

## **Tuarascail Bhliantúil 2008**

A chairde,

History is created by men of vision, those who dream dreams and say why not. Such were those men who met in Thurles one hundred and twenty five years ago to establish a body to preserve the vestiges of our nation, the sports, language, culture and heritage of the Irish Diaspora. Where does this vision stand today, has it been achieved, has it been modified or is it now only viewed in abstract. It is right to re-examine the basis for our Association and be satisfied that we are still motivated by the idealism of our founding fathers. It is right that the Gaelic Athletic Association makes itself relevant in each succeeding generation but it always needs to be measured against the basic principles of why our Association was founded. In the 1950's it was written that it was incumbent on each generation to educate its youth of the reasons for the formation of the GAA and the circumstances that existed at the time. That is still relevant today and it is now our responsibility to ensure that the founding principles are central to all of our affairs today. Achieving this will be a clear statement of our success to date and a firm foundation on which to build for the future.

It was a very successful year for Ulster in that we had five different Counties winning major competitions in football, Fermanagh won promotion to the National League Division 2, and Aontroim won the Walsh Cup in Hurling. Pride of place must go to Tir Eoghain on making 2008 a truly memorable year by winning the All Ireland Senior Football Championship and they also added the Minor Title, to achieve the first All Ireland Senior and Minor double in our history to date. Three years ago I made the comment that the two All Ireland Champions started their route in Healy Park, and that is again true, but this time it was a unique double for Tyrone. The success of Doire in the National League was also a stirring performance and kept the standing of Ulster teams at the top of the football tree. The success of Aontroim in winning the Tommy Murphy Cup was well merited and was achieved by commitment and dedication. The success of Ard Mhacha in winning the Ulster Senior Football Championship was achieved after a replay on an occasion that demonstrated that Fear Manach are capable of greatness but Ard Mhacha have been remarkable in their achievements over the past decade. The reaction of the players and supporters demonstrated the value of our Senior Championship and the sense of achievement that was attained by the outstanding team.

The success of the Ulster University Jordanstown in the Sigerson Cup was noteworthy in that it was achieved on a stage that requires all the skills and determination necessary for succeeding at Inter County level. The winning of the two Senior Schools and Colleges titles by St. Malachy's Castlewellan and St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon respectively meant that these titles remained in Ulster for the third year in a row.

## **Finance**

Given the current economic climate the maintenance of all our core work is of paramount importance. The need to plan for the future is still the best policy for an Association that

has been unafraid of challenges throughout the course of our history. The finances of Comhairle Uladh were strengthened during the past year by two significant drawn games including a replayed final. This was a very welcome boost in a time of need. The dismissal of replays in first round and quarter finals should have an adverse impact on our financial wellbeing into the future. The other significant threat to our wellbeing is the impact of the Euro versus Sterling exchange rate that will have quite enormous impact on the day to day workings of all our constituent units in the foreseeable future. We have examined the matter and have had discussions with Ard Comhairle on the matter and this will require ongoing monitoring. The increased income was necessary to offset ongoing expenditure in games development and physical infrastructure work. The centralisation of television, branding and sponsorship monies and their disbursement has not shown the increases that were indicated but this has to some degree worked for the advantage of the Counties who have seen a substantial benefit from these sources. It is regrettable that Ulster suffered from its compliance with the requirements of the new arrangements, while those who did not, benefited from the compensation payments to ensure their compliance.

The issue of Ard Comhairle funding has also required an intensive amount of work and at this point in time a final resolution is still not agreed. The slowness of the process is a significant cause for concern. It is also a matter of serious concern to find that on all funding arrangements that Ulster is underfunded against the levels applying to the other provinces. The deployment of resources is likely to be a major issue for Comhairle Uladh in the coming years and it is important that we secure the necessary funding to ensure the continuance of the work that is vital to our future. We are delivering a substantial programme at Key Stage 1 in the Primary Schools funded by the Department of Education to whom we are indebted. We are also involved in a Community programme funded by the Department of Social Development plus our ongoing arrangements with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, the two Sports Councils and arrangements with the Department for the Gaeltacht demonstrates that our work is creating a substantial amount of public support for the work that we do in advancing our Associations affairs. We thank all external bodies for their support and encouragement.

The Comhairle Uladh finances are consistent with the level of support for our games programme but dispersible income remains heavily dependent on the returns from the senior football championship. The total income amounted to €7,836,456 inclusive of all grants including capital grants. Our gate income, €3,335,025, represented 43% of this compared to 27% of the total income in 2007. In 2008 our grant income, €2,271,202, represents 29% of our total in comparison to 44% in 2007. The operating expenditure amounted to €5,781,217. In addition to this, the investment in Grounds and Infrastructure amounted to €990,708. The surplus on the years working equated to €264,742. Capital investment in floodlighting was €1,267,670. The continuation of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure funding has enabled us to progress modernisation programme and to support the counties in this vital work. The grants from Ard Comhairle have also assisted in these objectives but these reserves are finite and the future is unclear at this time. The bureaucratic approach and the significant under funding of Ulster is likely to place significant costs on our counties if we are going to meet the

Key Performance Indicators. We have worked diligently to assist all of our constituent units and we shall endeavour to meet the challenges that lie ahead but the processes internally are unworkable, restrictive and potentially costly. The costs of running our games programme are also evident but it needs to be stated that we have not increased our admission charges in 2008 but the current exchange rates will require a review of the equity of the current pricing arrangements.

Comhairle Uladh are well served by a tremendous team of workers. They give an enormous amount of time to act as stiles men, stewards, counters and supervisors throughout the year. We could not do without this outstanding input by a great team. An Cisteoir, Mairtin Mac Aibhne gives generously of his time to the wider benefit of Comhairle Uladh and provides the necessary support in the managing of our financial matters and for which we are deeply indebted. Michelle McAleer, our Business Manager, is a very important part of the team and keeps all aspects of finances under control. We are grateful to her for her work, interest and support in this vital area of governance.

### SENIOR FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

In 2008, the Ulster Senior Football Championship provided us with ten extremely entertaining games including two replays, one of which emerged from the third drawn Ulster Final in six years. Reflecting on the 2008 Ulster Senior Football Championship, we can safely say that we enjoyed another hugely competitive championship. There was no more than five points of a winning margin in any of the games played and interestingly, we used seven of the nine county grounds for these games.

The championship commenced on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May when Cavan and Antrim played out a high scoring encounter at Casement Park. Eight points from corner forward Seanie Johnston saw the Breffni men emerge victorious by 1-19 to 1-14. One week later, Ulster Championship fare returned to the recently refurbished Brewster Park, Enniskillen where the home county took on near neighbours, Monaghan. In a tight affair, Fermanagh's two fisted goals from Liam McBarron and Ciaran McElroy proved to be the difference as the home county collected a 2-08 to 0-10 victory. On Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June in MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey, Donegal faced Derry in another quarter final clash. The Oak Leak county edged a high scoring encounter as they emerged 1-14 to 1-12 winners in a great game. The following week, Tyrone met Down at Healy Park, Omagh in a quarter final that ebbed and flowed from start to finish. Early goals from Colm McCullagh and Sean Cavanagh put Tyrone in the ascendency, but similar scores from Benny Coulter and Ambrose Rodgers meant that the sides would have to do it all again as it ended 2-08 apiece. If patrons thought the first game was entertaining, the replay will go down in Ulster Championship folklore as a classic. A late Tyrone comeback, ably assisted by the introduction of Tommy McGuigan ensured that extra time would be required.

Interestingly, extra time was played under the floodlights at Pairc Esler and it was fitting that this unique occasion should provide a game of such high quality. Benny Coulter's fisted goal saw Down record a memorable victory in a fantastic game of football, as they edged out Tyrone by 1-19 to 0-21. The following day, in the last quarter final, Cavan met Armagh at Kingspan Breffni Park. Six points from renowned marksman, Stevie

McDonnell saw off the challenge from the Breffni men as Armagh progressed to the semi final with a 0-17 to 0-13 victory.

In the first semi final, Fermanagh faced Derry in Healy Park on a wet and miserable evening on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> June. The hero of the day turned out to be former All Star full back Barry Owens, now operating at full forward who had battled back bravely from injury, who scored a late goal to send the Erne County into their first Ulster Senior Football Final since 1982. In the other side of the draw neighbours Armagh and Down clashed at St Tiernach's Park, Clones on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> June. A more economical Armagh forward unit ensured that the Orchard County progressed to another Ulster Final on a scoreline of 1-11 to 0-10.

On Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> July, over 33,000 people packed into St Tiernach's Park, Clones for a repeat of the Ulster final of 26 years previous. While this may have been a repeat of the 1982 final, a new initiative introduced by the Marketing & IT Committee, honoured the Senior champions of 25 years earlier, Dún na nGall. This was a unique tribute and one which the committee, chaired by Michael Hasson, can be extremely proud of and can consider in the future, to continue this novel idea of honouring the winners from 25 years previous. On the field, goals from Finnian Moriarty and Ronan Clarke looked to be enough to collect another Ulster title for the Orchard County. However, a late Eamon Maguire goal allied to a last gasp equalising point from Shaun Doherty ensured that we all would have to return a week later for the replay. The colour that both sets of supporters brought to this occasion was a credit to both Armagh and Fermanagh and seven days later the occasion was no less a spectacular event. Second time around, Armagh made no mistake as a Stevie McDonnell goal ensured that Armagh would collect their seventh Anglo Celt Cup since 1999. Comhghairdeas Ard Mhacha!

### ALL IRELAND FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

The All Ireland Football Championship for Ulster representatives began on Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> July, with six of our counties involved. Donegal recorded a comprehensive 3-11 to 1-09 victory over Roscommon at MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey. Tyrone produced a strong first half performance to lay the foundations for a 1-17 to 1-09 victory over Louth in Drogheda. Down produced a masterful attacking display as they scored a remarkable 5-19 in reply to Offaly's 2-10 at Tullamore. In contrast, Cavan were extremely unlucky against Kildare at Newbridge as they lost by a single point, 1-16 to 1-15 in a high scoring encounter. The All Ireland Qualifiers threw up an all Ulster clash on the same day, as Monaghan and Derry faced each other at St Tiernach's Park, Clones. Five points from corner forward, Thomas Freeman ensured that the Farney county saw off the Oak Leaf challenge by the narrowest of margins, 1-13 to 1-12, in a thrilling game.

One week later, Monaghan again faced another Ulster county, this time in the form of Donegal at MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey. Once again, they recorded a one point victory as Paul Finlay produced a master class of point taking as he weighed in with seven scores to end Donegal's interest in the Senior Football Championship of 2008. On the same day, Down travelled to Portlaoise to take on the home county and collected a fine 2-14 to 1-15 victory. Tyrone also progressed to the next round of the All Ireland Qualifiers as they defeated Westmeath at Healy Park, Omagh by 0-14 to 1-07 to ensure

that five Ulster counties remained in the last twelve of the All Ireland Senior Football Championship.

Down returned to the stage of Croke Park for their last clash with Wexford and were defeated by 2-13 to 0-12 and thus, exited the Championship. Immediately afterwards, Tyrone faced the challenge of Mayo and after a tight tussle embodied by the huge work rate of the men from the Red Hand County, emerged victorious by 0-13 to 1-09. The following day, again at Croke Park, Fermanagh and Monaghan were both in action. Fermanagh faced Kildare, and similarly to Down a day earlier, left their best performances behind them, as they were defeated on a scoreline of 0-11 to 0-05. Monaghan took on the reigning All Ireland Champions, Kerry and like the previous year, played some tremendous football but just fell short on a scoreline of 1-13 to 0-13. By Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August, Ulster had two counties left standing in pursuit of the Sam Maguire Cup in the form of Tyrone and Armagh. Ulster champions, Armagh were first up as they took on a rejuvenated Wexford side, and despite being in control for long stages of the game, a late goal from Wexford confounded the Orchard County on a 1-14 to 0-12 defeat. One week later, again in Croke Park, Tyrone took on Dublin, on surely one of the wettest days that we have witnessed for a long time. The wet conditions certainly didn't dampen the enthusiasm of the Tyrone players on the day as goals from Joe McMahon, Sean Cavanagh and Davy Harte sent them on their way to an All Ireland Semi Final on an emphatic scoreline of 3-14 to 1-08. In the semi final, they took on Armagh's conquerors, Wexford in a unique occasion. Tyrone's ability to produce scores from various sources, where a total of nine players got on the scoresheet, including six points from their defence, ensured that they reached another All Ireland Final on a scoreline of 0-23 to 1-14.

On Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> September, Tyrone lined up against Kerry. Kerry were going for their third All Ireland in a row while Tyrone were seeking for their third All Ireland Senior title since 2003. On the greatest stage of all, we were treated to a fantastic game of gaelic football as these two counties illustrated all that is good in our game. Tommy McGuigan scored a vital goal just after half time while Sean Cavanagh produced a man of the match performance with five points from play. Tyrone produced an exceptional team performance on the day and finished very strongly to ensure that they collected Sam Maguire on a scoreline of 1-15 to 0-14. By virtue of Tir Eoghain collecting their third All Ireland Senior Football title, they have considerably increased the list of Ulster men who have now collected 3 All Ireland medals. Tir Eoghain have 15 men who have collected All Ireland senior medals in 2003, 2005 & 2008. This is added to the four Down men, who collected their trio in 1960, 1961 and 1968 and six Cavan men. Tom O'Reilly, brother of John Joe, won his three medals in 1933, 1935 and 1947 while the other five Cavan men won their medals in 1947, 1948 and 1952. Three All Ireland titles in six seasons is a remarkable achievement and immense credit must go to the players, Mickey Harte and his management team, the County Committee and the Clubs of Tyrone everyone associated in this tremendous success.

Special mention must also go to Derry, who collected the National Football League title with a 2-13 to 2-09 victory over Kerry at Parnell Park. Goals from Fergal Doherty and Conleith Gilligan were vital as the Oak Leaf county recovered from a poor start to collect their sixth National Football League title. At this point, I must acknowledge my

disappointment at the fact that this game did not take place at our national stadium. A national final of this stature should be played at Croke Park and I sincerely hope that this will be the case in the future.

Fermanagh too achieved promotion to Division Two of the National Football League after an enthralling encounter with Wexford. In a game that had everything Wexford won a titanic struggle after extra time but Fermanagh had demonstrated that they deserved their promotion and their season was to prove that this status was well merited.

After losing to Cavan in the Preliminary Round, Antrim were not permitted to take part in the All Ireland Qualifiers and subsequently, entered the Tommy Murphy Cup. They collected fine victories over both Carlow and London to reach their second Tommy Murphy Cup Final in a row. Once again, they faced Wicklow, and this time around, the Saffron county avenged their 2007 defeat as they emerged victorious in a high scoring encounter by 3-12 to 1-15. This was a great achievement for Antrim as they showed what they are capable of in front of a large crowd at Croke Park.

### MINOR FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

The 2008 Ulster Minor Football Championship commenced with Cavan taking on Antrim at Casement Park. It was a great start to the competition as Cavan emerged victorious by 1-14 to 2-08 in an entertaining game. The following week, Monaghan defeated Fermanagh by 2-07 to 2-03 at Brewster Park, Enniskillen. On Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> June, Derry produced a great team display to defeat Donegal by 4-12 to 2-10 at MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey. Seven days later, we were treated to another outstanding game as Tyrone met Down at Healy Park, Omagh. This game ebbed and flowed until a late Tyrone surge secured a 0-16 to 0-14 victory. After their Preliminary Round victory, Cavan faced up to Armagh in the last quarter final and produced some great football to defeat the Orchard County by 0-14 to 1-04. In the first semi final, Tyrone and Cavan clashed and another late surge by the Red Hand County ensured that it was them that progressed to the Ulster Final by 1-11 to 1-09. In the other semi final, Monaghan faced Derry at Healy Park, Omagh and it was the Farney County who were more economical with their chances to collect a 1-14 to 1-09 victory. Tyrone and Monaghan produced another fine spectacle in the Ulster Final and it was Tyrone who collected their 21<sup>st</sup> Ulster Minor Football Championship on a scoreline of 0-13 to 0-10.

Despite this defeat, Monaghan remained in the hunt for All Ireland honours as they faced Mayo in an All Ireland quarter final. Despite the fact that they were defeated by six points after extra time, Monaghan will count themselves extremely unfortunate as that scoreline did not illustrate the closeness of the tie. That left Tyrone as the sole Ulster representatives in this competition and they did not disappoint. In their quarter final tie, they saw off the challenge from Roscommon, which, like the Monaghan fixture, was also played at Pearse Park, Longford. In the semi final, Tyrone produced a stunning display to defeat Meath by 1-21 to 2-07 at Croke Park, to follow the example of the senior side in reaching the All Ireland Final.

It is fair to say that the All Ireland Minor Football Final was a fantastic game of football. Both Tyrone and Mayo played some great football and it looked as though Mayo had done enough to take the title, until Tyrone half forward, Matthew Donnelly stepped up

with a last gasp point to tie the game at 0-14 apiece. Following the seniors tremendous success, the stage was now set six days later for the minors to complete the 'double'. A large crowd packed into Pearse Park, Longford and after a titanic struggle that needed extra time and a Conor O'Neill goal, Tyrone collected the Tom Markham cup on a scoreline of 1-20 to 1-15. Some of the football played by this young side augurs well for the future of the Gaels of Tyrone.

