large team group; team managers (and their families) are alone in facing the public challenge to the individual reputation of the team manager, causing them considerable stress and some humiliation. Calling publicly for the resignation of a team manager should be an act of last resort.

There are, I believe important lessons to be learned from what happened in Mayo and Galway. Both Central Council and the GPA are committed to developing a process that will make similar events less likely in the future. And there is a willingness on the part of Central Council and the GPA to assist in resolving problems; such interventions, indeed, have been extremely useful on a number of occasions.

Third-level competitions

In previous reports I have commented on the place of third-level colleges within the GAA and have noted the indifference of some county officials to the third-level contribution to the Association. There is a recurring demand that third-level competitions should be completed before Christmas so that county senior and U-21 teams have exclusive access to players after Christmas for training purposes. It was more than surprising to hear this argument repeated regularly at the meetings to discuss the paper on player overtraining/burnout and the GAA fixtures calendar, as it takes no account of the challenges involved in third-level fixtures-making, not to mention certain obvious facts.

There is a very narrow period of time in which to complete the programme of third-level games. The academic year in colleges begins in September, in some cases early in the month, in others late in the month. Some colleges hold their first-semester exams in December, while others hold them in January. This makes it impossible to play competitive games from early December to late January. In 2015 the last of the seven Higher



21 January 2015; Supporters queue at the turnstiles as they arrive in ahead of the game. Dr. McKenna Cup Semi-Final, Cavan v Fermanagh. Kingspan Breffni Park, Cavan.

Education senior football and hurling league finals was played on 3 December and the first game in their championships was scheduled for 26 January 2016. The reason for the eight-week gap is to allow students to sit examinations without the pressure of competitive games. It is unfair to expect colleges to complete the Sigerson, Fitzgibbon and other competitions before Christmas and, in effect, to confine third-level competition to a period from early October to the end of November. There is no doubt that some colleges contribute to the player overtraining and burnout. But so do many counties. It is valid to criticise colleges where it is justified, but let us make an effort to understand why Comhairle Ardoideachais cannot complete their competitions before Christmas.

I have made these same points before, but my comments have fallen on deaf ears. We should acknowledge the contribution that this sector has made towards the development of our games in several important areas – in the raising of playing standards, in the training of administrators, the provision of scholarships to elite players and in the huge investment in our games and infrastructure.

Many good non-inter-county players enjoyed representing 45 colleges and 218 teams in the 2015/16 competitions and value the opportunity to improve their standard of play through participation at this representative level. As I have stated before, third-level colleges should not have to defend their efforts to promote their games against those whose concern does not extend beyond the requirements of the inter-county game. On the contrary, they should have the support of administrators at all levels, who should appreciate the important contribution that the third-level sector has made to the growth of the GAA.

Anti-Doping

It was disappointing that an inter-county panellist had to be suspended in 2015 for a breach of our Anti-Doping Rules. While our existing provisions to educate players did receive considerable praise from the Anti-Doping Hearings Committee which heard the case, a review of our Anti-Doping Education programme was initiated following this suspension. The committee, in its findings, had urged the GAA to 'intensify its work to ensure that all players, county officers, coaches, managers, medical and allied sports science personnel, and player

representatives are fully cognisant of their obligations under the Association's Anti-Doping Rules'. Following this recommendation, a series of measures were put in place to improve the existing provisions and to increase awareness in the Association of anti-doping rules and policies, as well as of their importance in player welfare and in ensuring fair play in our games. Among the steps taken were:

- *a review of all anti-doping material on the GAA website;*
- *the implementation of new communications protocols to ensure that all players on county panels are made aware of their responsibilities with regard to anti-doping and testing;*
- *the launch of an information and awareness campaign by our Medical, Scientific and Welfare Committee;*
- *an increased focus on the education of Talent Academy squads;*
- *the development of a new induction programme by the GPA for players new to the inter-county scene.*

15 February 2015; Liam Blanchfield, Bennettsbridge, in action against Simon Wallace, left, and Liam Knocker, Fullen Gaels. AIB GAA Hurling All-Ireland Junior Club Championship Final, Bennettsbridge v Fullen Gaels, Croke Park, Dublin.



It is important to emphasise that all GAA players, and not only inter-county players, are subject to the Irish Anti-Doping Rules as adopted by Sport Ireland (SI). But, of course, this is not just a matter of rules. We need to ensure that all players are aware of the dangers to their health of using banned substances. If there was any complacency in relation to drug use among players, the confirmation of a breach in 2015 has removed it. All of us have an obligation to ensure that our games are not blighted by further breaches.

For the record, there were ninety-five tests carried out on our players in 2015 under the SI testing programme, with players from twenty-six different hurling and football panels being tested. As part of our commitment to the maintenance of hurling and football as drug-free sports, and having signed up to the provisions of the World Anti-Doping Agency, blood testing, as well as urine testing, will be introduced into Gaelic games in 2016.

We have worked closely with SI and the GPA on the introduction of this testing programme. The programme that will be rolled out – while meeting these requirements – has been designed to take careful consideration of the unique circumstances of our amateur players,

their support personnel and our team and training structures. In an ideal world there would be no need for such intrusions; however, in the times in which we live, blood testing is a necessary component in the endeavour to maintain the integrity of our games, which must take precedence over all other considerations.

Concussion

Motion 13 at last year's Congress proposed the introduction of a temporary substitute to allow a player suspected of concussion to be removed from play on the instruction of the referee, to be tested for concussion and only to be allowed to return to play following a negative result to the test. The motion was referred to our Medical Scientific and Welfare Committee (MSWC) for consideration, which decided that such an approach would not be in the best interests of our players or, indeed, the Association.

The committee, which includes medical experts from the GAA world such as Dr Pat O'Neill (Dublin) and Dr Kevin Moran (Donegal), strongly believes that the GAA's current guidelines on concussion are the best approach to this issue – indeed the guidelines have received widespread acknowledgement and

praise for their emphasis on the basic principle of 'if in doubt, sit them out'.

Among the MSWC's reasons for advising against a temporary substitute in our games are the following:

- *Our existing management guidelines are clear in their insistence that a player suspected of concussion should be removed from play and should not resume playing that day. A concussion substitute and sideline assessment would contradict these guidelines, which are based on international best practice.*
- *The proposal to use a concussion substitute presumes that concussion can be diagnosed within a short timeframe. This is not in keeping with best practice, which shows that symptoms of concussion can take several hours or longer to present.*
- *Concussion is a brain injury and concussion diagnosis is a clinical judgement. There is no test currently available which is 100% accurate for pitch-side concussion assessment. The introduction of a concussion substitute would contradict best advice and would be impractical to implement at all levels of the Association.*

RIGHT: 19 July 2015; Sligo minor players line up for a team photograph ahead of the game. Electric Ireland Connacht GAA Football Minor Championship Final, Galway v Sligo, Dr. Hyde Park, Roscommon.



It was also the view of the MSWC that, in other field sports where there is a more pronounced issue with concussion, specific concussion-substitution rule changes have not worked; and there have been instances where, even with independent doctors, players still return to play showing signs of concussion.

It was for these and other reasons that the MSWC recommended that the Association should not introduce a ‘concussion sub’. It also advised against the introduction of independent doctors to complete an assessment during games. The committee rightly retains confidence in the professionalism, integrity and independence of our team doctors, who carry out their duties in the best interests of our players and their ongoing welfare.

The implications of these recommendations are that the current concussion guidelines should continue to apply; these will be subject to ongoing monitoring and review by the MSWC. The Association must continue to promote awareness of these guidelines, and of the risks of second-impact syndrome and other dangers of failing to manage suspected concussion appropriately.

One final, and critical, point: we look at so many issues affecting our games through their impact on the inter-county game. We should remember that thousands of club games will be played this year where a doctor will not be in attendance. It is vital that we communicate the essential message to all team mentors that GAA policy on concussion is simple and direct: ‘if in doubt, sit them out’.

Online Transfer System

At the 2014 Congress it was agreed to pilot an online transfer system. Phase

1 of this pilot was introduced in 2015 for cross-provincial and overseas transfers, and ran alongside the existing paper-based model. The new system facilitated the online transferring of over 300 players – more than 15% of all inter-county transfers – since the website went live. In the month of April, traditionally the busiest month of the year, this figure went up to 25%. The pilot achieved the goals outlined in the original proposal: the new process is a lot less labour-intensive; there is a strict adherence to time limits associated with transfer applications; there is complete transparency in terms of the status of various applications; and our clubs and counties receive instant notification when a decision is made on an application.

The new solution has been accepted and supported by the majority of clubs and counties. An extensive training programme was undertaken, which included online training, the production of user guides and a seminar at last year’s Congress. In 2016 we will continue with the second phase of the initiative, which will allow for transfers within provinces, in addition to those processed nationally. Transfers within counties will constitute the final phase of the project.

