

*Conor Curran*

‘It has almost been an  
underground movement’.  
The Development of Grassroots  
Football in Regional Ireland:  
the Case of the Donegal League,  
1971–1996

ABSTRACT

This article assesses the development of association football at grassroots’ level in County Donegal, a peripheral county lying in the north-west of the Republic of Ireland. Despite the foundation of the County Donegal Football Association in 1894, soccer organisers there were unable to develop a permanent competitive structure for the game until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the more ambitious teams were generally forced to affiliate with leagues in nearby Derry city. In discussing the reasons for this lack of a regular structure, this paper will also focus on the success of the Donegal League, founded in 1971, in providing a season long calendar of games. It also looks at soccer administrators’ rivalry with those of Gaelic football there, and the impact of the nationalist Gaelic Athletic Association’s ‘ban’ on its members taking part in what the organisation termed ‘foreign games’. In particular, the extent to which the removal of the ‘ban’ in 1971 helped to ease co-operation between organisers of Gaelic and Association football will be explored.

Keywords: *Association football; Gaelic football; Donegal; Ireland; Donegal League; Gaelic Athletic Association*

## Introduction

The nationalist Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), which is today the leading sporting organisation in Ireland despite its players having to adhere to its amateur ethos, has its origins in the efforts of schoolteacher and journalist Michael Cusack, who was eager to reform Irish athletics which was dominated by elitism and poorly governed in the early 1880s. He was also keen to revive traditional Irish football and hurling for work-

ers excluded from athletics. It was this desire which was fundamental to his and Maurice Davin's organisation of the GAA at a meeting on 1 November 1884 in Thurles, County Tipperary.<sup>1</sup> According to Richard Holt, the foundation of "the GAA was also part of a much wider international phenomenon: the creation of modern sport."<sup>2</sup> It was also part of the Gaelic Revival which was taking place in Ireland at the time and Roy Foster has stated that it was "the first landmark, emphasising physical training in the manner of contemporary Czech gymnastic clubs, and constructing a powerful rural network."<sup>3</sup> Events such as Bloody Sunday, when 14 people were killed by British soldiers while attending a Gaelic football match at the GAA's national stadium, Croke Park, in 1920, allowed the organisation to strengthen its nationalist identity.<sup>4</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the GAA also acted as a counter to the introduction and presence of sports in Ireland which had their origins in Britain including association football, cricket, hockey and rugby. In 1971, the GAA's 'ban' on its members participating in these so-called 'foreign games' was removed from the organisation's regulations.<sup>5</sup> Generally known as 'the ban', it was one of a number of restrictive rules including that which excluded members of British military forces from joining the GAA. In addition, GAA members were prohibited from attending dances run by the British military or those related to so called 'foreign games'. GAA clubs were also forbidden to organise events at which 'foreign dances' took place.<sup>6</sup> Since 1901, GAA members who attended or participated in these 'foreign games' could, if reported, be suspended for "up to two years" from participating in the GAA's codes.<sup>7</sup> Paul Rouse has stated that "initially, the 'ban' was introduced for organisational and administrative purposes; it later acquired a political dimension; but it was only in the decades after independence that it attained extreme ideological importance."<sup>8</sup> Opinion was divided between those who thought it was a crucial part of the GAA's identity and history, and others who felt that the only thing it resulted in was "the provocation of rampant hypocrisy

- 1 Cf. Paul Rouse: *Why the GAA was Founded*, in: Dónal McAnallen/David Hassan/Roddy Hegarty (eds.): *The Evolution of the GAA: Ulaidh, Éire agus Eile*, Armagh 2009, pp. 79–85, pp. 84 f.
- 2 Richard Holt: *Ireland and the Birth of Modern Sport*, in: Mike Cronin/William Murphy/Paul Rouse (eds.): *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884–2009*, Dublin 2009, pp. 33–46, p. 33.
- 3 Roy Foster: *Modern Ireland 1600–1972*, London 1988, p. 447.
- 4 Cf. Mike Cronin: *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic games, Soccer and Irish Identity since 1884*, Dublin 1999, p. 87.
- 5 Cf. *Donegal Democrat*: 16 April 1971, p. 13.
- 6 Cf. Paul Rouse: *The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland: A History of the GAA Ban on Foreign Games 1884–1971. Part One: 1884–1921*, in: *International Journal of the History of Sport* 10:3 (1993), pp. 333–360, p. 333.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 334.

and deceit within the GAA.”<sup>9</sup> Mike Cronin has written that “the introduction of the ‘ban’ was to ensure the popularity and success of the Association, and in response to the political spirit which dominated Irish life at the time. It was not introduced as a statement of political ideology.”<sup>10</sup> As the 20<sup>th</sup> century wore on, there were many who felt that it was becoming increasingly unnecessary, and many who ignored it, as Gaelic games became more firmly established within Irish society although, as noted above, it was not removed from the GAA’s constitution until the 1970s.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that similarities in playing techniques in both codes meant that players could switch between Gaelic and Association football quite easily. Despite the presence of the ‘ban’ until the early 1970s, not every GAA county board could afford to implement this punishment, particularly in rural areas where teams who lost too many players could not survive.<sup>12</sup> However, in many areas the rule was taken seriously and players who were involved in non-GAA codes and were active members of the GAA lived in fear of being caught and reported.<sup>13</sup> It did have an impact on participation in other sports and this was not unique to Donegal, with the Spa United soccer club in Kilkenny said to have disbanded in 1964 because of the ‘ban’ and a lack of finance.<sup>14</sup> Carrick-on-Shannon soccer club Carrick AFC of County Leitrim apparently survived for only one year in the 1950s, with one reporter of the view that neither witch-hunting nor the Spanish Inquisition “could hold a candle to the GAA Ban.”<sup>15</sup> The advent of televised soccer matches by the late 1950s made a mockery of the GAA’s ‘ban’, as it rendered monitoring of would-be offenders impossible if, for example, they chose to watch soccer in their own homes.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the system of appointment of vigilance committees to monitor players’ movements was becoming more publicly frowned upon, with one reporter stating at that time that “whatever can be said for the ever-controversial BAN nothing at all can be said by any sporting organisation for the method of enforcing it... to have a system of spying (only a hard word for the ‘vigilance’ idea) on fellow members surely must undermine the very roots of a sporting body.”<sup>17</sup> One writer has suggested that Limerick hurling legend Mick

9 Ibid.

10 Mike Cronin: *Sport and Nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic Games, Soccer and Irish Identity Since 1884*, Dublin 1999, p. 85.

11 Cf. Diarmaid Ferriter: *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000*, London 2004, p. 427.

12 Cf. Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport in Donegal, 1880–1935*, Cork 2015, pp. 217–221.

13 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 220.

14 Cf. *Kilkenny People*, 21 July 1972, p. 22.

15 *Leitrim Observer*, 1 Feb. 1975, p. 11.

16 Cf. *Donegal News*, 20 June 1959, p. 2 and *Anglo-Celt*, 2 May 1964, p. 11.

17 *Ibid.*

Mackey was put on his local vigilance committee so that he could attend rugby and soccer to watch these games himself, illustrating the farcical nature of this structure.<sup>18</sup>

Some GAA players took to using false names or abstained from team photographs while participating in the so-called 'foreign games', with Brian McEniff, who managed Donegal to their first All-Ireland Gaelic football championship in 1992, playing soccer under an 'alias' in the League of Ireland with Cork Hibernians and Drumcondra in the 1960s.<sup>19</sup> Others felt that they could get away with it because of their playing quality, with Kerry-born Jimmy Joy, who won an All-Ireland Gaelic football final with Dublin in the 1940s, of the view that the GAA would not suspend a player if he was good enough.<sup>20</sup> Joy had played for and captained the Blackrock Rugby Club during the same period, and having been initially reported for playing rugby, his suspension was lifted by the GAA in 1942 apparently because the person who informed on him was not officially part of a vigilance committee.<sup>21</sup>

While the history of the GAA has been very well chartered, particularly in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, less has been written about how the removal of the 'ban' in 1971 impacted on other sports.<sup>22</sup> Using Donegal, a peripheral county lying in the north-west of the Republic of Ireland as a case study, this article mainly deals with two forms of grassroots football and the rivalry between organisers, although the overwhelming focus is on association football and on men's leagues. While the GAA's 'ban' and its presence in Donegal hindered the growth of soccer there to some extent, soccer's own organisers were unable to put together a system for all the county's clubs for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It illustrates that while the organisation of competitive soccer may have been boosted by the removal of the 'ban' in the early 1970s, tensions remained between GAA and soccer organisers within Donegal and also in other counties. It will show that by the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, GAA players were still restricted in committing to both soccer and GAA teams simultaneously, but this was for practical considerations and this discouragement of participation in other codes by GAA administrators was rather different to the philosophical 'ban' removed in 1971.

