

The Clonduff Story

"The Career of Cathal Murray" – by Adrian Travers

It is a cold January evening in the Saval countryside and as half past seven approaches it is time for Cathal Murray to grab his kitbag once again and head out for an evening of sport.

His destination though is not a football pitch but the Handball alley in Saval for whom he now plays in the Down County League. At 37 years of age the curtain has been well and truly drawn on a magnificent football career but Cathal is still indulging in his love of sport and Gaelic culture and now plays Handball regularly for Saval travelling the length and breadth of County Down and beyond and wherever else the game of Handball takes him – still hungry for success - still the ultimate competitor.

Growing up in the Parish of Clonduff, Cathal was from a sporting family. His uncle is the Clonduff and Down Legend Patsy O'Hagan who starred for the great Down teams in the 1960s. Patsy and his two brothers John and Eddie played for Clonduff Harps in the 1956 Junior Championship winning side, and in the same side which lost the senior championship final the following year to who else but Clonduff Shamrocks. His grandfather Eddie O'Hagan, Senior captained the Clonduff Senior Team in the 1920s and 30s. His father Cathal Senior and his uncle Sean Murray both had long and distinguished careers with Clonduff Senior Team and won championship medals for Clonduff in the 1957 Championship.

It was therefore no surprise that Cathal, as he kicked a ball in the backyard at home as a young boy, aspired to play for Clonduff and Down. As he grew up he marvelled at the wonderful footballing skills of the great Kerry four-in-a-row team and had particular admiration for that burly Kerry forward John Egan. He dreamt of playing football in Croke Park and winning All Ireland medals.

He started his footballing life as a goalkeeper, a position in which not many young boys wants to play, but it was a position in which Cathal excelled. He won his first footballing trophy as a goalkeeper in the Clonduff Under 12 team which won the Gary Murray Tournament – a competition held annually in memory of his older brother who had died tragically in 1976. He starred in goals for the Cloc Mór team that won the Down and Ulster Community Games Titles in 1980 and represented the province in the All Ireland Community Games Final in Butlins that year. He continued to play in goals throughout Under 12s and Under 14s football proving to be an able custodian. However, his fame and fortune on the football field was not to be found as a goalkeeper. For the next twenty years he played with distinction in many defensive and forward positions.

In 1983 he was part of the Clonduff Under 15 team that won the Down and Ulster Óg Sport competition eventually losing in the All Ireland Quarter Finals. He starred in the all conquering Clonduff underage teams which won the Under 16 League and Championship Doubles in 1983 and 1985, that same team picking up County Minor League and Championships in 1985 and 1987.

He made his debut for the Clonduff Senior Team in the 1986 Championship against Rostrevor and for fifteen years was a permanent fixture in the Senior Team winning the 1989 Division Two Title and the League and Championship Double in 2000.

He played in many good Clonduff Senior sides that never truly fulfilled their potential but as a College and Down footballer Cathal left an indelible mark and was suitably rewarded with a plethora of medals and championships which his commitment and industry and immense skill deserved.

In 1982 in his first year at St. Colman's College Cathal won the Ben Dearg Shield. In his second year he picked up a Dalton Cup medal and was on the Corn na nÓg Team beaten in the Ulster Final. His first All Ireland medal followed the next year when he captained the St. Colman's Team that won the McGreevy Shield. The College had beaten Omagh C.B.S. in the Ulster Final with Cathal kicking four points. In the All Ireland Semi-Final they defeated Moyle Park of Dublin 1-11 to 0-9. The Irish Independent in the match report noted the contribution of Cathal Murray "Inspired by left-winger and Captain Cathal Murray who scored five of their points St. Colman's, Newry scored a handsome 1-11 to 0-9 victory over Moyle Park of Dublin". On the 10th May 1984 the College became the first Ulster Schools Team to annex the McGreevy Shield, the All Ireland Under 15 Colleges Title when they defeated St. Jarlath's Tuam 1-8 to 1-3. Cathal played a key role in this victory from the centre half forward position scoring two points and setting up Chris Lennon for the College goal which really swung victory their way.

