

GAA Oral History Project

Interview Report Form

Name of Interviewer	Seamus Donnelly
Date of Interview	30 th Dec 2011
Location	Jody's home, near Coalisland
Name of Interviewee (Maiden name / Nickname)	Joseph (Jody) O'Neill
<u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u>	
Gender	Male
Born	Year Born: 1936 Home County: Tyrone
Education	Primary: Primate Dixon Primary School, Coalisland Secondary: St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon Third Level: College of Technology, Belfast
Family	Siblings: 5 siblings Current Family if Different: 11 children
Club(s)	Na Fianna GFC [Tyrone]
Occupation	Pharmacist
Parents' Occupation	Brick Worker [Father]; Housewife [Mother]
Religion	Roman Catholic
Political Affiliation / Membership	None
Other Club/Society Membership(s)	Fishing Club

REFERENCE NO. TY/1/35

Date of Report	25 th July 2012
Period Covered	1940s - 2011
Counties/Countries Covered	Tyrone
Key Themes Covered	Travel, Grounds, Playing, Training, Managing, Coaching, Officials, Administration, Celebrations, Fundraising, Education, Religion, Media, Emigration, Involvement in GAA abroad, Role of Clergy, Role of Teachers, Role of the Club in the Community, GAA Abroad, Identity, Rivalries, Irish Language, Culture, All-Ireland, Club History, County History, Irish History, Earliest Memories, Family Involvement, Childhood, Impact on Life, Career, Alcohol, Violence, Politics, Northern Ireland, The Troubles, Ban on Foreign Games and Dances, Retirement, Socialising, Relationships, Economy/ Economics
Interview Summary	<p>Jody O'Neill holds a distinguished place in Tyrone GAA history. Captain of the first team from the county to win an Ulster senior title in 1956 and subsequently a senior county manager, his involvement with teams – at club, school, college and county – straddle the decades from the middle to the late 20th century. The interview begins with recalling his early sporting experiences in Coalisland, kicking around with old tennis balls and makeshift footballs. His introduction to formal games came in a competition organised among the local Primary schools. He continues to chart his experience of football at St. Patrick's Academy in Dungannon and recalls memorable games and players he played with and against. Moving to third level, O'Neill explains his reasons for declining an offer to become involved with the Queen's University Sigerson Cup team. He discusses the years he played minor football with Tyrone and the transition to playing senior football. He explains the background to his appointment as team captain with Tyrone in 1956, aged just 19. That same year the county won its first ever Ulster title, winning another the following year. He recalls some of the games played, including the defeats in two All-Ireland semi-finals, and provides an insight into the characters and talents of a number of his team-mates, among them the famous Iggy Jones. After his retirement as a player, O'Neill entered into management and he documents his experiences with county minor, junior and senior teams. Included among these was the winning an All-Ireland junior title in 1968, an achievement which was followed by a trip to New York, a visit which is brought to life with reflections on the places seen and the</p>