#### UNDER 21 FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

The fact that this competition was completed in a period of just twenty days illustrates the difficulties associated with the organisation of fixtures in our Association. In the Preliminary Round, played on St Patrick's Day, Donegal defeated Monaghan at Ballybay. In the Quarter Finals, Tyrone defeated Cavan by three points, Down beat Antrim, Derry overcame Fermanagh and Donegal overcame Armagh at MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey. Down and Tyrone had a great tussle in the semi final with the Mourne County emerging winners by 0-14 to 0-13 at Casement Park. In the other side of the draw, Derry had a comprehensive win over Donegal at Healy Park, Omagh to reach the decider. In the final, Down and Derry epitomised everything that is good about this grade of football as they played out a thriller at Casement Park. Down's ability to get goals proved the difference as they edged out Derry by 3-11 to 1-14. Two weeks later, Down represented Ulster as they took on Kildare in the All Ireland semi final at Navan. Unfortunately, Down could not repeat their Ulster Final performance and were defeated by 1-10 to 0-10.

#### CLUB FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

Since the last Comhairle Uladh convention, Crossmaglen Rangers in Senior Football, Ballinagh in Intermediate Football, Dunloy in Senior Hurling, Keady in Intermediate Hurling and Glen Rovers, Armoyle were all defeated in their respective All Ireland Club semi finals. In Junior Football, Rock from Tyrone capped a fine year by reaching the All Ireland Club Final, and were unfortunate to be defeated by Canovee.

In 2008, the Ulster Senior Football Club Championship proved to be an exciting competition. In the Preliminary Round, Antrim champions St Galls, defeated Down winners Mayobridge by a point at Pairc Esler. In the quarter finals, St Eunan's Letterkenny defeated Tyrone champions, Clonoe, Ballinderry defeated Latton, Crossmaglen overcame Fermanagh champions, St Patricks, while Cavan Gaels had a great victory over St Galls. In the semi finals, Ballinderry had an impressive victory over Cavan Gaels while Crossmaglen Rangers edged out St Eunan's Letterkenny by three points. This left Crossmaglen Rangers and Ballinderry in the final at Brewster Park, Enniskillen. Ballinderry finished strongly and with a late Niall McCusker goal secured a draw on a scoreline of 1-10 apiece. The replay was scheduled for the following Sunday but due to the adverse weather conditions was postponed for another week. On Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> December, the sides met again at Brewster Park and this time around Crossmaglen Rangers collected the Seamus McFerran cup with a 0-12 to 1-04 victory.

In the Intermediate grade, Tyrone champions Trillick, defeated Ballybay in the Preliminary Round at Healy Park, Omagh. In the quarter finals, Down champions Annaclone, beat Donegal winners MacCumhaills, Erne Gaels defeated Antrim

champions, All Saints in a high scoring encounter, Greenlough of Derry beat Armagh champions, St Patrick's while Trillick defeated Redhills from Cavan. In the Semi finals, Greenlough defeated Annaclone by two points while Trillick recorded a six point victory over Erne Gaels. The final was played under floodlights at the recently refurbished Athletic Grounds, Armagh and it was Trillick who edged an exciting tussle by 0-08 to 0-07.

In the Junior Football Club Championship, Coa from Fermanagh defeated Tyrone champions, Augher in the Preliminary Round at Brewster Park, Enniskillen. In the quarter finals, McDermotts from Antrim defeated Armagh winners, Middletown, Down winners, St John's defeated Coa, Lissan from Derry defeated Cavan winners, Drung while Drumhowan of Monaghan defeated Donegal winners, Carndonagh. In the semi finals, Lissan edged out St Johns by two points, while Drumhowan comprehensively beat McDermotts. The final was played as a curtain raiser to the Senior Football final at Brewster Park, Enniskillen and turned out to be a one sided affair as Drumhowan won by 5-10 to 0-04.

### INTER PROVINCIAL CHAMPIONSHIPS

In the Inter Provincial series in 2008, both semi finals were played in Fermoy as both our hurling and football sides faced Munster. In the hurling encounter, Ulster played very well and were unlucky to be defeated by 2-14 to 1-12. In the football, in the worsening weather conditions, the concession of a goal shortly after half time saw Ulster defeated by 1-05 to 0-05. At this point, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of all the players who represented our province with distinction during 2008. I would also like to pay tribute to the management team of both the hurlers, Dominic McKinley and Terence McNaughton and the footballers, Joe Kernan along with Seamus McEnaney, John McCloskey and Tony Scullion.

### SCHOOLS/COLLEGES

This past year was another successful chapter for the schools and colleges in our province. At Vocational Schools level, St Malachy's Castlewellan collected the All Ireland Vocational Schools Under 18 title. St Patrick's Academy, Dungannon followed up their MacRory Cup triumph with the remarkable achievement of the Hogan Cup, to ensure that both the senior football titles at schools' level returned to Ulster. On the colleges front, University of Ulster, Jordanstown, captained by Peter Donnelly were crowned Sigerson Cup champions for 2008.

### DR MCKENNA CUP

The Gaelic Life Dr McKenna saw the commencement of gaelic games in our province at the start of this year. There was added interest in this year's competition as counties had to overcome the ban on collective training in the months of November and December and there was also the introduction of the Experimental Disciplinary Rules, where a player who received a yellow card was to be replaced. These rules will continue in the National

Leagues and their continued involvement will require the approval of Congress in April. Once again, the Gaelic Life Dr McKenna Cup was played in a tight timescale with 21 games played in a period of 22 days. TG4 again provided coverage of three of the games, including the final. The nine counties were again joined by St Mary's College, Queens University and University of Ulster, Jordanstown. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all the teams involved for their co-operation in ensuring that this competition was finished prior to the commencement of the National Football League, despite issues such as team holidays, exams and adverse weather conditions.

In the group stages, there were noteworthy victories for St Mary's College over Monaghan, Queens over Cavan and Antrim and University of Ulster, Jordanstown over Derry. Other interesting points from the group stages included the fact that Derry drew two of their three games, Down's win over Tyrone, Cavan's win over Armagh and Tyrone and Monaghan served up a fantastic game at Healy Park, Omagh in a match that was covered live on TG4. In the semi finals, Donegal defeated Armagh in an entertaining game in dreadful weather conditions at Healy Park, by 1-14 to 2-09. The following night, Queens University defeated Down by 1-17 to 1-11 at Pairc Esler to become the first university side to reach the Dr McKenna Cup final. On Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> January, they met Donegal at Healy Park, Omagh in another game that was covered live by TG4. In a tight game, Queens University had a couple of chances to win the game in normal time, but Donegal eventually ran out 2-12 to 0-11 winners after extra time to collect the first silverware of 2009.

### SENIOR HURLING CHAMPIONSHIP

In the Senior Hurling Championship all nine Ulster counties took part for the first time. The Championship opened with first round games involving Cavan against Monaghan and Fermanagh against Tyrone. After two closely contested games Monaghan and Tyrone emerged as winners. Monaghan then progressed to cause a major upset by beating Donegal in round two on a 1-15 to 1-14 score line. Tyrone couldn't rise to the challenge of London and crashed out in the second round. The quarter finals saw London defeat Armagh in a cracker in Newry, after extra time, while Monaghan exited to a young Derry team. At the semi-final stage, Down and Antrim entered the competition and both struggled for long periods before overcoming the challenges of London and Derry respectively. The Ulster Final was eventually won by Antrim, who were tested all the way by Down, on a 3-18 to 2-16 score line.

### ALL IRELAND HURLING CHAMPIONSHIPS

Antrim, as Ulster Champions, were forced to play in a play-off with Galway to determine who they would play in the qualifier series. A heavy defeat to Galway led to Antrim being paired against Waterford in Dungarvan. Under new management, Waterford showed Antrim little mercy and dished out a heavy defeat as Antrim crashed out of the qualifiers and the McCarthy Cup.

In the Christy Ring Cup, Down and Derry qualified for the quarter finals where they were drawn against each other. Derry caused an upset by defeating the Down men by 1-20 to

0-18. However, Derry were unable to continue their winning ways and they were comprehensively beaten 1-19 to 0-9 by Westmeath.

The Nicky Rackard Cup saw four Ulster Counties qualifying for the quarter finals. South Down were defeated by Louth while Sligo defeated Tyrone. However, Monaghan overcame the challenge of Cavan to win through to the semi-finals where they were unable to overcome Louth and were beaten by two points on a scoreline of 1-13 to 0-18.