To date, the online transfer system has been well received, and I have little doubt that we will soon be in a position to have all our transfer applications processed electronically.

Player-numbering proposal

In last year’s report I outlined my support for the player-numbering proposal, which obliges every county to register a 26-man panel on the Thursday morning before senior inter-county championship games. Once passed at Congress, the

proposal was implemented with little difficulty. Among other advantages, it has ensured that players on extended county panels can be released to their clubs for league games (and other activities) on the weekend of inter-county championship games and that panel details in our match programmes are accurate.

I want to commend Congress for agreeing to this proposal and to thank team managers and county board officials for co-operating with the implementation of the new procedures and for ensuring that all teams were registered properly and on time.

Distribution of Finance

Given the efforts being made by the National Financial Management Committee to try to address, in so far as it is possible, the disparity that exists in resources and fundraising capacity among counties, it was surprising to be subjected to well-publicised criticism from Dublin in relation to Central Council’s contribution to the holiday fund for their football team. Dublin received the standard grant of €80,000 which goes to All-Ireland finalists. Having applied for additional funding due to their involvement in the All-Ireland semi-final replay with Mayo, Dublin were awarded a further €15,000. Considering that Dublin enjoys a much higher level of current funding from Central Council than any other county, that it enjoys vastly greater commercial revenues than other counties, that it incurs lower costs in terms of players’ travelling expenses to games and

“The new system facilitated the online transferring of over 300 players – more than 15% of all inter-county transfers since the website went live.”

1 August 2015; A television camera records the action at Croke Park. GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Championship, Round 4B, Sligo v Tyrone. Croke Park, Dublin.



training than all other counties and that it has a far greater fundraising capacity than most, the charge of Scrooge-like behaviour against Central Council was disappointing and misplaced.

Media

Our television broadcast partners, RTÉ, TG4, Sky Sports, Setanta and BBC, carried 145 live-match broadcasts in 2015.

They all deserve praise for their vast technical and presentation operations. In addition, they all supported their coverage with significant TV, print, radio and digital promotional campaigns. Our TV viewership remains strong in comparison to other live sporting events and our eleven-month playing season earns a near twelve-month media coverage of Gaelic games. Our partners in radio, RTÉ, Newstalk, Today FM, BBC, RnaG and twenty local IBI stations, and, of course, the print media, are also vital communication channels in the promotion of our games. We thank them for their support.

On the international front, GAAGO had an extremely successful second year of operation. It expanded its programming from 47 live games in 2014 to 108 in 2015. It also provided 'The Sunday Game' highlights programme to every continent, with strong penetration in North America and Australia and significant growth in Europe and Asia. The direct-to-fan service has now been accessed in over 180 countries worldwide, a figure that will increase in 2016. We can justly claim that GAAGO has been a very welcome addition to the international GAA scene. With the coverage of games available to emigrants in Britain through Sky Sports, we are providing for our members and supporters abroad as never before.

The 2016 senior football and hurling championships will be the last in the current arrangements with our TV broadcast partners; talks on new contracts will begin in early 2016. This accelerated process, which will include detailed research and consultation with various stakeholder groups, will allow for a longer lead-in time than usual and will facilitate greater forward planning for the 2017 season.

It is important to explain here the context in which discussions on new contracts will take place. Other sports bodies are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their exploitation of their broadcast rights, so the work to maintain the GAA presence on television intensifies accordingly. In recent years international representative bodies of other sporting organisations in Europe have established centralised rights-pooling and revenue-sharing agreements for their major tournaments. As a result, national federations share the globally generated media-revenue pot and are likely to see a significant increase in their incomes, irrespective of the size of their domestic market.

These international changes will have a knock-on effect on sport in Ireland, as they will significantly alter the balance of resources among the major Irish sporting bodies. Irish sports bodies whose codes represent globally-traded sports rights now benefit from an international marketplace, generating a windfall income simply not available to the GAA. The strength of this collective international revenue generation is compounded by the fact that major sports-rights inflation will never be a feature of the Irish sports broadcasting market. The larger the territory, the greater the number of competitors; Ireland is small, has relatively few

television broadcasters, so there is little competition and barely a market at all.

With this in mind, it is crucial that we do not hamper ourselves in our approach to our upcoming broadcast negotiations. The Association has traditionally adopted a policy of free-to-air availability in the Irish market for the vast majority of its major competitions. In 2015, 114 games were shown live, or on full deferred coverage on terrestrial TV. This policy will remain central to the next set of rights agreements – there will be no reduction in the number of live senior championship games shown free-to-air. However, any restriction that prohibits the GAA from engaging with all interested parties, including subscription TV providers, would seriously reduce our negotiating power and thus our ability to achieve the true worth of our assets, and would inevitably lead to a greatly reduced media-rights income. In what is already a small pool of potential broadcast partners, we must ensure the existence of a genuine market for our games and maintain the option of engaging with all interested parties, regardless of whether they are free-to-air or subscription providers. This flexibility and freedom is crucial if we are to nurture a competitive tender process and thus ensure that the GAA achieves the proper value for its rights. Ultimately these broadcast revenues represent an important funding source for the work of the Association and its units.

Promoting our leagues and championships

As in the three previous years, a major effort went into the promotion of the 2015 senior championships. The objective of our 2015 marketing campaign was to



14 September 2015; Kilkenny hurling legend Henry Shefflin and four-time All-Star, Kellogg's GAA Cúl Camps football ambassador and Donegal footballer Karl Lacey, left, pictured with Alice Brannigan, left, aged eight, and Hannah Brannigan, aged seven, and twins Conor, left, and Tadhg Scanlon, both aged seven, at the announcement of a record breaking summer for Kellogg's GAA Cúl Camps.

motivate people to attend and participate in our games. Our strategy was to build the GAA brand through an overarching brand theme and line, and to create an emotional connection with our members and supporters. ‘Nothing beats being there’ was a good tactical line, but, in order to encompass the wider audience, we needed an approach that delivered a more powerful and inclusive message. ‘Be there. All the way’ was an expression of the dedication and passion that motivates volunteers, who are bound to the GAA by a commitment to games played solely for the love of those games and by a dedication to club and county.

The campaign began on 4 May with the first broadcast of a 90-second TV commercial, and incorporated a wide range of ‘connection moments’ through TV, radio, website, docupills (mini-documentaries for online release), digital banners, outdoor advertising, social media, etc., with the aim of creating interest and stimulating people to attend games. The response to the campaign was positive, and the ads that communicated the overarching theme and line were well received. They provided a strong base for the provinces as they rolled out their own launches and marketing strategies. Our sponsors, too, activated a wide range of promotional activities over the summer months, and there has been a gradual improvement in the efforts of individual counties through their participation in open nights, website promotion, etc.

There has been close co-operation between provinces and Croke Park in running a strong marketing campaign around our championships. We have also greatly improved our engagement in social media, but much remains to be done, especially within counties. It is absolutely vital that counties appoint Public Relations Officers who have the skills necessary to exploit all the marketing and promotional tools available to promote our games.

Commercial and Sponsorship

The Association continues to benefit from outstanding support from our sponsors. **AIB** became a Senior Football Championship sponsor for the first time as part of the multi-sponsor model, and also extended their long-standing support of the AIB Club Championships. One of Ireland’s highest-profile rebrands saw eircom become **eir**, and as a sponsor of the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship, **eir** used the final as an important element of their rebranding, with Croke Park featuring heavily in the television advertisement.

SuperValu and the GAA received an All-Ireland Marketing Award for Sponsorship Management in 2015, while **Liberty** was honoured internationally for their sponsorship of the All-Ireland Hurling Championship with a Silver Medal in the prestigious European Sponsorship Association (ESA) Awards in the ‘Best in Europe’ category. Also enjoying success at the ESA Awards was **Electric Ireland** in the ‘Business to Consumer’ category for the Electric Ireland GAA Minor Championships’ #ThisIsMajor campaign. The GAA also won an award at the inaugural Irish Sports Federation’s Sports Industry Awards in the Best Mass Participation category for the **Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps**.

Games Development

The defining objective of GAA policy, from a Games Development perspective, is to foster lifelong participation and engagement in Gaelic games and, in so doing, to expand opportunities to excel at child, youth and adult levels. The memories of playing in an U-8 blitz, the friendships made through the Cúl Camps, the experience of developing as a player and person in the Talent Academy squads – these remain with one for life, and explain why people are motivated to ‘Play and Stay with the GAA’. Providing opportunities for lifelong participation can be achieved only through the hard work and efforts of thousands of tireless volunteers

and hundreds of dedicated personnel operating within a comprehensive and clearly defined framework for Games Development, namely the Grassroots to National Programme (GNP). This framework facilitates the development and implementation of high-quality projects with the aim of providing games opportunities, skills development and applied lifelong learning initiatives.