	<p>people met. As well as county teams, O'Neill managed a number of club teams and these, too, are recalled. Throughout all this, O'Neill offers insights into how football was played at different times, how players prepared and how competitions were run. There is, for instance, fascinating information on the popularity of tournament games at 'Gaelic weeklies' in the 1950s. In addition to his sporting experiences, O'Neill offers frank appraisals of the impact of the Troubles – including chilling, first-hand accounts of the harassment encountered by some players - on the GAA in the north, as well as the role of the clergy. Finally, O'Neill comments critically on certain aspects of the modern game of Gaelic football and reflects on the breakthrough All-Ireland success of Tyrone in 2003.</p> <p>00:00:00 Introduction by Seamus Donnelly. Location of interview is Coalisland.</p> <p>00:00:15 Jody O'Neill notes that he was christened Joseph.</p> <p>00:00:27 Born in Clonoe parish in 1936. Father was Joseph, mother Sarah. Family moved to Coalisland because that was 'where the work was'.</p> <p>00:00:50 Mother was housewife, Father worked in brickyard and pipeyard.</p> <p>00:01:13 Recalls kicking a 'shamie ball' – an old tennis ball. Mentions there wasn't enough money to buy plastic football. Talks about his father doing gardening after hours and the interest of the manager of the local firm in tennis. Says any ball in the hedge was brought home.</p> <p>00:01:45 Refers also to using an 'old sock' for a football.</p> <p>00:02:00 Tells story of gathering potatoes aged 11 or 12 and asking for an old sock which they stuffed with hay and used as a football.</p> <p>00:02:30 Talks about living close to football field in Coalisland. Now Fr. Campbell Park, then McRory Park. Tells of being ballboys behind the goals and not being allowed on to the football field.</p> <p>00:02:50 Mentions the lack of formal games in the area. Refers to a local soccer team called Rangers, but that was 'taboo'. Says the ban was in force.</p> <p>00:03:10 Introduction to formal football was in primary school. Mentions competition among 4 local schools and the insight this gave into what was to come. Says everything was Gaelic</p>
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	<p>football oriented.</p> <p>00:03:47 Recalls his brother Patsy being 'mad about cricket' and playing the game when things got out of hand with the Gaelic.</p> <p>00:04:03 Mentions the 1947 Education Act and the introduction of the 11-plus. Mentions his good fortune in going to St. Patrick's Academy and his introduction to training by the sports master, Mr McIvor.</p> <p>00:04:40 Believes he was part of the first team to win a cup for the Academy – the Corn na nÓg for the under 14s. Says that things progressed from there.</p> <p>00:04:53 Playing football for the local minor team. Remarks that he was a physically big adolescent and says he played minor football for Tyrone and also played football at junior and senior football for Tyrone.</p> <p>00:05:44 Discusses introduction to senior county football with Tyrone. Playing against Derry in a challenge in McRory Park in Coalisland. Recalls that some players didn't turn up so he got into the forward line. He was not yet 17 years of age.</p> <p>00:06:45 School's football: Under 12 with Primate Dixon school; Corn na nÓg and MacRory Cup with St. Patrick's Academy, Dungannon. Recalls going to Letterkenny and having to win to get to MacRory cup semi-final. Mentions game ending in draw and tells of referee blowing final whistle as ball was going over the bar. Says 'all hell broke loose' and tells of clergy leaving the field to the players and the fight continuing.</p> <p>00:09:00 Mentions meeting John Hannigan from Donegal years later and his recollection of the punishment they received for their part in the fight.</p> <p>00:09:35 Playing minor football for Tyrone and for Ulster Colleges for three years. Refers to meeting Mattie McDonagh and playing with James McCartan.</p> <p>00:10:08 Playing junior and senior county football. Refers to attempts at being player-manager and discovering that 'you can't do it'. Refers to retiring from inter-county football, aged 32.</p> <p>00:10:40 Mentions being manager of Tyrone juniors in 1968, winning the All-Ireland and getting a trip to New York on the invitation of the Tyronemen's Association.</p>
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	<p>00:11:00 Says he played last bit of county football in 1969.</p> <p>00:11:17 Says he played senior inter-county football from the age of 17 to 32. Mentions how much he loved it and not spending much time with family. 'Football took over your life.'</p> <p>00:12:14 Qualifying as a pharmacist, getting a shop and working until 11 o'clock on Saturday nights. Refers also to weekday opening hours and trying to combine this with training and matches.</p> <p>00:12:55 First organised was with Primate Dixon primary school. It was under 12 and he has a photograph of the team. Mentions most of the children had neither boots or shoes. Says that boys in front row of photograph used borrowed boots.</p> <p>00:13:40 Talks about playing football in school yard but that this was first organised game.</p> <p>00:14:10 Recalls standout matches with St. Patrick's Academy: mentions the aforementioned game in Letterkenny and another game against Armagh College, with Kevin Beahan for Louth on their team. Refers to Beahan's reputation as a college's player.