



Jim Carney

This Sporting Life

The brothers on opposite sides in a National League final

THEY TOGGED OUT to play a game of hurling 3,000 miles from the green, green grass of home. Josie and Stephen Gallagher from Gort. Brothers. Two great forwards who shared a love of the game.

On that late September Sunday in 1951 at the famous Polo Grounds in New York, Josie and Steve were on opposite sides in the National League final. Josie, playing at centre half-forward for Galway, hit the two clinching points of a 2-11 to 2-8 win over the Exiles, for whom Steve Gallagher lined out at right half-forward, with the renowned Kilkenny man Terry Leahy at No. 11.

Four years earlier, the two brothers had starred for the all-Galway team who represented Connacht in the West's first Railway Cup hurling triumph, twice defeating star-studded opposition at Croke Park: Leinster in the semi-final and Munster (including Christy Ring) in the final on April 6 (Easter Sunday) 1947.

The semi-final against Leinster was settled by Steve Gallagher's last-gasp goal. One of his opponents in that game was Terry Leahy. Emigration united them to play for New York at the Polo Grounds three years later.

In the build-up to the County Cup final next Sunday, I was thinking about legendary players who hold special places in the history of the Gort and Liam Mellows clubs, including the great Josie Gallagher, probably the best hurler to have played for Galway before John Connolly emerged in the mid 1960s. And for Liam Mellows the Duggan family from College Road in the city: Seán, one of the greatest goalkeepers of all time, and his brothers Jimmy and Paddy. All three were on the victorious Mellows team in the 1954 County Senior Championship final against Ballinasloe at Tuam Stadium. Seán was winning his fourth county medal that day and Jimmy went on to win four. Their sister Monica was a great camogie player.

Seán Duggan was captain of the 1947 Railway Cup champions. The 1951 National League winners were led by



NHL final, 1951. Josie Gallagher (Galway); Stephen Gallagher (New York).

MJ ("Inky") Flaherty from Bohermore; he was a Liam Mellows man until he moved to Ballinasloe.

Josie and Steve Gallagher were steeped in hurling tradition; their grandfather, Michael ("Captain") Gallagher, led Kilbeacanty against Meelick in the first County final, in 1887. It finished in a draw but no replay took place; reportedly it was decided to nominate Meelick - as an all-IRB (Irish Republican Brotherhood) team - to represent Galway in the first All-Ireland SHC final, against Tipperary representatives Thurles, the winners.

Josie Gallagher was rated a

top freetaker and an expert at taking sideline cuts, like his county team-mate Joe Salmon and, at the present time, Joe Canning. In a Man of the Match display against Limerick in a National League game at Galway Sportsground in 1950, Josie pointed two sideline cuts from the 21-yard line, which from a such a tight angle clearly required great skill.

He was featured in the 1965 Galway GAA Yearbook. The writer, Martin Dolan, called it a tribute to the "hurling forward supreme" and he recalled that two years before the 1947 inter-provincial series was won, Josie hit 2-4

of Connacht's 2-5 against Munster. He also looked back on the Gort wizard's early hurling life: playing for his club's juvenile (U-16) team in 1936 at the age of 13 and Gort senior goalkeeper for one game at the age of 14. He was a star forward for the club when they won the South Board Senior Championship three years in a row: 1940-41-42. At 19 he was sent in, as a sub, to play on no less a man than Jack Lynch of Cork in the 1943 Railway Cup semi-final in Nenagh. It was won by Munster, by three points, and the Connacht Tribune report of the game offered the opinion that "it would



GALWAY Hurler of the Year in 1965, Jimmy Duggan, received his award from Micheál O'Hehir.



STAMP OF APPROVAL: Seán Duggan was honoured by An Post with a national Hall of Fame award in 2002.

have been a different result if young Joe Gallagher had been playing from the start."

After '47 it was sad for Josie that he didn't have his brother Stephen close to him in the Gort and Galway forward lines. For a crucial late point in the 1947 Railway Cup final, Josie had the sliotar passed to him by his brother.

Gort had lost many talented players in the 1930s and '40s. Steve went to Canada in '48 and then to New York in 1950. It was in the "Big Apple" he met and married Kathleen, the sweet apple of his eye. They had a great life together. Steve would sing the ever popular old song "I'll Take You Home Again, Kathleen" and every year he would fly back to Ireland for a holiday at home in George's Street, Gort. He would plan his visits around club or county hurling matches.

He had never forgotten the emotion of his departure from Ireland on Sunday, January 25th 1948. Family, neighbours and friends visited him on the

Saturday night and they all sang a song made famous by Vera Lynn during World War II: *Now is the hour when we must say goodbye ...*

Irish tenor Josef Locke's recording of it was particularly popular in Ireland in the late 1940s.

On a visit home in 1992, Steve did an interview for the Gort community magazine *Guaire*. He loved New York but from the early years living so far from home he could recall many nights "lying in bed in the Bronx and longing for south Galway."

Growing up in Ireland in the 1930s, life was the same for nearly everybody, he told the interviewer: very little money but there was always something to do, even when they were very young - hurling, playing cowboys and indians, visiting the local forge, discovering woods and places to go swimming. "We had nothing and we had everything," Steve reflected philosophically.

Josie married Maisie Dillon from Ahascragh; it brought together two legendary GAA families. The Gallagher boys were outstanding forwards; Maisie's first cousin Tom 'Pook' Dillon was a stalwart defender of indomitable spirit, one of Galway's greatest of all time.

Josie and Steve have gone to their eternal reward, and so too have Seán and Paddy Duggan. They are all fondly remembered.

Jimmy Duggan, a proud Liam Mellows man, will be at Pearse Stadium on Sunday, *le cúnamh Dé*.