

Óráid an Uachtaráin – 30 Eanáir 2016

A Chairde,

A Aíonna speisialta agus a Chairde Gaeil,

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

Welcome to the 114th Ulster Council GAA Convention. I am delighted to welcome you all today to the outstanding Doire GAA Centre at Owenbeg, home of Doire GAA, the proud Oak Leaf 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 Derry who like all of us are proud of what they have achieved in developing this superb facility.

I wish to pay tribute and thanks to the former Cathaoirleacht of Choiste Chontae Doire John Keenan for his work for the GAA and also to his successor Cathaoirleacht Brian Smyth.

In 2015 the GAA in Ulster had many successes and some disappointments but I am pleased to report to you today that the GAA in Ulster is strong, growing and on the path to future success. This continues in earnest this weekend with the commencement of the Allianz Football League where 8 of our 9 counties are now in the top two divisions. This will then be closely followed by the Allianz Hurling Leagues in a fortnights time and again I wish all our counties well. I also wish our remaining teams in the All Ireland Club Series my best wishes, namely Eoghan Rua Coleraine, Crossmaglen Rangers and Ruairi Og Cushendall in their quest for All Ireland honours.

Integration and the GAA Family

Last Year I congratulated Roisin Jordan on becoming the first lady Cathaoirleach of a County Board. I am delighted that we now have two more firsts - The election at the An Dun County Convention of the first female member of Comhairle Uladh, namely Maureen O'Higgins and another first for Maggie Farrelly on becoming the first lady to referee at senior inter county level.

Many other ladies are very much involved in our association and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Maureen and Maggie and to say a special thank you to all the ladies involved. I would also like to commend the LGFA on their recent sponsorship deal with LIDL, this brings sponsorship of ladies sport to a new level and I welcome that one of our Gaelic Games will be the beneficiary of such a lucrative deal.

The Camogie Association are due to launch their National Development Plan 2016 - 2019 because of our close ties I would ask that all of our counties and clubs would support and assist the Camogie Association in securing their future as part of the GAA family. In 2015, we showcased integration at its best by hosting the Senior Camogie and Senior Hurling Club Finals in the Athletic Grounds, Armagh.

Fixtures

In the last decade, the GAA has made a number of attempts to address player overtraining and burnout, and a fixtures calendar that does not provide club players with a fair schedule of matches. The most recent document entitled 'Player Overtraining and Burnout and the GAA Fixtures Calendar' offered a number of proposals drawn from the previously published reports.

The report was made available to all units of the Association and I hope that all delegates will examine this thoroughly before making decisions that will have a major impact on the Association, our players and clubs.

As the Ard Stiúrthóir stated in his annual report, the two key issues are:

(i) at certain times of the year, talented players in the 17-21 age-group are being asked to train too much, to play too many matches for too many teams, and are afforded too little time for rest and recovery, leading to significant physical and psychological strains, and a negative impact on the academic performance of players at second and post-second-level education;

(ii) the great majority of club players, specifically those not involved in inter-county teams, are not offered a fair, evenly distributed and planned schedule of club matches throughout the year due to the scheduling of inter-county fixtures, and, more generally, due to the greater influence that inter-county competitions have come to enjoy and exercise in recent years. This is a source of great frustration to clubs.

I urge delegates who are attending the upcoming Congress in Carlow to support these divisive fixture issues. I want to thank the Ard Stiúrthóir, Paraic Duffy, for his leadership in this vital area and for his support and advice during my term.

With regard to the Inter Provincial Championships, the 2016 competition has now been fixed by CCCC for December and Ulster's position remains the same where we are fully supportive of this competition. We re-iterate our original offer to host the Football Semi Finals and Final. We feel that this competition provides a platform for our best players to be selected to represent their province. It also ensures that we have an active provincial identity on the field of play.