Soccer had initially been more prominent than Gaelic football in many parts of Ireland, particularly in Donegal, where the latter was slow to develop.<sup>23</sup> While the

18 Irish Farmers Journal, 24 Aug. 1991, p. 27.

19 Evening Herald, 9 Feb. 1993, p. 46.

20 Cf. City Tribune, 24 May 1996, p. 23.

21 Cf. *ibid.* See also Sunday Independent, 18 July 2010, p. 29.

22 See for example, Mike Cronin/William Murphy/Paul Rouse (eds.): *The Gaelic Athletic Association 1884–2009*; Mike Cronin/Mark Duncan/Paul Rouse: *The GAA: A People's History*, Cork 2009, and Mike Cronin/Mark Duncan/Paul Rouse: *The GAA: County by County*, Cork 2011.

23 Cf. Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport in Donegal, 1880–1935*, pp. 163–167 and Neal Garnham: *Association football and society in pre-partition Ireland*, Belfast 2004, pp. 2–31.

organisation of soccer for all clubs in Donegal faltered after the failure of the Donegal Football Association in the late 1890s, it remained a popular game in many areas, and was kept alive through localised competitions and connections with Derry city and Scotland. However, it was not until the foundation of the Donegal Junior League in 1971 that an annual calendar of competitive fixtures became available for aspiring clubs. By that time, the GAA had been running regular competitions for all Gaelic football clubs in the county for over 50 years. This paper therefore initially looks at the earlier development of soccer in Donegal prior to the 1970s and considers how, despite many failures in the organisation of a county league, soccer organisers were able to begin to implement a permanent structure for clubs, beginning in 1971. It then goes on to focus mainly on events in the first 25 years of the Donegal League's existence in light of soccer organisers' relationships with those responsible for the administration of Gaelic football, while addressing some other problems soccer clubs faced with player registration.

## Soccer in Donegal

Donegal, lying in the extreme north-west of the island of Ireland and one of the Republic of Ireland's 26 counties, provides an interesting case study in terms of analysing the growth of grassroots soccer in Western Europe. The game has been played there since the 1880s, but, despite sporadic attempts to develop a competitive structure for all the county, it was not until the 1970s that a league structure became a regular part of Donegal's sporting life. Initially, there were a number of reasons why the game spread there in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The desire to provide sport for shop apprentices, the presence of the military, seasonal migration and the influence of cultural boundaries were all significant, and by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, soccer was well-established around the county, although competitive structures were sporadic and inconsistent in their nature.<sup>24</sup>

The county lacked any major industries and was divided physically by the Derryveagh and Blue Stack mountains, with transport links underdeveloped. Sport was more likely to develop in the east of the county, which was generally more prosperous than areas around the coastline although some towns had established a thriving sporting scene in the years before the First World War, particularly Ballyshannon in the south.<sup>25</sup> However, the county generally lagged behind more urbanised areas such as Belfast and Dublin in the Sporting 'Revolution' of the era. Patronage was crucial for

24 Cf. Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport in Donegal*, pp. 167–170.

25 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 20–28 and pp. 65–69.

localised sport to flourish, with a few soccer cups held in the early 1900s, having been donated by businessmen with an interest in the game.<sup>26</sup>

Donegal has produced more English football league players than any other peripheral Irish county and this can possibly be attributed to the strong tradition of soccer which prevails in the north-east of the county, where links with Scotland and Derry City and a tradition of cup football in villages such as Ramelton, Rathmullan, Milford and Cranford have meant that the GAA has failed to significantly penetrate this region.<sup>27</sup> In the period from 1888 until 1939, five Donegal-born footballers were recorded as playing in the English Football League, with Kerrykeel-born Billy Gillespie becoming the first Irish-born player to captain an FA Cup winning team, when Sheffield United defeated Cardiff City at Wembley in 1925.<sup>28</sup> Between 1945 until 2010, nine Donegal-born players appeared in the English and Premier Leagues, with both Shay Given and Seamus Coleman captaining the Republic of Ireland.<sup>29</sup> With the dislocated state of the organisation of soccer in the county for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, this is remarkable in itself, but these figures pale in significance when compared to some cities. Figures for players born in the Republic of Ireland's capital city, Dublin, indicated that 322 of the 500 Irish football migrants who appeared in English league soccer between 1945 and 2010 were born there.<sup>30</sup>

With no established competitive structure for all soccer clubs in Donegal until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, soccer was still able to develop, but it required the efforts of individual clubs and localised cup committees to prosper.<sup>31</sup> By the early 1970s, the south and south-west of Donegal could be described as GAA strongholds, with few soccer clubs in existence there, while most of the soccer activity took place in the north-east.<sup>32</sup> The value of competitive soccer, as opposed to friendly matches, had been highlighted in the county in the 1920s when the GAA county board began to provide Gaelic football league and championship competitions for young men and their clubs on an annual basis throughout the county.<sup>33</sup> Soccer organisers failed to do this and to unite the code's clubs in a competitive, season-long calendar of matches, and the GAA county board, despite problems such as low levels of finance and emigration, grew in strength and created a county "identity" for Gaelic football in Donegal.<sup>34</sup> While some soccer

26 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 174–176.

27 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 170–191.

28 Cf. Conor Curran: *Irish Soccer Migrants: a Social and Cultural History*, Cork 2017, p. 1, p. 27.

29 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 30 and Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport in Donegal 1880–1935*, p. 232.

30 Cf. Conor Curran: *Irish Soccer Migrants. A Social and Cultural History*, p. 29.

31 Cf. Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport in Donegal, 1880–1935*, pp. 179–186.

32 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 179.

33 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 135, p. 152 and p. 226.

clubs in Donegal did play in leagues in Derry and in localised cup competitions, these were of little use to clubs dislocated from the heart of soccer activity in the north-east given the physical geography of Donegal with difficulties in travel along with cultural boundaries evident. Therefore, the development of soccer was weakened greatly in south and south-west Donegal. These areas also generally lacked dedicated organisers of cup competitions, as, with the exception of Ballyshannon and Killybegs, soccer clubs were scarce there. Competitions, as opposed to friendly matches, were a key factor in the development of sporting codes involving teams in Donegal.<sup>35</sup>

## Earlier Soccer Competitions

Prior to 1971, Donegal's soccer clubs generally had to rely on locally organised cup competitions and leagues, with Letterkenny Crusaders, said to be the county's top team in 1957, participating in competitions such as the Letterkenny Summer Cup along with tournaments in Milford, Raphoe, Convoy, Buncrana and Lifford, usually run and initiated by local men with a passion for soccer.<sup>36</sup> Generally speaking, the north-east of Donegal, particularly the Inishowen peninsula, could be said to be a soccer dominated area, while the south-west and south of the county have been Gaelic football strongholds since the 1920s, although there have been some soccer clubs from these areas, such as Killybegs Emeralds, which have challenged those further north throughout the years. It was the organisation of a GAA county board in Donegal in 1919, and its administrators' ability to regularly organise and promote competitive matches, which meant that soccer's prowess declined in some areas as they lacked the manpower to sustain two different types of football code, while the GAA's 'ban' on its members playing so-called 'foreign games' meant that soccer struggled in villages with small populations. Gaelic football had stronger nationalist ties, its organisers in Donegal were also able to conduct a well-run press campaign against soccer, and they also publicised their events more effectively.<sup>37</sup>

Some Donegal teams did organise their own competitions, but it was not until 1930 that a County Donegal Cup was again held. Again, this lasted only briefly, with transport and financial difficulties, along with rivalry from GAA-run competitions, ensuring that the whole county failed to unite for soccer purposes.<sup>38</sup> By the early 1930s, as shown in this map of areas hosting soccer competitions in Donegal between 1906 and 1934, competitive soccer was generally more prominent in the north-east

