

VOICES FROM CROKE PARK

THE STORIES OF 12 GAA HEROES

Edited by Seán Potts



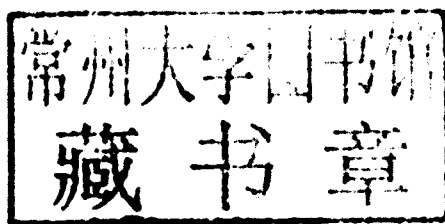
Introduction by Dessie Farrell



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EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

‘Any man’s finest hour, his greatest fulfilment to all he holds dear is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle victorious . . . Leave no regrets on the field.’

Vincent Lombardi

Few sportsmen who have been privileged to compete at the top level over the past 30 years have escaped the now hackneyed words of Vince Lombardi. During my own playing days, now unfortunately a rapidly fading memory, I was always struck by the idea of not leaving any regrets on the field.

It is one of the great driving forces of the competitor; the will to give all to the cause. But this unstinting desire is not without consequence. Great athletes – our footballers and hurlers – may aim never to leave any regrets on the field but they frequently leave many off it.

Since the Gaelic Players Association was first formed in 1999, we have learned a lot more about the experiences of our players after they’ve retired and those same experiences have opened our eyes to the often heavy price paid for their commitment to their sport.

Naturally enough, players are slow to complain, most are honoured to have made the sacrifices they did for their counties and would do the exact same if given the choice a second time around. But often, when you get a chance to tease out the after-

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effects of an inter-county career with a player in private, you find that they wish some things could have been done differently.

Many former players have to undergo medical procedures directly resulting from poor preparation or treatment during their playing days. Others have fallen on hard times, and some cite their inability to cope, initially at least, with retirement. The lucky ones can cherish the memories and still manage 18 holes without limping back to the clubhouse.

Specifics might differ but there is no denying that the traditional idea that the 'jersey' wasn't yours, you were only passing through, was prevalent and remained effectively unchallenged until the emergence of the GPA. And that attitude, that players should be seen and not heard, is directly related to many of the problems experienced by players after the show is over, when the all-consuming excitement of taking to the field on championship Sunday has evaporated.

I've been accused in the past of trying to play up negatives, portraying our involvement in the game as a chore, but nothing could be further from the truth. I loved every second of my inter-county playing days and would give anything – including the two knees I completely banjaxed – to be still playing. I continue to laugh to myself about the brilliant times I shared with my teammates, club and county. On the all-too-rare occasions when I meet up with former players, it isn't long before we are reminded about what an incredible experience it was to play for your county.

But while celebrating the contribution, we must not ignore reality. An inter-county career is not a pastime: it's a vocation, a wonderful vocation. It's not about giving time, it's about giving everything. We played to compete, to test ourselves, to gamble on the highs and lows of life on the edge. And too often in the past our amateur status was, at best, taken for granted and, at worst, abused. For all who prospered in the wake of their careers, there are many who fell through the cracks.

A lack of respect sometimes sullies the past players' experience; how many players can hold their hands up to say they got a

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good send-off from their County Board after retiring? One of the greatest players I ever knew spent nearly two decades in his county jersey and wasn't even afforded a phone call after finishing up.

Thankfully, the GAA has made huge strides in the area of player welfare in recent times and following the agreement reached with the GPA they are now supporting the implementation of one of the finest player development programmes anywhere in the world. And on behalf of the GPA, I would like to thank GAA Ard Stiúrthóir Paraic Duffy and president Christy Cooney for the commitment they have shown to players and to their welfare.

We have always argued that our players, the role models for the greatest amateur sports organisation in the world, central figures in the commercial success and continued prosperity of the GAA, are deserving of nothing less. Since the commercialisation of our games in the early 1990s, that argument has sharpened considerably with every passing year, with every extra televised game, with every new sponsorship deal, with every extra contribution made by our footballers and hurlers. That momentum brought players together in 1999 and now, 11 years later, we are putting in place a support structure we can be proud of.

The GPA fought and won a lengthy battle to have players recognised by the State through a programme of Government Funding. Politicians are quick to acknowledge the contribution of footballers and hurlers to the social and cultural fabric of the country, and indeed the economy. They never miss an opportunity to sit behind the presentation of a Cup, basking in the unique glow that surrounds the warriors who grace our arenas every summer. Government Funding gives practical expression to that acknowledgement and were the Government ever to withdraw it, the State would be discriminating against some of its greatest assets.

One of the most important components in the GPA's new welfare programme is support for the past player. Those in need, whatever their circumstances, can now lift the phone and engage with the GPA. On our Past Players Advisory Group we have put

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together a collection of some of the games' finest exponents to oversee and shape our policy in this area. They will ensure that that support is relevant and forthcoming.

This has always been an ambition of the GPA; that a player would not walk away from the game alone, that a formal network of support would always be there if and when they need it.

And supporting the past player is what *Voices from Croke Park* is all about. With the backing of Mainstream Publishing and MD Bill Campbell, royalties from this work will go to our Past Players Benevolent Fund. As well as supporting this important Fund, which helps former players who run into difficulties in their lives, we felt such a publication would provide us with a great opportunity to also highlight the existence of the Fund and indeed the GPA's commitment to the past player.

Voices from Croke Park is a celebration of the players' contribution to Gaelic games. It is a collection of the differing yet equally interesting perspectives of men who soldiered in the heat of battle. It is about the vicissitudes of life in a county jersey.

We decided that we'd ask 12 former players and 12 GAA writers to contribute to the project and without hesitation, those contacted, both players and writers, agreed to participate, happy to take the time from their busy schedules to support the Benevolent Fund.

I am indebted to all who contributed but also to Kerry football legend John Egan for his support in difficult circumstances. I wish John and his family the very best.

And I am sincerely grateful to Bill and Mainstream who provided this wonderful opportunity for the GPA. Also thanks to Ray McManus and Sportsfile for the player pictures, and Inpho for the use of the cover photograph.

I hope you enjoy this collection and perhaps we'll get the chance to chronicle the lives of more of the heroes of our games in the near future.

Dessie Farrell

Chief Executive Officer, Gaelic Players Association