



Exclusive Interview with Christy Cooney

By David Farrell

HE never ducks or attempts to evade a question answering directly and without hesitation that gives the impression that he is a man that knows where he's going and knows exactly what he wants and how far he can go.

That's our new GAA President Christy Cooney.

President Cooney says that while the economy has diminished it will not halt the association from its future developments. Asked if the association plans to open its gates at county level to facilitate other sports he rapidly replies with an emphatic 'No'.

He has no problem with the International Rules Series saying that the fans want it and that it gives players a chance to represent their country.

The Youghal native comes from a strong GAA background and says he was pucking a ball when the hurley stick looked as big and as daunting as his current task. His Father played hurling at both club and county level and was a selector with Cork. Christy himself picked up an u21 and Intermediate championship medal and served as a selector on several underage teams. He was Secretary of his minor club at the age of 16, and chairman of the Youghal GAA club at the age of 25.

He appreciates that he is facing a challenging time at the helm of the country's biggest amateur association, yet he's already looking forward to returning to his native Youghal and to getting involved with some of the teams there.

Q. Mr President, what is your first personal memory of the GAA?

'Well I am going back a good bit. My own memory I suppose is that I grew up in a house that was totally GAA. My father was involved as a player and with our club, with the Cork County board and a Cork Senior Hurling selector. So as far back as I remember I always had a hurley in my hand. It was just part of the family tradition and everything else came second. There was always a ball around and for as long as I can remember I knew nothing else'

Q. Did you achieve much as a player?

'I won an u21 and intermediate championships with the club and as a selector with the club at various grades. I think we had a couple of minors as well. At U14 we wouldn't have been much of a success. I remember getting thrashed one day by Middletown when I was 10 but it was U14! Winning wasn't always everything because I enjoyed playing so much, particularly hurling and the club always meant so much to me. I was minor secretary at 16 and I was club Chairman at

25. I had two terms as club Chairman which I enjoyed very much and I served as treasurer and secretary. My club is very important to me and I look forward to the day I can return to my home town and help play some role in the club once again, maybe involved with a team in some way. I would like to give a little more time to my club.'

Q. Who was your favourite hurler of all time?

'My favourite club hurler was Noel Gallagher. As a young man he was a guy I really admired. He played with Cork Seniors for a number of years in the difficult times of the late 50's and early 60's. He was a tremendous club player and a wonderful man. In regards to Inter-county I would have to go for Jimmy Barry Murphy. He was the greatest I have ever seen. He was a phenomenal player, a phenomenal person and a really good friend of mine. When I was Chairman of the Cork County board I actually appointed him manager of the Cork Senior Hurling team. He is a great ambassador for the GAA. He was one of the greatest hurlers and footballers of all time and he is an absolute gentleman and the service he has given to his club and county has been unbelievable. Even up to last year we got him involved with helping to resolve the disputes and to help pick a new manager. I meet him regularly and he's a quality guy'.

Q. The GAA recently announced that they were hoping that clubs and counties would raise 65m Euro to go alongside the 35m Euro raised by renting out Croke Park. This money is to be invested in major grassroots level projects. Is it wise to embark on such an ambitious project at a time of economic uncertainty?

'Well while the economy has diminished some of the projects we always wanted to undertake it has never stopped the association from developing. We have always strived to have the best facilities that we can available to clubs and counties. The association gave a commitment that whatever money it earned from soccer and rugby that it would be put back into the association. We were fortunate that we had a surplus of €35m doing that. The projects that have been undertaken throughout the country demand significant money from the county boards and from the clubs. A lot of these projects have been started already and we've put an estimate on it that by the time all the projects are complete we will have spent close to €100m as an association. It shows the GAA's strength in Ireland and in our communities and what it means to be a member of the GAA and be prepared to put your money where your mouth is and help support the current developments that are ongoing. I believe that will happen because we serve the community and we make a difference to people's lives through our games'.

Q. When the FAI and the IRFU move to their new stadium will Croke Park remain available to them if required?

'There is a motion going before congress this year with about 5 different counties suggesting a change in the rule and that permission be given to central council to sanction the availability of Croke Park to other sports. I believe that it will happen and that the motion will be passed but I don't believe that we will see soccer or rugby Internationals played in Croke Park for the next ten years. They have contracts with Aviva and with this is the responsibility to have to play their matches there. So I don't envisage it happening in the next ten years'.

Q. Was it ever thought about opening county grounds to other sports?

'No and I don't want it to happen and I don't believe it will happen. I believe we should maximise the use of our grounds whether it be club or county for the use of our games. We have big enough challenges at the moment with the availability of pitches because of the volume of teams playing so we should just use them for our own games because we need every one of them. Also I would say that the investment of our clubs, our counties and our people into creating what we have to today was created with the intention of our games. If soccer and rugby require facilities then they have the same responsibilities that we have to provide them and we have done that very successfully. I don't think there is a responsibility on us to open our club or county grounds to other codes.'

Q. The Experimental rules currently being tried out in the National League will go before delegates at Annual Congress in April. Would you be confident that all or any of them will pass?

'I think some of them will and some of them won't. I think that is the distinct advantage of having them experimented through the National League. I think the reason they are being tried out is because every 5 years we get the opportunity to change the rules in football and hurling so we put two committees in place made up of managers, referees, players and administrator to look and see if changes are needed. I personally believe only limited changes are needed. The changes that are being recommended and being tested are limited enough but they won't all get through. As President I

have to chair the congress in an independent way so I would rather not express a view on which items will or won't pass. Whatever change we do make is in the interest of our game and to better our game and that's all I want to see.'

Q. Are you glad to see the return of the International rules series? Is it something you have a particular interest in?

'We currently have an agreement with the Australians that they would come here this year and we will go there next year. I am happy for the International rules to continue once they are played in the spirits of sportsmanship that meets both associations' standards. I certainly would not want a repeat of what happened a few years back. If it is played in the spirit it should be then I have no problem with it. Our players want to represent our association at international level and our spectators come to watch the games in very large numbers. I can predict we will have a full house in Limerick and Croke Park this year for the two games. The pundits want to see it and it gives our players a chance to represent their country. So I have no problem with the international rules series.'

Q. Like every other club in Ireland, Edenderry has been affected by emigration. Is it a concern that small rural clubs in particular will struggle to field teams or even stay in existence during the current economic crisis?

'Yes of course it is a concern but every club should do what it can within its power to maintain its identity. I would hope we would never get to the situation where clubs ceased up or disappear. They might disappear in the short term through amalgamation while their resources are down which has happened in the past but through maybe economic times improving and people returning home they can return to being strong viable clubs again. I would never like to see any club disbanding or losing its identity and it is something we are very conscious of. We will do our best to support clubs to make sure that doesn't happen but it has its challenges and the economy is the biggest challenge at the moment.'

Q. Did the recent events or scenes in the Portlaoise - Kilmurray-Ibrickane match do much to damage the reputation of the GAA?

'The scenes weren't helpful but I don't believe it damaged our brand or credibility as an association because our disciplinary committee at national level dealt with the matter very strongly as it should do. I would not condone in a special way the behaviour of anybody who behaves after a match and tries to intimidate a referee. But I would have to say that Portlaoise did put their hand up. They came out with a public apology the next day and severely criticised any of their fans that took part in the behaviour and that it wasn't acceptable to them. That is leadership from within the club. While we have that kind of leadership within a club I think that the scenes we seen in the Gaelic Grounds will be few and far between and that's what we all want.'