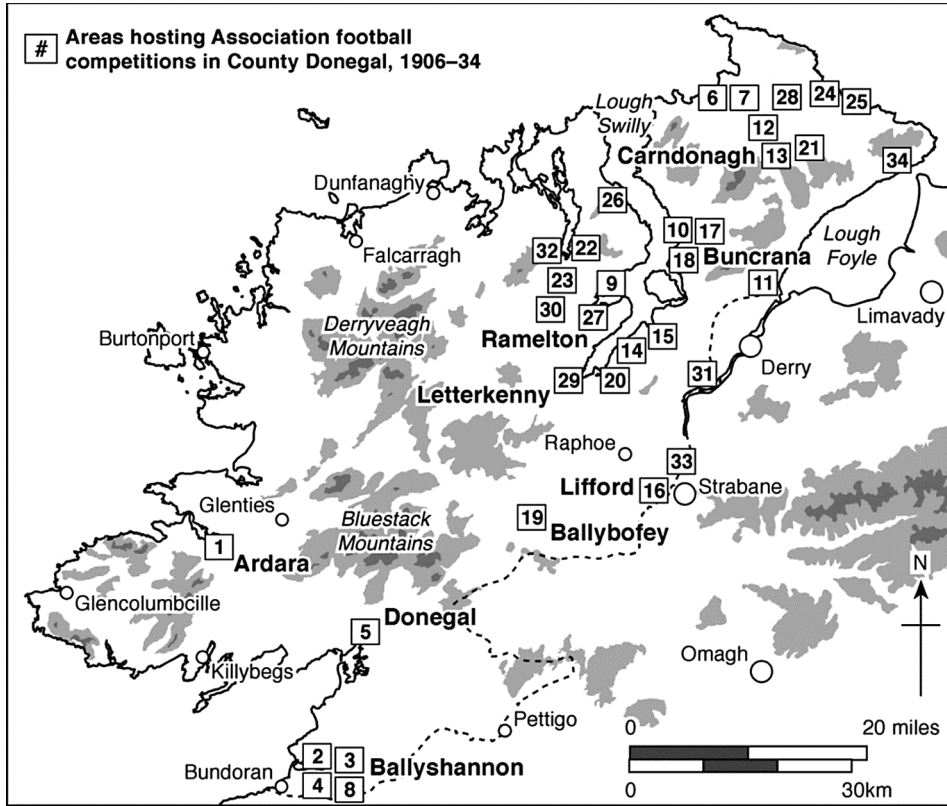
35 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 174.

36 Cf. *Donegal News*, 12 Oct. 1957, p. 6.

37 Cf. Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport in Donegal, 1880–1935*, pp. 199–222.

38 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 170–191.

area of the Inishowen peninsula, with links to Derry city a major factor in this. However, Donegal's soccer organisers failed to set up a permanent league for all the county's clubs for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The GAA in Donegal held county championships since 1919 while the development of their inter-county team, albeit slowly, meant that supporters could feel some sense of county identity in regards to Gaelic football.



Map “Areas hosting Association football competitions in County Donegal, 1906–34” by Matthew Stout, © Conor Curran



## The (Re-)Foundation of a Donegal Football Association 1952

By the early 1950s, the Buncrana Cup was still popular in that area, and by 1953, an East Donegal Cup was operational, while competitions were also prominent in Convooy, Ballybofey and Rathmullan.<sup>39</sup> However, the south-west and south of the county were areas in which the GAA had a strong grip, with the result that Gaelic football, rather than soccer, was dominant there. There had been some attempts by the Football Association of Ireland (FAI) to get competitive soccer organised more comprehensively in Donegal. In June 1952, at a meeting of the national football governing body's junior committee, the hosting of a conference in Lifford was discussed by Mr Wickham as being "the way forward for football in Donegal". It was noted that "the committee in Dublin had tried several times to have a Donegal County Committee formed but without success. It was a difficult challenge in view of the border and scattered centres of population in the county."<sup>40</sup>

In October 1952, following a visit to Letterkenny from the FAI's Mr Wickham "and other Central Council officers"<sup>41</sup>, a Donegal Football Association was established. L. McMenamin, a Ballybofey native and goalkeeper with a number of teams, was "well known in Donegal soccer circles" and was named as chairman and treasurer, while secretary, P. Harte of Lifford was also a player and said to be "equally well known in the north of the county."<sup>42</sup>

The geographic spread of the clubs involved in 1952 illustrates the lack of soccer clubs in the south and south-west and this point, with only three entries from this area out of a total of 16.<sup>43</sup> The league was said to have been sponsored by the FAI with trophies provided while it was intended to arrange minor and juvenile competitions as well.<sup>44</sup> At a league meeting in November 1952, an appeal was made to the clubs for better co-operation and to "play a bigger part in the fostering of it."<sup>45</sup> Interest was maintained in the league in the first half of the 1950s, and the game remained an important part of society in some areas including the west of the county, where links to Scotland were strong. It appears the league was played on a regional basis with the

39 Donegal News, 18 March 1950, p. 2, 26 June 1953, p. 5, 11 July 1953, p. 1 and 17 Oct. 1953, p. 4.

40 Football Association of Ireland Papers, Minute Book of the Junior Committee of the FAI. Junior Committee Minutes, 14 Oct. 1952, p. 131/137.

41 Donegal Democrat, 3 Oct. 1952, p. 2.

42 Ibid.

43 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 17 Oct. 1952, p. 6.

44 Cf. Donegal News, 4 Oct. 1952, p. 4.

45 Donegal News, 22 Nov. 1952, p. 5.

winner of each region then meeting each other.<sup>46</sup> In April 1955, islanders Arranmore Hibernians defeated Letterkenny Crusaders in the final at Burtonport with Paddy Ban O'Donnell scoring the winning goal.<sup>47</sup> The *Donegal News* vividly described events at the end of the game:

Amid scenes of unprecedented enthusiasm and excitement, and cheered to the echo by the huge crowd, the men in green won the Donegal League trophy for the 'Rose of Arranmore.' The referee had hardly had the whistle to his lips to signal the end of the game when hundreds of wildly-cheering exuberant men, women and children, swarmed across the field to raise their heroes shoulder high in victory ... a battery of amateur photographers, waving flags, and a band, scarcely audible above the din of a thousand delighted supporters-such was the scene for fully half-an-hour afterwards. At last the band was able to take up position and lead the team in triumph into Burtonport, with the vast strong [crowd] still cheering wildly bringing up the rear.<sup>48</sup>

As well as migrational connections, cultural and economic links with Scotland were key to keeping the game alive in West Donegal. Soccer had been played there since the 1890s at least with Derrybeg Celtic winning the Donegal FA Cup three years in a row while Keadue Rovers were founded in 1896 by two brothers who had experience of the game in Scotland.<sup>49</sup> By the early 1900s, localised competitions were taking place in the west Donegal area.<sup>50</sup>

Migration to Scotland was common from the area and the mother of Scottish-born 1968 European Cup winner Pat Crerand had been born in Gweedore.<sup>51</sup> By the late 1960s, Crerand was said to be "a regular visitor to Gweedore" and "well known over the district."<sup>52</sup> In July 1969, he brought Jim Brogan, Bobby Lennox and Hugh Gallagher there for a cabaret programme.<sup>53</sup> Interest in soccer remained strongest in the north-east and at times Scottish clubs visited for matches.

However, by the late 1950s, the league appears to have disbanded, but other leagues referred to as the Donegal League appeared in 1961 and 1964, the latter con-

46 Cf. *ibid.*

47 *Donegal News*, 23 April 1955, p. 3.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Cf. Conor Curran: *Sport in Donegal: A History*, Dublin 2010, p. 25, pp. 59–64.

50 Cf. *Donegal News*, 3 June 1967, p. 2. On Sunday 5 June, 1905 Gweedore defeated the Rosses by 2–1 in the final of a cup competition.

51 Cf. *Donegal Diaspora: Pobal Domhanda: Pat Crerand*, retrieved from <http://www.donegal-diaspora.ie/people/pat-crerand> [accessed 18 March 2018].

52 *Donegal News*, 5 July 1969, p. 9.

