



Jim Carney

This Sporting Life

From Abbey, Gurteen and Iraq to Croke Park – via Leitrim

IT'S the dream of every young person who plays Gaelic football and hurling to show their talent on the lush green sward of Croke Park in an All-Ireland final. Three members of Abbeyknockmoy Hurling Club will play there on Saturday week, June 10 – two of them for the second time.

Goalkeeper Declan Molloy, defender David Carton and goal-poaching forward Pádraig O'Donnell will be playing for Leitrim in the Meagher Cup final. This competition was added to the GAA calendar in 2009. In status it is the fourth-highest inter-county senior hurling championship, behind the Liam MacCarthy Cup, the Christy Ring Cup and the Nicky Rackard Cup. It is named in honour of a legendary Kilkenny hurler of the 1930s, Lorenzo "Lory" Meagher, whose club was Tullaroan.

In an earlier time in Kilkenny hurling, Tullaroan and Bennettsbridge were the two top clubs. The 'Bridge, having lost their senior status after two decades of glory (1950s and '60s), denied Declan Molloy, Pádraig O'Donnell and their Abbeyknockmoy clubmates victory in the 2015 All-Ireland Intermediate Club Championship final, played at Croke Park in early February 2016. Another very disappointed man that day was Michael Coleman, hero of two epic victories within a short time of each other in 1988 – playing at midfield for Galway in the All-Ireland SHC final vs Tipperary and his club's chief inspiration in their County SHC triumph, defeating Athenry in a replay of the county final. Michael is now in his third year helping the Leitrim senior hurling team as trainer and coach, alongside manager Martin Cunniffe, also Galway-born but he's lived all his working life in the county made famous in a very popular 1960s' Country 'n' Irish song as Lovely Leitrim.

A native of Gurteen – half the catchment area, along with Ballymacward – of the Pádraig Pearse's GAA club, Martin Cunniffe is a retired Garda sergeant who has had an unwavering commitment to Leitrim hurling since he arrived in Carrick-on-Shannon from the Garda training college in 1973. He had been a student at St Brigid's Vocational School, Loughrea and I was fascinated to hear from Martin that he had travelled to Loughrea daily by train, cycling the three



SPREADING THE GOSPEL OF HURLING: Abbeyknockmoy clubmen Pádraig O'Donnell, David Carton, Declan Molloy and Michael Coleman have helped the Leitrim county team to get to Croke Park.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILLIE DONNELLAN, LEITRIM OBSERVER.

miles from his home to Attymon railway station every morning to meet the Galway-Dublin main line train for its 8.00am Loughrea branch line connection, and doing the reverse journey at 4 o'clock. It was a splendid travel service to have in rural West of Ireland at the time but the Loughrea branch line closed in 1975.

A lifelong friend from Gurteen, Noel Treacy, paid Martin this tribute: "They are so lucky to have such a wonderful hurling man to promote the game in Leitrim. Martin and his wife Dolores (a Mayo woman, from Ballybrehony, Claremorris) and their family are united in their love of hurling and the county they live in, but he has remained a loyal Pearse's man too and everybody in our club will be wishing him all the best at Croke Park in the Lory Meagher Cup final against Warwickshire. We also proudly remember Martin for his great ability as a player with our club. He was a powerful midfielder who had the strength to win the ball, the speed to run with it and he could make or take a score."

In Leitrim, Gaelic football is much more popular than hurling and gets most of the official promotion by the local GAA authorities – as it does in all Connacht counties

with the exception of Galway. But one player who has stayed loyal, in the most exemplary way, to Martin Cunniffe and Leitrim hurling is Zak Moradi and it was the 25-year-old left full-forward's late goal against Sligo at Carrick-on-Shannon last Saturday week, allied to Warwickshire's win over Lancashire at the Old Bedians Sports Centre in Manchester on the same day, that ensured Leitrim would be on the road to Croke Park. The two results in the penultimate round of fixtures worked out for Leitrim but it was tough luck on Sligo who were defeated in the last two Lory Meagher Cup finals, by Louth last year and Fermanagh in 2015. Leitrim and Sligo are not yet on the Roll of Honour. Since the inaugural year of the competition, 2009, it has been won by Longford (twice), Donegal, Tyrone, Fermanagh, Warwickshire and Louth.

Semaco ("Zak") Moradi was born in Ramadi, a city in central Iraq, 110km west of Baghdad, and he spent the first eleven years of his life there with his family who are Iranian Kurds, the third largest ethnic group in Iran: ten million of the country's 80 million inhabitants. As a boy, Semaco could not have known that his



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family roots stretched through two war-torn countries in the Middle East. The Moradis came originally from the mountainous region on the Iranian side of the border with Iraq and five of Semaco's ten siblings were born there. Their parents were forced to flee to central Iraq, along with 20,000 other people, after the Iraq-Iran war started in 1980. Semaco was born in Ramadi in 1991 and the first Gulf War was on: Saddam Hussein vs George HW Bush and the USA's Operation Desert Storm.

In a recent interview, Semaco looked back on his childhood years under a dictatorship: "You couldn't open your mouth about Saddam Hussein. He was like a God in Iraq. You'd go to school and there would always be pictures of Saddam. You opened

your history book and you'd have a big picture of him on the front of your book. The second page you opened, there was a little picture of him. He was looking at us the whole time. If there were 30 million people in Iraq, there were 30 million pictures of him. You'd be trained not to say anything bad about him. Five TV channels and it was all about Saddam Hussein. The whole day long was all about him. Iraqi singers had to sing about Saddam and how great he was. You could pick up a newspaper any day and you wouldn't know if the newspaper was today's or from last month because it was the same stuff, all about Saddam."

One of Semaco's older brothers had left home early and made a great life for himself working for the United Nations, and he



LOVELY LEITRIM ... thanks to two Galway men: Michael Coleman and Martin Cunniffe.



GOAL! One of the two 'majors' scored by Pádraig O'Donnell for Leitrim in their crucial victory over Sligo in the Lory Meagher Cup competition.

helped the family members back in Ramadi to get out of Iraq. To cut a long story short, they came to Ireland, to Carrick-on-Shannon. Semaco, nearly 12 years of age, learned how to speak English and how to play hurling! His coach was Martin Cunniffe's son Clement, a Lory Meagher Cup All-Star two years ago. The boy now known as Zak became a brilliant hurler, moved to Dublin with his parents four years after they came to Ireland because his father got a good job offer in the capital, but Zak had fallen in love with Leitrim and hurling, and although he played in the Dublin IHC with the Thomas Davis club he kept a promise he made to himself that he would wear the Leitrim county jersey if it was ever offered to him. Last year, Zak was the delighted recipient of a Lory Meagher Cup

All-Star award.

In the recent victory over Sligo by 3-15 to 3-8, Zak Moradi scored 1-2 and Pádraig O'Donnell hit 2-6 (2-1 from play, three frees and two 65s). Martin Cunniffe told me that Michael Coleman's rousing half-time speech lifted the team to new heights. Michael wouldn't be a man to talk about that but he did tell me that he's enjoyed his three years helping Leitrim; he's proud to have three clubmen with him – Leitrim are entitled to bring in three 'outside' players – and they're all hoping for the best when they get to Croke Park to play a highly rated Warwickshire team who have a big name in their line-out, the former Antrim star forward Liam Watson.

Best of luck to Martin Cunniffe, Michael Coleman and the Leitrim hurlers. Keep the West awake!