### UNDER 21 HURLING CHAMPIONSHIP

The competition format may provide activity but the championship intensity is missing from round robin games and this was clearly evident at Derry's final game in Ballycran. Four Counties competed in the Under 21 Championship, in the round robin games which saw Derry, Antrim, Down and Armagh participate. Yet again Derry demonstrated that they are worthy champions by winning all their games and claimed back to back Ulster Under 21 Titles which is a great sign for the future of hurling in the Oak Leaf county. In the All Ireland Semi Final, Derry were beaten by Tipperary who were winners on a 1-20 to 1-10 margin.

### UNDER 21 HURLING SHIELD

London applied to enter Under 21 Hurling Shield after the draw had been made. Counties were therefore asked to agree to play out the Championship as drawn then play off against London to determine who would represent Ulster in the All Ireland series. Tyrone recorded a convincing win over Monaghan in the semi final while disappointingly Fermanagh withdrew from the competition at a late stage giving Donegal a straight passage through to the final where they had a 1-14 to 1-10 win over Tyrone. The Play off with London was a one sided affair with Donegal winning 6-21 to 1-2. In the All Ireland B Championship, Donegal lost 4-19 to 0-8 against Carlow at the semi final stage.

### MINOR HURLING CHAMPIONSHIP

Antrim breezed to yet another Ulster Minor title with comfortable victories over Derry (6-21 to 1-10) and Down (3-18 to 0-5). However, yet again they failed to make an impact on the All Ireland stage going down by 4-18 to 0-6 to Tipperary at the Quarter final stage. After several tremendous efforts by Antrim at this stage of the competition, there is a need to address all aspects of our progress at minor level to ensure that we are closing the gap between Ulster and the rest.

### ULSTER CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP

In the Senior Ulster Club Championship, Cushendall survived the challenges of Kevin Lynch's and Ballygalget to emerge as winners. Indeed Ballygalget pushed the Antrim Champions all the way before falling on a 1-14 to 1-13 scoreline. Cushendall will now play against De La Salle, from Waterford in the All Ireland semi final. In the Intermediate Club Championship after being forced to replay their semi final game against Carrickmore, on a technicality, Antrim's Gort na Mona emerged as champions.

However, following an All Ireland quarter final victory against the London champions, they were unable to beat Cork Champions, Blarney. In the Ulster Club Junior Championship, Fermanagh Champions, Lisbellaw, defeated Setanta from Donegal in the final before going down to Cork champions Dripsey in the All Ireland Semi Final.

### ALL IRELAND CLUB CHAMPIONSHIP

Dunloy were Ulster representatives in the All Ireland Club Championship, having won the 2007 Ulster Club Championship. In the All Ireland semi final confidence was high as they renewed acquaintances with Birr. However, yet again the Offaly Champions proved to be a bridge too far for the Antrim men, as they fell on a 0-9 to 0-17 score line. In the Intermediate Championship Ulster Champions Keady Lamh Dhearg, from Armagh, were beaten in the semi final by Clonkil from Westmeath by 0-10 to 1-4. While Glen Rovers, Armoy from Antrim went down to the eventual winners Conaghy Shamrocks from Kilkenny on a 4-15 to 1-10 scoreline.

### HURLING DEVELOPMENT

Progress continues on the Hurling Development front and we record our thanks to everyone working for the advancement of our National Game. The members of Coiste Forbartha Iomána give generously of their time and we are indebted to them. The level of investment and support delivered by Comhairle Uladh continues at a high level and we are indebted to all the coaches and staff working within each County for their input. The development of Hurling continues through the provision of links between clubs and local schools and this area needs to be developed further. Comhairle Uladh have also continued to support our Colleges, Vocational Schools and Third Level Colleges through the supply of hurling equipment in conjunction with Comhairle Colaisti Uladh, Coiste na gCeardscoil and Comhairle Ardoideachais Uladh. This area of work has been sustained over several years but it is now apparent that because of the potential lack of funding available there is likely to be a substantial reduction in funds for these items in the years ahead.

Coiste Forbartha Iomána are doing outstanding work in the cause of hurling. They attempt to represent the Provincial need gauged from a County perspective, but the interest of the game is placed in its correct place. We are indebted to the members for their involvement and work. It is also appropriate to record our appreciation to Aogaon O Fearghail on his work and interest in hurling and in the leadership of this committee. We also are well served by Jimmy Darragh as Hurling Development Manager who has given generously of time to assist in the work associated with the various programmes. During the year Frankie Quinn resigned as Hurling Development Officer after becoming Antrim Secretary. We wish to record our thanks to Frankie Quinn for his commitment to our work while in our employment. Kevin Kelly has replaced Frankie and we know that he is enthusiastic for the challenges ahead and we look forward to exciting development for hurling.

### REFEREES

Refereeing is an essential part of the playing and development of our games. Regardless of how much training or support that is delivered it is on the field of play that the true test is applied. Discipline is not the sole prerogative of the referee, but involves the players and the team officials. The concept of fair play is a requirement of everyone involved and the greater the level of cooperation by all parties the higher will be the skill level and enjoyment of our games. Habitual fouling has no part of our games and unless we commit ourselves to a zero tolerance of indiscipline then we shall not be able to advance the true spirit of our games being manly, fair and respectful. The negativity deriving for the Association and indeed refereeing in particular, is mitigating against the required elevation of the standing of the referee and the games.

We are indebted to the members of the Referee's Committee particularly the leadership of Liam MacNiallais, as Chairman and Brian Armitage as Secretary. They are very effective in dealing with referees and the various issues that arise as well as supporting and developing the referee. We are indebted to our referees for their time, commitment and involvement in the delivery of our games programme. We also acknowledge the continued work of the County Referees Administrators, Assessors and Tutors to whom we are also indebted and who continue to do outstanding work for our Association.

## **EDUCATION**

The Ministers Coaching in Schools Programme was expanded both in time and in the numbers of personnel deployed in delivering Physical Literacy as part of the primary schools curriculum. This has given our Association a substantial input by contributing to creating active lifestyles for the future players available to the Association. We are well served by the quality of people who carry out this work and represent a very positive image for the GAA in introducing the skills of agility, balance and coordination in a fun and non competitive environment within established curriculum time. We are appreciative of the input of the Department of Education its officials and the Minister for their work and foresight in making this project the success that it is. There is a substantial administration involved and the training of those delivering the programmes have required an increased workload for several members of staff in addition to those working in the schools. Comhairle Uladh have given significant resources to this project and the work of Eugene Young, Terence McWilliams, Jimmy Darragh, Diarmaid Marsden, Bernie McGlinchey supported by Michelle McAleer must be acknowledged.

Cumann na mBunscol continues to work within its schools network for the development of a GAA culture and are involved in the promotion of our games and related matters. They are still active in the Mini Sevens and the half time games involving primary schools in all nine counties. The Primary School is at the heart of community and the need to be vigilant about the state of health of Primary Schools should be at the centre of a clubs work. The current move to bigger and more remote schools has an economic motivation rather than a community and social benefit. I do not wish to become part of the education debate but the transfer issues and at what age needs to be monitored, so as to ensure that the community and societal benefits of the education are not lost in the

debate. Education is a central pivot for everyone involved and we can only hope that the future is built on the rights of the child, the importance of team spirit and the necessary respect for diversity on one side and societal cohesion on the other side.

The Vocational Schools Committee and Colleges Council have continued to provide a wonderful platform for the development of our games and the high level of skills that are needed to enjoy our games in the first place and to be successful in the second place. This has been a remarkable success for second level schools involved at whatever level of competition. The width and standard of competition have progressed at a tremendous pace and we are indebted to the schools, principals, teachers, boards of governors, parents and particularly the pupils for their involvement and continued support. We also need to reassess the involvement of our clubs in support of the second level schools so that they are supported, encouraged and respected in the outstanding and important work that they do. The new Post Primary Schools body will be fully operational and we hope that it is successful in advancing the work of all our schools and ensures that proper structures operate to ensure that there is continuity of activity that has been so successful to date. It would be remiss if I did not pay tribute to Art McRory who has been part of the affairs of the GAA for a lifetime of work for the Association at all levels including this Council. We acknowledge his service, dedication and contribution and know that he shall never be too far away from the games and the wellbeing of the Vocational Schools.

Third Level Colleges and Universities continue to work for our Association by developing our games, our players and the overall involvement in the GAA. The need to examine the requirements being placed on Universities, Comhairle Ardoidheachais Uladh, the Third Level clubs and those attending third level needs to be assessed so that we are engaging with all of our potential members rather than working only with those likely to represent teams. Winning is important but the need for those interacting with our Association to understand the role, function and importance of our games and community service is an essential part of our work at this level. We again have operated the Scholarship programme and have made the current year's awards to those students who were assessed as eligible by the panel established by Comhairle Uladh. It is an onerous undertaking and we are grateful to T. O Dalaigh, B. Mac Gabhra, Eugene Young and Jimmy Darragh for their work and diligence in respect of the making of the individual awards.