Some such initiatives, like the Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps, are well established, and continue to flourish. Others, such as the Super Games Centres, are new, and have been developed to address issues of player drop-off at youth level. Some of the key projects undertaken in 2015 were:

Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps

The Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps are designed to provide boys and girls (aged 6-13) with a positive experience of Gaelic games. They are based on the objectives of maximising enjoyment and nurturing continued involvement. The Camps provide children with the chance to play and develop their skills in Gaelic football, hurling, handball and rounders. Children happily wearing their Cúl Camp jersey and jumper could be seen in almost every parish in the country, while children in faraway places such as Saudi Arabia, Perth and New York also eagerly participated in Cúl Camps. In 2015 the Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps broke all records with a participation figure of 102,384, spread over 1,100 Cúl Camps nationwide. This made the Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps the largest summer camp in Ireland, and represented an increase of 15% on the 2014 figures (89,022 participants – then an all-time high). Overall, participation levels have increased by approximately 37,000 since the establishment of the Camps in 2006.

The increasing popularity of the Kellogg’s GAA Cúl Camps is a testament to the quality of organisation, coordination, supervision and activity provided. A significant level of preparation is required from volunteers to ensure the positive promotion, smooth operation and high standards of coaching at the Camps.

Super Games Centres and Activity Day

Games Development is committed to ensuring that the Association continues to maximise participation at child, youth and adult levels. The establishment of GAA Super Games Centres epitomises this approach. The introduction of the Go Games model at child level, underpinned by the ethos that ‘Every Child gets a Go for the entire Game’, has led to a huge increase in participation. The number of children aged 10–12, registered as members of the GAA, has increased from 39,778 in 2010 to 61,487 in 2015. The challenge is to retain as many players as possible as they move into the youth and then adult levels. Currently, 58% of players withdraw from participation between the ages of 12 and 21.

In 2014, in conjunction with the University of Stirling, GAA Games Development undertook research into youth drop-out in GAA games through a PhD study. As part of Phase 1 of the study, research was conducted into the factors that lead to dropout. The findings called for a re-imagining of the current GAA offering to align it with the needs of young participants, rather than reflecting a ‘win at all costs’ approach. This would involve a process of modifying the traditional Gaelic games environments by changing the sport structure, rules, facilities and equipment in order to make the participant the highest priority. It would also mean creating an environment in which coaches, parents and peers emphasise the values of belonging, effort, encouragement and fairness. The Super Games Centres was the concept developed in response to this.

Phase 2 of the study, which began in September 2014 and concluded in March 2015, involved piloting and testing the concept of GAA Super Games Centres in ten participation centres across Ireland. As part of Phase 2, 2,430 players (boys aged 12–16) attended the centres at a pre-determined time and place, for one hour a week. Here, small-sided Gaelic games activities were organised for a total period of twenty-four weeks. At each session there was minimal

coaching intervention at the beginning and end of the games period; the focus, rather, was upon playing games.

The study culminated in a GAA Super Games Centre Activity Day in Croke Park on August 24, 2015. The participants and site-leaders from the pilot were invited to attend the Activity Day and the launch of the research findings. On the day, 200 participants were given the opportunity to play a total of three small-sided games each in Croke Park.

As a result of a reduced fear of failure in participants, their reduced expectation to perform and their receiving positive feedback, the Super Games Centres met with a very positive reaction. The quantitative research revealed the players’ intentions to drop out of the GAA decreased and the stress encountered by players was reduced. On foot of the Research Study and pilot, a total of sixty-five Super Games Centres will be established in 2016.

The Super Games Centres are an important initiative in our ambition to reverse youth dropout. However, the Association must continue to try out innovative approaches to foster participation so that our games remain as vibrant, responsive and player-centred as possible.

Féile 2015

The format of the Féile tournaments was changed in 2014, as a result of which the number of games played increased from 285 at the 2013 Féile na nGael and Féile Peile na nÓg tournaments to a total of 634 during the 2015 National Féile tournaments. Furthermore, activity at regional and provincial Féile events, which run in conjunction with the National Féile tournaments, ensures that the Féile weekends truly promote the philosophy that every player has the opportunity to participate and play in their respective Féile tournament at a level commensurate with their age, skills and strengths.

The 2015 Féile na nGael tournament was hosted by Ulster, incorporating

all nine counties, plus Louth. A total of 108 teams participated in the boys competitions, while 84 camogie teams took part. Regional Féile na nGael tournaments took place at seven venues nationwide, and an additional 54 boys teams and 33 camogie teams played at these events, while 36 teams participated in the provincial tournaments hosted by Connacht and Munster.

Carlow, Wicklow and Wexford combined to host the national Féile Peile na nÓg tournament, where 160 teams participated in the boys’ competitions and 74 in the girls’ competitions. Nine additional regional Féile events were held, as well as provincial Féile Peile na nÓg tournaments in Connacht, Munster and Ulster; 136 teams availed of the opportunity to play in these competitions.

The sense of pride, community and celebration that pervades the Féile tournaments should not be underestimated. With clubs from all over the country represented, as well as teams from New York and Britain, they provide a genuine sense of occasion. The work accomplished behind the scenes to ensure that the tournaments operate smoothly must also be acknowledged.

The increase in teams and games has inevitably led to a greater organisational workload, but volunteers and personnel have responded and the expanded format goes from strength to strength.

GAA Primary Teacher Summer Courses

Primary school teachers have long played a special and significant role in the growth of Gaelic games. Throughout the history of the Association, hundreds of thousands of teachers have given their time – both during the course of their working day and voluntarily after school – to introduce generations of children to Gaelic games. In many cases it is the local primary school teacher who has fostered and nurtured the skills of our young players by taking training sessions during and after school, organising blitzes, or bringing teams to matches with neighbouring schools.

8 June 2015; Dublin hurler Chris Crummy celebrates after his St Joseph's Fairview side scored a goal against Francis Street in the Sciath Pádraig Mac Giolla. Allianz Cumann na mBunscol Finals, Croke Park, Dublin.



“...sense of pride, community and celebration that pervades the Féile tournaments should not be underestimated. With clubs from all over the country represented, as well as teams from New York & Britain...”



26 December 2015; Paul O'Donoghue with the support of his St Mary's team-mate Aidan Walsh is tracked by Waterville's Mike Curran. South Kerry Senior Football Championship Final, St Mary's v Waterville. Páirc Chill Imeachall, Portmagee, Co. Kerry.



In recognition of this commitment and of its importance, and further to the GAA's objective of enhancing applied lifelong learning, GAA Games Development has designed a Summer Course specifically for primary school teachers, the primary objective of which is the advancement of teachers' knowledge and management skills in the context of the primary school PE curriculum. The course combines practical, face-to-face interaction with online theoretical modules. The face-to-face element runs over three days, with eight hours of online modules to be completed through the Association's Learning and Development Community Portal (www.learning.gaa.ie). The courses are delivered by GAA Games Development personnel, tutors and primary school teachers. In 2015 the GAA held a record twenty-two teacher Summer Courses nationwide during July and August (up from eight in 2011), with almost 500 teachers participating.

Supporting, Upskilling and Recognising Coaches

A central goal of Games Development is the provision of opportunities for Applied Lifelong Learning (ALL). In this regard, the National Games Development Conference has become a focal point in the Coach Education calendar. Over 900 delegates attended the 2015 conference, the theme of which was 'Putting Youth into Perspective'. Issues relating to youth players were discussed by a range of national and international speakers, including coaches from the world of Gaelic games and other sporting organisations, and by players and teachers. There were presentations from guest speakers, including Anthony Daly and Sonia O'Sullivan, and practical applied sessions, based on, for example, the club case-study offered by the members of Ballyboden St Enda's GAA Club in Dublin and the experiences of coach practitioners in inspiring a hurling revolution in clubs and schools in Limerick City.

GAA National Games Development Centre

The official opening of the GAA National Games Development Centre at Abbotstown on 2 April 2016 provides a strategically located facility that offers a great opportunity to develop our games, in particular along the heavily populated eastern seaboard. It ensures a significant GAA presence on the National Sports Campus site, with four excellent sand-based pitches, a 3G synthetic pitch and a hurling wall, all of which are floodlit. There will also be ten changing rooms, a small seated stand and ancillary facilities. It will provide a valuable resource for the implementation of national and regional initiatives in terms of games opportunities at child, youth and adult levels. It will serve as an ideal base for the preparation of teams, including those of hurling/shinty and International Rules, and will be an easily accessed centre for provision of education workshops. The centre will be an ideal venue for the hosting of second- and third-level games, and will provide valuable additional pitches through which Dublin County Committee can deliver its games programme. One unit that can especially benefit from this development is the Leinster Council. Given the growing population of Dublin and adjoining counties, the centre provides an opportunity to develop new cross-county competitions for large urban areas within travelling distance of the new facility. It also provides a challenge to the Leinster Council to ensure that it maximises its use of the centre to increase participation in our games in the most densely populated area of the country.

