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This Sporting Life

30th anniversary of the day a Galway hurling legend inspired his club to County Cup glory

THIS MONTH 30 years ago, a new chapter in Galway hurling history was written. On the third Sunday of October 1987, the County Senior Championship was won for the first time by a club representing the town and parish of Athenry, where hurling had been played on an organised basis from as far back as 1885, one year after the foundation of the GAA.

A team from Derrydonnell – located within the civil parish and old barony of Athenry, and now better known for its achievements in athletics – won the County SHC in 1911, defeating Claregalway (including the hurling catchment area we now know as Carnmore). Tragically, a member of the Derrydonnell team, 23-year-old Andy Keane, was aboard the Titanic, with his hurley and County Championship medal among his possessions, on the big ship's doomed trans-Atlantic voyage in April 1912 and he was drowned.

After 1987, the St Mary's, Athenry club added seven more Galway SHC titles to their Roll of Honour, along with three All Ireland Club victories (1997, 2000, 2001) and many titles in all other hurling grades and all age groups, and in camogie.

In the politically turbulent early decades of the last century Athenry played a prominent role in Galway GAA administration but in the town the hurlers had to share the spotlight with successful football teams and handball champions. In the 1930s, '40s and '50s emigration hit all clubs hard but the GAA remained strong in Athenry. Certain parish areas – not only Derrydonnell – had their own hurling teams, including Cussane, Newcastle, Tiaquin, Castle Ellen (North Board minor champions in 1945) and Boyhill (minor and junior teams in 1953).

Bobby Gardner emerged as a highly influential figure in Athenry GAA circles, first as a player in the 1950s and '60s and later in a variety of leadership roles, culminating in his management of the senior team to County Championship glory in 1987. The Conways emerged too, very good players, along with many other sets of brothers, like in all clubs. It was also a big boost when Athenry won the 1966 Minor final against John Connolly's Castlegar team after a great semi-final win



THE St Mary's, Athenry team that defeated Castlegar in the 1987 Galway Senior Hurling Championship final in Duggan Park. Back: Bobby Gardner (manager), Dermot Monaghan, Seamus Kearns, Anthony Jennings, Sean Keane, Billy Caulfield, Pascal Healy, John Hardiman; front: Paul Hardiman, Declan Higgins, Barry Kearns, Pat Higgins, Michael Cahill, Mattie Gannon (captain), PJ Molloy, Gerry Dempsey. Mascots: David and Shane Donohue.



THE DAY the St Mary's, Athenry club reached the Promised Land: October 18th 1987 at Duggan Park, Ballinasloe. Joy unconfined for PJ Molloy, team manager Bobby Gardner and captain Mattie Gannon. PHOTO: RAY RYAN



GERRY KEANE captured Athenry to the county minor hurling title in 1987.

SPORT



PJ MOLLOY putting pressure on Limerick right half-back Liam O'Donoghue in the 1980 All-Ireland final.



THE SKILL of catching the sliotar in the heat of battle: PJ Molloy, supported by Noel Lane, vs Eugene Coughlan of Offaly in the 1985 All-Ireland final.



ACTION from the 1979 All-Ireland final: PJ Molloy vs Kilkenny goalkeeper Noel Skehan and defender Paddy Prendergast.

over Portumna whose star forward was Frankie Canning, later to become a top player in London.

In the mid to late 1960s, with the parish united behind the club, Athenry were consistently good at U-16, minor and U-21 levels, and in 1970 they gave three players, Stephen Cloonan, Seán Hynes and PJ Molloy, to the county minor team who reached the All-Ireland final (losing to Cork). Two years later, PJ and his clubmates Gerry Kelly and Luke Glynn helped Galway win their first All-Ireland U-21 hurling title.

PJ was promoted to the county senior team and he became a Galway legend: three points against Tipperary in the 1975 National League final victory at Páirc na nGael, Limerick; three more against Kilkenny in the All-Ireland SHC final of the same year and another three (including two frees) against Kilkenny in the 1979 final; a goal against Limerick in the first half of the historic All-Ireland final of 1980; one point in the shock defeat by Offaly in the 1981 final; 1-6 (0-5 frees) in the 1985 All-Ireland final defeat by Offaly; 1-1 against Cork in the 1986 final, and he played a key role when sent in from the dugout in the 1987 semi-final against Tipperary and in the final, against Kilkenny.