1984 was quite a year for Cathal when, in addition to captaining the successful St. Colmans team to All Ireland glory, he won the Bank of Ireland Cup with Down Under 16s. Another All Ireland Title followed in 1986 when St. Colman's won the Blue Riband of Colleges Titles namely the Hogan Cup. Having qualified for the Hogan Cup Semi-Finals by virtue of winning the Rannafast Cup in Ulster the College defeated St. Mary's, Galway in the semi-final to qualify for the final against St. David's, Artane. The College strolled to victory against St. Davids on a scoreline of 3-10 to 0-7 with Cathal playing a prominent role throughout. He left St. Colman's with two All Ireland Titles but unfortunately no MacRory Cup Medals. Despite playing a major role in three successive campaigns the College failed to win the MacRory Cup during Cathal's tenure.

In 1987 Cathal moved to St. Mary's Teacher Training College, Belfast. In his first year he played for both the Ryan Cup and the Sigerson Cup Teams. The

87/88 Colleges season was the first time that St. Mary's had entered the Sigerson Cup competition. The following year in the preliminary round they played UUJ at Corrigan Park. The 'Poly' started as firm favourites because of their Sigerson Cup pedigree with the likes of Down star D.J. Kane and Derry lynchpin Dermot McNicholl on their team. Cathal was selected to play left half back, a new challenge for him and he completed a formidable half back line with Danny Quinn in the centre and Paschal Canavan on the right. He continued to assume the free taking responsibilities even from the half back position and his four first half points helped send St. Mary's on their way to victory. This win enabled 'The Ranch' to progress to the three day football extravaganza hosted by Queen's.

Their Quarter Final match was against University College, Galway. This match was reported in the Irish News by Jerome Quinn. Jerome had this to say "Just as they did against the Poly St. Mary's surged clear of the opposition with a breathtaking blitz of scoring midway through the second period. Trailing by a point Conrad McGuigan, Ollie Reel and the impressive Cathal Murray fired over successive scores from play in the space of just ninety seconds. . . . Paschal Canavan, Danny Quinn and Cathal Murray formed the basis of St. Mary's win with a tremendous half-back performance". Cathal scored five points on the day and was voted 'Man of the Match'.

The semi-final against the hosts Queen's was an intense affair. With Cathal marking fellow Down man Martin Carey he immediately put his opponent on the back foot. The frees continued to go well with four in the first half mostly from 40–45 metres. Ollie Reel was also a major thorn in the Queen's side scoring an exquisite goal although later missing a penalty. A late Mark McCartan goal for Queen's made for an intense last few minutes but The Ranch held on with Cathal scoring six points in total.

The final against favourites University College Cork with the legendary Kerry star, Maurice Fitzgerald, in the side turned out to be one of the most one sided finals ever. St. Mary's played fast flowing direct football with a half-back line of Canavan, Quinn and Murray being the launching pad for most of the successful attacks. Such was the level of dominance, Cathal's frees were not relied upon this time as the forwards weighed in with 3–13 although Cathal did manage to get on the score sheet with one point. The icing on the cake was being selected as left half back on the Combined Universities Team (All Star) picked from all the players who participated in the Sigerson Cup weekend. Cathal was also picked for the Combined Universities Team the following year in 1990. St. Mary's reached their second consecutive final that year but were unlucky to be beaten by a James McCartan inspired Queen's team.

Whilst Cathal starred for Club and College he had also featured in Down teams from an early age. He had played for the Cloc Mór Under 13 Team and the Down Under 16s. He played for the County Minors in three successive years from 1985 through to 1987. He was part of the Down Team which won