## GROUNDS

The Floodlighting Investment has almost concluded the Council's Floodlighting programme which was initiated back in 2005 and has witnessed a very substantial resource being created for the GAA. Since last year's Convention the Floodlights were officially switched on in Celtic Park, the Athletic Grounds and most recently at the Dr McKenna Cup game at Brewster Park. To date eight main county grounds have been floodlit with TV standard lighting and it would be hoped to conclude with the installation in St Tiernach's Park, Clones.

The outworking of the Strategic Investment Fund has been at the centre of our forward planning and several Regional Centres and Centres of Excellence are an outworking of the need to provide additional facilities both for County team use but also for the increasing demand from Clubs and Schools. There is a substantial amount of work involved in getting these projects to the starting point but significant progress is likely in the coming year.

The matter of Secondary County Grounds has been discussed at many levels in the context of their status, the need to meet health and safety standards and to utilize these venues in conjunction with the main County grounds. Since last year's Convention and after much examination it was agreed that a fund would be created to enable some work to be undertaken. It was agreed in Ulster that we would match the Central Funds and make one award per annum. It may take some time but if we plan it we can do it. However, after just one year the fund at Central Level has disappeared and the future is not as clear as we had thought it was. We cannot abandon these grounds as they serve a very useful facility for many of our games and they are also used by the Counties themselves. There is also the legal requirements that are going to require us to address these issues. It is particularly critical as the Safety at Sports Grounds Legislation begins to be applied. We have committed funding through our own Parks and Safety Committee and the National Infrastructure and Safety Committee needs to revisit this matter as a matter of urgency. There are a number of venues which have been identified by County Committees and we all have a duty to ensure that measures are taken to ensure their compliance with legislation and address health and safety deficiencies wherever they exist. After three years of frustrating progress in this area progress is being made within the six Counties to take forward the full implementation of the Safety in Sport Grounds (NI) Order 2006. The Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure has established the new Overseeing Body within Sport NI and which will be lead by Paul Scott. The Designation of venues has begun and this will be a key area of the District Councils workplan for the foreseeable future. Consultation meetings are planned for March 2009 when the detailed delivery mechanisms will be unveiled.

During last autumn Sport NI consulted with all governing bodies of sport on the availability of approximately £3m for a programme to provide new or improved grass playing pitches for field sports. We held a series of workshops and a funding clinic and as a result achieved 14 successful projects which have been taken forward equating to over 90% of the total funding available for all sports. Timescales were tight for these applications and their ultimate delivery but a significant amount of work has been achieved to date. We are grateful to Stephen McGeehan, Ryan Feeney, Mark Conway and John O'Neill for all the support that they delivered to those clubs who were applying. There is likely to be other significant capital funding available in the six Counties and we shall be developing a series of support measures to assist clubs to achieve advanced state of readiness to qualify for grant aid for building and pitch projects. It is noted that the Sports Capital Fund has been a casualty of the economic climate and we need to ensure that these funding measures are reinstated as soon as possible as they too contribute both to the economic health of the state and also to the confidence of the people and through them all, aspects of society as a whole.

We acknowledge the work of our Parks and Safety Committee who deal with the County projects and ancillary matters including training and legal requirements. They are also taking forward the various programmes surrounding Centres of Excellence and Strategic Investment Fund matters. There has been a continuing interaction with those taking forward the work in delivering these projects. The work of the Club Planning and Physical Development Committee are also very active and they are acting as an advisory body to our clubs on a wide range of matters. We have made significant progress on tidying the legal aspects of our property. This is essential work but the Association needs to examine other mechanisms for the proper control of our property. It is acknowledged the assistance of the County Development Officers and Paul Sanders in creating a substantial database for future reference. We are grateful to Dan McCartan as Cathaoirleach, Ryan Feeney as Runai and the members of the Committee for their expertise and time in these very worthwhile elements of our Associations affairs.

The Multi Sport Stadium at the Maze/Long Kesh site has it appears come to a permanent stop if recent leaked documents are to be believed. The slowness of progress had always the perception that everyone was not enamoured with the project or our involvement in it. It needs now to be stated that the GAA had always said that they would play games in a publicly funded stadium since it was first mooted nearly twenty years ago. The Association were invited to participate in the recent appraisals by the Strategic Investment Board and we dealt with all of the issues that arose. The stadium would have met our strategic requirements for a generation in providing a world class stadium at no capital cost to the GAA and the stadium itself would have been revenue neutral to the three sports involved. We, as an Association, had a small group taking matters forward and they did so, on the concept of shared space and a shared future. Sport could have made a substantial impact to the creation of mutual respect within our diverse community but also that now appears to be no more. The matters are now to be examined within a yet to be defined process, but we cannot have a prolonged examination with no defined outcomes or identifiable benefits for our Association.

### PROVINCIAL COUNCIL

The role and function of the Provincial Council is prescribed in Rule and gives a wide remit to our part of the overall structure that is the Gaelic Athletic Association. In this milestone year it is worth noting that the Association became stabilised by the introduction of Provincial Councils within the first twenty years of its existence. Ulster has always supported the aims and ideals of the GAA regardless to the success of our teams in winning National titles. We do support our Clubs and our Counties and we do have a Provincial identity also, in which we all share in the joy of success and in the sad days of which there have been many, but the concept of the extended GAA family continues to permeate everything that we do. The work of the Ulster Council continues to expand and we are now involved in all aspects of community development be they within the Association or in the society in which we operate.

We are engaged with all Councils in the nine Counties and are working with County Committees and through them our Clubs to achieve the best level of support be it in games or physical development for them. The impact of legislation on our units was at the centre of our working and areas such as the Compensation Order, the Independent Safeguarding Authority, the Safety at Sports Grounds and several other spheres of legislation are creating a huge amount of work in ensuring that the requirements of such legislation do not place intolerable requirements on our volunteer members. The advancement of Club Mhaith to become a national policy is a welcome progress but the delivery of this programme alone will place a substantial amount of work on Comhairle Uladh but if carried out to its intended standards it should be of major benefit to our clubs as they carry out their functions. We have expanded our support base and have provided support for a wide spectrum of projects being undertaken in the development of our Association.

Strategic Planning has been a central tenet to the work of the GAA during 2008. Comhairle Uladh are ready to face the challenges arising for forward planning and welcome the publication of the National Strategic Plan. We are hoping to launch our Strategic Plan to 2015 at this Convention. We shall have all our Counties operating off a long term plan by mid 2009 and while this in itself is encouraging, it is in the delivery of these plans that we shall see the level of progress and be able to assess progress. We are also shortly publishing a Belfast Strategic Plan and shall work with both Counties to address the issues emerging from this critical area in Ireland's second largest city. The work at our main County Grounds has been something of tremendous pride for the Association as a whole and particularly in Ulster and the Counties concerned. The finished work at Brewster Park, the interim at the Athletic Grounds, Celtic Park and at Casement Park are typical of the advances that are being made to facilitate a higher standard for everyone involved.

Our four year Modernisation Programme is coming to an end and the project concludes on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2009. This programme had as its objectives, the creation of adequate systems, structures and support to ensure that the Association was cohesive, relevant and fit for purpose. The work that was undertaken is very substantially maintained in the emerging arrangements involving all constituent units and continuing support from Sport NI. New structures are and continue to be put in place through Full time County Secretaries, Games Development Managers and Administrators in each County and the provision of a reduced number of SportNI supported posts in the future at Provincial level. The true purpose is to support the volunteer by delivering all the requirements for the successful engagement of Clubs and members in advancing the work of our Association through providing County Games Development personnel in Hurling and Football and supplying substantial resources. We look forward to working through a strategic programme that should continue our advancement set against our Strategic Plan to 2015. We are grateful to Sport NI for the support during this project and we are currently working through a post project evaluation with KPMG, who will report to SportNI, and who are assessing the overall impact of the programme.

We are indebted to the various bodies and Departments that we interact with in pursuance of our objectives and we acknowledge the support of the Sports Councils, the Departments of Education, the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure, Social Development, the Department of Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, the Department of Tourism and Sport and the Department for Foreign Affairs and the North/South Ministerial Council, all of whom have been encouraging to us in the work that we do. We must be engaged and relevant so that GAA is included in all future plans. The hosting of our second Club Development Conference in November was one of several special events that indicated that we are confident of our Associations present and have a clear vision of a future based on a vibrant Association and Country proud of its heritage, games and its people.

Tomas Ó Dalaigh as our President, has been a cause of inspiration through his dedication, leadership and his total commitment to the Association and to this Province. He has been exemplary in all his dealings and we are deeply indebted to him for the amount of time and effort that he voluntarily gives to the GAA. Aogan Ó Fearghail, Leas Uachtarán, has also given generously of his time in the best interests of the Association and has been very involved in the Central Competition Control Committee, the National IT Committee and has worked to continue the development of hurling. We thank him for his work and support across the full spectre of our activity. Likewise, we are indebted to our Treasurer, Mairtin Mac Aibhne who has also given greatly of his services both as Cisteoir and at the organising of games and related matters. Micheal Ó hOsain as our OCP, has also been very committed and supportive on all matters and has worked very closely on dealing with media issues and he is deserving of our gratitude for all that he does for the GAA.

