



Jim Carney

This Sporting Life

A very special group of sportsmen – high achievers on and off the fields of play

In hindsight, it was a near-certainty that University College Galway hurlers would win the Fitzgibbon Cup in the 1976-77 season. This time 40 years ago, they fulfilled their destiny with a semi-final win over UCC, 4-12 to 3-12, and a 1-14 to 1-12 win over the host college at the High Field, Maynooth on March 6th, 1977.

It was not a surprise that UCG (now NUIG) won the blue riband of Third Level hurling competitions, with the prize honouring the memory of Capuchin friar Dr Edwin Fitzgibbon, a professor of philosophy at University College Cork from 1911 to 1936.

In 1975, UCG had won the first years (freshers) competition with a star-studded team led by Pat Fleury from Drumcullen, Co. Offaly and by '77 three students had already become Galway senior stars: Niall McInerney, a native of Sixmilebridge, Co. Clare, who had transferred to the Liam Mellows club in Galway city; Joe McDonagh, a member of the Ballinderreen club and a 1976 All-Star, and Joe Connolly from Castlegar. Conor Hayes from Kiltormer was a young star on the rise.

Four big names, big personalities; they would soon be legends of hurling, legends of Galway life.

What we didn't know then was that the UCG panel of 1976-77 were all very talented hurlers. A Clare man, Brendan Kenny, was goalkeeper in the Fitzgibbon Cup final. The full-back lined out: Hugh O'Donovan (Cork), Tom Cloonan, a member of a great Athenry GAA family, and Conor Hayes. In the half-back line were Niall McInerney, Pat Fleury, captain, at No. 6, and Paddy Leahy from Loughrea. Joe McDonagh and a future Kilkenny captain, Frank Holohan, were at midfield. The half-forward line lined out:

Pat Costello from Aughrim, Cappataggle, Martin Quilty (Limerick) and Gerry P. Fahy from Gort. In the full-forward line were Jody Spooner (Tipperary), Joe Connolly and Cyril Farrell from Woodford, another legend in the making, coach and manager of three Galway teams who brought the Liam MacCarthy Cup across the River Shannon at the bridge in Athlone: 1980, '87 and '88.

Two other Galway students got into the action from the bench: John Flaherty of the Abbeyknockmoy club and Alfie Barrett of the Pearses (Gurteen-Ballymacward) club.

Also in the panel were Denis and Michael John Hurney from Turloughmore, PJ Burke from Tynagh, now living in Ballinderreen; Denis Connolly from Skehana, Vincent Daly (Clare), Seán Burke (Limerick) and a brilliant hurler who missed the Fitzgibbon Cup semi-final and final because of injury, Kieran Brennan of the Kilkenny club Conahy Shamrocks. Kieran and his brothers Nicky, former President of the GAA, and Canice all won All-Ireland SHC medals; Kieran rose to the rank of Major General in the Irish Army and in June 2015 he was appointed Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations with the Defence Forces.

Seven counties were represented in the UCG panel: Galway, Clare, Limerick, Cork, Tipperary, Offaly and Kilkenny.

Tom Cloonan and Niall McInerney were winning their second Fitzgibbon Cup medals; they were on the victorious team of 1969-70.

Maynooth were gallant runners-up in 1977; they had five Galway men in their starting XV: Tony Kelly, Joe and Iggy Clarke, Seán Silke and Anthony Brennan.

Sadly, four members of the victorious UCG



PEIG and Eoin McDonagh, from Barna, wife and son of the late Joe McDonagh, were guests of the organising committee of the 1977 UCG players' 40th anniversary reunion in Galway.

panel have gone to their eternal reward: Niall McInerney, Gerry P. Fahy, Denis Hurney and, most recently, Joe McDonagh last May. Rest in peace.

Joe's widow Peig and son Eoin were guests of the organising committee of the 1977 UCG players' 40th anniversary reunion in Galway on the night of February 24th.

The function, which honoured Joe McDonagh's memory with a series of tributes, coincided with NUIG hosting the 2017 independent.ie Fitzgibbon Cup semi-finals and final. The winners were the defending champions Mary Immaculate College, Limerick who defeated IT Carlow in the final by 3-24 to 1-19.



