

A Chairde,

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you here today to County Tyrone for our Ulster Convention to the home of one Sam Maguire. When I spoke last year I wished everybody well for 2005 and I said we would welcome Sam back to Ulster after his little break. Sam has dutifully done what I asked and is now back resident in Ulster and we are certainly delighted to have him back and we would hope that he would be here for quite sometime.

2005 has of course been a great year for Ulster on the field, with Tyrone winning the Senior All Ireland for the second time, Down Minors coming through to win the Minor title and then Down Under 21's reached the final of the Under 21 Championship and unlucky to lose in the final. The Quinn Group also won the All Ireland Inter-Firms title, a first for Ulster.

We had a great Championship with four draws and the great spectacle of the Ulster Final once again in Croke Park and a Replay to boot. This was probably the greatest Ulster Championship of all time. We had of course controversy in the Ulster Final and I must compliment on Tyrone on the way in which they accepted decisions and carried on with the game and went on to win the great prize of the All Ireland by the scenic route. In saying so we do have to mention that after the All Ireland Peter Canavan announced his retirement, Peter whom I believe has been the top scorer in the Ulster Championship ever and all we can say is Peter thanks for the memories.

In the National League it was a great year too with Armagh winning Division 1 and Monaghan winning Division 2. This was in spite of the attempts at experimentation of our rules and we in Ulster came in for some criticism for not using these so called experimental rules in our McKenna Cup. Our decision of course was vindicated when all the experimental rules with the exception of the tee for the kick out were done away with. So we found what we said was right, we didn't need new rules, we wanted implementation of the existing rules and again the Ulster teams came out on top.

It was indeed a great year for Ulster, when we have the McKenna Cup which people said that the McKenna's don't even go to it, well the McKenna's have certainly come back in great numbers to attend the McKenna Cup and this year we had greater numbers at our Semi Final that they had in FA Cup matches in England involving some of the supposedly top teams in the world and the amount of people attending our matches shows you the strength of football in this province and long may it continue. I want to compliment also Tyrone on winning again the McKenna Cup and making it three in a row, it shows that the best teams still want to win the McKenna Cup. In the Club Championship we are delighted that our teams have done so well after going outside the Province. We compliment, of course, Iniskeen on winning the All Ireland Intermediate Championship and they have certainly won it the hard way. We salute them and certainly it's a tribute to the late great Paddy O'Rourke that they have done so well and we congratulate them. We are also delighted that St. Gall's won the Ulster Senior Championship, a team from outside supposedly the big two in what again was a great competition and they are now in the All-Ireland Club final on St. Patrick's day and we

wish them well in that. On the Hurling Club championship Ballygalget certainly gave us a great day out in Portlaoise when they ran Newtownshandrum to the minimum before going out gracefully. A tremendous effort by Ballygalget and it was sad to see on a day like that, grown men so upset, not upset at losing, but upset at the prospect of not getting into Croke Park to play. If you play Rugby or Soccer, you have a better chance of playing in Croke Park, than if you play Hurling in Ulster and that doesn't seem right to me.

It was also a great year for Ulster in other ways, Tony Scullion managed the Irish Under 17 team to great success in winning the series and it is a testimony to Tony and to all the Ulster people involved with him and particularly the Ulster players who actually carried that team through and we say well done to him but we are not surprised. Again the All Stars were a great tribute to Ulster. We had eleven All Stars, the Young Player and the Senior Player of the Year and it is a testimony to the great year we had on the playing fields. We congratulate all the winners and wish them well in the New Year.

2005 has been an excellent year for Ulster off the field with so much happening with Comairle Ulad since our move from Clones to Armagh. Many new staff have taken up employment with us and we now have our systems almost totally in place. We have what we consider now to be our full compliment of clerical staff in our offices, we have our coaching staff almost completely in place, we have our compliment of County Administrators in place as well. We are moving ahead on floodlighting in the first three grounds, namely Casement Park, Healy Park and Breffni Park and they should be in place within the next month or so. This has been a great year for Ulster in that we have had funding for, four of our major grounds from the government in the six counties as well and we look forward to having better facilities for our patrons who attend our games.

On the Hurling fields it has been a pretty good year for Ulster as well, we have had another successful Feile in Ballycastle and it was again a great day for the young hurlers and we thank in particular, Tom Daly and Seamus McGrattan who organised the competition. We also thank Seamus, for his efforts over 27 years with the Ulster Council. Seamus has now gone into semi retirement and we wish him well, but we certainly know that he is certainly not lost to Ulster or Hurling in Ulster and we will probably see him around for some time to come. We do welcome of course his replacement Frankie Quinn, who has taken over as Hurling Development Officer and Frankie has set in place now a competition across the nine counties, for clubs to play an Ulster Club Hurling competition, which will certainly benefit Hurling in the Province, so again thanks Frankie for all your efforts.