Today we wish a fond farewell to Naul McCole, J. P. Graham, Patrick Og Nugent and Joe McWilliams. All have made a substantial contribution whilst part of Comhairle Uladh and we thank them for their work in the full knowledge that they will continue to be active in advocating the best interests of our Association. The members of Comhairle Uladh also provide a substantial contribution to the GAA through their work as part of the Council and the three Executive Sub Committees and for which we are deeply grateful. Next year we shall see a substantial departure of people who have made a significant contribution to the wellbeing of the GAA and Comhairle Uladh will have to examine how this will impact on our affairs and to address the issues to ensure a smooth transition.

We are deeply indebted to Sean Mac Taidgh and Eamann Mac Mathuna who have acted as Chairman and Secretary of the Hearings Committee and who have given a tremendous amount of time and knowledge to the outworking of this important process. The tremendous amount of work provided by Stephen Donnelly and Geraldine McKavanagh to the CCCU, Hearings and Coiste Bainisti also needs to be acknowledged as their contributions which have been outstanding and way beyond the call of duty, for which we are deeply grateful.

The replacement of Planning Policy Statement (PPS14) with PPS21 is a significant achievement for all those who opposed the draconian approach to Planning matters. We

too played our part in what has emerged and I would wish to thank all those within the GAA who supported our position including our members, Clubs, Counties and many public representatives. We have not been entirely successful but the dispersed rural communities are being retained and the presumption against building in the countryside are worthy of note as is the controlled elements of future developments that hopefully will see a sustainability of rural communities who do contribute immensely to the wider benefit of society as a whole. No doubt problems will arise again in the future but today we are thankful that clubs like Greencastle have a realistic chance in the years ahead.

The response again to our high profile after the success of Tyrone in the All Ireland Championship was the attacks on our property which saw devastation on the premises of St. John's, Drumnaquoile, St. Malachy's, Edendork and Fr. Rocks GAC in Cookstown. The usual ritual of condemnation ensued and while welcome to know that people are annoyed at wanton destruction, there is little to suggest that there is any likelihood of the perpetrators desisting from these actions. There are two matters that I wish to raise in the context of these attacks. The Association too condemn attacks of any kind on anyone's property but that we also do so, as routine without equivocation. We have suffered many such attacks on our community property and these also are used for the benefit of those communities. We need to restate that we are not a threat to anyone and we work positively for our Association and the community that it serves. The second part of this approach is the discrimination being perpetrated by the amendment to the Compensation Order 2008. This legislation sets dual standards as to how malicious attacks are treated in law and renders one side of the community bereft of the type of cover afforded to the other. We have made substantial representations on the matter but the response of the Northern Ireland Office does not adequately deal with the consequences of attacks on community property coming from the Association's point of view.

The restructuring of local Government in the six Counties has finally settled on an eleven Council model. We have been working with the Consortia in developing a sport framework for the wider interest of sport in general and trying to achieve the necessary measures to support our complete array of games within the Club and Schools sphere of operation. A lot has already been done but there is much more required if we are to achieve our objectives and we are to be successful then we need a unified approach by all of the Counties affected working closely with Comhairle Uladh. The last changes in Public Administration lasted thirty five years so whatever is established is likely to influence our work for many years to come. We need to ensure that we get it right.

We have been most diligent in ensuring that we properly celebrate the current jubilee of our Association and its contribution to the Country since our foundation. We have formed a close relationship with the O Fiach Library and are also involved in the development of a sports library in Belfast that will encapsulate the contribution of all sports, including Gaelic sports, through their participants, teams and administration. We are also supporting the GAA Museum in its programme to preserve the written and documentary history of the GAA. The Association also is working with the 125 Programme being taken forward by Boston College which if fully utilised should record our personal and social history of the people who made it happen, and for whom the volunteer and

community input made the GAA what it is and demonstrates the sense of ownership that we all feel for our Association

We have a very active 125 Committee and they have set several projects in place to allow all of our membership and even non members to help celebrate another wonderful and historical milestone for the Association. We have a tremendous commitment from all aspects of our Association family including the officers of Camogie, Ladies GAA, Handball, Rounders, and representatives of every facet of our own affairs and Comhairle Uladh. We shall see the full involvements that we have planned and we ask for the full support of the Counties and Clubs on the main elements of our programme. The outcomes will be accessed in a years time but we hope to have a full representation of the GAA and that our seminar in March will challenge everyone about our Association and establish a firm base for the future. We will have a Club Ground Award and several other initiatives to recognise the huge input of our Association and the volunteers that built it. We acknowledge the huge amount of work taken forward by our 125 Committee and thank them for what they have done to date and look forward to the full fruition of their work throughout the next year.

The senior staff group was introduced to ensure that we were focused on the various matters that arise from decisions of Coiste Bainisti, CCCU, Coiste Forbartha and Coiste na bPairceanna agus Slandala. It has by and large, been an effective structure and made managing the large and complex structure possible. It now might be appropriate to trim the group to reflect specific areas of responsibilities so that we are satisfied that we are taking matters forward in a unified and strategic manner. It has been invaluable to me in ensuring that things get done and that we are acting collectively in all matters. I am grateful to Eugene Young, Stephen McGeehan, Michelle McAleer, Ryan Feeney, Jimmy Darragh, Terence McWilliams, Aileen Tohill and Geraldine McKavanagh for their input into planning, provision and management of the complete operations that are part of the overall work of the Council.

### COACHING AND GAMES DEVELOPMENT

This area has expanded at an enormous rate and the expansion of our Physical Literacy Programme within the Ministers Coaching in Schools initiative is reflective of this. The involvement at Key Stage 1 in Primary Schools in the six Counties is at the forefront of games development in that, it is for everyone and provides the basic needs to partake in sport. It is non competitive and generic in nature but anyone involved in the programme will have the essential skills to play our games. The next area needing addressed is at Key Stage 2 and beyond, and that will require a concerted effort by all levels if we are to fully benefit from our work. We are indebted to all involved in the Key Stage 1 initiative but we acknowledge the input of the Department of Education, and the support of the Minister, Caitriona Ruane. Eugene Young has been central to the success to date and he is assisted by Terence McWilliams, Diarmaid Marsden and Bernie McGlinchey in ensuring that we deliver the programme as designed.

The scope of work undertaken in the furtherance of our Association is astounding. The work in delivery of the programmes is a huge undertaking but it has motivated our coaches and made games development fun for all involved. We have made our presentations to Government Committees and indeed overseas, with a delegation from Jordan visiting Ceannaras Uladh in November. The role and functions of our volunteer coaches at Club and County level need to be fully supported and developed if we are to deal with our games development in the modern context. We need to ensure qualifications that shall be mandatory by law are properly in place, accreditation is given and recorded and we meet the legal requirements for child protection while at the same time ensuring that our games development is expansive and a welcoming environment to everyone.

The work with the Belfast Cuchulainns demonstrates the power of sport in building bridges. The work of the four schools, aided by the Association have seen it develop to the extent that they travelled to the Intercontinental Youth Games in Philadelphia and playing some great hurling, won the competition. However, in this case it was the taking part in our games that was important. The other diversity work, our health and wellness agenda and the work with special needs demonstrates the requirement to provide support for the whole GAA family.

The Coaching and Games Development Committee continues to provide enormous amount of resources for all of our constituent units. It gives leadership, direction and foresight in this critical area of our work. We are indebted to Olibhear Ó Gealagain, who as Cathaoirleach, has been to the fore of everything we do. The input of our County Coaching Officers is also worthy of note as is all the Coaches, Coaching Tutors and staff. We recognise the work of Bernie McGlinchey in administering the work of this committee and also her support to the many successful initiatives including the Coaching Conference that was again oversubscribed and a very successful venture. It would also be needed to record our appreciation to Eugene Young and his coaching team for all the work that they do and the support that they provide.

### **Gaeilge agus Oidhreacht**

The Seamus de Faoite Course in the Downings was again an outstanding success. The programme was well organised and the involvement of Scór in the concert was a very worthwhile endeavour. The purpose of the course is to encourage the use of our language and the whole programme demonstrates what a rich and living heritage, is being promoted. The work being undertaken in conjunction with Fermanagh District Council is a very welcome development and one that has at its centre the promotion of the Irish Language and the related aspects of our heritage. It is hoped that this will be expanded by other Councils as they take forward the needs of a developing society that treasures our linguistic heritage that we support wholeheartedly.