In 2015, we re-established the Provincial Inter Firms competition and this proved to be a huge success. This provided meaningful games to various organisations and numerous employees, including the PSNI who have been established since 2002 but have been unable to secure a regular games programme since their inception. Congratulations to Kingspan who were the Senior winners but were subsequently defeated in the All Ireland Semi Final. Well done and best wishes to our Junior winners, Citi Bank who take on Mayo Teachers in the All Ireland Semi Final on Saturday 13th February. I wish to thank Ciaran McLaughlin for his work in co-ordinating this event. In concluding my fixtures summary, I wish to record the excellent input of Stephen Donnelly for his efficient handling of all fixture matters.

Ulster Schools

The Post Primary Schools sector took significant steps forward during the past year, with the establishment of Ulster Schools GAA and ongoing work to ensure that Ulster Colleges and Ulster Vocational Schools are fully amalgamated into one organisation this year. This reflects what has already happened at national level and within the other three provinces.

It has taken a major leap of faith by two bodies who have contributed handsomely to the history and development of our games in Ulster. They both have a considerable history, but they are now ready for a new era - together. Their intention is to provide as many games and competitions as possible to the schools of Ulster, and to do so for the benefit of everyone. By the time they host the AGM of Ulster Schools GAA in May, there will be a realignment of competitions to reflect the greater number of schools (132) within one organisation as a result of this amalgamation. At the moment, they are meeting regularly and are determined to ensure that the new proposals will be fully in place by May.

I want to sincerely commend the officers who have been involved in these developments, Chairman John Devaney also Seamus Woods and Jimmy Smyth, both of whom were honoured at the Presidents Awards in

November. The committee have kept us abreast of proposals and developments and Comhairle Uladh will certainly provide support in what is an important and exciting time for our schools sector.

Bank of Ireland Dr McKenna Cup

Over 36,000 people attended the 2016 Bank of Ireland Dr. McKenna Cup and over 1,000 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 again 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 competition regulations were adhered to. I want to congratulate Tyrone on their five in a row and I also want to recognise the Bank of Ireland for their significant investment and commitment to the competition.

I hope that the three universities received valuable game time in preparing them for the upcoming Sigerson Competition. I wish all three universities good luck in the inter-varsity competition and to Ulster University in hosting the 2016 event.

Ulster Championships

The 2015 Ulster GAA Senior Hurling and Football Championships were an outstanding success. For the fifth 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 2015 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 Monaghan on their 2015 Ulster Senior Championship Success.

Since the inception of the three tiered provincial and All Ireland Club Championships over a decade ago, we have been privileged in Ulster to witness some brilliant contests. 2015 was no different and I congratulate all winners. I commend all teams for their discipline during this competition and we had no major issues throughout the entire club championship. The investment in our modernisation programme has equipped us with state of the art playing surfaces. These venues catered for the club championships, and in some cases, double headers in atrocious weather conditions. This is a testament to our ground staff throughout the province in ensuring that we are able to play these competitions as scheduled. The momentum gained from this regular fixture programme was epitomised by the tremendous crowds that attended these games.

Hurling

At the request of our clubs, Ulster GAA has moved the Táin Hurling League to the Spring and Summer months and therefore, more in line with the hurling playing season. However, the original ethos of playing across county and provincial boundaries has been eroded somewhat and the number of teams playing has diminished since its inception.

On a positive note however Monaghan, Cavan, Fermanagh and Louth have been meeting with our hurling staff to try to develop an Under 16 and Minor element to mirror the Táin League to provide games in an effort to sustain the game through to Senior levels for these developing counties.

The new National HDC has launched a new Hurling Action Plan with a number of development themes including the introduction of an Under 17 Development Programme. The Celtic Challenge will be the first

step to addressing the Under 17 Development Programme. A total of 38 teams, including regional teams from recognised stronger counties, will participate. The competition will replace the All Ireland Minor 'B' & 'C' Competitions which were littered with unfulfilled games over the last number of years.

Ulster GAA has worked closely to accommodate the Celtic Challenge and has moved the group stage for the six northern counties to March to ensure that all our counties can participate. In tandem this has had the knock on effect of moving the Ulster Minor Hurling League to May.