the Ulster Title in 1986 but lost the All Ireland Semi-Final. 1987 though was to be an altogether different year for Down Minors and Cathal Murray in particular. The Minors had defeated Derry, Cavan and then Armagh to win the Ulster Title. The All Ireland Quarter Final was played at Pairc An Iuir against the English Champions Warwickshire who were on the receiving end of a merciless thrashing from the Down Team who emerged victorious in a very one sided affair on a score line of 10-12 to 0-3 with Cathal scoring 1-1 from the left half forward position. Down then accounted for Kildare in the semi-final with Cathal scoring three points. In the All Ireland Final Down came up against a very strong and fancied Cork Team. Cathal played a significant role in Down's march to the All Ireland Final and his contribution in the All Ireland Final itself was immense. After just eight minutes Down faced a three point deficit. With fifteen minutes on the clock and with Down yet to score, James McCartan was fouled but the resulting free kick was a difficult angled kick into the breeze. Cathal, however, was the most composed Down man in Croke Park as he kicked Down's opening point to reduce the deficit to two. A minute later another marvellous forty yard free into the breeze narrowed the deficit to just one. A point from Jeffrey Breen levelled matters and with ten minutes of the half remaining a third successful free kick from Cathal put Down into the lead for the first time in the game. A Ronan Fitzpatrick free increased the margin to two points and with five minutes of the half remaining Cathal hit a monster forty-five yard kick into the wind and over the bar. With four minutes of the half remaining Cork found the Down net to leave the sides all square at the interval. A goal and a point early in the second half from Tom Fegan put Down into a commanding position. Two further free kicks from Cathal stretched Down's lead to seven points and a further long range point from play from Cathal was to be Down's last score of the game as they finished 1-12 to 1-5 winners over Cork. It was a truly remarkable game for Cathal accounting for almost half of the Down scores, scoring the first and last Down points of the game and it was a significant contribution to Down's success on the day. There were no prouder people in Croke Park that day than Cathal's parents, Cathal and Lily Murray. The village of Hilltown was awash with red and black colours the following evening as a large crowd of people from the Parish and indeed throughout the county congregated in the village square to welcome Cathal and his team mates Paddy Hannaway, Mark Matthews and Dominic Brannigan home to Hilltown to celebrate another historic Down All Ireland Victory. Cathal like his famous uncle Patsy O'Hagan had played a major part in another Down All Ireland success.

His Down Senior debut followed quickly. He made his Ulster Championship Senior debut in the 1988 Ulster Championship against Derry at Ballinascreen when he came on as a sub for Kelly O'Rourke in the corner forward position. He featured for Down in both the league and championship in 1989. He really came to prominence as a Senior Inter-County footballer during the National Football League Campaign of 89/90. In the eight games leading up to the final against Meath Cathal amassed a personal tally of 2.26 but in the final against Meath at Croke Park on Sunday 29th April his six points were not

enough to give Down victory as they lost the final to Meath by a margin of two points. During that League campaign he was one of the top scorers in the country. In the Ulster Championship in the first round game against Monaghan Cathal scored a goal and six points. Sean O'Cuinn in the Outlook had this to say about Cathal's performance "Cathal Murray finished the game as Down's leading scorer but even without his late goal he was still one of the best forwards as his points from free kicks and play kept Down in touch". In both the drawn semi-final and replay against Armagh Cathal scored three points as Down exited the Ulster Championship after the replay losing to Armagh by a single point.

1990 had been a great year for Cathal and the Senior County Team. Unfortunately in 1991 due to exam commitments Cathal could not give the necessary commitment to the Down cause but was still part of the panel and the successful team that clinched the All Ireland in 1994. He continued to play for Down in various positions including corner back until he retired from the County Panel in 1998.

Cathal spent four summers in America playing for Chicago Wolfe Tones and in 1988 won the Chicago Championship and the North American League playing alongside the Kerry Great Jack O'Shea and International Rules star Pat O'Byrne of Wicklow. He got a further winners medal in the 1992 Chicago Championship with the Wolfe Tones.

In 1992 Cathal graduated from St. Mary's and took up a teaching post as a physical education instructor at St. Louis' Grammar School in Kilkeel. He took an immediate interest in the Gaelic team and became a member of the coaching staff. When he first joined St. Louis' the school were competing at the lowest level in Ulster Colleges' football. It is no coincidence that during Cathal's tenure as a Coach at St. Louis' from 1992 to 2005 that the school graduated through the ranks of Colleges football to such an extent that they competed in and narrowly lost the MacRory Cup Final in 2005 to St. Colman's College. The previous year they had annexed the All Ireland Colleges B title. Cathal at the time of writing is the Head of Physical education at St. Colman's College, Newry and is now coaching the St. Colman's College MacRory team and it will surely not be long before he achieves MacRory Cup or indeed Hogan Cup success with the college.

In 2006 Cathal made the Panel of 45 in St. Paul's All Star Awards to mark the 25th Anniversary of the competition, with players being selected throughout that quarter century. Unfortunately, he did not make the final 15, but he felt honoured to be nominated and represented Clonduff with pride on the night – 16th February 2006 in The City Hall, Belfast!