Nollaigh Mac Cumhaill has given generously of his time in providing leadership to this Committee and has worked diligently to advance the complete programme of work envisaged for this Coiste. He has had the wholehearted support for this, of the ever

reliable Tomas Ó Cuilinn, as Runai, to assist with this vital work. We are very grateful to Tomas for his tremendous work for the Language and Heritage and for his continuing enthusiasm. The Committee also provide a solid platform for getting things done and the only thing that we need is the full support of all of our Counties. We are grateful for all of the work undertaken and by having a concerted effort by all our units we can achieve so much for the future.

### CULTURE AND SCOR

Scór and Scór na nOg competitions have had a tremendous year that saw success in the All Ireland Finals, a renewed interest in the competitions and a higher public profile due to the introduction of Scór performers as part of the games programme. This has worked very well and the assistance of County Scór Committees is duly acknowledged. The music, song, dance and drama have been widely acclaimed but the need for all clubs being involved is now more important than ever. It is part of what we are and rightly becoming a publicised part of the role of the GAA. We need to support all aspects of Scór and we record our appreciation to all those that have contributed to the Scór history of the past forty years as we rededicate ourselves to this essential part of the aims and ideals envisaged in our original charter of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

The work of Coiste Scór in ensuring the organising of the various events and programmes for Scór and Scór na nOg are recognised and appreciated. We are grateful to those who help in the running of the competitions, the adjudicators and the host Clubs. We acknowledge the work of Miceal Ó Grianain who has been diligent in everything that he does for Scór. Fearghal Mac Aoidh has also been most supportive in his role as Runai and we appreciate the dedication to the work required to administer all aspects of Scór within the Associations activity programme.

### CODE OF ETHICS AND GOOD PRACTICE

There is no area of our current work that is as demanding as delivering the concept of Ethics and Good Practice policies for the Association including other Gaelic Associations. We are an umbrella body that over a short period will have the duty of having everyone working, or in contact with, children shall be vetted. Based on figures of the scope of this vetting, forty percent of all adults over the age of eighteen will be vetted over the next five years. We need the fullest cooperation of our Counties and Clubs to firstly have a signed service level agreement to ensure compliance with the legal requirements, the proper submission of the application forms and the appointment of a Child Officer in each unit to ensure compliance. A child is defined as any person under eighteen years of age and the potential of vulnerable adult also needs to be appraised. The vetting element in itself is a very substantial undertaking but there is also the need for training in child awareness and the requirement to have a traceable system so that we have a record of everything that is required to satisfy everyone that we can meet the standards that are laid down. We have responsibility also for the Association in Britain. The Association has a huge input into the wellbeing of the youth of our country and we

have always had a high sense of ethics that should assist us in taking forward these legal requirements.

The area of Child Protection legislation is also being tackled by the Association and the requirements emerging are challenging and in some cases daunting. Given the role that we deliver to our country's sporting and cultural life we must succeed in meeting the legal requirements placed on the Association and on our individual volunteers. The concept of subjecting volunteers to the Garda Vetting Unit, AccessNI or the Independent Safeguarding Authority may be disconcerting but we have always operated to best practice and this is simply a variation on the theme. The appointment of Gearoid Ó Maolmhichil at National level and the ongoing work of Geraldine McKavanagh, should ensure that we meet this challenge and by doing so, give assurance to parents and society as a whole that we operate within a safe environment for children and vulnerable adults.

We acknowledge the work of the Code of Ethics and Good Practice Committee and thank them for the important work that they do. The leadership of Mairtin Mac Briain, as Chairman, is most noteworthy and he provides the crosschecks and balances in taking forward the issues that arise from time to time. Geraldine McKavanagh is a treasure in regard to the whole field of ethics and Child Protection and provides a tremendous resource as our Child Officer. We record our thanks to her for her outstanding work.

### ASSOCIATION MATTERS

At a time of economic difficulty, it is important that we do not become reclusive about our ability to overcome the difficulties that are clearly going to be part of forward planning and our immediate future. This is our major challenge and how we react to it will have significant implications for the GAA for generations to come. It is fitting that the Associations Strategic Plan is central to such future operations. We need to see the challenges and plan for the achievements envisaged by the Plan and take the necessary steps to ensure its delivery. We can take the leadership demonstrated throughout our history and once again demonstrate that with planning and courage we can deliver on the things that we have already decided are necessary.

The relationship with our players needs attention and, in particular, our inter county players. The basic tenet of the Association is that those who play our games are essential to our future. There is a need to also state the other side of the matter which is, that there is a responsibility placed on those who choose to be part of the GAA. We seem to have evolved to a position whereby we are selective and almost autonomous. There is nothing to be gained by the current divisiveness but there must surely be huge benefits from a cohesive Association built on understanding and respect.

During the past year there have again been substantial changes to hurling emerging from the work of the Hurling Development Committee. We seem to spend too much time changing competitions and not enough time developing hurling. For most counties, the prospect of any significant advance is almost out of range and we continue to believe that creating winnable competitions will by themselves advance hurling, this is unlikely to be

the case. Less counties can plan today to win the All Ireland Senior Championship than ten years ago. So we do need to review this matter thoroughly in 2011. To make the new arrangements work, required a significant alteration to our Ulster championship, that is still a championship, still involves all nine Counties and still promotes the concept that playing against better opposition will improve standards and lead to better standing for hurling and a higher profile for those that play it.

The renewal of our International Series with the Australian Rules Football began with a successful campaign down under. The success of the team and the huge input by players from Ulster needs to be recorded and our congratulations are extended to the players and mentors alike. However, we have observed with dismay the concerted efforts of the AFL Clubs and their agents working to entice our best talent to join their game to the detriment of our Association. We have blurred the position by choosing players from the AFL to play for our International team and we seem to be powerless to prevent a so called partner from targeting our best talent. We are told that without this partnership things would be worse. I doubt it. The position of the GAA over the years is that we have had to live with other sports competing for our players but it is something that we have largely succeeded in combating because we declared them as competitor sports, why should the AFL be treated differently. This is a challenge that must be taken on and if we are to succeed then we must be vociferous on the defence of our own games against any external threats regardless from when they come.

Integration has been advancing satisfactorily during the past year and the interaction between the various bodies has been exceptionally good. There is a significant level of cooperation to enable the complete GAA family to operate with a unity of purpose that is helpful to all involved. The completeness of our work is observed at its best at Club level where the efforts to facilitate our six games is taken forward by the various interested members on the ground. It is in our best interests that we cater for all the games defined in our Charter so that we are always looking to have the whole family involved for the whole life. It will only happen if integration is supported at all levels but an Association that does not pursue unity is likely to be more fractious than an organisation that ensures that we are what we state in our Rules, an organisation that promotes Gaelic games, culture and pastimes. We are working to coordinate fixtures, involve Ladies Football and Camogie to be part of our championship programme and to cross support special projects that are being undertaken. We acknowledge the input of all our Associations and particularly their officers who make a significant contribution to the work of our Integration Committee and we are indebted to Aoghan Ó Fearghail for his leadership of this Committee and also to Ryan Feeney and Aileen Tohill who are at the forefront of the work and in the Integration Strategies that have such an important part of the future.

We are at the end of another Presidency of the GAA and we record our appreciation to Nicky Brennan for his unstinting work for the Association. He has had many difficult decisions to make and he has always demonstrated that he views everything from an Associations perspective and we appreciate his support on difficult matters as well as his interest in the affairs of the Association in Ulster. We welcome his successor, Christy Cooney and wish him well as he faces the future at the head of the GAA at a time of great

challenge. He is assured of our support in taking forward the interests of the GAA. We pay tribute to all from Ulster who worked on the myriad of Committees, Task Forces and Workgroups during the past three years. We know that this work leads to the betterment of our Association and we hope that the benefits of such a huge input will serve the GAA well in the years ahead. A new National Executive has been in existence for a year and its role has yet to be evaluated but suffice to say that the interaction between Central and Provincial Directors needs a review as to its effectiveness in dealing with operational issues that impact on both levels of the Association. A proper structure could strengthen the Association and the consistent delivery of affairs of the GAA.

We also acknowledge the work of the Ard Stuirthoir, Paraic Duffy and his staff in working to improve the structures and systems for the betterment of the GAA. They provide a substantial support to the whole Association across a wide spectrum of issues and their involvement with Comhairle Uladh is acknowledged. It would be remiss if I did not record the departure of Sean Ó Laoire and Lorcan Ó Ruairc, two men who gave substantially to the Association at Central level and we thank them for their work.

A year ago, I stated that we needed to categorise our fouls into clear sections that are unambiguous and cannot be misinterpreted by any section of those associated with our games and the recent experimental application of categorisation should ensure an improvement in the understanding of what constitutes a foul and what is the applied penalty. It is not the referee's responsibility to ensure that play flows but it is the referee's responsibility to ensure that our games are played in accordance with the rules and to achieve this position requires the responsibility of players and mentors alike towards the concept of fair play.

Within the framework of the Association, discipline should mean order, obedience or punishment as required by our Rules. Order is a prerequisite to a large organisation managing its affairs, fixtures, programmes and especially its administrative structure. In this regard the Association makes a genuine attempt to be disciplined. However, in respect to obedience, this is the area that causes much soul searching in the area of Rules, directives, governance and fair play. The challenge to the authority of the Association, its' Rules and directives are many and leads to a public perception that everyone is trying to achieve an advantage, win a game, compromise the structure and not allow proper governance of our essential matters such as Amateur Status, outside Team Mentors and the operation of unconstituted bodies at variance to the Rules of the GAA. Dealing with these is the crux of our disciplinary problem.

Punishment is our most ongoing difficulty and the application of a penalty is where we have made huge changes to ensure fairness, proper application of penalty and ensuring total respect for the general health and well being of the GAA. We have lost the public respect for this element of our affairs as the process is prolonged, misunderstood, restrictive and lacking in clarity. The various stages are rarely properly referred to nor are the outcomes accepted. The situation at club level is less damaging but continuing challenges to the referees report and the disciplinary process, has changed perception of our Association to one of rank incompetence that will ensure that key players are not

suspended for clear disciplinary matters. At the same time the confidence and respect of the disciplinary process and the individuals involved have continued to have their integrity challenged to the extent where Competition Control Committees are effectively removed from having or moving an opinion on discipline.

The work of our County Committees is acknowledged as is the tremendous input of our County Chairmen, Treasurers and Secretaries, who along with the other officers deliver a substantial service to our Clubs and Members. Their involvement with the Council, its Officers and Staff are deeply appreciated as we all work for the greater good of our Association.

We have had a good working relationship with SportNI and we have ongoing matters of mutual interest to ensure that objectives common to both bodies are met. The role of SportNI is to ensure that the various programmes are aligned with the appropriate policies and strategies to ensure that our constituent units can deliver the matching outcomes. We are grateful to all of the staff with whom we work and they do their best to deal fairly with us on all matters. We acknowledge and thank Eamonn McCartan, Chief Executive of SportNI, for all his work and his consideration of the issues that arise from time to time. There is a new Chairman of SportNI, Dominic Walsh, and we look forward to working with him and wish him well in his term in office. We also acknowledge Jill Poots, who acts as our Liaison Officer and thank her for work on our behalf. Our appreciation is also due to the various staff of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure who has worked diligently with us in dealing with the matters that arise from time to time. I would like to record our thanks to Edgar Jardine, Ciaran Mee, Jerome Dawson and Jack Palmer who have dealt with us in the most courteous manner and with whom we hope to continue working into 2009 and beyond. We acknowledge the Sports Institute and the work of Roger Keenan. It is in a state of change and we are unsure as to how things will emerge but we would wish that the Sports Institute retains its rationale that established core sports when it was established.

I would also like to congratulate Conor Gormley (Tir Eoghain), Justin McMahon (Tir Eoghain), Davy Harte (Tir Eoghain), Philip Jordan (Tir Eoghain), Enda McGinley (Tir Eoghain), Brian Dooher (Tir Eoghain), Sean Cavanagh (Tir Eoghain) and Ronan Clarke (Ard Mhacha), on winning GAA All Star Awards in 2008 in association with Vodafone. Sean Cavanagh also deservedly won the Player of the Year Award for an outstanding contribution to his teams performance particularly in the All Ireland.

The O'Neills/TG4 Ladies Football All Star Awards were: Sharon Courtney (Monaghan), Neamh Woods (Tyrone), Amanda Casey (Monaghan), Niamh Kindlon (Monaghan), Michaela Downey (Down) and Edel Byrne (Monaghan). Jane Adams (Antrim) won a Camogie All Star in association with O'Neills, and we congratulate all for their achievements and their recognition.

### IT and MARKETING

This Committee is proving a very important part of the imagery of our Association in Ulster. They are innovative, motivated and very focused on what we need to be doing to

meet the modern marketing requirements. The Information Technology is a vital part of our interaction with our members, units and the general public. We have available a wide array of documents, policies and advice notes that can be utilised by those seeking support or research. There are proposals emerging that cast doubt on our ability to have an efficient network of communications across the spectrum and any regression is likely to reduce rather increase the flow of information across our Association and particularly so in Ulster. We once again thank the committee for their work and ideas in creating a vibrant image for our Association. Micheal O hOsain gives outstanding leadership to this work and we are indebted to him for all that he does on our behalf. We also acknowledge the work of Damian Kelly, our staff member responsible for ICT, Website and functionality of our systems and know that he will be diligently planning to enhance our systems as we advance towards an interactive future.

## MEDIA

There is often a perception that we and the media do not agree on most issues and this is simply not true. During any year there are matters of controversy and differing opinions are reported but the items that we agreed on is the greater good of the Association, the right for our public audience to know that we are all held to account for what we do. We have close involvement with the media and we endeavour to deal with all matters as they arrive. We issue statements, give interviews and generally are responsive to the need of media to cover our affairs. We have a respectful engagement with the various facets of media including TV, Radio and the written and photographic coverage of our games and the related matter.

The position of television is a continuing cause for concern and the past year saw a very stressful involvement with the BBC. They covered most of the games but except for the Ulster Championship there was a lack of organisation in how coverage was planned. Too often it was a last minute decision that allowed games to be covered and we are very grateful to Nicky Brennan, Pauric Duffy and Tomas Ó Dalaigh for ensuring that our games were available free to air throughout this province. Work is underway in attempting to find an acceptable formula, but it requires everyone to be actually interested in a solution but, to date, the only people pursuing a solution is the GAA. The coverage, or lack of coverage, depending on your perspective, from UTV is alarming and it appears that they are effectively abandoning action coverage of Gaelic Games. They are not part of any of the packages that allow for coverage of the games. News access and interviews are a poor substitute for their coverage just a few years ago.

The media in general have afforded us excellent coverage and we pay tribute to the journalists, photographers, radio and television personnel for bringing out the build up to games, reporting on the events and occasions and recoding for posterity our greatest moments and saddest occasions. We particularly acknowledge the work of The Irish News and Gaelic Life in their intensive coverage for all aspect of our Associations affairs. We thank Micheal Ó hOsain for all his excellent work as our Public Relations Officer. He has worked very closely with me and has been most helpful in dealing with

the media in general. I would also like to thank Stephen Donnelly and Damian Kelly for their work and support in this area of operation.

## COMBHROIN

In the Canal Court Hotel a year ago we had a Mass celebrated for the deceased members of our Association. The Celebrant was Fr. Frank Lyons who today we recall among our deceased members. He was a Nemo Rangers man from Cork but several clubs in my County of Down know of his commitment to the GAA. To those that had the privilege of knowing this kind and wonderful man, who I will always recall as someone whom I knew through the GAA and who embodied every sense of the true volunteer and totally motivated by the idealism of the community based organisation that is the Gaelic Athletic Association. Last year we had in attendance at our Convention, the Mayor of Newry and Mourne District Council, Michael Cole, who sadly died refereeing a match in Ballyholland in early summer demonstrating the ongoing commitment of our members in giving time to the affairs of the Association. Many great stalwarts of the Association have passed to their eternal reward and numbered among them were players, referees, administrators, supporters and extensions to the wider GAA family as a whole. We sympathise with their families, friends, Counties and Clubs of all of the deceased on their loss and hope that they find comfort and peace within the extended family and the Gaelic Athletic Association.

The Sacrifice of the Mass will be offered for all the deceased members of our Association in St. Patrick's Church, Ballyshannon, on the morning of Convention at 10.30 a.m. It is hoped that all delegates can attend as a mark of respect for all our deceased members.

### **Conclusion**

Today we are here at this point of our history. What has been achieved has been by hard work and idealism. How would our founding fathers view us today? Would they be happy? I do not intend for a theoretical debate but the vision and ambition of those people are still relevant today. We were founded to preserve and promote the characteristics of the Irish Nation and despite the demographic changes that have taken place the vision is still an essential ingredient in determining our future. We are not a threat to those who have differing views but the matter that we must guard against is being viewed as abstract. We can bask at our achievements that are manifold but if we lose our idealism then we may lose our purpose. Sixty years ago it was written that it was incumbent of the Association to educate each succeeding generation of rationale for founding the GAA and the circumstance that prevailed at the time. Today, as we hear of doom and gloom, we can truly state that we are better placed than we were 125 years ago but we face new challenges that attack our core values and we must remain true to our aims if we are to prevail.

Is mise, le meas,

Donall O Murchu  
Runai