

“My Left Foot”

The Ross Carr Story – by Adrian Travers

Ross Carr comes from a proud footballing tradition. The Carr family hailed from Warrenpoint, Co. Down. His uncle, Barney Carr, played for Down in the 1930's and 40's and was the manager of the successful Down teams in 1960 and 1961. His father Aidan Carr was one of six Carr brothers who won senior championship medals with Warrenpoint.

His uncle Gerry “Joker” Carr captained the All Ireland winning Down Junior Team in 1946 and his father Aidan was also on that Down Junior panel.

The young Ross was educated at St. Patrick's Primary School, Ballymaghery. Thereafter he attended St. Colman's College, Newry where after five years as a student he left without any Colleges' titles, a remarkable statistic given the success of St. Colman's College both before and since Ross's pupillage. He had, however, as a 13 year old won an All Ireland Community Games Title with the Down Cloc Mór Under 13 Team.

He moved on to Newry Technical College where he again tasted All Ireland success in the All Ireland Vocational Schools Championship in 1982 and was part of the team again the following year when the Newry boys retained the All Ireland Title.

In 1982 he was the right half forward in the Down Minor Team beaten by Antrim in the Ulster Final. He had not long, however, to wait for his first Ulster Championship medal. He played mid-field in the Down Under 21 Team which won the Ulster Championship in 1983. He was drafted into the Down Senior panel the same year being a non-playing substitute in the team beaten by Fermanagh in the Ulster Championship.

He made his competitive debut for Down, coming on as a sub against Galway, in the National League fixture during the 1983/84 campaign. Ross was not to be on the fringes of the team for very long. He became a permanent fixture on the team during the next two National League campaigns where he played primarily at mid-field and he was quickly establishing himself as a free taker of note. Such was his prowess at the kicking of a dead ball especially from 50 yard frees that many an armchair pundit could be heard saying that Ross Carr could kick a 50 yard free over the bar blindfolded. In the 1985 National Football League Quarter Final game against Laois Down were trailing by a point with time virtually up. They were awarded a 50 yard free. Ross who had been knocking 50s over for fun all that season stepped up to take the kick to salvage the game and duly missed. Many pundits were heard saying after that game that Ross would never take another 50 again. Ross would

make these particular words sound very hollow in later years when his free taking prowess would be a pivotal turning point in the 1991 Championship.

In the 1986 Ulster Championship Ross had moved from mid-field to wing half-back where he played for the entire Championship campaign. He was part of the losing Down team that year when they lost to Tyrone in the Ulster final.

There then followed a number of lean years for the Down Senior Team. Ross was becoming disillusioned with life as a County footballer. All the training and hard toil with no rewards was taking its toll, both on him and many of his footballing colleagues. Being dropped from the 1990 Ulster Championship replay against Armagh only added to his sense of disillusionment and he thereafter declined to join the Down panel for the 1990/91 National Football League series. He was not on his own however. At the start of that campaign almost a third of the players invited by the Senior Team Management to join the County Panel declined the invitation. At the County convention in January the words of the then County Secretary Brian McAvoy summed up the mood particularly well "too many Down players lack pride in wearing the red and black and fail to give the necessary and total commitment which is needed to win championships".

Down, without Ross, had struggled in the League and were relegated from the First Division on the second Sunday of March after losing to Kerry at the Fitzgerald Stadium, Killarney. Had Ross not been coaxed to rejoin the panel in April 1991 then history may indeed have taken a different turn of events. Down got off to an inauspicious start in the Ulster Championship on Sunday 8th June at Newry, when they faced Armagh. The football served up by both teams was often as dull and miserable as the weather. On a rain-sodden pitch Down emerged as winners by a two point margin. Ross played the match at left half forward and scored two points from frees. Even the most ardent and optimistic of Down Supporters could not have forecast the dramatic events that were to unfold in the summer of 1991.