53 Cf. *ibid.*

sisting of 11 teams based mainly in the north-east.<sup>54</sup> Localised competitions were still run with Letterkenny having a thriving soccer scene. The local club at the time, Crusaders, founded in 1951, were winners of the Bunrana, Raphoe and Letterkenny cups in 1957 and reached the semi-final of the Convoy Cup.<sup>55</sup> Despite this, their success appears to have been built on the fielding of non-local players, with one reporter suggesting that “the expense and difficulties of bringing in outside players from Derry and Sligo frequently, could be better turned to coaching and training of local talent.”<sup>56</sup> This publicly known professionalism within a level of the game that was supposedly amateur will be returned to later. In 1963, Letterkenny Rovers were founded, and by late 1967, their youth team had been set up.<sup>57</sup>

Travelling, a difficulty for Donegal’s early soccer pioneers given the awkward terrain and poor transport infrastructure, was still a problem by the late 1950s, with the organisers of the East Donegal League ‘reluctantly’ deciding to confine the teams involved to that area because of this and ‘other difficulties’ in October 1959 at the league’s founding meeting.<sup>58</sup> Some Donegal soccer clubs in the north-east of the county did find a higher standard of competitive football by affiliating with the North-West Football Association, and later the Derry and District League, which was based in Derry City, but generally the majority of the county’s soccer clubs did not participate in these leagues or cups.<sup>59</sup>

Donegal was not unique in its lack of permanent structures for leagues and cup competitions for junior clubs. Despite the common perception that soccer in regional Ireland did not develop until after the televised 1966 World Cup and the removal of the ‘ban’, there is significant evidence that the game maintained a strong presence before these developments although many counties had a poor infrastructure for it.<sup>60</sup> Numerous rural areas in the Republic of Ireland hosted localised competitions, but competitions in the Irish Free State (the name given to independent Ireland from 1922–1937) were generally held on a regional basis. At the beginning of 1922, there were around 200 clubs registered with the FAI which had regional associations in place for Leinster, Belfast and District, Athlone and District and Munster.<sup>61</sup> Some clubs in Sligo, Roscommon, Mayo, Galway and Donegal did affiliate to the Con-

54 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 24 Feb. 1961, p. 4 and Donegal News, 14 Nov. 1964, p. 4.

55 Cf. Donegal News, 12 Oct. 1957, p. 6.

56 Ibid.

57 Cf. Donegal News, 27 May 1967, p. 2 and 16 Dec. 1967, p. 8.

58 Conor Curran: *Sport in Donegal: A History*, Dublin 2010, p. 55, p. 60; Donegal News, 10 Oct. 1959.

59 Cf. Conor Curran: *Networking Structures and Competitive Association Football in Ulster, 1880–1914*”, in: *Irish Economic and Social History* 41 (2014), pp. 74–92 and Donegal News, 22 Sept. 1956, p. 4.

60 See, for example, *Waterford News and Star*, 6 June 1975, p. 22.

61 Cf. Conor Curran: *Irish Soccer Migrants*, pp. 55–56.

nacht Football Association (FA) which was established in 1928, but development was slow.<sup>62</sup> In 1953, a league was set up in Mayo, while by the latter part of that decade one cup competition in Monaghan was attracting entries from surrounding counties. Leagues were operational in Cavan by 1966 and in Kerry and Roscommon by 1972, and a league was operational in Longford by 1973.<sup>63</sup> Soccer had been played in Kerry in areas such as Tralee prior to the removal of the ‘ban’, but in some villages such as Castlegregory it was less prominent before this.<sup>64</sup>

Some other counties such as Meath (1980) and Kildare (1994) were slower to get their own leagues, but these counties had clubs which participated in the provincial Leinster League which may partially explain why they did not act independently in setting up county-based leagues for so long.<sup>65</sup> The impact of televised international and English soccer in the 1960s was certainly important in spreading interest in the game, but it must be stated that soccer in regional Ireland had a history dating back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, although it lacked significant organisational structures for competitive county leagues until much later.<sup>66</sup>

## “Most of the soccer is crammed into 4 months”

By 1970, organising competitive structures for the game still remained awkward throughout Donegal. One reporter summed this up when he wrote that:

Soccer in Donegal is unusual. There is no governing body like there is in the GAA. How does it function then? What happens is that for example Milford Cup Committee decide to run a cup. They accept about 16 entries from Tyrone, Derry and Donegal. Matches are k.o. evening ones (sic) that run from May to August. Some Sunday matches are included. The local Milford Committee run the cup themselves and are responsible to no one else. Matches are arranged and played on stated dates. Towards the end of the competition a team may ask for a postponement of a game because of another game on the same day or 3 games in 3 days. The decision for postponement is usually taken within 12 hours. If a team fails to turn up or plays an illegal player it is thrown out of the cup but no further action is taken. No suspension is necessary nor is there a feeling that suspension of a club

62 Cf. *ibid.*

63 Cf. *ibid.*

64 Cf. *The Kerryman*, 6 Nov. 1971, p. 30.

65 Cf. *Conor Curran: Irish Soccer Migrants*, pp. 55–56.

66 Cf. *ibid.*

would do harm to football in the club's area. It is always clear that the committee run the cups not the clubs.<sup>67</sup>

In addition, in 1969, 21 localised competitions had begun, with the 19<sup>th</sup> completed by May of 1970.<sup>68</sup> The reporter felt that this was an indication that "a governing body could hardly do more" but also stated that "most of the soccer is crammed into 4 months" while "players may have two or three matches a week with little or no build-up to them."<sup>69</sup> Organised soccer was therefore a summer sport in Donegal, as "in the winter the pace slackens" while a few competitions were usually run at Ballyare and Fanad.<sup>70</sup> It was noted that "the trouble in the past with winter leagues was that weak teams tended to pull out as time went by" while it was said to be hard to get referees, with the reporter hoping that some ex-players would help out.<sup>71</sup>

The development of Ballybofey club Finn Harps, who won the FAI Junior Cup in 1968 and became a League of Ireland club the following year, was thought to be "great boost to Donegal soccer" although youth structures in the county were said to be weak with only four youth competitions having taken place in the 1969–70 season.<sup>72</sup> Despite good work undertaken by Dick Duffy in promoting the game, an emphasis on cup rather than league football was said to be detrimental to the game's development at youth level. Swilly Rovers' success in the 1966–7 FAI Junior Cup was also felt to be "an inspiration for many a young player" but local soccer clearly suffered from a lack of publicity. Soccer matches received only sporadic, vague coverage with clubs failing to send reports to the newspapers while the GAA had dedicated reporters.<sup>73</sup> In this way, little had changed since the 1920s when the GAA was astute enough to realise the value of promoting their matches in the local press, and the importance of providing regular competitions for young men.<sup>74</sup> The reporter concluded by stating that "both games [Gaelic football and soccer] contribute a lot to life in the county" but felt that soccer "had not been that much in the public eye." He added that "it has almost been an underground movement."<sup>75</sup> The GAA also had a better organisational structure within the schools, with "many GAA-minded teachers" promoting its games with the result that soccer was "trailing behind" in its development at that level.<sup>76</sup>

67 Donegal News, 16 May 1970, p. 2.

68 Cf. *ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*

71 *Ibid.*

72 *Ibid.*

73 Cf. *ibid.*

74 Cf. *ibid.* and Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport*, pp. 202–217.

75 Donegal News, 16 May 1970, p. 2.

76 *Ibid.*

## The Removal of the ‘Ban’

Despite these comments, and the GAA’s well-cemented league and championship structure within the county, by the beginning of 1971 it was clear that some clubs were in difficulty. One reporter noted that the “Donegal GAA will go into the seventies equipped with an administrative system designed in the thirties” and stated that

The cold facts indicate that several clubs are simply tottering along, running on dedicated interests of a very few enthusiasts. Club organisation stands at a very poor level in most areas. Some have barely a committee on which to depend. Few club meetings are held in some districts, let alone talk of activity within the club. The position is a serious one, demanding the highest efficiency in any real effort to regain public esteem and practical activity for the GAA.<sup>77</sup>

In addition, there was little enthusiasm shown by clubs for maintaining the ‘ban’, which had been implemented as a rule by the nationalist GAA in the early 1900s to prevent its members’ participation in so-called ‘foreign’ games such as hockey, cricket, rugby and soccer:

I have not heard of any club coming out in favour of the Ban yet. Many of them do not seem to have bothered considering it. They simply ignore it and that seems to be the general unofficial position in the county. Inishowen has come out firmly and totally against the Ban. Three other clubs have done likewise.<sup>78</sup>

A few weeks later, the same newspaper noted prior to the Donegal GAA’s annual convention that:

[a]ll the talk about the Ban is irrelevant anyhow. There is no Ban in force, and it is most unlikely to be enforced. Should anyone be rash enough to step in with foreign games suspensions and apply them fairly to all seeing soccer, the already low numbers of GAA members would very rapidly dwindle. The only effect of the Ban now is for use as scoffing at the GAA and all the hypocrisy that surrounds the rule.<sup>79</sup>

