

Óráid an Uachtaráin

A Chairde,

As my term as Uachtaran Comhairle Uladh comes to a close, I reflect on the most challenging, rewarding, interesting, fulfilling, demanding yet enjoyable years of my life. I wish to thank the counties of this great Province for the great honour they bestowed on me. On my election I said that I would probably be different, and I may have been. I took early retirement to give it my best shot – to be where I should be at all times – representing the Province whenever possible and serve both club and county to the highest level. I hope I went a little bit of the road in fulfilling these roles.

Success on the field is normally used as a barometer for measuring a year and 2006 would not rank as one of our greatest years. All-Ireland success did not come our way in the form of the Sam Maguire or McCarthy Cups, but off the field Comhairle Uladh made great strides in the promotion and development of our Association. We now have County Administration Managers in place in our counties, coaching structures in place across the Province, made great strides on the integration front in spite of lack of support/guidance from National level and are well down the road of floodlighting our main county grounds with Casement Park, Breffni Park and Healy Park complete and Brewster Park, McCumhaill Park and Pairc Esler well under way. Major development is also under way in Pairc Esler, Brewster Park, the Athletic Grounds and plans for further development in Healy Park. There are close to forty staff currently employed through Comhairle Uladh whose knowledge, experience and expertise is available to all units in our Province.

On the field we had National success with Hurling taking the lead. Antrim won the Christy Ring Cup with Derry claiming the Nicky Rackard Cup, with Donegal as runners up. Add to that Maghera's success in the Colleges 'B' Hurling and Armagh in the Under-16 'C' Championship. In football Inniskeen from Monaghan won the All-Ireland Intermediate title while Abbey C.B.S. won the Hogan Cup, with Virginia and Castlewellan winning the Vocational Schools U-18 and U-16 respectively.

This allowed Ulster referees to be considered for major finals in football. We congratulate Brian Crowe who refereed the All-Ireland Senior final, Joe McQuillan and Pdraig Hughes who officiated at the U-21 and minor replay respectively. Unfortunately our Hurling referees were not so fortunate. Last year no Hurling referee was appointed to a Championship game and this year the status quo was maintained until the Ulster Senior Hurling Final in Boston in October. We congratulate Gerard Devlin on his appointment for this historic game.

Off the field we had a lot of activity and promotional work. We again organised a very successful Feile for the U-14 Hurlers of the Province, in Cushendall. We continue to provide hurling equipment to our second and third level schools and also a grant of start up equipment to new Hurling clubs. A great success was the new Ulster Hurling league for clubs which was played on a Province wide basis. This gave competitive games at

their own level to clubs, many of whom were not, getting enough or quality games heretofore.

Integration was an area where we moved on working with other sister sports of Camogie, Ladies Football, Handball and Rounders. We are aware of the numbers of people now in our country from other countries who would not be familiar with our games and are endeavouring to encourage their participation in Gaelic games. We are also involved with the Youth Justice Agency to assist young people who have had difficulty in their lives.

We have our Strategic Plan in place at Provincial level and with assistance from Comhairle Uladh, two counties have their Strategic Plans in place and the others are in train with some close to a launch. Our Club Development Committee, our newest one – have done excellent work in liaising with clubs embarking on development and acquiring loans.

As usual the Ulster Senior Championship was the most competitive. All-Ireland Champions Tyrone lost to Derry in the first round while champions Armagh needed replays with Monaghan and Fermanagh before reaching the final. Donegal emerged from the other section and gave a repeat of the 2004 pairings for the final, once again in Croke Park. Armagh emerged victorious and completed an amazing three in a row – the first since Down in 1959-61. Derry's defeat by New York in the Senior Hurling Championship caused some hitches. The final was delayed and playing historically on 22nd October 2006 in Canton, Boston where Antrim had a comfortable win over New York in the first ever Provincial Final played outside of Ireland.

This year saw major changes in the Dr McKenna cup, as Gaelic Life became our first sponsors of the competition and we thank them for their support. TG4 came on board to televise a live game in each round, as well as a Semi-Final and Final. We are very grateful to this station, who are doing so much to promote our games. It is unfortunate that everyone who played in the competition knowing the regulations in advance, did not adhere to them. We were delighted to acquire a new trophy for the competition and to present the previous one to the McAnallen Family as it was the only one Cormac was presented with in his only too short tenure as Captain of Tyrone Seniors.

During the past year we in Comhairle Uladh, have had serious issues with discipline and disciplinary procedures, but in particular with the D.R.A. and its operation. On a number of occasions, having dealt with and decided on appeals, we were ignored and prevented from defending our decisions which in any other court would not be permitted. The D.R.A. appears to be the exception.

During my term we saw the unfortunate decision of rule 42. But the decision having been made, we were prepared to live with it as per the motion. Sadly the motion as passed has not been adhered to. We all know Landsdowne Road grounds is closed, but not closed for redevelopment as planning permission has not finally come through. I wonder where the D.R.A. would stand if appealed to on this one.

To add to this, the Ulster Final cannot be played in Croke Park, at a serious financial loss to Comhairle Uladh but also a tremendous set back to followers and in particular, families and children who would wish to attend. The other sports can come in, train on multiple occasions before games – something traditionally denied to our own teams if they were allowed to play in Croke Park. Comhairle Uladh would spend monies thus generated to promote our games among the youth of our Country. Dare I ask will the others who are allowed in and generate major amounts of cash do anything to promote our games. The Ladies Football Association who promote and play our games have only a provisional date for their All-Ireland Final in 2007, yet these others who are in opposition to our games have guaranteed dates in 2008 and are now requesting friendly (or extra money generating) games which are conveniently referred to by another name. Sadly, Croke Park is no longer a G.A.A. Stadium yet government built stadia like Landsdowne Road and Tallaght will not permit our games to be played. I think they call that “Equality”.