FITZGIBBON CUP champions 1976-77, UCG. In front, from left: Bobby Curran, UCG GAA Club treasurer; Brendan Kenny (Clare), Denis Connolly (Skehana, Galway), Pat Costello (Aughrim, Galway), Kieran Brennan (Conahy, Kilkenny), Joe Connolly (Castlegar, Galway), Jody Spooner (Roscrea, Tipperary), Pat Fleury, captain (Drumcullen, Offaly), Cyril Farrell (Woodford, Galway), Gerry P. Fahy (Gort), Seán Burke (Limerick), Joe McDonagh (Ballinderreen, Galway), Denis Hurney (Turloughmore, Galway), Alfie Barrett (Pearses, Galway). At back, from left: Eamonn Cuddy, team manager (Kilkenny), Martin Quilty (Limerick), John Flaherty (Abbeyknockmoy, Galway), Frank Holohan (Ballyhale Shamrocks, Kilkenny), Tom Cloonan (Athenry, Galway), PJ Burke (Tynagh, Galway), Conor Hayes (Kiltormer, Galway), Hugh O'Donovan (Cork), Paddy Leahy (Loughrea, Galway), Niall McInerney (Sixmilebridge, Clare) and Liam Mellows, Galway), Vincent Daly (Clare), Michael John Hurney (Turloughmore, Galway), Andy Kelly (Cork), Dr Tony Finan, chairman UCH Hurling Club; Tony Regan, trainer and team mentor.



AT the NUIG special event: Enda Fallon, NUIG delegate to the Connacht GAA Council and the Higher Education GAA Council, with Tony Regan, retired NUIG Sports Officer.

1977 Fitzgibbon Cup champions' reunion

Leadership was a major contributory factor in the 1976-77 UCG hurlers' success story. Looking at the photograph of the victorious panel, it's fascinating to see that four of the players went on to captain teams playing in All-Ireland SHC finals: Joe McDonagh, captain of the Galway team who lost the 1979 final to Kilkenny; Joe Connolly, winning captain of Galway in 1980; Pat Fleury, winning captain of Offaly in 1985, and Conor Hayes, winning captain of Galway in 1987 and '88.

In Joe McDonagh, the team had an All-Star and future President of the GAA. Niall McInerney won an All-Ireland SHC medal, a National League medal, three inter-provincial medals and two All-Star awards, and he was a very successful coach of Moneenageisha Vocational School and the Galway VS team in three decades. Cyril Farrell was the coaching supremo when Galway won the 1980, '87 and '88 SHC titles. Tom Cloonan was a brilliant coach at all under-age levels in his club St Mary's, Athenry.

Many of the players made a mark in other walks of life, including Pat Costello, CEO of Chartered Accountants Ireland and Accounting Technicians Ireland, chairman of the organisation which represents 500,000 chartered accountants around the world, a former CEO of the Irish Taxation Institute and a former Army officer who served with the United Nations in the Middle East and the former Yugoslavia.

Patrick Leahy, a native of Loughrea, is Chief of Surgery at The Laser Centre Clinic, Dublin; he is an internationally acclaimed pioneer in the field of minimally invasive surgery, and he developed and patented several of the very important advances in less invasive surgery. Dr John Flaherty is a well known GP based in Loughrea.

Eamonn Cody, manager of the 1977 Fitzgibbon Cup champions, is a brother of Kilkenny manager Brian Cody; Martin Quilty from Limerick, centre half-forward on the 1977 team, is an uncle of rugby legend Paul O'Connell, and PJ Burke from Ballinderreen is the father of the 2016 Galway Rose, Rosie Burke.

Trainer and team mentor Tony Regan, who also guided UCG to five Sigerson Cup titles, remembers the 1976-77 hurling team as "a highly motivated group who took their exams and their sport seriously but they also knew how to enjoy life and each other's company."

He added: "A UCG GAA Club tradition was for players to take club officer roles and help run the club and I think that gave them a sense of responsibility and developed their leadership skills, although men like Joe Connolly and Joe McDonagh had something special about them, even as students. Conor Hayes had a quieter, more private kind of personality but he became a real leader, too. Pat Fleury was a tough defender, a very good hurler, and when he walked into UCG as a first year student it was clear he was ideally suited to the captaincy of any group. I wasn't surprised that he was the man who received the Fitzgibbon Cup two years later."