“GAA units have always taken care to ensure that our members enjoy the best possible facilities at our clubs. It is within the control of all units to see to it that the management and maintenance of our grounds provide for the safety of those who enter and use GAA grounds.”

Use of GAA Facilities

GAA units have always taken care to ensure that our members enjoy the best possible facilities at our clubs. It is within the control of all units to see to it that the management and maintenance of our grounds provide for the safety of those who enter and use GAA grounds. Claim investigations by our loss assessors make it clear that we must: (i) engage competent contractors to design and build facilities, and who are covered by adequate insurance; (ii) ensure that safety statements or risk assessments are in place at all units; (iii) maintain proper records of accidents, incidents and usage; (iv) improve cleaning procedures; (v) place a greater focus on maintenance and upkeep; and (vi) train and supervise staff in their activities.

The GAA has regularly made its facilities available to support an increasing level of non-GAA use. Examples include (but are not limited to) the provision to community and other groups of meetings rooms, indoor halls, playing fields, all-weather facilities, walkways, playgrounds, functions rooms and bars.

If we wish to continue to provide this community service, we must:

- *implement safe systems of operation;*
- *ensure effective management and control of access to properties;*
- *ensure that all non-GAA users have insurance in place to enable risk to be diverted away from the Association's insurance;*
- *ensure that excluded or prohibited activities do not take place at events or on properties;*
- *implement effective maintenance and upkeep on all properties so that they do not deteriorate and become hazards.*

Factors outside the control of the GAA have led to an increase in the number of personal-injury claims being pursued in Ireland and to a large increase in the level of compensation being awarded by the courts. We currently have 260 open personal-injury claims being pursued against the Association. No more than 25% of these claims relate to the core GAA activity, the playing

17 March 2015; Ronan Steede, left and Daithí Burke, Corofin, in action against Paudie McGuigan, Slaughtneil. AIB GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Club Championship Final, Corofin, Co. Galway v Slaughtneil, Co. Derry, Croke Park, Dublin.





29 November 2015; Oulart the Ballagh captain Barry Kehoe leads the team down the tunnel before the start of the game. AIB Leinster GAA Senior Club Hurling Championship Final, Oulart the Ballagh v Cuala. Netwatch Dr. Cullen Park, Carlow.

of our games and fundraising for the benefit of affiliated units. The claims' experience underlines dramatically the fact that serious exposures exist across all units when GAA club facilities are provided for use to non-GAA users and for the support of non-GAA activities.

Clubs form an important part of the communities in which they operate, and the GAA seeks to be of service to our communities. However, our claims' experience indicates that we are making our properties available to outside groups with little control over the activities taking place and without documentation in place to divert risk away from the GAA insurance cover. If unacceptable current practices are not reversed, and if the claims' trends we have experienced in the past number of years continue, liability insurance in its current format may no longer be sustainable for the Association. Unsustainable claims' costs will mean we will be unable to continue to make our facilities available to the wider community. This is an eventuality we wish to avoid, as any such restriction would diminish the role that the Association wishes to continue to play in Irish communities.

Casement Park and Páirc Uí Chaoimh

In 2010 Ulster Council GAA proposed a scheme to upgrade Casement Park in Belfast to a 38,000-capacity all-seater stadium, incorporating 588 corporate seats, 3,832 premium seats, 2,580 m2 of conferencing facilities, 370 m2 of commercial units for rental and 560 parking spaces. The total cost of the

project was €77m, of which Central Council committed to contribute €15m. Planning permission for a 38,000 all-seater stadium was granted by the Department of the Environment in January 2014. A local residents group, the Mooreland and Owenarragh Residents Association (MORA) applied for a Judicial Review into the decision, which was granted. On 18 December 2014, Mr Justice Horner quashed the existing planning approval for the Casement Park project, ruling that the Minister for the Environment had acted unlawfully when he granted planning permission for the redevelopment of the stadium.

In early 2015 the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure commissioned a Project Assessment Review (PAR), which examined concerns raised about the progress of the Casement Park project, and, in particular, about safety issues that had been raised in relation to emergency exiting. The review team, which included an independent team-leader from the Cabinet Office in London, issued its report on 5 August 2015. The review was largely supportive of the Ulster Council arguments on emergency exiting and stated that 'we believe that meeting the goal of successfully constructing and operating a strategic regional stadium at Casement Park is still achievable. Delivery of the stadium and associated benefits will be late, but the overall Business Case remains sound'.

Ulster GAA, Central Council and Antrim County Committee remain firmly committed to the development of the new stadium. The Project Board

continues to work closely with the planning and delivery teams to prepare a revised scheme for the stadium that will: (i) develop and provide a world-class stadium for the GAA in Belfast; (ii) enhance the local community; (iii) deliver a facility suitable for hosting club, county, provincial and national fixtures; and (iv) contribute to the economic and social development of Belfast and Ulster. A public consultation process is underway on new proposals. Following this comprehensive engagement process and consideration of the results and feedback of that work, Ulster GAA will prepare and submit a planning application later in the year. One can only admire the determination and resilience of the Ulster Council, its Project Board and Antrim County Committee, as they strive to overcome various obstacles. Although completion of the project will extend far beyond the original timeline, the objective is a vital one for the Association and the major investment of time and energy worth the effort.

Progress has been better in the redevelopment of Páirc Uí Chaoimh. Two stands have been demolished and considerable piling work completed. There was some delay to the project in the final months of 2015 due to the need to meet requirements attached to the drawdown of Government funding, including a statutory notification by the Government for assessment of state aid by the European Commission. At the time of writing, the completion date is 2 June 2017, which would allow for some major games to be staged in the newly developed stadium during that summer.

Pitch Maintenance

In my report to Congress in 2015 I referred to a seminar for groundsmen that took place in Croke Park in November 2014, attended by thirty-nine representatives from twenty-eight counties. The seminar drew attention to a number of deficiencies in current practice, and highlighted the difficulties many groundsmen encounter in maintaining their pitches – overuse and high wear, not enough recovery time between games, poor drainage, inadequate maintenance routines, lack of knowledge and training, use of outdated equipment, insufficient funding, lack of qualified and appropriately trained ground staff, etc. On the positive side, there was an obvious enthusiasm to address these issues and an acceptance that, despite the huge investment in ground development in recent years, we have been slow to develop a more scientific approach to pitch maintenance. The growth in the number of county training centres and the increasing number of clubs that are developing additional pitches emphasises

the importance of properly protecting and sustaining these important assets.

The seminar offered a number of useful suggestions that will require an investment in both training and equipment. As a follow-up to the seminar, we have been in discussion with the Golf Course Superintendents of Ireland (GCSAI), through its General Manager, Damian McLaverty, with a view to developing a GAA-specific Pitch Management Education Programme. The GCSAI, in association with our Croke Park Pitch Manager, Stuart Wilson, will work with us in the organisation of a GAA Groundsmen National Education Day at the National Games Development Centre at Abbotstown in May and also in the provision of up to four annual educational events. In addition, it is hoped that our groundsmen will have access to the GCSAI Continuing Development Programme. This link offers great potential for upskilling our groundsmen and for protecting the massive investment we have made in the development of our pitches.

Strategic Planning

The GAA Strategic Plan 2015/2017 was launched in 2015. The Plan sets goals to guide the Association's activities in six areas, each of which identifies specific strategies to achieve stated objectives and defines measures of success. An Implementation Committee has been monitoring the execution of the Plan's strategy. Good progress has been made since the March launch in the six areas, which are as follows:

- *Games*
- *Clubs*
- *Governance and Structures*
- *Finance and Commercial*
- *Communications*
- *Co-operation within the Gaelic games family*

28 June 2015; Westmeath supporters celebrate in the Hogan Stand near the end of the game. Leinster GAA Football Senior Championship, Semi-Final, Westmeath v Meath. Croke Park, Dublin.



RIGHT: 8 November 2015; Referee John Keane helps Kerril Wade, Sarsfields with his helmet. Galway County Senior Hurling Championship Final, Craughwell v Sarsfields. Kenny Park, Athenry, Co. Galway.



Significant progress has also been made in areas such as fixtures planning/scheduling, player retention, increasing participation, recreational games, coach education and governance. It is very encouraging to see, over the past number of years, that provinces, counties and clubs have been devising their own strategic plans to address areas of activity. Much progress was made in the implementation of these plans and there is no doubt that there is now an acceptance within the Association of the importance of identifying specific strategies to achieve goals and define measures of success. Many of these plans drew on the National Strategic Vision and Action Plan 2009-2015 and set goals for a period ending in 2015. It is vital that the culture of planning that has been established is maintained and, now that many plans have reached their 2015 end-date, that the process of setting new goals for the years ahead is a priority for all of our units.

Leadership Development

One of the frustrations of writing the annual report for Congress is that it often feels as if one is addressing the same issues every year. In time, many problems are successfully addressed, but the reality is that many are beyond the capacity of Croke Park staff or Central Council to resolve, as they are of a local nature.

