

"I KNEW BRIAN BETTER THAN MOST"

by **Brendan Doyle**

"Brian McGreevy's dead!" This unbelievable statement came from the lips of my Clonduff team mate Tom Mooney on a mild April evening in 1957 at a hydro electric project in Northern Scotland.

He came running towards me with an opened letter in his hand, tears streaming down his face.

"Brian's dead" he whispered again and again.

Joe Brannigan (RIP) Patsy Downey and Dan Mussen fellow workmen and parishioners gathered around in utter disbelief.

"What happened?" – "Are you sure?" "It must be a mistake!"

The crumbled paper clipping which fell from the envelope in Tom's hand revealed the cold hard facts –

"Tragedy struck at a Gaelic football match at Saval on Monday evening when a young Clonduff player, Brian McGreevy (22), Ballymaghera, Hilltown, was killed while playing for his side against Carrickcruppen (Co. Armagh) in a tournament organised in connection with Saval Parish".

Years have since passed and often I've been asked by the younger generation did I know Brian. Yes, I knew Brian better than most and I loved him like a brother. Brian was born on 27th January 1935 in a beautiful little farmhouse on the brow of a gentle slope at Ballymaghera. He was the second son of James and Mary Ann McGreevy, good parents whose love and example had such an influence on his life.

He had two brothers, Gerard, the eldest, later to become Chairman of our Club and Seamus affectionately known as the "Cocker" – Clubman supreme.

His sisters Bridie, Maura and Eilish inherited the shy sincerity and charm of the McGreevy family.

I cannot pinpoint the exact year when we became friends but it must have been in the early '40s when we both commenced our primary education at Ballymaghera P.E. School. His passion for football and adulation for the Clonduff players at that time had a magnetic effect on me resulting in a friendly rivalry which was often quantified by one's association with members of the team.

If for instance one had talked to the Browns, Jimmy Doyle or Paddy O'Hagan the other most likely had carried Andy Murnin's or Eddie Grant's boots.

Sunday matches were a ritual and from an early age his dream was that one day he would emulate his heroes and don the beloved Clonduff jersey.

Brian's baptism on a G.A.A. arena was in or around 1947 in a friendly game organised by the late Dr. McPolin against a Cabra selection in the compact little playing field behind Ballymaghera School.

Our strip of red jerseys and white knicks were worn by the lucky ones and it memory serves me correctly we won by a goal.

Brian lined out along sides of Dan Spiers, Harry Gribben, R.I.P. Jackie Cunningham and Vivian Fegan, R.I.P. to mention a few, while the opposition managed by Eddie O'Hagan senior included Eddie Gribben, Eddie McParland, Eddie O'Hagan and the late John Joe O'Hagan.

We cycled to the return game at O'Hagan's field at Ballykeel where Cabra turned the tables on the Ballymaghera squad.

A laughable incident showed the first competitive spark from Brian when he objected to binder twine being used for crossbars and on the return journey argued that the two goals credited to Cabra in the 2nd half should have been points.

Now clearly established in their own minds as a force to be reckoned with the boys travelled by bus to Newry to take on a Christian Brothers selection and in a thrilling game Dr. McPolin's boys went under by a late Abbey goal and a partisan referee – an opinion incidentally formed only by the Ballymaghera lads.

In June 1948 Dr. McPolin arranged that Brian, Liam Mussen, Harry Gribben (R.I.P.) and the writer would enter an oral Gaelic competition in Feis an Duin at Newcastle. Much to the amazement of all, and the help of prayers to Saint Jude, we all four won a scholarship granting us a free months' holiday in the Donegal Gaeltacht of Gortahork. We had a most enjoyable time in that delightful county and two amazing incidents will always remain with me.

After our first Sunday at Mass in the tiny village we took advantage of a lift towards our lodgings on a turf lorry crowded with natives speaking only the language of their ancestors. Our destination duly arrived, but not having prepared for the eventuality of having to request a Gaelic speaking driver to stop, we some time later disembarked miles away, near Gweedore. Needless to say the word 'stad' was quickly added to our vocabulary.