In coaching again Ulster is leading the way and we compliment Eugene Young our Director of Coaching and all his staff Terrence McWilliams and Tony Scullion. Jimmy Darragh has now come aboard with us as well and we know that Ulster will continue to lead the way in coaching in Ireland and hopefully others will follow us but we cannot in the circumstances, allow Ulster to fall behind in anyway particularly with the recent passing of the motion to open Croke Park. It is important that now we promote our games to the best of our ability and to ensure that we are not at any loss or disadvantage because of this decision which to me is a very partitionist decision.

Rule 42 and the debate has not gone away as up until Christmas or shortly after we still being ridiculed in some areas of the media. That being so we accepted the decision. What we cannot and will not accept is a decision by any other body which is contrary to the motion passed at Congress and therefore illegal according to rule. We did, last week, receive an assurance from Uachtarán Cumann Lúthchleas Gael that should planning permission not be through and therefore Landsdowne Road not closed for renovation then everything changes.

Much has been written and spoken about the Compromise Rules since the disgraceful scenes of thuggery we saw on T.V. screens. I think the Association rushed into a decision on the continuation of the Senior and Junior series, without enough discussion, thought or dialogue and proper decision making process. Should we not do more for our people who play our games overseas in the first instance.

We thank the media who cover our games and offer constructive criticism, but we certainly are not impressed with people, who print untruths about events at which they were not even present and make wide ranging statements which are incorrect and have to be corrected maybe on the same day or later. Criticism is acceptable provided it is constructive, but certainly an article that appeared in a paper, showing a Monaghan player wearing a balaclava was totally out of order and to mention another player from the same county and mention his physical appearance certainly is unacceptable. We have read much about the blood bath of Omagh in the media, I have seen no blood or heard of no blood in this blood bath and to me a blood bath without blood, is like a bath without water. I think that maybe some people have gone overboard on that one.

On the matter of discipline the composition of the C.D.C. leaves a lot to be desired from and Ulster point of view. We have no input directly or indirectly into the issue of dealing with discipline in our Championship. The location of those supposedly from Ulster would not stand up to much scrutiny.

Some people were unhappy at the fact that the Ulster draws for the Ulster Senior Championship took place on BBC television. We don't accept that the draw for the Ulster Championship should not be available to the people of this Province who are entitled to see the draw for the championship as they would have been entitled to see the All-Ireland football final involving an Ulster team on television. The station broadcasting the All-Ireland did not cover all of Our Province we felt more in justified in coming up with this decision.

On the refereeing front, again our Ulster referees were to the fore but sadly our Hurling referees did not get the credit they deserve or the appointments they should have had. It is unfortunate that if you are an Ulster Hurling referee you don't have a chance of refereeing a Championship match. This is unacceptable and certainly moves will have to be made this year to rectify that decision and if it is not rectified, we will have to take the decision ourselves of appointing referees in this province for Hurling.

I mentioned the retirement of Seamus McGrattan earlier and again we wish Seamus well in his semi retirement. We also saw the retirement of Kathleen and Theresa from our staff in Clones again we wish both Kathleen and Theresa well. They were unable to take up positions in our offices in Armagh but we wish them well in the future. Also Sean O'Neill stepped down as our legal advisor after many years. Sean has been a magnificent advertisement for our Association. He has been a player at the highest level, a man who is a legend of his own lifetime, who then took over with great success the management of the Ulster Railway Cup team for many years and continued to work for the Association as our legal advisor and again Sean I say thank you very much and thanks for the memories as well Sean.

Much has been said about the amalgamation of Colleges and Vocational. All I'll say is that we have an excellent College system and we have an excellent Vocational system who have done us proud over the years and have stood us in good stead. I see no reason for changing the present system. We will do our best to live within the rules but we don't want to fix something that is not broken. I thank the people in both Colleges and Vocational for the great work that they have done and continue to do and I know they will continue to do for many years because of their great pride in their schools our young players and our Association and again I want to thank everyone involved.

With the appointment with so many new staff many, many interviews had to take place across the Province at various locations and I want to compliment the people involved in that, particularly Stephen McGeehan in our office, who oversaw all the running of the interviews, to ensure that they were all compliant with all legislation. Again thanks to Paul Johnson from the Sports Council and Naul McCole the Chairman of our Coaching Committee who spent many hours travelling from Donegal to the various points to be involved in the interviews, to thank all concerned and indeed to Geraldine and Bernie in our office with all the help they gave us with the interviews. I want to compliment all the interview boards because obviously in my estimation the people we have got are the best people for the job.

I want to compliment all our Sub Committees from our Finance Work Group, under John O'Reilly, the IT Committee under Aogan Farrell, the Hurling Committee under Tom Daly, Development and Coaching under Naul McCole, particularly the Club Development Workgroup under Chairmanship of Dan McCartan which was a new committee and has done so much good work, to our Irish Committee under the stewardship of Tom Cullen and particularly for the running of the cursa in the Dowings. Our Referees Committee under Paul Doris who again have done so much good work and also to Eugene Young who has been helping them out in so many ways with new initiatives and their Technical Officer John Gough and Secretary Liam Nelis. To our Code of Practice Work under Martin McAviney our Scór Committee under Willie Turner, again to the Colleges and Vocationals I spoke earlier and the Handball Committee, and our Third level under Brendan McGeary. I want to thank all the Committees for the excellent work that they have done over the year to ensure that our Association at all levels in the Province is moving well and moving ahead for the betterment of our Association.