The Celtic Challenge will be totally developmental and the early group stage will seed teams from 1 through to 38. Teams will then play in Qualifiers and Play Offs in five divisions at a level commensurate with the skill levels of each county.

The Celtic Challenge is named in recognition of the original juvenile hurling club known as 'Celtic'. The Divisional trophies are named in memory of 5 of the 14 civilians who were shot dead in Croke Park on Bloody Sunday, 21st November 1920. Michael Hogan, John William Scott, William Robinson, Jerome O'Leary and Michael Feery.

This year will see the centenary commemorations of 1916 take place throughout our island and indeed, our Association. We, in the GAA, recognise that developing a greater understanding of our shared history is essential to building a shared future. The GAA will be organising a National event for its members in Croke Park on Sunday 24th April. All clubs are encouraged to attend Croke Park on this special and historic day.

Should clubs intend to organise their own commemorative events, I ask all our members to be mindful of adhering to the Rules of our Association. Rule 1.11 states that the Association shall be non-party political. Rule 1.12 outlines that we are committed to the principles of inclusion and diversity at all levels and Rule 5.1 comments on the uses of GAA property.

Casement Park Stadium Project

When I started my Presidential term 3 years ago the Casement Park project was at an exciting point with designs progressing and milestones to be achieved later that year. This included achieving planning consent, signing off a multi-million pounds Business Case and entering into a secure funding agreement with the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure. Confidence was high for a successful delivery. Over the last two years there have been a number of challenges posed to the development and even in the past few days, it is clear that we continue to operate in a difficult and complex environment. Our Rúnaí has detailed many of those matters in his report before convention today.

The Project Board, led by Senior Responsible Owner (SRO), Tom Daly, Management Committee, Ulster Council, Antrim GAA and our Project Team have remained committed to overcome these difficulties and deliver the Casement Park project. Many thanks to all.

In the coming months, a new community consultation process will get underway. Later this year a fresh planning application will be submitted. Today I want to again repeat that Ulster GAA are firmly committed to the Casement Park project. Antrim GAA and Ulster GAA needs Casement Park.

I wish to record our most sincere thanks to DCAL Minister Carál Ní Chuilín for her absolute and total support for the Casement Park project and the GAA generally in Ulster during her time in office.

Finance

Ulster GAA have made gradual improvements financially over the past few years. The gate receipts of the Ulster Senior Football Championship, increased by 6% in 2015, after the replays of 2014 are discounted. Our marketing focus in 2015 was on the Buy early campaign, which is targeted on giving our counties, clubs and supporters the incentive to access tickets at a discounted rate. This proved successful and will be a campaign we will continue to build on. Ulster GAA's finance team are hugely appreciative of the help and support received from County Treasurers and personnel in the operation of our games and we will work together to ensure all games in Ulster are operated with best financial practices in place. This will enable us to maximise our income and subsequently, maximise the return to our counties.

Government Funding and Investment

Grant support from Government departments plays a huge role in the development of Gaelic Games in our Province. Staff that are employed through these programmes are coaching in clubs and schools, educating our children in physical literacy and nutrition, supporting our volunteer and club development and ensuring awareness in health and wellness. This work is vitally important to society here and I urge the government departments to continue this support.

Thanks must also be extended to Central GAA for their investment in our Province. They continue to provide funding to Ulster units for games development staff, programmes, facilities development and in the management of some of our sponsorship and media agreements. Most notable was the continuation of their support in the redevelopment of Casement Park and their investment in the Belfast Pitches Strategy in 2015. I also wish to acknowledge the input of Belfast City Council in the Belfast Pitches Strategy in providing excellent Gaelic games facilities, in association with Antrim and Down GAA.

Foreign Exchange continues to affect Ulster GAA, Ulster Counties and Clubs. The 2015 Income and expenditure account for Ulster GAA, (reported in Euro), showed an increase in grants and spend but this is primarily to do with the strength of the pound against the euro compared to 2014.

