

Clonduff Hall of Fame Dinner Dance 5th December 2009 (Presented by Jerry Quinn)

The skills of the high-catch, the block, the drop-kick are just some of the skills which make our game of Gaelic football unique and it is significant that on his present tour of the counties the Ard Stiurthoir Pauric Duffy is giving a commitment that even in our present economic climate grants for coaching will not be cut.

But when the recipient of tonight's Hall of Fame was growing up coaching as we know it today did not exist... the skills were honed to perfection in Barney McPolin's meadow and other fields commandeered from a kindly farmer.

The will to win was embedded from an early age and when the two sets of coats were thrown down to mark the goals it soon became evident that these sessions weren't for the faint hearted. Brothers were marking brothers, cousins were marking cousins. All the ingredients were in the melting pot and slow learners soon had to start learning fast the art of knowing how to look after one's self.

Tonight's recipient began his football career and long association with Clonduff Club playing minor football in an amalgamated team made up of players from Clonduff, Annaclone and Magheral.

Father Trainor was a curate in Cabra in the 1950s and he along with John Woods and Peter McEvoy started the table tennis in the old Cabra hall.

The young men made the table themselves. This proved to be a very popular pastime in the hall and extremely competitive. It was not uncommon for some of the table tennis sessions to continue until the early hours of the morning such was the competitive nature of some participants. The homemade table had a very fast playing surface and this proved to be a wonderful asset to the Cabra players whenever they went to play teams in Warrenpoint and other venues, they were a match for the best! He was a good all round player with a good front hand service though he couldn't master the backhand service at all.

But that didn't really matter, football was his first love

From the minor team he progressed to the Clonduff junior team, today we call them the "Seconds".

His first game for the Clonduff senior team was against old rivals Kilcoo.

Earlier that Sunday afternoon he had already played for the juniors when the manager asked him to go and get stripped again.... Holding back the tears he replied disappointingly that he couldn't as he had given his boots to his good friend Tom Travers to play in the senior game. He was unceremoniously told to go and get them again and join the rest of the subs for the match. ..**That was a big ask – Tom was one of the stars remember!** In the second half his big moment came when he came on as a substitute playing at right half-forward. His dream had come true. Now was the time to put all those mental images that he played over and over again in his mind into action on the field of play. The man marking him was a Kilcoo stalwart for years but was beginning to slow down a bit in the twilight of his career. Of course there was no way that he going to let a

young Cabra lad get the better of him on his debut. After a couple of welcoming tackles this great pass came his way, he fielded it perfectly in space and started on a solo-run down the wing. The Kilcoo man was perfectly positioned to send the young man flying. He increased the speed and soloed right up along the line and left your man for dead. Behind him all he could hear was ‘come back here you wee so and so nobody does that on me’.

He had made a statement that day ‘I have arrived’. He certainly had arrived and he stayed there for a long time.

The final score on that day was Clonduff 4-14 Kilcoo 6 points.

In those days “seven a side “ football was the past time on most Sunday evenings and the speed and skill displayed in that game against Kilcoo did not go unnoticed and he became a regular on Clonduff sevens that travelled all over the county and beyond.

Although he started playing as a forward it was as a full back that he was to make his mark in senior football and it was in that position that he attracted the attention of the county selectors being selected for the county team in the mid fifties.

Only those old enough to remember the days when full backs blocked the way to goal, when full backs rose high to catch the ball above the forwards’ heads and clear their lines know what it was like to see a full back spring into the sky to catch the ball above his head or in this case on his chest, it was a sight to behold and on his day **Eddie Gribben** had few equals.

The highlight of his career was probably winning the Junior Championship with the Harps in 1956 and playing for the Harps against the Shamrocks in the senior final of 1957.

It was his performances’ in those years that had attracted the attention of the county selectors and earned him a call up to the county senior team.

A broken leg sustained in a league game against Downpatrick cut short the career, he did make a comeback, he shared in the joy of a league success and the disappointment of championship defeats but the injury had taken its toll.

However like all good Clubmen when his playing career came to an end he did not lose his interest in the club. When the club purchased the property known as Mussen’s meadow in 1966 Eddie was appointed one of the four club trustees, a position he has held ever since.

It is the nature of their position that Trustees may not have a “hands on” day-to-day involvement in club affairs; they do have serious financial responsibilities and responsibility for the club property. They are always there to provide good counsel and advice and I can say that in all my years as a club chairman and club secretary I frequently consulted with Eddie Gribben and his fellow trustees – their advice was always welcome, freely given and well considered.

I recall an evening, it might have been in the summer of 1967 when work on the development of the new field was nearing completion and we wondered about the fencing around the pitch, Eddie Gribben, Paddy O'Hagan the late Henry Brown and myself left Hilltown to go to O'Neill Park in Dungannon to see how the ground there was finished...it was one of the new county grounds in Ulster at the time ...

As we drove along the road between Armagh and Moy, near to where Traynor's scrap yard is now, there is an orchard there, as we drove along Eddie piped up "there is your fencing there". It was what the manufacturer called a "swan neck" post, and that is how that high concrete post with the turned top came to be around Clonduff Park,

A month ago when the club chairman Brian McGreevy signed the latest contract to start the work you see ongoing, more than forty years after that trip to Dungannon, Eddie Gribben was here with the rest of the trustees to be part of another great day for our club.

Eddie Gribben welcome to the Clonduff Hall of Fame