</p> <p>00:15:05 Talks about an incident against St. Malachy's. Mentions John Campbell being injured and doing umpire. Refers to 'all hell' breaking loose when a goal was flagged for a ball that went wide.</p> <p>00:15:50 Discusses the role of the dean, Dr. McLarnan, in organising football. Mr. Mclvor took over on his arrival as sportsmaster. Refers to Mclvor's efforts with his team and his approach to football and training.</p> <p>00:16:38 Individuals he played alongside in college: Fr. Oliver Breslin.</p> <p>00:16:50 Mentions being in Corn na nOg final against St. Colman's Newry. Discusses the talents of Jerry Butterfield, describing him as a 'genius like Peter Canavan.' Recalls preparing to take a sideline kick in game in Davitt Park, exchanging words with McLarnan on the line and ending up scoring a goal.</p> <p>00:18:40 Says he didn't play football in university and explains why. Mentions marrying young and playing with St. John's in Belfast, then the dominant team in Antrim.</p> <p>00:19:25 Refers to Mickey Brewster from Fermanagh asking</p>
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	<p>him to play with Queen's and to studying Pharmacy at the College of Technology. Talks about his concerns about getting hurt and missing exams.</p> <p>00:20:00 Talks about his club team at underage and present perceptions of the past. Says they had a 'magnificent team in 1952' when winning minor championship. Reflects on the standard of football and notes that half the team had represented the county. Mentions that most of that team disappeared afterwards, but that he was involved in another minor success in 1954.</p> <p>00:21:13 Considers why they were successful: refers to the quality of forwards – Jim Kavanagh, Frank O'Neill, John Timlin (now in Australia), Martin Looney (a 'great stylist'), Francie Donnelly, Joe Kenny, Pat Joe O'Neill and others.</p> <p>00:22:20 Playing for the local Na Fianna team in Coalisland and winning the county championship in 1955, backed by senior county players.</p> <p>00:23:10 Recalls, however, being the sole Na Fianna representative on the county team in 1956 and, a county champions, being nominated by his club.</p> <p>00:23:43 Reflects on the procedures for call-up to Tyrone team. Mentions trials between east and west, but recalls that he had become established elsewhere. Says the transition was 'plain sailing'.</p> <p>00:24:25 Highlights of club career: winning 1952 minor and 1955 senior county titles. Talks about the playing 'Gaelic weeklies', tournaments organised over a week by clubs as fundraisers. Going to Armagh, Derry, Donegal, Monaghan – 'journeys to places you never had been or would have been'. Refers to the craic whether you were pioneer or drinker. Mentions that he himself was a pioneer.</p> <p>00:26:00 Recalls playing on a good Coalisland senior team in the mid-1960s, playing a number of county finals and being beaten.</p> <p>00:26:30 Recalls the lack of money in clubs and people who were working 'chipping in' with petrol money. Refers to getting a mini-bus and players travelling together. Refers also to the poor state of roads and the lack of activity on them.</p> <p>00:27:40 Talks in general terms about the post-war years. Mentions that the Tyrone lads who won an Ulster title in 1956 had previously won minor medals. Says that 'things improved'</p>
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	<p>and there were 'wee bits of light training'.</p> <p>00:28:05 Recalls playing the Moneyglass club tournament in Toome and meeting Bellaghy in final. They were, he says, 'the team in Ulster' at the time. Recalls playing against Tom Scullion and the Diamonds and the satisfaction of beating them.</p> <p>00:29:44 Discusses Na Fianna's intense rivalry with Clonoe O'Rahilly's. Refers to the connections between schools and clubs and moving from Clonoe to Coalisland and the competitions between the town and country team. Said that over a 19 year period Coalisland had never beaten Clonoe. Recalls arranging a match with Jimmy O'Neill to break through this barrier. Leaving the town with 13 men, picking up 2 along the way and defeating Clonoe.</p> <p>00:32:03 Being asked by Jimmy O'Neill to play again the following Sunday. Mentions that Coalisland then went 11 years without losing to Clonoe.</p> <p>00:32:22 Description of football at the time: hard and physical. Discusses the zonal approach to the game. Remarks that the only player with latitude to roam was the midfielder, but the instruction was always to get back into position. Reflects that it prevented the game from developing and comments on the nature of the modern game.</p> <p>00:33:50 Call-up the county team: mentions playing with college team and minor teams and recalls there being more Minor trials than senior trials, with two teams picked out of east and west Tyrone. East and west teams would then play each other. Mentions the absence of training.</p> <p>00:34:55 Tells story of being collected by county chairman and his mother telling him that Joseph couldn't go unless his brother Malachy was also taken. Recalls being told to get out of car by his mother.</p> <p>00:36:04 Tells of playing minor football in an Ulster semi-final Clones and entering a cafe in the diamond in the town. Tells of his brother and Francie Donnelly eating all the sandwiches and the commotion it caused.</p> <p>00:37:55 Reflects on minor record with Tyrone. Recalls a semi-final in Casement Park against Armagh, jumping for a ball and hitting Pat Breslin, now a priest, on the shoulder. Says he broke his collar bone.</p> <p>00:38:56 Reflects on senior inter-county career with Tyrone: captaining the county to first Ulster title, aged 19, was a</p>