Coaching and Games

Coaching and Games remains a vital part of Ulster GAA business. Our Coaching and Games activity in Ulster has a significant number of projects, programmes and initiatives. Twelve projects contributed directly to bringing players along the player pathway. Twenty competitions provide real game opportunities and eighteen programmes provide coach development and mentoring support.

There are accredited programmes in Management and Coaching on the National Qualifications framework and Level 1, 2 and 3 programmes with associated Tutor training opportunities. These are supplemented by Coach Development workshops. This activity is delivered directly to Community Groups, Schools, Further and Higher Education and our Clubs and Counties. Over 2,300 events were delivered in 2015 with over 80,000 participants in programmes and over 15,000 children per week receiving coaching in schools. This is a direct investment by Ulster GAA to our counties and clubs.

I would like to highlight the Wheelchair Hurling programme which has grown from strength to strength. This programme integrates both wheelchair bound, participants with learning difficulties and able bodied young people. The "wheelchair hurling family day" project and the "have a go schools programme" provide siblings and friend with the opportunity to compete in competition. Ulster's wheelchair hurling team moved on in 2015 to winning the All Ireland League and Championship. All of these programmes are an investment in our members, our clubs and in your county. It is important to thank the key stakeholders who provide important financial support including the Department of Education, Department of Culture Arts and Leisure, Sports Council NI, County Boards, National GAA and the Irish Sports Council.

Please note that this years Coaching Conference takes place next weekend 6th Feb. in Cookstown and is dedicated to the Growing and Development of Hurling & Camogie please encourage those involved in Hurling in your Counties to attend this Conference.

Feile na nGael

As part of our on-going Hurling Development Programme, Ulster GAA played host to an excellent Feile na nGael for a second successive year in June 2015. 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. 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 na nGael Organising Committee Chairman and Vice President Michael Hasson and all the hosts Clubs, families and venues who made this event an outstanding success. We really appreciate the hospitality shown by our host families and for their positive endorsement of Child Protection best practice.

Club & Community Development

Many of our clubs are heavily reliant on a small number of volunteers who invariably carry out the main functions of the club, and these demands are continually increasing. For clubs that feel they are struggling in terms of recruiting and developing Volunteers, our Community Development Department offer a number of programmes that can help support these clubs. Through the newly established Volunteer Development Pathway, appropriate and specific training is available free of charge to our volunteers helping them understand the role they have undertaken whilst building the necessary skills to carry out their function.

The Ulster Council recognises the absolutely central contribution that volunteer officials in our clubs make to the Association. The Club Maith resource has been designed to support clubs in their ongoing development and the betterment of their community. The Club Maith website continues to evolve and should be the first point of call for anyone wishing to find out more about Club Maith or Club Development.

The GoldMark volunteering scheme has been successful for a number of clubs throughout the province encouraging young people aged 14-25 to get involved in volunteering within their community whilst also receiving an accredited certificate of achievement for their efforts, something that can prove useful on any university or job application.

The Club Planning Programme is a National programme which is being run-out in Ulster through Comhairle Uladh's Community Development Department in conjunction with County Development Officers. Each county holds a bank of trained Club Planners who are assigned to a club to facilitate the 12-week Club Planning process. Training is provided by Ulster GAA annually for Club Planners, working closely with County Development Officers.

The Programme has been designed to better enable clubs to plan for the future, but it has also been found to be an effective way in which to entice more volunteers to get involved in the Club. Although putting together a Club Development Plan may seem like a daunting task for clubs who are struggling in many areas of club business, it is often a good starting place. The Club Planning process has already been successful in motivating people to become involved. In summary, Ulster GAA Community Development Department offer various programmes that can help support our clubs. Do not hesitate to get in touch.

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 also want to extend

my thanks to the President of Ulster Rugby Bobby Stewart, his predecessors and the IFA's Jim Shaw for their friendship and co-operation during my term as Uachtarain..