77 Donegal News, 2 Jan. 1971, p. 10.

78 *Ibid.*

79 Donegal News, 16 Jan. 1971, p. 12.

The GAA's 'ban' was difficult to implement and was often ignored in Donegal and in other counties such as Monaghan and Louth, but it did impact on the structure of teams.<sup>80</sup> Even the Mayo-based Ballina Stephanites club, from a town said to be "the stronghold of Gaelicism in the west" were having doubts about the 'ban' as players and committee members had "turned away and entered into rugby and soccer circles" by the late 1940s.<sup>81</sup> Many of those playing Gaelic games were clearly against it, with 18 of the St Eunan's Gaelic football team which won the Donegal county championship in 1967, voicing their opposition to it when interviewed on the subject the following year.<sup>82</sup> Earlier in that decade, one GAA writer, in discussing the negative impact and inconsistent implementation of the 'ban', was of the view that "a more positive approach would be to stimulate field activity in all grades in all districts."<sup>83</sup> In addition, another felt that the GAA's disorganisation in the county meant that the organisation was "threatening to throw its playing members right into the arms of soccer."<sup>84</sup> Despite the GAA's superior structure for leagues and cup competitions, soccer continued to maintain a strong presence. In 1969, the Donegal GAA county board again set up a Vigilance Committee to monitor players' activities in 'foreign games'.<sup>85</sup>

In the months prior to its official removal in 1971, the Donegal GAA's county secretary, Hugh Daly blamed the "more affluent times" rather than the 'ban' as having an effect on the GAA interests of the youth of the county, in that "in many cases the glass of spirits has replaced the caman or the football boots."<sup>86</sup> The Donegal GAA delegates voted overwhelmingly against retaining the 'ban' at their annual convention in January 1971.<sup>87</sup> In April, at the GAA's national congress, held in the Whitla Hall of Queen's University in Belfast, it was decided that rule 27, otherwise known as the 'ban', should be deleted, with GAA president Pat Fanning announcing that a new charter was required to replace the former rules.<sup>88</sup> Only two counties, Antrim and Sligo, had voted to retain what one newspaper columnist described as "the most ridiculous posture that any Irish association has ever adopted"<sup>89</sup> at their county conventions. The removal of the 'ban' was partly the result of lengthy campaigning by Tom Woulfe

80 Cf. Conor Curran: *The Development of Sport*, pp. 217–221 and *Donegal News*, 26 May 1962, p. 3.

81 *Ballina Herald*, 22 March 1947, p. 1.

82 Cf. *Donegal News*, 13 Jan. 1968, p. 2.

83 *Donegal News*, 26 May 1962, p. 3.

84 *Donegal News*, 7 May 1960, p. 3.

85 Cf. *Donegal News*, 1 March 1969, p. 2.

86 *Donegal Democrat*, 22 Jan. 1971, p. 15. 'Caman' was the traditional name given to a hurling stick in some areas.

87 Cf. *Donegal Democrat*, 29 Jan. 1971, p. 15.

88 Cf. Paul Rouse: *The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland*, p. 335.

89 *Donegal Democrat*, 16 April 1971, p. 13 and *Sunday Independent*, 11 Jan. 1976, p. 9.

of the Civil Service club in Dublin in the 1960s while, as Rouse has stated, “an intense battle”<sup>90</sup> took place in the media, both in Ireland and overseas, before a decision was reached in 1971.

## The Foundation of the Donegal League 1971

In the spring of 1971, there were sporadic soccer leagues taking place in Donegal at various levels and of differing standards. In the north-west, an indoor soccer competition was operational in Gortahork while a North Donegal 7-a-side league was also in existence.<sup>91</sup> A north-west soccer league, which included a few teams from the south and south-west of the county, was also up and running while the Letterkenny and Ballybofey Summer cups began a few months later.<sup>92</sup> Ballybofey hosted an international fixture between the Ireland and Yugoslav Olympic selections in April, a rare opportunity for soccer enthusiasts to see an international match within their own county.<sup>93</sup> However, later that year, an event which would change the face of soccer in Donegal took place through the instigation of a small number of individuals. The Donegal League came into existence after a number of meetings between its key organiser, Dick Duffy, the secretary, the league’s first treasurer, Paddy McFadden, who became chairman and Fr Michael Sweeney, who took up the role of treasurer, and had evidently decided that the time was right to give the game a proper administrative structure in the county.<sup>94</sup> It is unclear if the committee had discussed the greater freedom of some players through the removal of the GAA’s rule 27, but they must certainly have been aware of this, and in any case, decided to take concrete action.

In November of that year, the Donegal League Soccer Management Committee met in the technical school in Letterkenny to draw up rules for their new competition which included two divisions and to affiliate to the FAI.<sup>95</sup> The week before Christmas 1971, a meeting was held between teams hoping to join while the Donegal Soccer Referees Committee also met to make arrangements for a course with a view to preparing for the FAI Referees’ Examination.<sup>96</sup> It was decided to postpone the opening fixtures of the league, which included 24 teams, until March 1972.<sup>97</sup> Lifford Celtic

90 *Ibid.* and Irish Press, 18 Aug. 1979, p. 5 and Paul Rouse: *The Politics of Culture and Sport in Ireland*, pp. 334 f.

91 Cf. *Donegal News*, 6 March 1971, p. 6.

92 Cf. *Donegal News*, 13 March 1971, p. 9, 29 May 1971, p. 2 and 4 June 1971, p. 13.

93 Cf. *Donegal News*, 3 April 1971, p. 12.

94 Cf. *Donegal News*, 27 Nov. 1971, p. 3 and *Donegal Democrat*, 13 June 1996, p. 30.

95 Cf. *Donegal News*, 27 Nov. 1971, p. 3.

96 Cf. *Donegal News*, 18 Dec. 1971, p. 3.

97 Cf. *Donegal News*, 25 Dec. 1971, p. 3.



were the first league winners, with the league having an income of 261 pounds the first season and expenditure of 175 pounds.<sup>98</sup> Clubs affiliated during the opening season were reflective of the game's strength in the north, west and east of the county. Only three clubs were located outside these areas in the south and south-west with Donegal Town and Killybegs involved.<sup>99</sup> In addition, Carrick Rangers had won the South-West Soccer League in 1969 and were comprised of players from the "three adjoining parishes of Glencolumbkille, Kilcar and Ardara."<sup>100</sup>

## The Donegal League and the GAA

By 1976, the Donegal League was said to be regarded by the FAI as "the best run in Ireland" with "would-be entrants to the Association" advised to look at the Donegal example when they enquired about "how to organise and set up a ruling league body."<sup>101</sup> With this new rival football organisation now in operation, GAA administrators were evidently feeling the threat of the loss of players and support. Despite the removal of the 'ban' at the GAA's Annual Congress in 1971, GAA organisers remained wary of soccer's new administrative structure and players were still actively discouraged from playing soccer, most notably in the local press. The comments in 1975 of the Donegal GAA's outgoing secretary, Frank Muldoon, in replying to a delegate's remarks at their Annual Convention, illustrate how the conflict and tension which had existed since the early 1900s, when Gaelic Revival activist Seumus MacManus had attempted to have soccer eradicated in the county through a newspaper campaign, had not gone away.<sup>102</sup> In replying to a delegate, who stated that "soccer was taking over the county", Muldoon commented that "like bloody hell they are" and went on to claim that referees were not turning up for soccer matches, the League Disciplinary Committee's fines were not being paid and there was also financial trouble.<sup>103</sup>

The Donegal League's response came from their chairman, Paddy McFadden, who told the local press that Muldoon's remarks were "sour grapes" and that he needed to

98 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 13 June 1996, p. 30.

99 Cf. Donegal News, 27 Nov. 1971, p. 3. Division 'A' consisted of Finn Harps Reserves, Fern United, Glassagh, Finn Rovers, Fanad United, Annagry, Lifford Celtic, Letterkenny Rovers, Arcade Athletic, and Downings. Division 'B' was made up of Gweedore Celtic, Swilly Rovers, Falcarragh, Kildrum Tigers, Keadue Rovers, Convoy United, Donegal Town, Killybegs, Creeslough and Carrick Rangers.

100 Donegal News, 31 May 1969, p. 7.

101 Donegal News, 31 Jan. 1976, p. 12.

102 Cf. Donegal News, 3 January 1976, p. 6 and Conor Curran, *The Development of Sport in Donegal*, pp. 201–216.

103 Donegal News, 3 Jan. 1976, p. 6.

check his facts as there were “wild inaccuracies” in his comments.<sup>104</sup> He added that the Donegal League was “completely self-supporting” and that their teams were run without any help from the FAI.<sup>105</sup> This was in contrast to the Donegal GAA, who made applications for grants to the Ulster GAA Council and the GAA’s Central Council in Dublin. McFadden also noted how there had only been five occasions where referees failed to turn up and their disciplinary system was well organised. He did not want to attack the GAA but felt that Muldoon’s comments were “uncalled for, especially at a time when everybody was trying to build up good community relations.”<sup>106</sup> This was a reference to the Troubles in Northern Ireland, with those in the east Donegal area along the border particularly close to developments in the western areas of nearby counties Derry and Tyrone.