I have had my share of bashing over this issue. I have been targeted, ridiculed and vilified by some, many of whom, do not know or have even spoken to me. My only view on the issue is that had some of those involved been praising me I would have more cause for concern.

In 2005, and marginally worse in 2006, we had the International Compromise (aptly named) Rules game. The level of violence and thuggery was beyond belief. This took place in the presence of thousands of children for a cup named after one of the country’s greatest sportsmen – Cormac McAnallen. It is certainly difficult to deal with discipline in our own games while this is going on.

We in the GAA are often denied monies from the Government on the pretext that we are not community based. In most parts of the country, the GAA club is the community who use our premises for most community activity in the locality. In many instances players return to their club on a number of occasions in midweek and at weekends to train with and turn out for their local club, and to remain part of their native area and community base.

We thank the media for the coverage afforded our games. We have many excellent journalists who do justice to our Association. Alas there are many whose primary aim appears to knock and seek fault and implicate the GAA in controversy wherever possible. Photographs have appeared in newspapers of persons who had issues unconnected with our Association. They appeared in photographs which were taken in a sporting context. The photographs featured in some cases the names of sponsors and manufacturers which could be constructed as mischievous. In others, they featured players from other clubs who had no involvement in the issue and in instances were front page items.

We also have the situation of sportswriters presenting awards on the apparent understanding that they are Ulster GAA awards while ignoring the only body with authority to make such awards i.e. Comhairle Uladh. I am not aware of any application

for or granting of permission to do so. Personally, as one whose letter box never refuses post, I have never received any invitation to attend.

We continue to promote our culture and language. Bhí áthas orm an cúrsa bliantuil sa Dúnaibh a ainmniu i gcuimhne Seamas de Faoite a fuair bás timpeall bliain o shin. Ba mhaith liom buiochas a ghabhail le Tomás O Cuilinn agus Naul MacCumhaill agus an coiste Gaeilge agus Oidhreachta as uct an méid atá á dhéanamh acu. Bhéadh Seamas an bhródúil astu.

During my term many changes have taken place. We moved from our temporary offices in Clones to our new home in Armagh. The existing staff choose not to come to the new offices so we had to commence recruiting new staff, with Geraldine McKavanagh being the first to be employed. We had more than sufficient office space. To-day we don't have nearly enough such has been the increase in staff numbers.

Now we are even able to field a team in the Inter-Firms competition. Such is the quality of our staff that we are now the proud holders of the All-Ireland Inter-Firms Junior title. Congratulations to all concerned on a tremendous achievement.

This year saw a number of changes of County Chairmen. Kevin Brady, Philip Smith, Sean Kelly, Kevin Bell and Peter Carty took over from Joe Jordan, George Cartwright, Charlie O'Donnell, Jerry Quinn and Joe McGurn. I wish the new officers well and thank the former ones for their efforts for Cumann Lúthchleas Gael.

Over the last number of years I was able to visit the club grounds in all nine counties. This was something I wanted to do and thanks to all who enabled me to achieve it. I also want to thank the clubs for the welcome I received in all cases and my delight in meeting the real GAA people on the ground. These are the salt of the earth, working for the youth, generating money and providing first class facilities for our players and ensuring the future, knowing full well they will never see their club in Croke Park. Isn't it so sad?

I wish to thank the members of Comhairle Uladh and all the County Officers for their co-operation and support and the eight county boards who invited me to their county functions. I also thank our staff for their dedication, work beyond the norm and support at all times. My fellow officers gave me total support at all times and for that I am most grateful.

My thanks is due to all our Sub-Committees together with their Chairmen and Secretaries. A special word of thanks to Naul McCole, Chairman of the Coaching Committee, who had a major involvement in the interviews for the vast majority of our staff. He spent endless hours and many, many miles travelling to the interviews and we have some excellent people employed including a few All-Ireland Senior Medal holders.

I thank the staff in Croke Park and Ard Stiurthoir Liam O Maolmhichil for their efforts. My thanks go to Uachtarán Nickey Brennan for his leadership, transparency and the

manner in which he kept us informed of events and he could be believed which was refreshing.

We were all taken aback in Mid-December when Runaí Danny Murphy became ill. After his hospitalisation, we are delighted he is back home and progressing very well. Over the past three years we have worked very closely together, travelled the length and breadth of the Province and even further a field, discussed all aspects of our Association and never disagreed. Danny's appetite for work was amazing, day or night, Sunday or Monday, it made no difference. If you couldn't contact him it was because he was already on the phone taking another call. I thank him for his time, effort, advice, assistance and most of all, friendship to me and my family.

As I finally step down, I again thank everyone for the honour bestowed on me. I assure you that at all times I only wanted what was best for Comhairle Uladh and Cumann Luthchleas Gael. I only wanted to represent the views of the Province and to promote it and its people, be they players, officials' referees or ordinary members. To that end I apologise to no one.

I wish my successor Tomás Ó Dalaigh all the best for the next three years, and that they are as good as (or better) than mine.

Finally, I wish to mention my own family. My wife Carmel and my sons and daughters have been supportive of me all my life and their lives. A lot of times they came second to the GAA, but without complaint. A little warning – I don't intend to spend all my time at home in the next year. I will continue to do anything I can or anything I'm asked for to assist Comhairle Uladh and Cumann Luthchleas Gael.

Go Raibh Míle, Míle maith agaibh go léir.

Miceál O Grianain,
Uachtarán Comhairle Uladh CLG