

Hurling

We can substantially increase the number of young people participating in Gaelic games by making a real effort to promote hurling throughout the county.

Meath G.A.A. needs to make a fundamental decision about its raison d'être – **Is it an organisation dedicated to the advancement of Gaelic football and maintaining hurling at current levels or is it a body dedicated to the promotion of football and hurling?**

The answer to that question must come from the Gaels of Meath through their clubs.

This Committee believes the role of the Meath G.A.A. is the promotion and advancement of football and hurling and makes its recommendations on that basis.

Currently there are 7 hurling only clubs in Meath. There are a further 14 dual clubs. There are 36 football only clubs. It is fair to say that because of these numbers and because of the success of our footballers in the past the hurling fraternity in Meath feel that they are often forgotten or neglected. Equally, among the football fraternity in the clubs and at the County Board, there is a sense that the hurling fraternity are or want to be a “law unto themselves”.

We are not making judgements merely stating facts as presented or apparent to us in the context of our work on this Committee.

Regardless of the rights or wrongs of the perceptions of both groups the fact remains there is a “them and us” attitude on both sides. This, from our Committee’s point of view, is not conducive to encouraging young people to participate in our games and to stay playing them throughout their teens.

We are losing youngsters to the GAA in many areas of the county because they do not want to play football and they have no alternative offered to them. It is not acceptable that geography and tradition should decide whether or not young people play our national game.

A perception that hurling is the “second class citizen” in terms of Gaelic games in the county is also not conducive to youngsters making the choice to start or to continue playing hurling.

If the answer to the question posed above is: “Meath GAA is dedicated to the promotion of both our national games-hurling and football”, then we must put in place a plan to give effect to this. This “Hurling Plan” must put in place a programme, which will promote hurling and football on an equal basis from under 8 onwards. All children in the county should have an equal chance to play hurling and football from the earliest age. They can make a choice as to which game they prefer at a much later age if they so wish.

Meath G.A.A. is the custodians of our national games in this county. We have an obligation to try to hand on our games to future generations in a better state than we inherited them. Can we truly say we believe that we are on course to do that in the case of hurling?

The “Hurling Plan” should take into account the realities we face currently. In the rural areas of the county (mainly north Meath) where there is little or no hurling we should aim to introduce it to children from 6 years upwards, through our primary schools system. This would involve a steady roll out under the auspices of the Hurling Development and Promotion Committee in co-operation with Meath Coaching and Games and Cumann na mBunscoil.

Starting in the primary schools in this area it will give time to build numbers and to allow the time to build a club infrastructure in the area over a five or six year period.

In the more urbanised traditionally “non-hurling”, mainly east and south Meath promotion of hurling should be largely through the existing club structures in Colmcilles, Duleek, Stamullen and Donaghmore-Ashbourne. These areas, together with urbanised areas where hurling has a longer tradition but is currently struggling with participation (Navan, Kells, and Dunshaughlin) need a concerted focus to ensure they offer hurling to our young people.

We must make a real effort to change course and to give every child a chance to play what is undoubtedly “the best field game in the world”. At the moment we are clearly failing hundreds of young people in many parts of the county because there is no policy in place to ensure that young people, no matter where they live in the county, have an opportunity to play hurling.

Adding to the perception of hurling as being less important is the chaos which often occurs in the fixtures and competitions. While at first glance there may appear to be plenty of games the reality is somewhat different. Unlike in football the games are frequently squeezed into short timescales and there are long periods when there are no games.

One of the main reasons for this is the “culture” that seems to exist that fixtures are there to be changed. Although there are rules in place regarding the limited circumstances (bereavement) in which games can be postponed this does not prevent clubs from making requests for the most spurious of reasons. While these requests do not always meet with success they cause uncertainty for everyone and waste significant time for all.

In fairness, not all the fault lies with the clubs as there have been occasions when development squad activities/fixtures have clashed with scheduled matches. This should never happen as it is unfair to clubs and players.

We identified the problem of burnout for some football players because of the age structures of our competitions. This problem is even more acute for hurlers and for dual players. With less players to choose from in hurling there is a greater call on those available to play in a number of age groups.

If the players in question are dual players the problems multiply. As in football we believe some of these pressures could be relieved by confining players to playing in their own age groups as outlined in recommendation 11 on page 12.

All this points to the absolute need to have a well organised competition structure with a full hurling fixtures and activities schedule available in January each year and which is adhered to throughout the year.

Organising the fixtures on a 2 week cycle (i.e. hurling one week, football the next) seems like a sensible thing to do and avoids a conflict of fixtures. However, many of the 36 football only clubs, especially the larger ones, have difficulty with this as it will mean only fortnightly matches for players in each age group and they fear they may lose players to other codes that have weekly fixtures.

We believe that the best approach to the question of fixtures is that outlined in the "Competition Structures" section of this report (Page 10) which suggests a target number of matches for players in each age group from under 14 up. This could be facilitated by an earlier start to the football leagues which would allow some rounds to be played initially before hurling starts and then interleaving football and hurling until May.

Championships in hurling could then take place in August September with the Summer months (June/July) taken up with other hurling activities and development squad activities.

Recommendations

28.

Meath GAA should commit to ensuring that each child in the county is introduced to hurling at the same time as football. To ensure this a "Hurling Plan" should be put in place immediately.

29

Meath County Board, through its Hurling Development Committee should work with Cumann na mBunscoil to introduce hurling to each school and to provide the necessary coaching and equipment to allow this to happen.

30.

In areas of the county where hurling is practically non-existent (mainly north Meath) hurling development should be focused on the primary schools initially and then Meath Co Board should assist the formation of new hurling clubs or facilitate some existing football clubs to become dual clubs if they so wish.

31.

In the newly urbanised areas of Meath served by St Comcille's, Duleek, Stamullen and Donaghmore-Ashbourne the hurling development should be focused through the clubs.

32.

We recommend a concentrated effort to revive hurling to previous levels in the more traditional hurling urbanised areas of Navan, Kells and Dunshaughlin/Drumree.

33.

To facilitate the implementation of this Hurling Plan the county should be divided into areas and *each area should have a dedicated Hurling Co-Ordinator to work with clubs and schools to develop hurling in their areas..*

34.

In the “weak” hurling regions or those with no hurling we should aim to have a minimum of four hurling teams in each at under-14 level within 5 years.

35.

Meath Co Board, Leinster Council and Croke Park should invest in the necessary equipment and personnel to promote and support these efforts.

36.

Meath Coaching and Games should adjust their programmes to facilitate this concerted effort to promote this hurling revival.

37.

The Fixture Calendar published each January should be strictly adhered to and should include all hurling related competitions and activities.