Donegal League secretary, Dick Duffy, also stated around that time in 1976 that since the ban’s abolition, “good relationships” had existed “between GAA and soccer people and this can be seen each week where players turn out for soccer one week and prefer the Gaelic team the next.”<sup>107</sup> He added:

We in the Donegal League are not trying to take over from anyone; we are catering for a need that already had existed where young boys and men had wished to play soccer football and we provided interesting competitions for them on an organised basis. We feel that we are providing opportunity for a healthy recreation for young people in Donegal and the encouragement we have received from responsible people has indicated that we are correct in this. I don’t know why Mr Muldoon should choose to criticise us as he has, but our record and our conduct over the past few years speaks for itself.<sup>108</sup>

After the Donegal GAA’s Annual Convention, one reporter noted that “a motion supporting the retention of the ban on foreign games was passed unanimously.”<sup>109</sup> However, there is little evidence in other reports that this actually happened, although one GAA delegate complained that national newspapers were focusing too heavily on “the activities of some of these playboys that played soccer in England” rather than on Gaelic games.<sup>110</sup> In any case, the motion does not appear to have been taken very seriously at the GAA’s Annual Congress in Ennis, County Clare, in April of that year,

104 *Ibid.*

105 *Ibid.*

106 *Ibid.*

107 *Ibid.*

108 *Ibid.*

109 *Donegal Democrat*, 6 Feb. 1976, p. 10.

110 *Donegal News*, 3 Jan. 1976, p. 14.

despite the attendance of Frank Muldoon as Donegal's delegate.<sup>111</sup> Issues such as television coverage and finance appear to have received the majority of attention and the 'ban' on 'foreign games' was not debated.<sup>112</sup> As will be shown, clubs such as St Eunan's and Seán McCumhaills had to deal with the loss of players through involvement in other codes themselves and it appears this motion, if passed locally in Donegal, did not receive much attention at a national level.

The visit of Derby County to play Finn Harps later that year in an Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Cup match was the subject of some annoyance to Frank Muldoon.<sup>113</sup> In particular, he was aggrieved that the secretary of the Donegal GAA County Board, Charles Kavanagh, had attended a reception given to the English club by the Milford Bakery.<sup>114</sup> Kavanagh, however, refused to apologise and no action was taken against him by the Donegal GAA governing body. It is clear that while some GAA officers retained a die-hard attitude against soccer after the removal of the 'ban', others had no issues with this code. Kavanagh stated in his defence that "there is nothing in the rules or nothing decided at convention that 'I go here and don't go there'".<sup>115</sup>

The soccer-Gaelic football debate continued in the local press in the latter half of this decade and there was some suggestion there that soccer organisers tried to encourage young players to stay away from Gaelic football. In November 1976, one GAA writer claimed, under the heading "Has Soccer a ban for youths playing Gaelic?" that "the Ban has returned again-but in reverse. It is being applied by some people in the soccer promotion in the county."<sup>116</sup> North-west GAA club Roger Casement's minor team had lost three fit players "to a relatively unimportant soccer trial game", although the reporter also stated that "it must be emphasised that it [a ban] is not by the Donegal League as a body."<sup>117</sup> Apparently, the players were told they would not be considered for selection for the Ulster soccer team if they missed the trial because of participation in the Gaelic football county minor semi-final replay against Gweedore.<sup>118</sup> In addition, it was claimed that Gweedore's soccer manager Colm McBride "refused to release four players"<sup>119</sup> for the subsequent county minor final. The reporter also stated that the idea that the end of the GAA's 'ban' would see an influx of rugby and soccer players anxious to play Gaelic games had not been realised. Instead, he felt that:

111 Evening Herald, 19 April 1976, p. 12 and Irish Press, 19 April 1976, p. 8.

112 Cf. *ibid.*

113 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 1 Oct. 1976, p. 3.

114 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 5 Nov. 1976, p. 1.

115 *Ibid.*

116 Donegal News, 6 Nov. 1976, p. 4.

117 *Ibid.*

118 Cf. *ibid.*

119 *Ibid.*

Most were simply glad to get rid of a Ban which was generally distasteful. Since then, however, it has been apparent that claims of numerous ‘outsiders’ coming into the GAA was nothing more than an ephemeral dream. The traffic has been one-way and the numerous GAA players involved in soccer and rugby has grown immensely. No-one really objects to this apart from players having a clash of allegiance when fixtures clash or having players turning out in rugby on a Saturday when they are listed for an important Gaelic football game on Sunday. It has touched the Donegal inter-county team and is something that has not yet been faced up to.<sup>120</sup>

The Donegal Soccer League secretary, Dick Duffy, later refuted any notions that the League had imposed any ‘ban’ on players taking part in Gaelic football, and listed a number of clubs who had dual players in soccer and Gaelic football that could back up this statement.<sup>121</sup> He added that they did their best to ensure that there were no clashes of fixtures if at all possible.<sup>122</sup> Dermot Coll, a youth player with Gweedore also informed the local press on behalf of his teammates that they had never been “victimised by soccer management” or “pressurised or forced to play soccer when clashes occurred with a GAA game.”<sup>123</sup> The Gweedore GAA club’s Public Relations Officer later stated that they had no conflict with “any organisation within the parish of Gweedore.”<sup>124</sup> This type of accusation was not uncommon in some other counties, with Mullingar Town AFC denying that a young player had been suspended from their soccer club in June 1976 for playing Gaelic football.<sup>125</sup>

## A Question of Commitment?

While debates over the involvement of GAA players in soccer teams continued after the removal of the ‘ban’, it is important to note that GAA managers’ and administrators’ concerns were for practical concerns such as injury rather than the philosophical ideology of the pre-1971 ‘ban’ on GAA members taking part in ‘foreign games.’ At the St Eunan’s GAA club AGM in December 1976, delegates discussed the loss of players to soccer and rugby. Outgoing secretary, Sean Boyle, stated that “no sportsman can give of his best if he did not give his commitment to one sport and one sport only. A man who played Gaelic from February to September and then gave it up to go off playing some-

120 Ibid.

121 Cf. Donegal News, 13 Nov. 1976, p. 11.

122 Cf. *ibid.*

123 Ibid.

124 Donegal News, 20 Nov. 1976, p. 4.

125 Cf. Westmeath Examiner, 5 June 1976, p. 15.

thing else wasn't really too much use to anyone."<sup>126</sup> While most present were in agreement that the removal of the 'ban' was necessary, it was highlighted that players were turning up for Gaelic football matches carrying injuries received playing other sports, and what was needed was a commitment to Gaelic football. Finally, it was agreed "that the team manager and the team selectors would be responsible for the internal discipline of the club."<sup>127</sup> In November 1978, the club was reported to have suspended seven players, including two inter-county footballers, for six months for playing soccer.<sup>128</sup>

Despite the apparent freedom to play other codes, GAA players were publicly reminded by their clubs that commitment was expected. At the Seán MacCumhaill's GAA club Annual General Meeting in December 1977, secretary, Eugene Boyle, noted the 'ban' was no longer operational, and "their players were at liberty to participate in any code" but "the retention of the senior championship and the winning of the league would not be achieved without the fullest co-operation."<sup>129</sup> In addition, some regional committees took more serious steps to ensure crossovers between soccer and Gaelic football activities were restrictive, with the mid-Tipperary *Bord na nÓg* (Youth Board) suspending 64 members of the St Patrick's Juvenile Gaelic football and hurling club in March of that year after their club had run a soccer league during the season's break from Gaelic games.<sup>130</sup> The club had also remarkably taken the decision to pay their players 1 pound for each goal scored in the league, with their chairman stating that the league had been run to keep players interested when there were no GAA fixtures, despite the governing body's amateur ethos.<sup>131</sup>

The GAA in Donegal did have much reason to feel threatened by the loss of players to soccer, with the Rosses Rovers team said to have been unable to field a team against Kilcar in November 1975 with "soccer seeming to have hit hard in the Rosses."<sup>132</sup> The club had initially withdrawn from the GAA's senior league in 1971 with the loss of players through work-related migration and a lack of finance, due to a loss of interest in the GAA in this area, key factors in this.<sup>133</sup> By the beginning of 1976, there were six soccer clubs in the area and the GAA club was struggling to regularly put together a Gaelic football team, while their Annual General Meeting was poorly attended.<sup>134</sup> In 1980, one "high ranking Kilkenny official", Tom Ryall, stated publicly that the removal of the 'ban' was "to blame for the state of [Gaelic] football throughout the