The semi-final against Derry was something of a roller-coaster ride. Down, ten minutes into the second half led by seven points and were seemingly coasting to victory. Then Greg Blaney was sent off and the tide began to turn. With six minutes remaining Joe Brolly kicked a point to put Derry in front by a solitary point. With the game virtually over Barry Breen was fouled 48 metres out and Down were awarded a free kick. Contrary to popular belief the referee did not tell Ross that it was the last kick of the game but he surely must have suspected that it might be. As Ross stepped back to take the free kick the large crowd drew its breath in nervous anticipation. Cometh the hour, cometh the man! Ross coolly converted the free to salvage a draw and give Down another chance. It had been a remarkable game for him. He scored the first and last points of the game. His personal tally was seven points – over half the Down total. That free kick in the dying seconds confirmed what we already knew about Ross Carr, that he was a footballer of remarkable composure and was sheer class. It gave rise to the oft-heard

chant "Over the bar, Ross Carr". However, Ross being the modest man he is does not remember that game for his free kick but points to the save by Neil Collins earlier in the game when the keeper stopped an almost certain point going over the bar.

Ross featured prominently throughout that championship scoring nine points against Derry in the replay and three more in the Ulster final against Donegal despite the close attention of Donegal Defender Martin Shevlin, a player that Ross cites as his most difficult football opponent.

Ross scored four points against Kerry in the All Ireland Semi Final again scoring the first and last points of the match. In the final against Meath he kicked five points and when the final whistle blew and as the adoring throngs of Down Supporters emerged onto the pitch Ross sought out his proud parents in the Hogan Stand. Yet another Carr had played a major part in an All Ireland success for Down. Another Clonduff player joined a long and illustrious list of Clonduff stalwarts to star for Down. In 1946 it was Paddy O'Hagan, Andy Murnin, Eddie Grant, the Brown Brothers Henry and Paddy and Thomas, in the 1960s it was Kevin Mussen and Patsy O'Hagan and in 1991 to that illustrious list was added the name of Ross Carr.

More All Ireland success followed in 1994. In the 1994 Ulster final Ross notched 1-4 against Tyrone and after defeating Cork in the semi-final he played a key role in the victory over Dublin. The second All Ireland win was for Ross more important than the first. It proved Down were not a one hit wonder or the proverbial flash in the pan.

Ross continued to play for Down until the end of the decade. His last match as a Down senior player was in the National Football League in February 2000, seventeen years after his first.

Yet his County career did not end there. He has since played for the Down over 40's and was the manager of the Down Minor Team and just recently has been appointed as manager of the Down Senior football team. One hopes that he will emulate the success of his Uncle Barney Carr and take Down to an All Ireland Title once more.

Whilst Ross will be remembered within and outside the County for his illustrious County Career he will be remembered within the club of Clonduff for his years of unerring service to the yellows. His uncles, on his mother's side, Charlie and Peter Bradley had won senior championship medals playing for Clonduff. Up to the year 2000 all his efforts with the Club yielded only a runners up medal in the 1979 minor championship and a league medal with the senior team in 1980 and a second division winners medal. It was fitting in 2000 that when the curtain was finally brought down on his County career that the long wait for a senior county championship medal was finally ended when Clonduff beat Leitrim in the Senior County final. That elusive

championship medal takes pride of place among his two All Ireland Winners Medals, his All Star Award in 1991 and three Railway Cup Winners Medals.

Ross not only played football for Clonduff but hurling and handball as well. His son Aidan is now featuring in Down teams and his sisters and daughters have played camogie for Clonduff.

When Ross reminisces on an illustrious career he will fondly remember the underage coaching of Matt McGinn, the lessons he learned from his playing colleagues Peter Hamill, Noel Fitzpatrick, Martin Farnon and Frank "Boysie" Grant amongst others. He holds in high regard his former managers and mentors Sean Smith, Peter McGrath and John Murphy. However, the biggest influences in his career were his parents Aidan and Rosemary Carr, the first people he looked for to celebrate that 1991 All Ireland victory.

As a young footballer growing up in the Parish of Clonduff, he was awestruck at the footballing skills of the Castlewellan and Down Great Colm McAlarney and later at the Kerry maestro, Jack O'Shea.

There are many things that he will miss about being a Senior Inter-County footballer but none more so than the visits he used to have from John "The Darner" O'Hagan, brother of Down great Patsy O'Hagan. The Darner would come to Ross's house every Saturday evening after Mass on the eve of an Inter-County Championship match to get the inside track from the Down camp and Ross's opinion on how the match would go the next day. A great evening's craic was guaranteed any time The Darner was about.