This year in 2005 we again ran our grounds competition for club grounds all over the province. We have presently selected a winner in each of the nine counties and we will shortly be announcing the overall winner, for the best Club ground in the Province. The standard has been excellent and continues to rise, it is a great credit to the volunteers in all the Clubs throughout the Province for the work they are doing on the ground, a lot of the time unnoticed by others, but the initiative also by Clubs, Club Officers in providing new and excellent facilities for our players, going a long way to ensuring that our players have the best facilities so that our games can be played at a higher level and I compliment everybody involved. I also want to congratulate Newry, Armagh, Omagh and Enniskillen, on the major grant awards that they have received from the government and I am sure that the money will be well spent and we will have better grounds for it.

I feel I should mention Scór at this point and again in thanking the Secretary Rosena and the Chairman Willie for all the work that they have done, but particularly to say thanks for a lifetime of service to Scór to Harry McEvoy who is now stepping down. Harry was on the Ulster Council when I came on to it first. Harry has been involved with Scór from day one, has been a secretary for many, many years and even when he ceased to be secretary he continued his involvement and his great efforts for Scór. I thank Harry for all he has done. I suppose Nationally Scór is going through maybe somewhat of a crisis because it needs to be revitalised and changes need to be made to make it more vibrant and to get more people involved. Maybe the National Scór Committee should put more effort into having more meetings, more work, more planning for the future and maybe if they did that, instead of trying to make awards to me it might be better employed.

We've had a number of sponsorship initiatives Nationally that we in Ulster would take exception to. Many of the initiatives were totally twenty six county based and we in our Association have always tried not to be partitionist, but so many of these have been partitionist decisions, as has been the decision on the adjustment in rule 42 which to me again is a partitionist decision, it only refers to a part of our Country and most of our Province has been left out. This to me is not acceptable, we are a 32 County Organisation, we don't have even coverage in our 32 Counties from what is supposed to be our National TV station and now sponsorship is being done in a partitionist way and is not acceptable or should not be acceptable to our organisation or to us.

I wish to thank my fellow officers for their work for Comairle Ulad in 2005 and also the County Delegates for their support and corporation throughout the year. I take this opportunity to thank all our staff based in Armagh – Eugene Young, Terence McWilliams, Tony Scullion, Frankie Quinn and lately Jimmy Darragh on the coaching side – Stephen McGeehan, Catherine Donaghy, Geraldine McKavanagh, Stephen Donnelly, Bernie McGlinchey, Damian Kelly and Liam Nelis on the clerical and project sides. I wish the new personnel in the counties well and look forward to working with them.

While Sam Maguire has been in our Province he has been carefully guarded and chaperoned by his good friend and ours, Cuthbert Donnelly. We thank Cuthbert and all

concerned for the constant availability for all events, official and semi-official, of the Sam Maguire Cup.

We thank Brendan Kirk for his guidance and advice on all taxation matters and his back-up for security of our headquarters. I thank Liam Mulvehill and staff in Croke Park. I also take this opportunity to wish incoming Uachtarán Nicky Brennan all the best. I know we can work with him for all that is good in our association.

We remember some great players who have passed to their eternal reward. We remember with great fondness Pat Rice and Tony Tighe whose exploits are legendary and who brought honour and All-Ireland medals to their counties and to this Province.

It is with great shock and sadness that we learned in the last few days of the passing of Seamus de Faoite, a fíor Gael who was until his death Rúnaí of Coiste Gaeilge agus Oidhreacht. Seamus spent a lifetime promoting everything Irish, language, dancing, music and story. He will always be remembered for the Cursa sa Dunaibh which he conducted almost single-handedly. Go ndeana Dia trocaire orthu.

I have deliberately left one person until last and that is the man who makes Comairle Ulad tick, our Secretary Danny Murphy. I suppose over the last couple of years I have spent more time between meetings and travelling all over the Province with Danny than I probably have spent at home. Danny has shown tremendous leadership and initiative in the acquiring of funds for all the issues that we have in Ulster, in his determination, his leadership, his support and advice for me have been invaluable. We have worked very well together. I have no recollection of even a difference of opinion, never mind any cross words, so again I say Danny thanks very much, we are delighted to have you and we are delighted that you have decided to stay on for another five years. It is great news for Ulster and hopefully you will continue to do all the work you have been doing and the leadership you have given even after my time. I am sure you will do that thanks Danny. Finally I want to wish all our Counties success, in this year 2006 and hopefully Sam Maguire will prolong his stay in Ulster and be here for many years to come. I suppose if we in Ulster were to have a motto, it would have to be, 'We Don't Talk About It, We Do It'. Go raibh míle maith agaibh go léir.