126 Donegal News, 18 Dec. 1976, p. 6.

127 Ibid.

128 Cf. Donegal News, 4 Nov. 1978, p. 1.

129 Donegal Democrat, 23 Dec. 1977, p. 19.

130 Cf. Nenagh Guardian, 5 March 1977, p. 3.

131 Cf. *ibid.*

132 Donegal News, 15 Nov. 1975, p. 16.

133 Donegal News, 15 May 1971, p. 15.

134 Cf. Donegal News, 24 Jan. 1976, p. 16.

country”, claiming the game was “in such a pitiful state in almost half of the 32 counties” on the island of Ireland.<sup>135</sup>

There is strong evidence to back up the view that soccer was not wanted in some areas. Some sections of society in Donegal took matters into their own hands in attempting to curtail soccer’s development, particularly at junior level. Some junior soccer clubs, such as the West Donegal Gweedore Celtic in 1969, 1976 and 1977, had their property vandalised, such was the opposition to the playing of soccer from some sections of society.<sup>136</sup> By May 1977, the pitch had been vandalised for the seventh time, with glass broken on the playing surface, goalposts smashed and cars used to cut up the playing surface.<sup>137</sup> In April 1983, the newly-formed Ardara club had their grounds at Sandfield vandalised, with goal-posts being pulled out of the ground and broken, while glass was scattered all over the playing surface. The club had to play their home fixture against Ballybofey on local club Leitir United’s ground that weekend.<sup>138</sup> In the late 1980s, the caravan used as a changing facility near Carrick Town’s soccer pitch in Straleel was repeatedly damaged with windows smashed.<sup>139</sup>

## Player Registration, the Legacy of the ‘Ban’ and Inter-County Gaelic football

At the 1980 AGM, chairman Paddy McFadden stepped down after nine years in that position, with John McHugh of Fern United replacing him.<sup>140</sup> McFadden was subsequently named as the league’s first honorary president in recognition of his hard work throughout the past decade. Concerns were raised about some clubs’ failure to improve their grounds while the loss of Swilly Rovers from the League was also noted. They had withdrawn because the league had failed to grant them postponements for intermediate cup matches. A motion was raised by a Finn Harps delegate that no matches be played on Sundays when Finn Harps had home games in the League of Ireland, but other delegates felt that they could not give support as it would damage their own league.<sup>141</sup> In 1983, the Donegal League’s representative team won the Oscar Traynor Cup, a competition between regional leagues named after the former FAI president.<sup>142</sup>

135 Irish Examiner, 22 March 1980, p. 19.

136 Cf. Derry People and Donegal News, 3 May 1969, p. 4, 28 Aug. 1976, p. 6 and 7 May 1977.

137 Cf. Derry People and Donegal News, 7 May 1977, p. 13.

138 Cf. Donegal News, 9 April 1983, p. 12.

139 Author’s own recollection.

140 Cf. Donegal News, 5 July 1980, p. 12.

141 Cf. *ibid.*

142 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 15 July 1983, p. 12.

Some clubs' illegal use of cross-border players was described in the press as "a most difficult problem"<sup>143</sup> in 1979. It was in June of that year that the League decided that an International Clearance Certificate was required from the player's national association in order for them to be properly registered.<sup>144</sup> The issue of the use of cross-border players was again discussed at the 1986 Donegal League AGM, with league secretary Hugh Strain questioning the local pride of a number of clubs located near the border, while he also felt "it also made younger players cynical about the game."<sup>145</sup> Donegal League officials locked in a continuous battle with Ardara soccer manager Hugh Campbell over the recruitment of players from Northern Ireland in the late 1980s. The club's success and use of players from across the border did not go unnoticed with six players suspended for the 1987–88 season by the Donegal League.<sup>146</sup> In 1988, the Donegal League introduced what were said to be "clear and concise guidelines... on the use of cross-border players and the identification of players" with players required to submit two passport sized pictures with registration forms.<sup>147</sup> In addition, it was agreed that clubs would only be permitted to register two players from outside the FAI jurisdiction, and that any who broke this rule would be expelled from the League.<sup>148</sup>

Despite these efforts, problems remained, particularly with the Ardara club's registration of players.<sup>149</sup> However, it could be argued that after a few unsuccessful years in the Donegal League in the mid-1980s, the Ardara club began to source players from outside their own parish due to a difficulty in procuring significant numbers.<sup>150</sup> This was partially due to the local strength of Gaelic football and the overlap between the Gaelic football and soccer seasons, which meant that soccer teams from strong Gaelic football areas struggled to field teams at times. Fines for this offence were increased by the Donegal League in 1986, as travelling teams occasionally arrived to be told the home team were willing to forfeit the points.<sup>151</sup> Carrick Town were heavily criticised at the Donegal League AGM in 1986 for failing to fulfil their end of season fixtures.<sup>152</sup>

By the latter years of the 1980s, the issue of commitment to one code was still very prominent within debates about the legacy of the 'ban' and an uneasy tension continued to exist between Donegal's GAA and soccer administrators. In the latter half of the decade, Donegal inter-county GAA players were disciplined for taking

143 Donegal News, 23 June 1979, p. 11.

144 Cf. Donegal News, 2 June 1979, p. 11.

145 Donegal News, 14 June 1986, p. 28.

146 Cf. Donegal News, 14 Nov. 1987, p. 15.

147 Donegal News, 25 June 1988, p. 15.

148 Cf. *ibid.*

149 See, for example, Donegal Democrat, 16 June 1994, p. 31.

150 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 22 May 1987, p. 17. Only one locally based player appeared in their Ulster Junior Cup final win in 1987.

151 Cf. Donegal News, 14 June 1986, p. 28.

152 Cf. *ibid.*

part in other codes by manager Tom Conaghan, who had taken up the position in 1986, with Charlie Mulgrew and Marty Carlin dropped from the panel for playing rugby with Letterkenny in February 1987.<sup>153</sup> Conaghan stated that he had “nothing against those sports played by some members of the panel; he might even be a bigger fan of the sports than the players playing them” but he believed that “a player at the top level should give all his commitment to the one game.”<sup>154</sup> He had given his panel of 31 players an ultimatum that they adhere to Gaelic football, if they wanted to be selected for the Donegal inter-county team, at a training session in January 1987.<sup>155</sup> Both Mulgrew and Carlin later returned to the panel having contacted the manager and they agreed to come back “on his terms.”<sup>156</sup>

This ‘ban’ on other sports was not on an all-year basis, and it appears that during breaks in the Gaelic football training and playing schedule leniency was shown with a number of players involved in soccer clubs.<sup>157</sup> In March 1989, for example, Conaghan told his players that they were free to play other sports until Gaelic football championship training started.<sup>158</sup> The *Donegal Democrat* reported this as “a turnaround in relation to players playing other games during the inter-county season”<sup>159</sup> with full-back John Connors playing soccer around the time of the manager’s comments. Connors was said to have broken “one of Conaghan’s cardinal rules” by playing in a Donegal League soccer match for Maghery Celtic early that month, but kept his place in the panel.<sup>160</sup>

However, no players representing Killybegs, the club which had had won the 1988 Donegal senior Gaelic football championship, were selected in that season’s Ulster championship, with Donegal suffering a disastrous Ulster final replay defeat to Tyrone when surely the presence of some of the players left out may have seen them win the Ulster title for the first time since 1983. Barry McGowan, a key man in Donegal’s first All-Ireland win in 1992, was reluctant to play at that time as he had been involved in Fanad United’s soccer team and Killybegs Gaelic football team and wanted a rest from Gaelic football over the winter.<sup>161</sup> In March 1989, members of the Donegal Gaelic football panel objected to the possible inclusion of McGowan and his Killybegs’ team-mate Manus Boyle for the championship campaign.<sup>162</sup>

153 Donegal News, 7 Feb. 1987, p. 19.

154 Ibid.

155 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 30 Jan. 1987, p. 23.

156 Donegal News, 9 Jan. 1988, p. 16.

157 See, for example, Donegal Democrat, 15 January 1988, p. 20.

158 Donegal Democrat, 17 March 1989, p. 25.

159 Ibid.

160 Donegal Democrat, 10 March 1989, p. 25.

161 Cf. *ibid.* and Donegal Democrat, 14 Oct. 1988, p. 24.

162 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 17 March 1989, p. 25.