“Our new GAA.ie website went live in January. Developed in partnership with market leaders Deltatre, the new platform offers a range of new and upgraded facilities to users.”

These issues can only be resolved through a combination of local knowledge, local leadership and a touch of local inspiration. Central Council can, of course, assist local efforts through the provision of resources, but the ability to influence what happens at local level is limited. Each county is unique in terms of population, number of clubs, the urban/rural demographic profile, the football/hurling balance, financial resources, etc. Solutions to problems have to be addressed within that unique local context. Whether or not that happens depends, above all, on the leadership provided at County Committee level. The performance of the key officers – Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer – is absolutely crucial in that regard and will largely determine whether a county makes progress in addressing issues. It is essential, then, that county officers have access to a high-quality programme of officer training that will develop the skills necessary to deal with the challenges facing their county. Hopefully, the National Education and Research Centre will provide that training.

The development of a major training programme for club officers was an important priority for the Strategic Plan Implementation Committee in 2015. Problems relating to the recruitment, retention and training of officers were documented in last year’s report to Congress, so a commitment was given to make continuous support for club officers a strategic priority. Since then, very good work has been done by our National Officer Development Committee on the preparation of a new Club Leadership Development Programme (CLDP). This is a much-needed initiative that will help the principal club officers fulfil their roles successfully through the acquisition of knowledge and information and through developing leadership, management and communication skills.

In 2016 the programme will be offered in sixteen counties and a condensed programme will also be delivered in Britain. Each module will be delivered by experienced Leadership Associates who have all completed a three-day training programme. The programme represents an important milestone in the training and development of club officers, one that promises to strengthen considerably the management of clubs.

The National Education and Research Centre

The proposed National Education and Research Centre (NERC) is a collaborative partnership between the GAA and Dublin City University. When the partnership was initially discussed, it was noted that there was a need ‘to support the Association in the planning and execution of policy, with a particular focus on promoting best practice in the areas of player welfare, training and development and knowledge alliances’. Three elements that would constitute the essential work of the NERC were identified at the outset: (i) education and training (of officers, coaches, team managers/mentors, referees; employees and volunteers); (ii) player/team development, including performance management relevant to individual players and teams; (iii) research and innovation (using and harnessing knowledge and expertise from external sources to support the Association’s decision-making across its core activities). There has been significant engagement on the NERC project since May 2015. The Association hopes to be in a position to outline further details on this initiative towards the end of the first quarter of 2016.



LEFT: 29 March 2015; The Clare and Kilkenny managers, Davy Fitzgerald and Brian Cody, shake hands after the game. Allianz Hurling League, Division 1A, Relegation Play-off, Kilkenny v Clare.

GAA website

Our new GAA.ie website went live in January 2016. Developed in partnership with market leaders Deltatre, the new platform offers a range of new and upgraded facilities to users. The site has been split into three separate portals. The main home of **GAA.ie** offers our most sought-after content – fixtures and results, tickets, news and video. It also hosts our live match-day coverage. **MyGAA** is the hub for those involved in our games at all levels – players, coaches, referees, administrators, etc. **TheGAA** is the home for all information regarding the Association as a governing body, its history and its structures. The reorganisation of the site means that all our site users will more easily find what they are looking for and, hopefully, will encourage further exploration of what the website has to offer. For our community outside Ireland, the website is a vital connection with the GAA at home and is also an opportunity to heighten awareness among the GAA membership in Ireland of the growth in activity across our international units.

Health and Wellbeing

The Healthy Club Project

The GAA's work in the area of health, wellbeing, and personal and community development reflects the Association's values. And, it turns out that – according to an independent report into Phase 1 of the Healthy Club Project – this work also benefits clubs and makes them more relevant to and inclusive within our wider society. Conducted by a team from Waterford IT's Centre for Health Behaviour Research, the report was launched in Croke Park in November, following a two-year evaluation into the activities of the eighteen clubs involved. The research identified how GAA clubs

play a role in supporting the health and wellbeing of members and their wider communities, but also suggested that there was considerable potential for clubs to benefit from this engagement. Over the two-year duration of the project, club-membership numbers increased, while club and community representatives also remarked on the positive impact that participation in the project had (by exposing club activities and health behaviours to new audiences) on attitudes to health and on the public perception of the club.

The evaluators also recorded improvements in the overall 'health promotion orientation' of clubs, specifically in areas relating to club policy, club practice and the club environment (both physical and cultural). Seventy-two initiatives were implemented across seven target areas (physical activity; diet/nutrition; health awareness; emotional wellbeing; social inclusion; anti-bullying; and smoking/alcohol) and were, for the most part, made available to both club members and the wider community. We look forward to working towards implementing Phase 2, which will begin in early 2016, with the aim of involving at least one club in every county.

The potential of the Healthy Club Project has been recognised by Irish Life CEO, Bill Kyle, and his Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) committee, with the company committing to a €1m investment in the project over three years to ensure that its potential is maximised.

Health and Wellbeing Structures

While the Healthy Club Project is currently operational in only a small number of GAA clubs, all our clubs support the wellbeing of their members and communities. The new structures being put in place aim to support and enhance this work to

ensure that we follow best practice and, where possible, respond to identified needs in an appropriate manner.

The National Health and Wellbeing Committee developed a comprehensive three-year plan in 2015 that reflects the goals of the Association's Strategic Plan 2015-17. At its core is the determination to provide all the support required to ensure that our members benefit – from the perspective of holistic health – from being part of their local GAA club, whether they play our games or not. The committee includes volunteer experts and advocates from a range of disciplines, including public nutrition and health promotion, emotional wellbeing and suicide prevention/response, coaching and counselling, and critical-incident response.

At a special forum held in Croke Park in October, the Community and Health team in Croke Park presented action plans to the chairpersons of the new health and wellbeing sub-committees at county level. These plans set each County Committee the task of overseeing five key actions in 2016. To make this effective at club level, we are asking our clubs to appoint (not elect) health and wellbeing officers. The national committee, with the support of the Community and Health team, developed a two-hour training module for this new officer role. This will be implemented in 2016 by Croke Park-trained volunteer tutors.

National Health and Wellbeing Conference

For those who would question the Association's investment of time, effort and money in what some might see as non-core activities, we should remember that 270 delegates attended the GAA's second annual Health and Wellbeing Conference in Croke Park in March 2015.

These delegates were GAA members from all over the country who were sufficiently engaged to devote a full day of their weekend in order to learn about the issue involved on behalf of their clubs. The conference, entitled 'Healthy Minds...Healthy Bodies...Healthy Clubs', featured leading national speakers from within and without the GAA, and offered practical tips and guidance to enable officers to promote and support health and wellbeing in their clubs.

Critical Response Plan (CIRP)

In an organisation the size of the GAA, it is inevitable that what we call critical incidents will occur every year. A critical incident is defined as any situation that overwhelms one's natural capacity to respond. These are as broad and varied in their nature as any situation that can befall an individual, club or community. In the vast majority of such situations, what clubs or counties needed most was reassurance that their response was appropriate.

In 2015 the Community and Health team was called upon by clubs and counties to support and guide them through a variety of difficult situations. Unfortunately, many of these involved the tragic death of a member.

Following approximately thirty-five such situations in 2014, it was evident that our units would benefit from a resource that could help them deal with such events. A professionally facilitated workshop in Croke Park in January, featuring representatives from clubs and counties that have experienced critical incidents in the past five years, contributed to the completion of the GAA's Critical Incident Response Plan. It is designed to help all GAA units:

- *better understand the nature of a critical incident;*
- *develop and maintain their own critical-incident response plan;*
- *follow recommended practices when supporting community*

responses to critical incidents to the best of their capacity;

- *ensure a consistency of care for all members following an incident, regardless of the situation/location;*
- *identify and access the range of national and local support services that are available to them in such circumstances so as to reassure members that they are not expected to bear alone the burden of dealing with critical incidents.*

One of the 2016 plans for County Health and Wellbeing Committees is to adopt their own Critical Incident Response Plan and to encourage and support, in turn, their respective clubs in preparing their plans. The resource and sample plan is now available for downloading at www.gaa.ie/community

Dermod Earley Youth Leadership Initiative

In 2015 the Dermod Earley Youth Leadership Initiative grew from its three-county pilot scheme to reach 130 15-18 years-olds from seventy-three clubs in counties Kildare, Dublin, Roscommon, Galway, Cork, Tipperary, Donegal and Monaghan. The programme operates as an innovative partnership between the GAA, Foróige and NUI Galway.

Participants who successfully complete all three modules between September 2015 and May 2016 – which involves thirty instructional hours exploring the concept of leadership and twenty hours of community action during which this concept is put into practice – will receive a FETAC Level 6 Foundation Certificate in Youth Leadership and Community Action from NUIG.