Other days to recall include August 7th 1977 at Croke Park: PJ Molloy's seven points (0-4 frees) for Galway in their five-point defeat by Cork in the All-Ireland semi-final, 3-14 to 1-15. It was probably PJ's greatest ever performance for the county; he hit three brilliant points from play, sent in a clever lob that led to a "21" for John Connolly to lash to the net, along with an exhibition of skilful, brave catching under the dropping ball and huge workrate, non-stop for the whole game and several times back in his own half of the field. Cork started Dermot McCurtain on the Athenry maestro; then they gave the job to Johnny Crowley and later came another "changing of the guard" when Denis Coughlan took over from Crowley. Midfielder Michael Connolly also played great hurling for Galway and Tim Crowley was outstanding for Cork but, even in defeat, there was only one candidate for Man of the Match and that was a measure of consolation for PJ Molloy.

The *Cork Examiner* newspaper carried this tribute on the morning after that game: "PJ Molloy gave young Dermot McCurtain of Cork a nightmare introduction to All-Ireland senior hurling, with a scintillating performance on the left flank of the Galway attack. Some of the points he scored were from the experts' advisory code and unquestionably he was the player of the day. His brilliance was in keeping with the rays of the sun that shone on the hallowed turf of Croke Park."

Also in 1977, Athenry reached the County Cup final and gave a wonderfully spirited display but victory went to Kiltormer, 3-10 to 3-8. Ten years later, Athenry got another opportunity to put their club's name on the Roll of Honour and they took it in glorious style,

against Championship aristocrats Castlegar. Duggan Park, Ballinasloe was the venue, on the third Sunday of October, 1987. In my report for *The Tuam Herald*, I wrote: "It was PJ Molloy's day. For all he had achieved with Athenry and Galway, a major honour had eluded him, a County Senior Championship with the club he gave such stalwart, unselfish service through thick and thin, good times and bad, through the ups and downs of an eventful but ultimately rewarding career. Emotions ran free as hurling craft, commitment and all-consuming will-to-win brought the County Cup to the historic walled town for the first time in a century of endeavour. If those walls had feelings they'd have understood the euphoria of a County Cup victory that marks the St Mary's club as a major force at all levels of hurling although in existence in its present formation only since the landmark parish rule brought neighbouring townlands together in the mid 1960s."

Midfielder Pascal Healy gave a dynamic display for Athenry in the county final, with two other sturdy men, Billy Caulfield at No. 3 and Dermot Monaghan at No. 6, marshalling the defence in exemplary style in front of goalkeeper and captain Mattie Gannon. Younger players excelled too, including brothers Paul and John Hardiman, Gerry Keane and a great forward who had won an All-Ireland minor medal with Galway four years earlier, Pat Higgins. Teamwork was a vital ingredient, especially against the battle-hardened warriors of Castlegar, but for the winners the influence of PJ Molloy was a huge factor in shaping the outcome of the final: six points – three from play, two from frees and one a sideline cut. He also hit a sideline ball into the heart of the Cashel' defence for Seán Keane to goal for Athenry; that was in the first half and it was a crucial score as the final scoreline indicates: 1-12 to 2-6.

That came after a sensational exhibition of marksmanship in the semi-final win over Gort in Loughrea: 2-15 to 2-11 – and 2-9 for PJ. His first goal was a bullet of a free from the 21-yards line past a five-man wall and the second 'major' was a spectacular pull, John Fenton-style, from play about 30 yards out and defenders attempting to put him under pressure. He was unmarkable in that game, as Sylvie Linnane, John Nolan and Pearse Piggott discovered.

That phenomenal, bravura performance in his 17th year playing for the Athenry senior team and the exhibition of all the wondrous skills of hurling that he gave for Galway against Cork at Croke Park ten years earlier are two compelling reasons why I put PJ Molloy on the mountain-top of greatness alongside the three JCs – John Connolly, Joe Cooney and Joe Canning.

*** It is the 30th anniversary year of the Athenry hurling hat-trick, for in addition to the County Cup they also won the Minor and U-21 Championship titles in 1987.**