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	<p>highlight. Recalls trip to New York as ‘the best holiday..we ever had.’</p> <p>00:40:14 Recalls the visit to New York, the places visited. Fr. Peter Campbell, his wife’s Uncle, based in New York took him to Atlantic City. Going to see film ‘...Fight at the Ok Corral’; boat trips of Manhattan; New York China town; Times Square. Mentions that at the time he had been to Dublin and Belfast, but didn’t ‘know what the world was like’.</p> <p>00:41:07 Meeting with Mr. McElroy, the Police Commissioner with connections to Carrickmore, and with Mayor O’Dwyer with connections to Bohola, Co. Mayo.</p> <p>00:41:30 Going to Waldorf Astoria, playing in the Polo Grounds and Gaelic Park against a New York selection. Mentions having a photo of entering Gaelic Park – describes the appearance of the ground and recalls a sign near the field: ‘Donations for the IRA’. Suspects that the photograph, which was developed in Belfast, was handed on to the police.</p> <p>00:43:00 Mentions the disappointment of losing to Galway 0-8 to 0-6.</p> <p>00:43:23 Refers to invitation from Tyronemen’s Association and to their visit being contingent on Galway beating Kerry in National League final. Says that GAA wouldn’t have allowed two teams travel in same year.</p> <p>00:44:00 Winning back to back Ulster titles, playing Louth in All-Ireland semi-final and marking Kevin Beahan. Recalls it as an occasion he played above what he thought he could play. Mentions getting a thigh injury in game and losing Frank Higgins and Donal Donnelly to injuries. Louth won by 5 points. Believes that had the three of them remained on the field for the full game, they may have won.</p> <p>00:45:35 Reflects on the celebrations on winning Ulster title: supporters coming over fence and players being hoisted on shoulders. Recalls being in the Creighton Hotel afterwards and bringing the cup over to his father and his friends. Recalls being encouraged to take a drink and his father saying ‘What ever you like, son.’ Says he remained a pioneer.</p> <p>00:47:50 Considers the best players he played with for Tyrone: Talks about the reputation of Iggy Jones, describing him as a ‘freak in his ability’ and likens his talents to those of players in subsequent generations: McKenna, Dooher, Canavan. Says Iggy Jones was the ‘first God’ in his lifetime.</p> <p>00:49:09 Refers to Frankie Donnelly from Carrickmore and</p>
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	<p>compares him to Jones. Describes him as a 'supreme finisher'. Talks about him leading the scoring stats and scoring 4-11 in a game against Fermanagh in Pomeroy.</p> <p>00:50:08 Recalls being called over by Paddy O'Neill, the county secretary, and being asked not to let Frankie to hit a penalty when the team was well ahead. Says penalty was given to Iggy Jones who kicked it over the bar. Mentions meeting Frankie years later when he was ill and not forgetting being deprived of taking penalty.</p> <p>00:51:40 Talks about Frankie's religious commitment: says he was a pioneer and would always get home for his religious devotions. Mentions that others wouldn't want to 'ride in that particular car. Talks also about Frankie's working life, and 'shouldering 200 weight bags' onto lorries from 16 years of age.</p> <p>00:53:00 Refers to Iggy Jones and Frankie Donnelly. Also talks about Mick Cushnahan, Paddy Corry from Omagh, Jim Devlin.</p> <p>00:53:40 Best players played against: talks about Frank Ivers from Galway outplaying him in All-Ireland semi-final. Talks about Ivers as an army man and a 'bear' of man. Mentions Mattie McDonagh, Derry's Jim McKeever. Says he never played against Cathal O'Leary from Dublin.</p> <p>00:55:10 Lowpoints in inter-county experience: recalls managing Tyrone in 1973, winning Ulster championship and playing Cork in semi-final. Recalls the conclusion to that game and hoping the ground would 'swallow' him up afterwards. Describes Cork as a great team with Jimmy Barry Murphy, Jimmy Barrett, O'Leary.</p> <p>00:56:42 Talks about his experiences in team management: explains the background to taking over Tyrone in the early 1960s, when he 'reluctantly agreed'. Winning junior All-Ireland in 1968 and managing senior team subsequently. Recounts the record of the Tyrone seniors in the early 1970s and the reasons for stepping down.</p> <p>00:58:09 Returning to management in the late 1970s because 'they couldn't get anyone'. Comments that the quality of player was 'average' and recalls going to meet the county board and the exchange with the officers. Says that 11 days before the National League started, he took over the team and reflects on the performances through that league and his decision to step down.</p>