The programme is facilitated by thirty-seven volunteers from within the GAA and Foróige, each of whom completed a four-day training course provided by Foróige and NUI Galway. For their time and efforts, they were also awarded with a Foundation Diploma in Training

and Education by NUIG in a special ceremony in Croke Park on the day of the International Rules Series match.

Safeguarding and Welfare of Children

The enactment of the Children First Act by the Houses of the Oireachtas in November 2015, and the proposed introduction of the National Vetting Bureau Act, will require the GAA to fulfil all requirements and directives contained in the legislation. Many of the implications of this legislation have been anticipated by our Child Welfare and Protection Committee in recent years and are already Association policy. The GAA Code of Best Practice in Youth Sport, a code in operation with Cumann Camógaíochta and Cumann Peile Gael na mBan, stipulates that coaches or others who work with children are required to:

- *undertake vetting in their jurisdiction (e.g. Garda or AccessNI);*
- *attend relevant child-welfare training courses;*
- *have a minimum coaching qualification.*

These minimum standards are in line with the requirements of the new legislation and are already met by most of our volunteer coaches. To ensure compliance with our stated child-welfare strategy, the GAA has to date vetted in excess of 75,000 members through Garda Vetting and AccessNI background checks. Almost 12,000 of these applications were received last year. In 2016, with the implementation of the new vetting legislation, it will be mandatory for all our members working with children to be vetted.

Legislation

The Children First Act spells out the reporting obligations on all those who work with children in GAA clubs. It is hoped that the Safeguarding Guidance booklet, to be issued upon implementation of the Act, will provide

30 March 2015; A general view of children parading around the pitch at Croke Park during the opening day of the National Go Games. Croke Park, Dublin



“The GAA continues to develop training materials for those working with children. A Children’s Officer Training Programme has recently been agreed as part of a concerted approach to training Children’s Officers at club and county levels.”

clarity on our day-to-day legal obligations and on the requirements to be met by those who work with underage players. We will be obliged to ensure that:

- *a national mandated person is nominated to oversee our Children First responsibilities and to see to it that all concerns are reported to Tusla (Child and Family Agency);*
- *every club and County Committee appoints a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) whose role will include the immediate reporting of child protection concerns to Tusla;*
- *the Association undertakes an assessment of the potential for risk of harm to children participating in our games and prepare an appropriate Child Safeguarding Statement in accordance with the Act.*

Our recently established International Child Welfare Advisory Committee will seek to ensure that, as a basic requirement, all units at international level sign up to agreed child-welfare policies and training-programme content.

Child Welfare Training

The GAA continues to develop training materials for those working with children. A Children’s Officer Training Programme has recently been agreed as part of a concerted approach to training Children’s Officers at club and county levels. The GAA’s Tackling Bullying Programme continues to be implemented nationwide, while a comprehensive training calendar has been agreed for 2016. The ongoing provision of the Child Protection Awareness Programme, endorsed by Sport Ireland, and the proposed Designated Person Training Programme, will facilitate compliance with legislative directives throughout 2016.



29 March 2015; Seamus Harnedy, Cork, in action against Andrew Shore, Wexford. Allianz Hurling League, Division 1, Quarter-Final, Cork v Wexford. Páirc Uí Rinn, Cork.

Information Technology

Tomás Meehan was appointed as the Association's first Chief Information Officer (CIO) in 2015. He has identified clearly the key objective of the GAA IT Department as being the provision of reliable IT services to all members of the Association, and thus enabling them to fulfil their roles within their team, club, county, committee or department as efficiently and effectively as possible. To help realise this objective, significant investment has been made in the Association's IT infrastructure over the last number of years, a commitment that has continued under Tomás's direction in 2015.

The Strategic Plan for the Association mandates that an IT strategy should be developed, and this is currently being drafted. In the interim, a number of projects have been initiated to address the immediate needs of the Association and to mitigate risks linked to older technology. Some of these projects have been undertaken so as to provide value for the Association as a whole at national level (the new website) and at club level (administrator training and

guidance). Others have provided specific benefits to smaller groups such as provincial grounds or County Boards.

The key projects and initiatives developed in 2015 are outlined below:

Infrastructure

1. Croke Park Infrastructure

The IT infrastructure in Croke Park was upgraded in 2015 in three key areas – external connectivity to the internet, the network used to transfer data within the Stadium, and the data centres used to store data – as follows:

EXTERNAL CONNECTIVITY

Croke Park is connected to the external world using *eir's* high-speed Next Generation Network (NGN). This connection was upgraded to ensure that the speed of internet connection is sufficient to meet the Stadium's current and projected future needs. The firewall, used to protect the Croke Park network from external threats, was also upgraded in 2015.

NETWORK

Incremental improvements have been made to the core IT network in Croke Park

following a major upgrade in 2014. The network performs to a very high standard and has been used as the backbone for a number of other enhancements in Croke Park, including new Digital Signs, IPTVs and CCTV upgrades. These upgrades have helped to improve the safety and security of patrons when attending games at Croke Park and when entering or exiting the Stadium. The two big screens in Croke Park were also replaced in 2015, with live match action, notifications and match-day entertainment being displayed during games. To ensure that Croke Park remains a premier venue for matches, conferences and other events, investment has also been made in upgrading the WiFi available in the Stadium to provide high-speed wireless internet connectivity to all internal areas of the Stadium.

DATA CENTRES

Because of the critical nature of systems used to run match days and other large events, several key IT systems are hosted internally in Croke Park. These systems include the Access Control System (ticket scanning) and the safety systems used to manage large crowds of people (e.g. the public address system). As it is imperative that these systems remain operational

14 March 2015; Michael Newman, Meath, in action against Gearoid Hanrahan, Laois. Allianz Football League Division 2 Round 5, Meath v Laois, Páirc Táihteann, Navan, Co, Meath.



“The Strategic Plan for the Association mandates that an IT strategy should be developed, and this is currently being drafted. In the interim, a number of projects have been initiated to address the immediate needs of the Association and to mitigate risks linked to older technology.”

at all times, an upgrade on the internal Croke Park data centres was completed in 2015. This upgrade provides the resilience and business continuity necessary to guarantee that these key systems are always available and operational.

2. County Grounds Infrastructure

The GAA IT department is available to provide assistance and guidance to other venues outside of Croke Park so as to ensure that the basic IT infrastructure is in place at county grounds, covering services such as ticket scanning, CCTV, public address, media facilities and basic office functionality. A number of projects were undertaken in 2015 in consultation with the relevant personnel at County Committee level and with the Infrastructure Committee. IT infrastructure upgrades for media areas and ticket scanning was implemented in Thurles, Limerick and Killarney. Significant additional IT network upgrades were also implemented in Thurles to enable the use of Hawkeye in 2016. Assistance has also been provided to Cork County Committee relating to IT requirements for Páirc Uí Caoimh and Páirc Uí Rinn. In addition, every county IT Officer was invited to complete a survey of IT Infrastructure

at county grounds and this will be used to prioritise and schedule future work.

3. National Games Development Centre

The GAA IT department has been working with the architects and builders at the new complex in Abbottstown to ensure that all necessary IT services are in place when the centre opens in 2016.

APPLICATIONS

The Association continues to invest in and improve the key applications it uses, as in the following examples:

1. Office Productivity

Microsoft Office 365 is used to provide email, Word and Excel to staff, to Provincial Councils and County Committees, and to clubs and committee members. Every club has access to up to four email addresses, and work continues to ensure that these addresses are used to their full potential. Licences are also available centrally to County Committees and Provincial Councils, a number of which have benefited from this arrangement to reduce costs when investing in new computers and laptops. The IT department has

also provided assistance to both the LGFA and Camogie Association in 2015 relating to Office products.

2. Servasport Platform

There has been continuing development in 2015 of the Servasport platform (the key application used to manage our games) so as to ensure that the required functionality is in place to manage player and member registrations, fixtures, results, transfers, sanctions and general reporting requirements. Our LGFA and camogie colleagues also use the Servasport platform, and enhancements have been provided to facilitate their requirements also.

3. Membership Management

There is a need to provide clubs with better systems to manage day-to-day engagement with their members, including registrations, subscription payment and communications on club-related activities. To meet this need, it is intended to procure a system that will be made available to clubs in 2016.

20 September 2015; A general view of Croke Park overnight.
GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Championship Final,
Dublin v Kerry, Croke Park, Dublin.

“There was a major investment in capital expenditure in the Croke Park stadium in 2015. Our two big stadium screens were replaced and upgraded to HD technology, while the installation of a new eighteen-metre ribbon board on the Davin Stand provides a more interactive scoreboard and time clock.”

4. Hawkeye

The Hawkeye Score Review System was commissioned and installed in Semple Stadium, Thurles in 2015. It is currently being tested and will be available for use in matches in 2016.

5. Digital Communications

A major redesign and upgrade of the GAA's online presence was undertaken in 2015, while a revamped GAA.ie website was launched in January 2016 (see above).