Grounds Awards

In 2015, the Developments Committee undertook pitch inspections of every club ground within the province. This inspection formed the basis for the selection of the Club Grounds Awards. I thank all our members who carried out this arduous but enjoyable task and I express my congratulations to all the winners who received their awards at the Presidents Awards in the Slieve Donard Hotel. It was an honour for myself to accompany our Provincial Secretary in visiting the nine county winners ahead of the awards night. This visit facilitated the selection of the Overall winner, Ardara CLG (Dún na nGall) and the Highly Commended, Loughmacrory CLG (Tir Eoghain). The information gathered also provided an updated audit of facilities at all our club grounds.

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. Congratulations to Brian Farmer, former Chairperson of the Canadian GAA Board. Brian has been awarded the 2016 Irish Person of the Year in Toronto. Sean Harte has become President of the Canadian GAA Board, we wish Sean well in his role and assure him of our continued support.

We have also had ongoing contact with our colleagues in the Council of Britain GAA. Ulster GAA has worked closely with the British Provincial Council and in particular with the President Sean Hackett to seek and obtain funding from Sport England, Scotland and Wales as a National governing body which will be of immense benefit to the Provincial Council & Counties of Britain. Ulster GAA have worked closely with the Council of Britain GAA to strengthen their practices and policies around the Safeguarding of children and young people in sport. We continue to assist them in their implementation of this area of governance in line with both legal and best practice guidelines.

I would like to acknowledge the work of former Chairman and now current Secretary of Britain, Brendy O'Brien during my term.

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. When we met with the National Scór committee, they asked us to seek to increase participation from our clubs and I strongly encourage this engagement. I also welcome the coverage that Irish TV provided in broadcasting National Scór na nÓg and Scór Sinsear Finals in 2014 and 2015. Ulster GAA established a new historical project that traced GAA members in Ulster who were involved in World War I. I commend Donal McAnallen for his work in the delivery of this project, entitled 'Forgotten Volunteers'

Cursa na Gaeilge 2015 in Downings was an outstanding success and we look forward to the further development of this important event later in the summer. I would encourage all County Officers to attend this worthwhile and enjoyable course. I thank all our volunteers involved in the promotion of Culture and look forward to further success in 2016.

Marketing and Communications

Our Marketing and Communications work remains to serve an important function. Ulster GAA is a good investment for any business and I thank all our sponsors for their continued support. I would ask our members to support our sponsors at every opportunity. Our social media channels continue to flourish and are now an essential method of relaying information. I want to also thank the media for their on-going coverage and promotion of our games and activities.

Conclusion

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 want to thank Jim Murray who has given five years of service as County Chairman and for his contribution to all matters pertaining to Casement Park. Best wishes to Colin Donnelly who succeeds Jim as Chairman of Antrim. A special word of thanks to all the Clubs and Volunteers throughout Ulster for their dedication and commitment to the GAA and for the hospitality and courtesy shown to me on many occasions.

Ulster GAA has a very committed staff team who make a significant contribution not only to Ulster GAA but also nationally. I would like to place on record my sincere thanks and gratitude to all our staff, they give generously of their time and have been a tremendous support to me during my time as Uachtarain. I want to thank the Senior Staff team of Dr Eugene Young, Stephen McGeehan, Michelle McAleer and former member of senior staff Ryan Feeney. I pass on my thanks to two other former staff members, Brian Mallon and Donal McAnallen for their contribution during my time as President. I also want to thank Geraldine McKavanagh for her outstanding support to Danny, myself and the Officers.

Today sees the stepping down of several long serving members of Ulster GAA – Danny McLernon, Patsy Mullan, Aodh Mairtin O Fearraigh, William James Smith and Gerry Duffy who all served with distinction, we thank them for their service to Ulster GAA. Special word of appreciation to Patsy and Gerry both chaired hard working sub-committees and served on Coiste Bainisti during the past three years.

Former President of Comhairle Uladh, Aogan O Fearghail took up the position of Uachtaran CLG last February and he is working tirelessly to implement his plans for the betterment of the GAA. As he completes his first year in office, I can assure Aogan of our continued support.

In particular I want to highlight the loyalty of Michael Hasson, Oliver Galligan and John Connolly who are three hardworking members of the GAA and most especially, as colleagues on Coiste Bainisti. To all Sub-Committee Chairpersons, secretaries and members who have completed three years of service, Thank you for all the work which you have undertaken so diligently during this time on behalf of Ulster GAA. My thanks also to Pat Conaghan as Chairman of Coiste Gaeilge and for his service on Coiste Bainisti.

We are fortunate in Ulster GAA to have one of the Associations finest officials as our Runai and CEO. I want to thank Dr. Danny Murphy for his continued leadership. Since being elected as Cisteoir in 1986, he has also held the positions of Leas Uachtaran, Uachtaran and currently An Rúnaí. In my time serving with him on Comhairle Uladh, I can honestly say that it was an absolute pleasure to work with a man who has a huge knowledge of our association. He has been a leading light for our province and Danny always represents Ulster's best interests. I have never doubted how fortunate we in Ulster GAA are to have the services of Danny Murphy but it was at a recent multi-sport event where his standing outside of the GAA was clearly evident. At the launch of the recent strategic framework, entitled 'Sport Uniting Communities', his CEO counterparts Shane Logan from Ulster Rugby and Patrick Nelson from the IFA both commenced their keynote speeches with reference to the integrity and vision of our Provincial Secretary. They both acknowledged

that it was Danny who outlined that there was a need for the three sporting bodies to play an integral part in achieving a shared future.

Danny, I want to personally thank you for your massive contribution and indeed, friendship during the last three decades on Comhairle Uladh.

I have had a close working relationship with Michael Hasson since we served as Cathaoirleach and Runai of the inaugural Ulster Code of Ethics and Good Practice Committee in 1998. He has served at all levels of the association as a player, referee and administrator and is therefore, well equipped for the role of President. I have absolutely no doubt that Michael will make an excellent President for Ulster GAA. I want to wish him well and I hope he experiences the same enjoyment that I had during my tenure. I extend my best wishes to his wife Noeleen and the extended Hasson family who will share this journey with Michael.

There have been many highlights during my term but I would like to make special mention of 4 spontaneous standing ovations for GAA people from GAA people that I witnessed in the last year.

1st Linda Ervine, in her own description "A protestant from East Belfast", after her speech at the Cursa na Gaeilge in Downings. This epitomised the importance of our culture and heritage and just as importantly, our willingness to share through social inclusion.

2nd At the Presidents Awards, Paddy Mee (Killeavy, Ard Mhacha) received a Long Service to the GAA award and those in attendance recognised not only Paddy, but the many volunteers who devote so much of their life to the GAA. **3rd** On the same night, Nigel and Sharon McGrath, parents of Oisín McGrath, accepted the Humanitarian Award. They showed tremendous spirit by donating Oisín's organs to save others. They continue to encourage others to begin the discussion around organ donation. **4th** The Ulster Wheelchair Hurling Team also picked up a Presidents Award last November. In doing so, they illustrated the 'GAA for All' philosophy. One could only admire the strength of their determination to receive their awards at the presentation area that night. These ovations will live long in my memory as examples of the generosity and decency of the people who make up the GAA.

Finally as I conclude my three year term as Uachtarán I want to thank my wife Grainne and my family for their understanding and support for me. It was a great honour to be the President of Ulster GAA three years I will fondly remember and cherish thank you all for this once in a lifetime opportunity. I look forward to continued success for our great Province and Association. I'm looking forward to my year as Iar Uachtarán and as a member of Coiste Bainisti.

Go raibh maith agaibh

Mairtín Mac Aibhne/Martin Mc Aviney
Uachtarán Comhairle Uladh CLG