



Jim
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This Sporting Life

Tribute to Jack Higgins, Killерerin and Galway footballer in the 1950s

THE LATE Jack Higgins, from Dangan, Barnaderg, Tuam, who passed to his eternal reward early last month, aged 86, was a popular, highly respected man in his community. He will also be remembered for the very important role he played in the development of his local Gaelic football club, Killерerin, in the 1950s.

At the age of 22, Jack had his first success as a footballer when he won a North Board Junior Championship medal, not for Killерerin but for the club further out the road, Moylough. At that time the Killерerin club was dormant, chiefly because of emigration. As a famous song in one of John B. Keane's best known plays put it so poignantly:

Many young men of twenty said goodbye,
All that long day

From break of dawn until the sun was high
Many young men of twenty said goodbye.

From its foundation as Killерerin John Dillons in 1889, the club did not survive the Parnellite split and later the Civil War but football was played in the parish any year there were enough men available for a team to be affiliated.

The longest barren period was 1927 to 1948. Some very talented footballers represented other clubs, as they were entitled to do. They included two outstanding players, brothers Tommy and Joe Hughes who played for Tuam Stars and Galway in the early 1930s, and two Connacht Minor Championship medal winners in 1937, Martin Lyster (played for the Corofin senior team at 17 years of age) and Tom Hogan (son of a Kerry man who was station master at Ballyglunin, the railway station which won global fame for its role in the film *The Quiet Man*).

Killерerin fielded teams in 1949 and 1950 but didn't affiliate again until '55. By then, Jack Higgins had helped Moylough to the 1952 North Board and County JFC titles, playing in defence alongside county senior player Gerry Colleran.

Seamus Colleran, a member of the Galway senior football panel for all of the second half of the 1950s and a big name in the legendary Tuam Stars 7-in-a-row team, grew up in Moylough and remembers seeing Jack arriving on his bike two or three times a week. "He would cycle to training sessions and games from his home in Dangan and he was made very welcome by everybody in Moylough. He was a strong, steady footballer and a really fine man, tall and fit, and he always carried himself well. He was great fun too, I remember that about him. Many years later I met him regularly and it was great to meet him. I'm very glad now that I visited him at his home about six months ago. What I'd like to say about Jack is that he was a good footballer and a very nice man."

Having featured prominently in the Junior Championship (no Intermediate grade at the time), Jack was noticed by John Dunne, the Godfather of Galway football for half-a-century, and the big Dangan man was called into the 1953 county senior panel.



THE GALWAY TEAM who drew with Dublin in the 1953 NFL at Croke Park. In front, from left: Frank Stockwell (Tuam Stars), Brian Mahon (Dunmore MacHales), Cyril Kelly (Tuam Stars), Seán Purcell (Tuam Stars), Pat Staunton (Dunmore MacHales), Jack Higgins (Killерerin), Tom McHugh (Caherlistrane). At back: Jack Mangan (Tuam Stars), Liam Mannion (Corofin), Gerry Kirwan (Ballinasloe), Seamus Ferguson (a Garda then stationed in Tuam), Frank Evers (Garda club), Tom Dillon (Ahascragh), Gordie Ward (Ballinasloe), Tom Higgins (Fr Griffin's).

He also wore the maroon and white of Galway in the Cahill Cup competition at Tuam Stadium, earning praise from Jarlath P. Burke in the Tuam Herald, and in early October he was chosen to play at right full-back in Round 1 of the National League against the League title-holders Dublin, at Croke Park. It was a great honour for Jack but an intimidating prospect; he would be marking one of the greatest forwards of all time, Kevin Heffernan, and the Dubs were expected to have an easy win over a Galway team going through a slump from as far back as 1948. But Galway played their hearts out on the big stage and goals by Pat Staunton and Gerry Kirwan helped them to a morale-boosting draw, 2-2 to 0-8. Heffernan played well for Dublin but he didn't have it all his own way, with the Herald reporting that "Jack Higgins stuck manfully to his task all through."

He played in other League matches at the end of that year and was called up again in 1954, winning a Connacht Championship medal in Galway's 2-10 to 3-4 victory over Sligo in the provincial final at Tuam Stadium (attendance 15,000). Stalwart defender Iggy Hanniffy from Ballinasloe was injured in that game and replaced by Jack Higgins who rose to the occasion – the Herald paid him the compliment of saying he was "strong and brave" as Sligo made it a test of character and resilience.

It's recorded in Pat Coen's History of the GAA in Killерerin that in early 1955, Stephen Nicholson and Jack Higgins called a public

meeting, at Mick Comer's Hall, with a view to reviving the football club. There was a large attendance and four men were chosen to lead the club – a club that has never looked back: Chairman, Willie Mannion; secretary, Stephen Nicholson; treasurer, Martin Greaney; captain, Jack Higgins.

Killерerin's best day in that decade came in 1957 when they won the North Board League by defeating Mountbellew in the final at Abbeyknockmoy. The Herald reported that "star of the game was Jack Higgins, outstanding at centre half-back." Others who came in for special praise were Martin Cunniffe, Tom Dunleavy, Joe Mannion, Stephen Nicholson, Tommy Kelly (captain), Tommy Nicholson and Padraic Fahy.

Jack limited his football to the club in the second half of the decade; his mother, Catherine Tighe, also from Dangan, had died young (only 34) and left her husband James Higgins to bring up four young children: Eileen and Anna, who live in Boston; Jack, and Mick, the youngest who died two years ago, to Jack's great sadness. James Higgins, who bought the farm in Dangan that was home to his son Jack all his life, worked hard to rear his family and they grew up well looked after, happy, healthy and fit, all four living long lives. Jack's own children – John (Dangan), Eileen (England), Anne (Claregalway), Martina (Tuam) and Marie (Mountbellew) and their mother Julia (née Kelly from Imanemore, Barnaderg) – were thankful that Jack died peacefully

at home at the end of a life well lived. Jack and Julia celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary on June 8th last year.

Friends of Jack on the football fields say he could have played on for Galway but he always put work first, at Tuam Sugar Factory on the 'campaign' when he was younger, then with the ESB, and then full-time with the Office of Public Works, whilst also working on the farm, which was his pride and joy. He knew from losing his mother early in life and watching his father work very hard that family life always had to be the chief priority.

Donal and Tomás Gilligan from Dangan, County Championship winning footballers for Killерerin in the 1970s, have a lovely reason to remember Jack Higgins; he was 'best man' at their parents' wedding in 1948. Michael O'Donohoe from Caherpuca, Ballyglunin told me it was an honour for him some years ago to present, on behalf of Miko Kelly of Galway Football Board, an anniversary scroll of honour to Jack, marking the 1954 Connacht Senior Championship victory. Michael added: "Jack was a gentleman. I met him many times and he was the best of good company."

He will be fondly remembered as a loyal friend, a man of honour, integrity and sound values who loved life and nature, a man with a great sense of humour and a man who achieved much but was first and foremost devoted to his loving family.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal.