

Óráid an Uachtaráin – 31 Eanáir 2015

A Chairde,

A Aíonna speisialta agus a Chairde Gael,

Ba mhaith liom fáilte a chur romhaibh uilig go dtí Comhdháil Bhliantúil Uladh Dhá Mhíle agus a Cúig Déag. Is cúis áthais dom go bhfuil muid ábalta an chomhdháil seo a eagrú san ionad nua iontach seo do Chumann Lúthchleas Gael Thír Eoghain i nGarbhachadh.

Welcome to the 113th Ulster Council GAA Convention.

I am delighted to welcome you all today to the outstanding Tyrone GAA Centre at Garvaghey, home of Tyrone GAA the proud Red Hand County and one of Ulster's regional GAA centres. This magnificent facility is testament to the vision, dedication and hard work of the Gaels of Tyrone who like all of us are proud of what they have achieved in developing this superb facility.

2014 was a year of hard work for the GAA in Ulster with many successes and some disappointment but I am pleased to report to you today that the GAA in Ulster is strong, growing and on the path to future success.

Integration and the GAA Family

Ulster GAA is not just about Gaelic Football, Hurling, Handball and Rounders; we also have an important responsibility for the promotion of both Camogie and Ladies Gaelic. We also have to ensure that our female members have an equal role in the on-going development of the GAA and on that note I want to highlight the election of Roisin Jordan of Tyrone as the first female GAA County Chairperson in the history of the Association. Roisin has been an outstanding servant of her Club and County and her election was a milestone for the entire GAA. Well done Roisin and best wishes during your term of office.

The GAA is a community based sporting and cultural association and we should always have both family and volunteers at our core. Our President Liam O'Neill has worked hard to bring together the Ladies Gaelic, Camogie and GAA National organisations into one new GAA and already we have put in place a joint Code of Behaviour that covers all Associations. I strongly commend his efforts and I know that our Uachtarán Tofa Aogan O Fearghail will continue this important work. We can no longer delay this important and vital step forward for the GAA family and I again encourage everyone to work to achieve the goal of one new family GAA.

Fixtures

I fully endorse and support the Director General's new proposals to play our games off in one calendar year and to conduct a further review of the GAA fixtures calendar. It is clear that we need significant reform if Gaelic Games are to remain the leading spectator sports and also an enjoyable hobby and past-time. Player welfare is of paramount importance and must be considered as we review our fixtures schedule. The new proposals may have an impact on many of our GAA traditions but they will be something we all need to endorse and support in order to ensure our Association remains fit for purpose. During the review it is important to ensure that the Inter-Provincial series, an important GAA competition, remains and is given an appropriate place. I want to also highlight that Ulster GAA will host the 2015 Inter-Provincial series in December and we will putting in a lot of work to ensure that the competition gets good coverage and a good attendance.

I want to also report that the Ulster GAA minor review group report has also been fed into the future proposals at central level and I want to thank everyone involved that in that work. Finally we have recently succeeded in changing the National byelaws that now allow the organisation of a Provincial Inter-firms competition and we are finalising the membership of an organising committee to run the event.

Hurling 2020 Proposals

I welcome the new report from the Review Committee on Hurling. Ulster GAA are taking the new proposals seriously and we will be hosting a new Hurling Forum February 10th to debate the new report with all County committees and I strongly endorse the recommendations contained in the report and ask all delegates to do the same.

Bank of Ireland Dr. McKenna Cup

Over 45,000 people attended the 2015 Bank of Ireland Dr. McKenna Cup and over 1000 competition tickets were sold. The competition, which was played off on schedule in spite of the adverse weather, continues to grow and there remains a keen interest in our games each January. The McKenna Cup is there to provide our Counties and Universities with the opportunity to get games in order to be well prepared for the Allianz Leagues and the Sigerson Cup. I was delighted that we were able to reach agreement between the County and University Management teams on the use of players and I want to personally thank everyone for their efforts in ensuring that the spirit of the competition was adhered to. I want to congratulate Tyrone on their four in a row win this year which was Mickey Harte's 8th McKenna Cup title during his managerial reign. I want to also recognise the Bank of Ireland for their significant investment and commitment to the competition up to 2017. Congratulations to everyone involved.

Ulster Championships

The 2014 Ulster GAA Senior Hurling and Football Championships were an outstanding success. For the fourth consecutive year our attendances are up and our games continue to be the leading sporting events in this Province. The joy that the Ulster Championship brings to each summer is sometimes taken for granted and I want to thank our players, team managements, the volunteer event team and everyone involved in the 2014 Championships. We had two wonderful Ulster Finals that were a showcase of the best talent on offer within the GAA and I want to congratulate Antrim and Donegal on their 2014 Ulster Senior Championship Success. I want to also congratulate Armagh on their Ulster Ladies Championship title and Derry on achieving Ulster Championship success in Camogie.

Casement Park Stadium Project

On 15th December Mr. Justice Mark Horner, who presided over the Judicial Review challenge of the Casement Park planning application approval by the Minister of the Environment, found that the approval of the planning by the Minister and Department was unlawful. On Thursday 18th December the Court quashed the planning approval.

This was a deeply disappointing set back for the project. However it is important to note that Justice Horner stated in his findings that the JR challenge had *"nothing to do with the merits of the new stadium"*. Furthermore, his findings further highlight that the evidence for the need of the new stadium was *"convincing"* and notes the potential of the Casement Park Project to *"contribute to the regeneration of the greater Belfast area and the Andersonstown Road in particular"*.

Justice Horner makes it clear that there is no criticism of the GAA's approach in the development of Casement Park project and he noted in his judgment: *"The court rejects any suggestion, whether*

express or implied, of any improper behaviour on the part of the GAA.” Furthermore, Ulster GAA and I strongly support the continued hard work and effort of our dedicated Stadium project team and Stadium Project Board who have acted with total professionalism and integrity throughout this process. You are doing an outstanding job. In particular I want to recognise the role of our former President Tom Daly who, as the volunteer Chairman of our Stadium Board, continues to give outstanding service to this project and the GAA. I also want to thank our CEO and Runai Danny Murphy for his continued leadership and work on this vital project for Ulster GAA.

I also want to thank Antrim GAA and in particular Frankie Quinn and Jim Murray for their partnership and on-going support in this important project.

I want to also welcome the continued commitment of the Minister for Culture, Arts and Leisure, her department and the entire Executive to funding the Casement Park project. The Stadium Project team have already held a series of meetings to assess the future requirements for the continuation of this project. We also welcome the continued commitment and support from the Ard Stiurthoir who on behalf Central Council has stated that the GAA’s funding support to the Casement Park redevelopment project remains. In case there is any doubt about the future of Casement Park Project I want to make it crystal clear today that Ulster GAA remains totally committed to the development of Provincial Stadium at Casement Park that meets the strategic requirements of the GAA and we will continue to work hard to achieve this goal.

Finance

2014 has shown the greatest increase in gate receipts since the ticket prices of our Championships were reduced in 2009. The increase was 30% up on 2013 or 9% up when replays were discounted. Many factors have affected this such as our deliberate strategy to improve controls at our games, our new marketing campaign, venue choice and the attractive fixtures that Ulster Gaelic Games provide. Special thanks should go to our County delegates who assist Ulster GAA personnel in the marketing and organisation of our games. Ulster GAA activities in 2014 led to a surplus of €425,169 after a provision for grants for club development applications. We have recently allocated approximately €160k to the Clubs participating in the Ulster GAA Club Championships and furthermore approximately €450k in Club development grants was approved recently and will go to Clubs soon which means our Clubs will receive a payout of over €610k over the next few weeks which is another clear commitment to grassroots GAA development.

Government Funding and Investment

Ulster GAA continues rightly to be the recipient of significant government investment and I want to thank firstly the Tax payers both North and South for their contribution to the development of GAA and secondly the government Ministers who see value in supporting Ulster GAA and the money is well spent. Government funding for personnel was maintained in 2014 and Ulster GAA is working hard with our Counties to ensure this continues via our Public Affairs team. The major areas of spend are the direct costs of our development projects in both coaching development and community development. The GAA in Ulster, in addition to being the largest Governing body of sport, is a significant contributor to social capital in this Province and we continue to be a good investment for Government. We lobby government on a daily basis and continue to have a strong and mutually beneficial relationship with all departments North and South and thank all in the civic sector for their on-going support.

Coaching and Games

Coaching and Games remains a vital part of Ulster GAA business. This year over 51% of our income, an estimated €3.8 million, was spent on Coaching and Games Development which underlines Ulster

GAA's commitment to this important area of work. This includes coaching courses, blitzes, Hurling development, sports science and I want to thank our Coaching Department staff and the Coaching and Games Development Committee under Gerry Duffy for their continued work. Coaching and Games is a sizable but important investment in our future. I want congratulate everyone involved on their work in the Sport in Schools programme which achieved the UK Coaching Award in November.

Feile na nGael

As part of our on-going Hurling Development Programme Ulster GAA played host to an excellent Feile na Gael in June 2014. Everyone who was present at the competition, which was hosted on a regional basis across Ulster, was very proud of our organisation and the fact that 25,000 young people from across Ireland came to Ulster to participate in Hurling. This was an excellent initiative and I am delighted that we are going to host Feile na nGael again in 2015. I have no doubt that this will be an outstanding success but it is vitally important that we build on the work of 2014 and 2015 to ensure there is a strong legacy. I want to thank our Feile nan Gael Organising Committee Chairman and Vice President Michael Hasson and all the hosts Clubs who made this years event an outstanding success.

Community Development

Community Development and Public Affairs is the vital vehicle by which Ulster GAA is able to obtain our non-games income. Lobbying government, completing business cases and strategic plans for our Clubs and Counties by driving our capacity building and enhancing our cross community work all falls into this remit. Ulster GAA is in the fortunate position that we have been creative enough to ensure that our Community Development work is covered by government support or sponsorship therefore we are getting a great return on this core part of our strategic development and so are our Clubs and Counties.

Last year I was in the unfortunate position of having to propose the winding up of a GAA Club in line with rule 3.7. Already work is underway to establish how many licenced premises we have within the Association in Ulster. Urgently we need establish what future social clubs have within the GAA, if any at all, as our focus must be the promotion of our Games first.

Our cross community work continues to grow and the success of the Game of Three Halves and the Cuchulainn cup underline our continued commitment to outreach and engagement. I am also delighted Ulster GAA established a new historical project that will trace GAA members in Ulster who were involved in World War I. We have an important task in ensuring that we understand our shared past in order to promote a shared future.

I was also pleased that myself, Aogan O Fearghail, Danny Murphy and Ryan Feeney were invited to take part in the State Visit of President Michael D. Higgins to Britain over four days in April. This was recognition by both the Irish and British Governments of the vital role that that Ulster GAA has in building a shared future.

New Strategy

We are currently in the process of developing a new strategic plan that will guide the work and direction of Ulster GAA up to 2020. This will be developed and led by our Developments Committee who will have a significant few months of work ahead as they will also be leading the pitch inspections for the Club Grounds Awards. This will be our third plan and its clear that the previous three over 15 years have served us very well. At present we are conducting a consultation process and will be hosting a major feedback day in March that will involve all the GAA stakeholders in Ulster. An online questionnaire will come online next week and it's vitally important that we get as many people as

possible to give us feedback and ideas on what direction they want their Provincial Council to go for the next five years. This is your chance to make a contribution to the future of your GAA.

Twinning

Ulster GAA continues to work to support our twinned bodies in Britain and Canada. We have supported Canada in referee development, Club Officer and Club Development and Coaching & Games projects throughout the year. We have also had ongoing contact with our colleagues in the Council of Britain GAA. We remain in the unacceptable position where Britain GAA has not been recognised as a governing body of sport. I am therefore fully committing the resources of Ulster GAA to support and finally achieve this recognition this year.

Culture and Heritage

Culture and Heritage is an important part of our GAA identity and our increasing attendances at Scor and our enhanced work in promoting the Irish language highlight the importance of sustaining and building one of our stated GAA aims. Following a review, this year's Cursa na Gaeilge at Downings was an outstanding success with a higher attendance and we look forward to the further development of this important event later in the summer. I thank all our volunteers involved in the promotion of Culture and look forward to further success in 2015.

Marketing and Communications

Our Marketing and Communications work remains the best in the business. We have won awards and plaudits for our innovative campaigns and activities but most importantly we have increasing spectator figures and sponsorship investment. Ulster GAA is a good investment for any business and I thank all our sponsors for their continued support. I want to also thank the media for their on-going coverage and interest in our games and activities.

Ulster Council

Delegates, 2016 is an election year for the Ulster Council in what will be an important year for the Council. Over the last two decades we have had a rotating system on a gentleman's agreement that would result in Ulster Council officers being elected Treasurer or PRO and then moving up through the officer system to eventually become Vice President and President. There has been wide ranging discussion recently on this issue and following some consultation I now think it is now time for that system to change and I would ask delegates to consider that when you are electing a PRO or Treasurer you are not voting for a future President. This system is the norm in other Provincial Councils and the 2002 SRC report highlighted that the Vice President should be a leadership position with the Council and the holder of that post should be making preparations to assume the role of President and again this should be an agreement basis.

Conclusion

To conclude, Ulster GAA is in a strong and good place but we still have much work to do. Our new strategy will direct that work however it is important that we remain cohesive and united as we look forward to 2020. Ulster is a special place and while we may be in competition with each other on the pitch, off the pitch we are one family, with one vision and one goal to make our GAA stronger.

Recently there has been criticism by some who clearly do not understand the GAA and its activities because they labelled the Association the "Corporate GAA". This deliberate misrepresentation is simply wrongly and unacceptable. The GAA is a volunteer led not-for-profit organisation that reinvests its income back to Clubs and Communities. Read our accounts and read the National GAA

report; you will see where the money goes and the good the GAA does for Ireland. The only corporate that exists in the GAA is the corporate unity of purpose and that is something we are proud of and that will continue.

I want to thank my fellow Officers, the members of the Council, the County Chairpersons and all County Officers for their support to me and the Ulster GAA. I also want to thank John Keenan, Ciaran McLaughlin, Tom O'Reilly, Seamus Walsh and Paul Duggan, all of whom have given five years of service as County Chairmen and all of whom did an outstanding job.

Ulster GAA has a highly professional staff team who make a significant contribution to the GAA in Ulster and Ireland. I want to thank the Senior Staff team of Ryan Feeney, Michelle McAleer, Stephen McGeehan and Eugene Young for their dedication and effort over the last year. I also want to thank Geraldine McKavanagh who as the CEO's PA keeps Danny, me and the Officers right in our duties.

In particular I want to highlight the loyalty of Michael Hasson, Oliver Galligan and John Connolly who are three hardworking members of the GAA. I also say thank you to all Sub-Committee Chairpersons and Council members and to all of our loyal volunteers who keep Ulster GAA functioning. We are fortunate in Ulster GAA to have one of the Association's finest officials as our Runai and CEO. I want to thank Dr. Danny Murphy for his continued leadership.

Today sees the stepping down of several long serving members of Ulster GAA - Tyrone Eastwood, Paul McArdle, Gerry Soden, Paddy Sheahan, Brendan Kelly, Jack Devaney, Diarmuid Cahill, Tiernach Mahon, Pat Darcy and Gerard Bradley. They served with distinction and we thank them for their service to Ulster GAA.

In February our Iar Uachtarán Aogan O Fearghail will assume the highest office in the GAA. Aogan is eminently qualified to lead the GAA and this was clear from the outstanding work he undertook as Uachtarán Comhairle Uladh. Recently the new national plan was circulated around the Counties which outlines Aogan's plans for the next three years. Aogan, all of Ulster is proud of you and I look forward to your term of office.

Uachtarán Liam O'Neill will leave the service the GAA at the end of next month. Liam has been a led of the GAA and has served our Association with distinction. I wish him well as he completes his term. He has put on place some major and innovate changes including the 2020 report, the Club Draw and the FRC proposals.

Finally as I enter my last year as Uachtarán I want to thank my wife Grainne and my family for their understanding and support for me. It is a great honour to be the President of Ulster GAA and its is something I do not take for granted. I will continue to serve you all in the year ahead and I look forward to continued success for our great Province and Association. Thank you all for being here today.

Beir Bua!

Mairtín Mac Aibhne
Uachtarán Comhairle Uladh CLG