Na Rossa's Declan Bonner, the current Donegal Gaelic football manager, was also absent due to his commitment to soccer. He was awarded a junior international cap that season while playing as captain of Ardara and was the Donegal Sportstar for soccer that year.<sup>163</sup> Bonner had opted out of the Donegal Gaelic football panel in the winter of 1988 to focus on soccer with Ardara, a junior club with a non-amateur policy.<sup>164</sup> Brian Lafferty, a Finn Harps reserve player who was called into the Donegal Gaelic football panel in October 1988, was told by Conaghan that "there were no hard and fast rules [that] there will be no soccer"<sup>165</sup>, but clearly serious commitment to both was not possible. The view that commitment to a number of sports was impractical was not one that was simply restricted to the Donegal manager. Speaking in 1981, one Kilkenny soccer administrator felt that the removal of the 'ban' meant that players faced difficulty in switching from one game to another, with commitment to a single sport called into question.<sup>166</sup>

While it is unclear how strict other inter-county managers were in removing players who took part in what had been known as 'foreign games' around that time, Tyrone manager Art McRory made it clear on his appointment in 1980 that he would be selecting those who were mainly interested in playing Gaelic football when he was asked to comment on the difficulties the previous manager had encountered in dealing with soccer players.<sup>167</sup> Numerous players from inter-county teams also played soccer with, for example, two Longford Town players, Jude Quigley and Dessie Barry, part of Westmeath and Longford Gaelic football teams respectively in the late 1980s.<sup>168</sup> In addition, Dublin players Kieran Duff and Brian Mullins played soccer and rugby respectively in that decade.<sup>169</sup> Dave Barry, who played for Cork City FC and Cork Gaelic football teams in the 1980s and 1990, was dropped from the latter team in 1987 after the Cork county board had decided to implement a 'code of conduct', to prevent their inter-county players participating in other non-GAA sports.<sup>170</sup> He knew that other players were taking part in other codes and felt that he was deliberately targeted for playing soccer. He later returned to win the Gaelic football All-Ireland Championship before scoring against Bayern Munich in a UEFA Cup match in the 1992–93 season.<sup>171</sup> Some other footballers in that decade played both Gaelic football

163 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 3 Nov. 1989, p. 21.

164 Cf. Donegal News, 1 Oct. 1988, p. 16.

165 Donegal News, 8 Oct. 1988, p. 14.

166 Cf. Kilkenny People, 11 Sept. 1981, p. 18.

167 Irish Independent, 1 March 1980, p. 13.

168 Cf. Donegal Democrat, 30 Oct. 1987, p. 24.

169 Cf. Evening Herald, 7 Feb. 1984, p. 31.

170 The 42: They ask me about Effenberg. And I said: 'If he thinks I was like his father, he played like my mother, 15 April 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.the42.ie/dave-barry-interview-3956696-Apr2018/> [accessed 5 Jan. 2019].

171 Cf. *ibid.*

and soccer at All-Ireland Championship and League of Ireland level, including Jason Sherlock of Dublin, although he appears to have been able to manage playing both codes without any major conflict.<sup>172</sup> He has stated, however, that one soccer manager was not as sympathetic as others to him in his desire to play both Gaelic and Association football.<sup>173</sup>

Commitment issues, therefore, remained for some players at inter-county level. In 1995, Gaelic football player Brian Nolan was temporarily dropped from the Kildare team for playing rugby with Naas and “for defying the Kildare selectors’ instructions.”<sup>174</sup> He was reinstated by manager Dermot Earley having confirmed he would commit to Gaelic football.<sup>175</sup> The following year, two Clare hurlers were removed from the inter-county hurling team for playing soccer on the day of a hurling inter-county match.<sup>176</sup> Loss of inter-county players to other codes and clashes of fixtures remained a problem, with two Wexford Minor Gaelic footballers opting to take part in a soccer trial for Leinster Youths rather than play in an All-Ireland minor quarter-final against Laois the same day, with the latter match resulting in defeat for their county.<sup>177</sup>

Soccer continued to be a thorn in the side of the Donegal GAA into the 1990s and there were also issues at club level. Ardara FC, a club from a strong GAA area, benefited from having a generous manager in rising from division two of the Donegal League to the top of the Donegal Premier League in less than 10 years, and was also involved in the unusual case of two post-ban GAA players being publicly reprimanded for playing soccer rather than Gaelic football. In April 1993, the *Donegal Democrat* reported that the Naomh Conaill GAA club of Glenties “disciplined” two of their best players, Martin Doherty and Stephen McKelvey, “for not giving a commitment to the club” at the start of the Gaelic football season.<sup>178</sup> Both were playing soccer for Ardara and had failed to show up for a GAA match against Naomh Ultan, and, while chairman, Pat Boyle, said they were not suspended, he stated that “they would be welcomed back if they showed the commitment necessary.”<sup>179</sup> It was not clear what the punishment was, and neither player attended the meeting related to the issue, but they both later returned to play Gaelic football for Naomh Conaill.<sup>180</sup> Both organisations generally failed to come together to discuss fixture clashes and the loss of players through this,

172 Cf. Off the Ball.com: Jason Sherlock on his soccer crossover: From West Ham trials to Liverpool’s interest, 29 November 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.offtheball.com/sport/jason-sherlock-team-33-153054> [accessed 5 Jan. 2019].

173 Cf. Jason Sherlock: Jayo, London 2018, pp. 160 f.

174 Connacht Tribune, 10 March 1995, p. 15.

175 Cf. *ibid.*

176 City Tribune, 24 May 1996, p. 23.

177 Cf. *ibid.*

178 Donegal Democrat, 22 April 1993, p. 22.

179 Donegal News, 14 June 1996, p. 19.

180 Donegal Democrat, 22 April 1993, p. 22.

and depending on individual choices, dual players annually gave up one code when their preferred one began its season, or varied between matches depending on which days fixtures fell upon. In this case, it appears that a top Donegal Premier League club with a non-amateur policy could attract the best local talent, despite the rural strength of the GAA.

## Conclusion

Ironically, while it was soccer organisers' failure to establish a permanent structure that allowed the GAA space to establish itself in Donegal in the 1920s, by the early 1970s, the poor state of the GAA in Donegal was probably a help to those seeking to establish soccer on a more regular, competitive basis. While the 'ban' had been detrimental to soccer's growth for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would be incorrect to assume, as shown here, that its removal in 1971 led to a major thaw in relations between organisers of codes at grassroots level, while commitment issues were never fully resolved, and an uneasy tension remained in Donegal sporting circles, particularly when club competitions heated up, or when the lure of finance tempted aspiring soccer players away from the GAA.

By the end of the 1970s, the Donegal League faced problems in monitoring the use of cross-border players, despite a 'ban' on their use in place without an International Clearance Certificate by clubs, while some clubs had been expelled from the league for not paying registration fees.<sup>181</sup> The view was also forwarded in the press that a gap was developing between the top clubs who had good facilities and pitches and "many of the smaller outfits."<sup>182</sup> Some clubs such as St Catherine's took part in a higher level of the game by joining the Ulster Senior League, albeit briefly in the Killybegs club's case.<sup>183</sup> Many villages, particularly in the south and south-west where Gaelic football had a strong grip, had no clubs and the game was not particularly well supported in comparison with Gaelic football. For example, it was estimated that around 2,700 spectators watched the Ardara-Killybegs Donegal Gaelic football senior championship quarter-final second replay in September 1996.<sup>184</sup> Soccer clubs in this rural area could only dream of attracting that type of local attention.

However, despite these issues, on the eve of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the Donegal League's organisers had much to be satisfied with. Speaking in 1996 at an event to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the league's organisation, Donegal League co-founder Fr Michael

181 Cf. Donegal News, 2 June 1979, p. 11 and 23 June 1979, p. 11.

182 Ibid.

183 Cf. St Catherine's FC: A celebration of 100 Years of soccer in Killybegs, Donegal, 1997, p. 85.

184 Donegal Democrat, 12 Sept. 1996, p. 38.

Sweeney recalled that prior to the league's initiation in 1971, "for many people like himself the only time they could play soccer was at a sports day, a regatta, or summer cup competition."<sup>185</sup> He also noted how the game was banned in many schools including St Eunan's College, although the students still went ahead and played it.<sup>186</sup> In this way, soccer at a grassroots level in Donegal had come a long distance, and was there to stay.

**Conor Curran** is a postdoctoral research fellow at Trinity College Dublin where he is researching the history of physical education in Ireland. He has published extensively on the history of sport in Ireland. His most recent monograph, *Irish Soccer Migrants: A Social and Cultural History*, was published by Cork University Press in 2017.

185 Cf. Donegal News, 14 June 1996, p. 19.

186 Cf. *ibid.*