On another occasion Brian bought a regulation sized ball with the intention of showing it off on his return home. However an aimless kick by Harry Gribben propelled it into a field of corn and every attempt to retrieve it was thwarted by a ferocious looking woman who used to always appear at the window of the adjacent farm house with her fist clenched as if directed by radar. Even on the morning of our departure she appeared like an apparition at 6 am. So Brian waved goodbye to his ball.

His secondary education began that year but our parents, in their wisdom, decided we should go to different schools – Brian to St. Colman's and the writer to the Abbey. Day pupils were seldom considered for selection on St. Colman's football teams and Brian found himself in that category but he was, nevertheless, boastfully proud of the exploits of Kevin Mussen, Sean Spiers, P. J. McElroy and Stephen McKay much to my disgust as the Abbey teams in those days were not exactly setting the scene alight.

Sundays as usual were spent following the endeavours of his Clonduff heroes and gathering the results of all games in the county. He built up a close relationship with Barney Carr from Warrenpoint and every Monday morning having descended from the bus at the Mall he met Barney outside Woolworths in Newry to compare notes of the previous day's happenings and exchange worthwhile stories.

In 1950/51 Fr. Bernard Trainor organised an unofficial U-15 League for the South Down area and from somewhere he conjured up a Cup and a set of silver medals. Brian won his first medal in this competition when the Clonduff team went through the league undefeated beating teams from Burren, Rostrevor, Warrenpoint, Mayobridge and Newry, with the following panel of players – Brian, Dan Rooney, Patsy O'Hagan, Geordie Rooney, Brendan Doyle, Jackie Cunningham, John Donnelly, Dan Spiers and Eddie McParland and the following who are all deceased, John Joe O'Hagan, Vivian Fegan, Paddy O'Hanlon and Harry Gribben.

Travelling to away matches in those days was a problem and I well recall the late Peter Hamill packing as many as a dozen of us into his green Ford Prefect and Fr. Bernard taking up the rear with the remainder.

Peter, God rest him, had among his many great qualities one of making people feel important. He lovingly compared each of us to players in the great Cavan team of that era – Brian he said, "You're another Victor Sherlock" – great praise indeed. The medals and the cup were presented at a lovely little function in a hall adjacent to Cabra chapel. Brian was very proud of his award and he had every right to be as all the way through the competition he was our star player. His competitive qualities and leadership which were to be

so evident in later years were beginning to develop at that tender age. A quiet word of advice or encouragement was always forthcoming.

His apprenticeship in the football world continued when it was decreed by the powers that be that he could play in the "school field". This arena was something special, the first step towards manhood – no place for the faint hearted – where one rubbed shoulders with the Mussens, Spiers, Murrays, Downeys, McConvilles, McGarrys, Hughie "Bushtown" Murphy, Charlie O'Hagan and Jimmy Mooney. The games were played nightly between selected teams and ended at dusk but many a premature ending was not caused by atmospheric conditions. The play was often robust but Brian was well able to look after himself. Never one to shirk a tackle he was more than a match for those years older than himself.

He had an uncanny ability of "sniffing" out lifts to matches and often we travelled unchaperoned to games all over Ulster with the Down team in the early '5's when it was unfashionable to do so.

He loved sport of all descriptions and had no qualms about cycling over to Rathfriland to view the European Cup Matches of that day on a display T.V. Set in Rea's Shop window.

Billy Kelly and George Lavery (R.I.P.) were favourites of his and often he travelled to the King's hall in Belfast to view their fistic prowess.

He began working in '53 and whether by accident or interest he was employed as a shop assistant in Newry by the famous Armagh G.A.A. family of McKnights and as an added bonus that great Irishman Bobby Langton R.I.P. was his workmate.