Significant work has also begun, in conjunction with the Broadcast Authority of Ireland and RTÉ, to digitise up to five hundred historical matches, including provincial and All-Ireland finals. This digitised footage will potentially be made available to view on the new website, as will footage of recent matches.

Many clubs already have excellent websites and provide great coverage of their club's activities on their sites. However, a significant number of clubs have neither the resources nor the expertise to develop a website. To support these clubs, a generic website template has been developed and is available for use by any club. This website template can be customised and modified by anyone with basic computer skills. Over 150 clubs have already signed up to use the template and it is intended to promote this Club Website Solution further in 2016.

IT Governance

Given the wide variety of users of GAA systems and their dispersed geographical locations, it is important that there exists strong governance and management of the Association's IT systems, applications and information. A new IT and Communications Committee was formed in March, and it has, in conjunction with the GAA IT department, been working to enhance IT governance structures throughout the organisation. Information-security guidance and data-protection requirements have been prepared, and it is intended to include these topics in officer-training workshops

in 2016. An IT audit and an external security review have also been conducted to ensure that the GAA's IT systems are secure. And it is intended to build stronger links between the GAA IT Department and IT Officers at county and club level.

Croke Park Stadium

Just over one million patrons (1,015,233) attended Croke Park in 2015, spread over twenty-eight event days on which over sixty games were played. Also staged were Go Games and Cumann na mBunscol finals, in which more than 20,000 children participated over fifteen days. In addition, Croke Park hosted The Script for their biggest live performance to date, as well as bringing Ed Sheeran's tour to a close with two sell-out shows. It is to the great credit of Pitch Manager, Stuart Wilson, and his team that the pitch withstood so well such a heavy programme.

Staff training continues to be a priority for Stadium Operations and for the event teams and other staff that we oversee. Nationally, more than 600 voluntary stewards, including over one hundred new Croke Park stewards, received official steward training, while a number of staff and contractors completed their Occupational First Aider training. A Stadium Customer charter ('Our Promise') was launched internally over the summer months, with particular focus on match days, and planning is underway to introduce this publicly for 2016.

There was a major investment in capital expenditure in the Croke Park Stadium in 2015. Our two big Stadium screens were replaced and upgraded to HD technology, while the installation of a new eighteen-metre ribbon board on the Davin Stand provides a more interactive scoreboard and time clock. Internally, additional GAA offices for the IT and Commercial departments were created on level 2 of the Hogan Stand, and impressive new Hogan Stand corporate upgrades were completed in September. The museum café also received a total refurbishment.

“Just over one million patrons (1,015,233) attended Croke Park in 2015, spread over twenty-eight event days on which over sixty games were played. Also staged were Go Games and Cumann na mBunscol finals, in which more than 20,000 children participated over fifteen days.”

In other improvements, the Hogan Suite was renewed; the addition of new projectors, screens and furnishings adds greatly to the match-day experience. And a number of the Davin Stand 30-seater suites were split into smaller sizes to meet client needs. It was a record year for sales of both food and beverages, helped by the refurbishment of concession units on Levels 3 and 7, which allows more patrons to be served on event days and increases food options on all levels.

A strategic review of the Conference Centre business, conducted in association with SoolNua, led to a restructured sales and events team and to a significant refurbishment of event spaces on the Hogan side of stadium. The centre was rebranded as Croke Park Meetings and Events and achieved a 16% sales growth, reversing a decline of the previous year. A three-year strategic plan, focused on growth, yield and strong partnerships, has been devised, with an increased emphasis on attracting international business.

Industry peers have recognised Croke Park stadium staff, through a range of awards, for their excellent work in facilities, safety and environmental management: the 2015 Stadium Business Awards for Safety and Security; the Green Facilities Management Award for 'Greener on and off the pitch'; and overall winner for 'Excellence in Facilities Management' at the 2015 Facilities Management Awards. In addition, Ed Brennan won the award for BIFM Young Facilities Manager of the Year, while Croke Park's Environmental and Sustainability Management Group, which comprises staff and contractors, won the 'Sustainability Team of the Year' at the 2015 National Green Awards.

The major project of developing a new fully responsive website for Croke Park Stadium has recently been completed. The new site provides visitors with up-to-the-minute information and engaging content, with the aim of increasing page-views and bookings for all Stadium offerings.

GAA Museum

The GAA museum welcomed a record number of 137,000 visitors in 2105. It has maintained its full museum accreditation from the Heritage Council of Ireland and is consistently listed as a Top 5 visitor attraction in Dublin on TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel site. A new exhibition, 'GAA Dynasties', was launched, celebrating the unique sporting achievements of families that have excelled in Gaelic games. Another notable event was the induction of two legends of our games, Jimmy Barry Murphy and Jimmy Keaveney, into the GAA Museum Hall of Fame.

GAA Charities

Each year the Association makes a total of €100,000 available to charities to support their work in addressing societal needs. Each of five charities benefits to the sum of €20,000. As important as the funding, however, is the fact that the GAA works with all the groups to raise their profiles in order to raise awareness of their work and improve their long-term fundraising capacity. A significant number of applications are received annually, and every effort is made to provide a balance in funding to national and local charities. In 2015 the recipients were Diabetes Ireland, Special Olympics Ireland, The Cuisle Cancer Support Centre in Laois, The Maria Goretti Children's Respite Centre in Louth and White Ribbon Ireland, the latter a non-profit organisation and primary prevention campaign to end male violence against women.

An Ghaeilge

Tá Cumann Lúthchleas Gael lán-tiomaithe i gconaí maidir le cur chun cinn na Gaeilge agus an Chultúir Ghaelaigh. Bíonn an Ghaeilge le cloisteáil ag mórchuid na n-ócáidí a reachtáileann muid agus altanna sa teanga ar fáil sna hirisí agus sna cláir a fhoilsíonn muid.

Tá Plean Straitéiseach 3 Bliana i leith na teanga leagtha amach ag Coiste Náisiúnta na Gaeilge. Faoin bplean sin tá an tionscadal 'Turas Teanga' bunaithe. Cheana féin tá cuairt tugtha ar beagnach 100 club ar fud na tíre agus faoi dheireadh 2018 táthar ag súil go mbeidh plean gníomhaíochta Gaeilge á fheidhmiú ag a dhá oiread sin clubanna.

Tá CLG maraon le Glór na nGael agus Foras na Gaeilge ag soláthar maoinithe don tionscadal.

Chomh maith leis sin tá Coiste Náisiúnta na Gaeilge faoi láthair ag déanamh scrúdaithe ar ainmneacha Gaeilge ár gclubanna ar fad chun a chinntiú gur é an leagan ceart a bheas ar fáil.

Mar is eol díbh, seoladh leagan nua de shuíomh idirlín an Chumainn níos luaithe i mbliana agus tá sé i gceist go mbainfí lán-úsáid as seo agus as na meáin shóisialta nua eile chun an Ghaeilge agus an Gaelachas a chur chun cinn.

GAA Handball

The past year was one of progress for GAA Handball. Participation levels continued to rise, in particular through growth in the number of schools with One Wall facilities. The One Wall game is a simple, cost-effective way to introduce handball and is an excellent addition to any school or club facility. It offers an enjoyable recreational outlet and helps attract new members; it also complements the training facilities in any club.

On an international level, an official Team Ireland travelled to the World Handball Championships in Calgary, Canada in August, where Cavan's Paul

Brady won an unprecedented fifth World Open Singles title and Aisling Reilly (Antrim) won her second 'Women's Open Singles title. Team Ireland took home a total of twenty medals (twelve gold and eight silver) in what was the most successful performance at a World Championships by any Irish team.

Paul Brady proved himself to be a magnificent competitor and athlete in retaining his World title, producing a brilliant athletic performance in what was probably his final appearance at the World Championships. One regrets that his achievements have not always received the recognition they deserve.

GAA Handball also launched its newly revamped website in 2015, www.gaahandball.ie, which won the Best Website Award at the Realex Irish Website Awards in September. The award recognises the tremendous work being done at national level to increase the profile of the game and it has helped improve the media profile of the sport.