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	<p>01:01:06 Managing at club level, bringing Maghery to a county final. Managing Ballinderry and getting to county final. Remarks that it was not his expertise but the quality of the two teams at the time.</p> <p>01:01:50 Scoring forwards: recalls Tyrone playing Cavan in 1947 against Cavan. Mentions Jim Devlin, later shot during the troubles. Tells story of being asked his opinion of the game the day after and being told that 'forwards win matches'. Believes this is still true and refers to Tyrone with Canavan and to modern Kerry teams.</p> <p>01:03:35 Considers the impact of the Troubles on the GAA: believes that football in Ulster would have broken through earlier but for Troubles. Mention Vincent Skelton, taxi driver for Tyrone team, wouldn't collect players without an 'outrider'. Recalls being stopped going to and from training. Tells story of meeting UDR roadblock one night. Five men were hooded and they hit them with the 'butts of the rifles'. One of them spoke in Irish and when he responded he was hit. Mentions knowing one of the UDR who put a gun to one of the player's heads and to another player 'praying out loud'.</p> <p>01:07:10 Reference to speed camera and road blocks and being stopped on a regular basis.</p> <p>01:07:50 Says they were 'most unsympathetic' towards Gaelic people. Says they weren't going to put of 'our games'.</p> <p>01:08:21 Remarks that Coalisland, Ardboe, Clonoe area was badly affected and suggests that it had more young men die per head of population than anywhere else in the north.</p> <p>01:08:35 Remarks on it being 'hard times for everyone'.</p> <p>01:08:53 Suggests that about the time the Ceasefire talks had come about, footballers emerged in Tyrone and Armagh and 'showed their mettle'.</p> <p>01:09:26 Hunger strikes: recalls divisiveness of the time. Says that players couldn't escape, couldn't speak out or say no. Remarks that all the young men, because of the harassment they were receiving, became Sinn Féin followers.</p> <p>01:10:22 Talks about the role of the clergy in the GAA and remarks that they played a 'very passive role', except at times of funerals of IRA members. Suggests they were responding to orders from the Cardinal on 'how to behave'. Says he didn't expect them to be vociferous or anti-British. Remarks on Fr. Faul and what he did for the prisoners in Long Kesh, he says</p>
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	<p>he spoke on behalf of Catholic population.</p> <p>01:12:13 Jody states that he never got involved. Says 'you could be very sympathetic while not agreeing with the way it was done.'</p> <p>01:12:45 Reflects on what the GAA mean to him: part of the 'fabric of your working life'. Mentions that his area was totally Catholic and it was the thing to do. Says you didn't play soccer.</p> <p>01:13:47 Refers to the 1947 Education Act as 'liberating' the Catholic people of the north and said they would still be a 'backward' people without it.</p> <p>01:14:15 GAA clubs kept Irishness and nationalism alive. Expresses the hope that there is more of what happened in the previous decade.</p> <p>01:14:58 Reflects on the GAA of 2011: comments on the rules and criticises the shoulder charge and the injuries caused. Suggests the shoulder charge is not even getting a bad press and should be - the rules need to be cleared up.</p> <p>01:16:40 Comments on the ladies football tackle and contrasts with the men's game. The tackle can be 'a graceful thing' instead something that's 'animalistic'.</p> <p>01:17:15 Remarks on the tendency to 'have a go'. Refers to the integration of society – attending same schools and chapels – and changing on the field of play. Contrasts the observance of the rules of other sports with that of Gaelic games.</p> <p>01:18:18 Managing minor team with Benny Corr, who had spent 8 years in Long Kesh. Recalls him saying he played against a 'screw' the evening before.</p> <p>01:19:20 Refers to the 'animalistic' growl when players start shoulder charging on the field – says it's about 'superiority' and that it shouldn't be that way.</p> <p>01:19:57 Recollections of Tyrone's All-Ireland success in 2003. Recalls Eugene McKenna and Art McCrory falling out in 2002 and Mickey Harte coming in. Talks about walking with Sean Quinn in the town and him saying that the 'best manager is the lucky manager' and that Harte had been lucky up to then.</p> <p>01:21:33 Mentions thinking that Tyrone was near to something but not an All-Ireland. Mentions the influence of</p>
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	<p>Paddy Tally, moving the team into a new phase of conditioning and training. Everything was planned. Talks about the lack of physique in the team prior to 2003 and how it changed. Says Tyrone set down a 'marker' for other counties.</p> <p>01:24:19 Recalls going onto the field after 2003 final and picking a divet of grass from the field. Comments on the generous response of Armagh team who 'stood up as great Irishmen' that day.</p>
Involvement in GAA	<p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Player <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Manager <input type="checkbox"/> Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Committee Member <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caterer <input type="checkbox"/> Jersey Washer <input type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p>
Record as a Player (Titles won; Length of time played)	N/A
Record as an Administrator (Positions held; how long for)	N/A
Format	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual
Duration	Length of Interview: 01:25:07
Language	English

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To be filled in by Interviewer:

I hereby assign the copyright of the content of the above to the GAA Oral History Project on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner. I understand that I am giving the GAA Oral History Project the right to use and make available to the public the content of this interview.

Signed: Seamus Donnelly

Date: 30th Dec 2011