He was happy at his work but not with Clonduff Minor teams display during the 53/54 season. He strove hard to instil some life into the squad but to no avail. In addition to the regular games in the school field he trained on his own running around the lea fields at the family farm and finishing off with a self administered rub of embrocation.

He prided himself in his condition and had by now matured into a physically strong young man. He never drank alcohol or smoked but he did not isolate himself from those who did.

He was very good living but he didn't wear his religion on his cuff. He went about his duties in a humble way and his life was an example to all. In 1956 our club split up and after endless permutations of the talent available in the upper half of the parish Brian found himself selected at midfield to play senior football for his beloved Clonduff.

His first game was against Annaclone and in his distinctive saffron shaded jersey he did reasonably well when one realises his opposite number was none other than the legendary Brian Morgan.

Clonduff lost their opening league games but the example, advice and promptings from Paddy O'Hagan, Dessie McGarry, James and Henry Brown were beginning to have an effect on the younger players, none more so than Brian.

Suddenly confidence grew and the light at the end of the tunnel was suddenly brighter. The Senior Championship has its own magic but none more so than the first. Brian and the boys trained well and approached the game against Aghaderg quietly confident. A disastrous first half display prompted James Brown to give his team mates a rollicking at half time. Brian unashamedly retorted "We'll show big James". This he did with a majestic display that enabled "the yellows" to run out easy winners at the away venue.

The younger players like Tom Mooney, Vivian Fegan, R.I.P. Liam Mussen, Brian and Seamus McGreevy had at last established themselves and a championship medal was a distinct possibility.

Kilcoo were swept aside in the next round in Mussens meadow and a crashing goal by Brian in the first half was the turning point of the game.

The draw for the next round was eagerly awaited and it decreed that a George Lavery led Kilwarlin would be their opponents in the semi-final at Newcastle. However having led all the way Clonduff were eventually beaten by a Lavery penalty awarded when one of our defenders illegally picked up the ball in the prohibited area. The final score was Kilwarlin 1.5, Clonduff 0.6.

Brian broken-heartedly admitted he had played well below his true form but that night in Pat Brown's kitchen we vowed to win it in 1957 – little did we know. Meanwhile the league was continuing and our next game was at the Fourmile against a Glenn team manned by James McCartan and after something of a battle we finished up victorious with 14 fit men having used up all our substitutes.

We were now on course for the league title but the curse of emigration ravaged the spine from the team. Vivian Fegan and Liam Mussen sought their fortune in Canada while Tom Mooney and the writer crossed the Irish Sea and James Brown after almost 20 years sterling service finally hung up the boots. The challenge for league honours petered out and another dream for Brian had been shattered. Undismayed Brian soldiered on and having regrouped his forces his morale received a great boost with the return of Kevin Mussen late in '56 to play for his native parish.

His efforts had not gone unnoticed by the Clonduff committee and he was duly elected captain for the '57 campaign. The little boy who years ago had hero-worshipped the Clonduff players had now come of age and had quite rightly received the greatest honour his club could bestow on him.

He found alternative work in Belfast and while this necessitated him lodging away from home it in no way deterred him from travelling to all games no matter the venue.

We corresponded regularly and while he expressed satisfaction at his team mates' display he never commented on his own form. He was that sort of person and I had to rely on the paper clippings sent on by my mother as my sources of information. It was obvious Clonduff had made a wise choice in electing him captain. He had justified their confidence in him.

His father James died early in '57 and on my return for the Easter holidays I visited the McGreevy house to commiserate.

The greetings were warm and sincere and after a wholesome meal the conversation naturally centred on football. Then all too soon it was time to go. Brian and Seamus walked with me as far as the flax dams at the hollow of the road and we chatted casually for a few minutes.

I'll never forget his parting words:

"We'll not shake hands, sure you'll be home for the championship – is that a promise?"

Brian I was home for the Championship but –

'57 seems like a dream,
That's the year we lost the captain of our team,
He died out in Saval, on the green, green grass he lay
But no man stole his cup away'.