Comhbhrón

Déanaimncomhbhrón leis na clanna a chaill duine i rithana bliana. I measc na ndaoine a chailleamar do bhí: Gaillimh – Sylvie Donoghue, Billy O'Neill, Dan O'Neill, Eamon Meagher (formerly Longford), Frank Corcoran; Liatroim – Joseph (Josie) Murray, Garda Michael Galvin, Fergus O'Rourke; Ros Comáin – John Joe Nerne, Gerry O'Malley; Maigheo – Daragh Doherty; Corcaigh – Dan Hoare, Willie Horgan; Tiobraid Árann – Tommy Barrett, Jimmy Doyle, Rev. Fr. Ray Reidy, Bobby Mockler, Eddie Connolly; Port Láirge – Paul Foley; Ciarraí – Patrick Curtin; Ceatharlach – Fr. Moling Lennon; Laois – Paddy Bracken, Tom O'Loughlin; Áth Cliath – Dave Billings, Paddy Delaney; Cill Chainnigh – Jim Bennett, Johnny Ryan, Monsignor Thomas (Tommy) Maher; An Lú – Stephen Melia; An Mhí – Michael O'Brien; Uíbh Fhailí – Tom Furlong, Mick Brady, Adam Mangan; Iar Mhí – Denis Coyne, Arty Pyke; Cill Mhantáin – Patrick (Pat) Murphy; Aontroim – Jim Nelson; Ard Mhacha – Malachy McGeeney;

5 September 2015; Mayo supporters celebrate after Cillian O'Connor scored his side's first goal. GAA Football All-Ireland Senior Championship Semi-Final Replay, Dublin v Mayo. Croke Park, Dublin.



An Cabhán – JJ Reilly; Doire – Stephen Deeney, Aaron Devlin; Fear Manach – Malachy Mahon, Shane Mulholland, Pat King; Muineachán – Peter Sherry, Aidan Quigley; Tír Eoghain – Mick McCaughey.

Buíochas

My office is totally dependent on the support and co-operation of administrators at all levels of the Association; it is a rare occasion when this vital assistance is not forthcoming. The relationship between Uachtarán and Ard Stiúirthóir is particularly important, and I wish to thank Uachtarán, Aogán Ó Fearghail, for his advice and friendship over the past year. We have worked very well together; the strength and ease of our relationship has allowed us to agree a common approach on a range of issues. Aogán has brought great energy to the role of Uachtarán and his exceptional communications and interpersonal skills make him an outstanding ambassador for the GAA at home and abroad.

I am also grateful for the support of the members of Ard Chomhairle and Coiste Bainistíochta. However difficult or challenging the decision to be made, both bodies can be relied upon to deliberate calmly and to reach the decision that is

best for the GAA. Because of the impact of the five-year rule, the turnover of members on both committees is greater than in the past, but the loyalty and dedication of members is as strong as ever, which makes my job so much easier. I enjoy, too, a good working relationship with county and provincial secretaries; whether volunteer or full-time officials, their courtesy and assistance is unflinching, a quality equally prevalent among County Chairpersons and other county officers with whom my office comes in contact.

On a daily basis I am totally dependent on the work of the Croke Park staff. Their work ethic and determination to make the Association stronger and better equipped to meet its goals is impressive and unwavering. In this respect, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Lisa Clancy, who moved on from her role as Director of Communications in October after seven years of dedicated service to the GAA. Finally, I am indebted, in particular, to the staff of my office, to Treasa Ní Raghail, Operations Manager, Lorena Ní Chealligh and Áine Ní Mhainín, for their admirable patience and support.

Conclusion

Much reflection – and much commentary – was devoted in 2015 to our senior championship structures, to fixture scheduling and to player overtraining and burnout. In this context, Congress 2016 is an important gathering as there are critical decisions to be taken on all these issues. Where the structure of the football championship is concerned, once we decided – after long debate – to retain the provincial system, options were limited. And it is unlikely that hurling structures will change. If we do decide to change structures at Congress, the task will be to explain and market the new structures and to do our best to have them fulfil their potential. But if we decide *not* to change the structures, then let us accept the current structures as the best that are available to us, accept what has been agreed, and accept, too, that it is time to stop talking about structures and to deal with what *is* and not with what ought to be or might have been. Our time and energies will be needed to face the many other issues we need to address.

An important issue that has been growing silently for years, but that has never been directly addressed, is that of our grounds infrastructure, and, more specifically, its funding. It is becoming a problem that we can no longer evade. In my report to

“There is great vibrancy and enthusiasm in our clubs, the fruit of tremendous and heartening dedication by members committed to the ideals of the GAA. These are the people we need to support through our decisions at Congress. Guided by their spirit, we will not go far wrong.”



25 October 2015; A young Rathnew fan celebrates a point for her team. AIB Leinster GAA Senior Club Football Championship, Edenderry v Rathnew. O'Connor Park, Tullamore, Co. Offaly.

Congress last year, I dealt at length with the difficulties facing us in developing our main grounds. I highlighted the need to agree a long-term strategy dictated solely by our needs. Our National Facilities/Health and Safety Committee will shortly publish such a strategy, which, I am certain, will oblige us to face up to difficult choices, with major financial implications. It is imperative that the Association be ruthlessly realistic with itself when considering the development of grounds, as finance is set to become an even greater challenge to us than it is now. In the context of our competing with soccer and rugby for the Irish public's patronage, for commercial sponsorship and for Government financial support, we need to remind ourselves of the following financial facts of life:

- *we do not enjoy revenue from major international competitions such as European Championships and World Cups, as do the FAI and IRFU;*
- *we do not earn as much as these bodies for media rights;*
- *we do not receive any direct funding from international governing bodies.*

Such funding is vital for other sports for their promotion of and investment in their games. We have the same funding needs in terms of promotion and investment, and for the maintenance of our grounds to accepted, and expected, modern standards. But this is hugely expensive, as we know from the series of ambitious plans currently before us to develop grounds. Where is the money for this to come from? Either we increase our revenue sources, or we cut back in some areas. This is the brutal reality and choice that extensive grounds development inevitably sets before us. And it has to be clearly understood by all that it is unlikely that Croke Park will be able to continue to directly support counties financially as it has traditionally done while having to fund extensive grounds development from its own resources, and at the same time continue the vital investment in all the other areas that call for financial support, such as games development

and clubs. The decisions we make in the matter of grounds infrastructure must, therefore, be made in the financial and resources context I outline here.

In his report to his County Convention in December, Tyrone Secretary Dominic McCaughey wrote powerfully about the pressures on club volunteers, on the difficulties in recruiting club officers, and on the imbalance between training sessions and club games. These factors act as burdens on our club officers and are a source of huge frustration for our club players. He wrote of the need to attract more volunteers into leadership roles and to prevent 'officer burnout'. He lamented the fact, too, that the Association has become part of a 'training and coaching industry' (rather than a games association), a distortion of values and priorities in which senior club players can be expected to participate in five training sessions for every game played. He asks whether this is what the Association is supposed to be about. Tyrone is one of our strongest county units, so we would do well to sit up and listen when we hear such comments.

Dominic McCaughey is not the only one to have identified the issues that have created serious obstacles for clubs in their efforts to run their affairs and to offer their players a fair schedule of competitive matches. It seems to me that the choices we have made and the practices we have allowed to develop have led us to a point in the Association's development where we need to ask ourselves a fundamental question about our essential values, about what is the Association's most important work. For me, that work begins with the club. And the solution to the difficulties facing clubs is obvious: all of us, and especially our county officers, need to act *now* to rebalance our priorities in a way that our attentions are devoted more to our clubs and less to inter-county activities. The means to resolve the problems that we ourselves have created are available. We can be bold and decisive in overcoming the obstructions that are undermining our clubs. But do enough of us care about our club officers and club players to take

remedial action (and in so doing, where fixtures reform is concerned, help our young elite players). We in the GAA must never forget that, in our amateur games and volunteer association, the rewards and pleasures of playing our games and running our units must be available to all.

It is right that many of the comments I make here concern themselves with clubs, not just because of the difficulties and frustrations they face, but also because of what they represent. We are battered incessantly by news of global catastrophes and conflict, of powerful international forces overwhelming the smaller units of community. We are fortunate in Ireland that we still have a strong sense of community, although our communities in rural Ireland are struggling to survive the loss of the vital local presences of shops, post offices, banks and Garda stations. These communities are vital for the preservation of the Irish experience, of the much-loved daily pleasures of living in small Irish towns, villages and townlands. Small is beautiful, they say, and so it is with our clubs, because the beauty of the club is the beauty of community. I am always wary of being sentimental or complacent about the GAA's place in community life in Ireland, but, in the anxious times we live in, where the global and international seem to equate mostly with menace and distress, we can draw solace from the local, the small, the community, the club. This is where our Association began, where it lives and from where it draws its strength. There is great vibrancy and enthusiasm in our clubs, the fruit of tremendous and heartening dedication by members committed to the ideals of the GAA. These are the people we need to support through our decisions at Congress. Guided by their spirit, we will not go far wrong. Neglect them, and we lose touch with the heart and soul of the GAA.

Páirc Ó Dufaigh

**Páirc Ó Dufaigh
Ard Stiúrthóir**



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4 January 2015; A general view of Pairc Esler during the game.
Dr McKenna Cup, Round 1, Down v Cavan. Pairc Esler, Newry,
Co. Down.





GAA, Croke Park
Dublin 3
Fax +353 1 836 6420
Tel +353 1 836 3222

GAA, Páirc An Chrócaigh
Baile Átha Cliath 3
Faics +353 1 836 6420
Guthán +353 1 836 3222



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