

The GAA in crisis

Somhairle Mag Uidhir

The clock overlooking Croke Park reads 72 minutes and 22 seconds. The allotted two minutes of injury time have passed and the Cork bench are screaming for the referee to blow the whistle. It is the 2013 All-Ireland Hurling final and the Rebel county are ahead by a point against a Clare team led by Davy Fitzgerald. Both counties have surprised pundits and supporters alike by making it this far, and for Clare, this match represents their best chance of ending the fifteen-year gap since their last All-Ireland win.

Up steps the Clare corner-back, Domhnall O'Donovan, who receives the ball just past the 65-metre line. And instead of playing it into the Clare forward line (which had been so potent that summer), he turns to his left, throws off the shackles and strikes the sliotar high and over the bar, tying up the game. A quote in one report on the match emphasised the risk involved in taking the shot himself: "And what he was doing inside the Cork 65m line only he knows!" Regardless, the final whistle blows, Davy Fitzgerald puts his face in his hands, and a week later Clare beat Cork in the replay to win one of the most remarkable All-Irelands of recent memory.

And whether it is O'Donovan going it alone, a golfer driving for the green rather than laying up, or rugby teams opting to kick for a five-metre line-out from a penalty when three points are a given; greed is never far away from the margins of sport. The potential either for unmitigated glory or for disastrous ruin is something that makes the 'greedy' play so compelling. They are part of the drama of sport, and as such, of the GAA.

However, over the past decade 'greed' has begun to be associated with another, different, aspect of the GAA. No longer does it conjure up images of the

corner-forward, who, instead of recycling the ball, shoots from an impossible angle and invariably misses. Instead it is the greed of corporate GAA that comes to mind; of ticket-price hikes and Sky pay-per-view deals, encapsulated in the oft-repeated refrain of the 'Grab-All-Association'. And the reality is that the GAA has reached a crossroads. Its founding values – of amateurism, community, voluntarism and democracy – are under threat to an extent never before seen in the history of the Association.

This article is an attempt to shed light on the rot of commercialisation that has taken hold. It will lay out where the compulsion to commercialise has come from, how it manifests in the GAA, and why it needs radical action to tackle it. Because ultimately, if we want to save the GAA, we need to be clear about what we're saving it from. As such, this is not intended to be a historical account of the GAA, of its roots and its role in 20th century Irish society. Instead it will tease out the contemporary dynamics of the organisation, arguing that the problems facing it are not simply the result of a few bad eggs. The depth of commercialisation within the Association means that the problem is structural, and is one which needs to be overcome before the amateur organisation that is a source of such pride for its members gets into a hole from which it cannot escape.

The Good

Many could be forgiven for thinking that, despite the odd difficulty, much was rosy in the GAA. Indeed, it would be unfair not to look at some of the positive aspects of Gaelic games today.

There are record breaking crowds and viewers watching hurling and football¹. And no wonder, as we are

seeing arguably the highest ever quality play; on-field exploits are leaving people all over Ireland mesmerized, (in hurling especially). The skill and athleticism of the game today, especially at inter-county level, cannot be overemphasised.

At the other end of the organisation is a vast network of volunteers; people of all ages who give up countless hours of their own time simply for the sake of sports they love and communities they belong to. The Irish Independent, for example, recently described the activities of one club volunteer, Martin. Over the course of one week, he marked out the pitch for an under-16s game, went to a committee meeting, drove a carload to a camogie game, stewarded the car park for a minor league final, took the under-8s for training, and organised the celebrations for the club's intermediate champions. Despite many problems at the top, local GAA clubs continue to be rooted in communities across the country and exist as the lifeblood of many of them. It is a mass-participatory sporting organisation, providing a much-needed, positive social outlet in today's atomised capitalist world.

Importantly, given the rise of racism across Ireland, Gaelic games have acted as a means of integrating newer arrivals to Ireland. While there is more that could be done, many GAA clubs across the country have provided worthwhile examples of what local populations can do to welcome refugees and immigrants. Other good news stories include the trend of specifically Irish language GAA clubs, outside traditional Gaeltacht areas, wherein people train and play wholly through Irish. In recent years such clubs have been established in Belfast, Dublin, Galway, and Monaghan, with great success.

And significantly, there has been an historic growth in the women's games, with participation among girls skyrocketing. The decades-long efforts by women to gain long overdue recognition is beginning to pay off. Of course, there is still a long, long way to go.

And the Bad

The GAA, then, is not all doom and gloom. Indeed, it is precisely *because* of the many ways in which it continues to be a beneficial part of Irish society that the dangers facing the Association are so pressing. Dangers that are worth examining if we are to understand the cause of the crossroads the GAA finds itself at. The women's games

is a good place to start, because there has been a definite limit to the progress made. Women continue to struggle with a high level of discrimination and a general lack of status and recognition given to "ladies'" football and camogie. In terms of pitch times, resources, coverage, and basic respect, the women's games are made to play second fiddle to the men.

Similarly, behind the positives of huge attendances and recent record viewing figures lie a litany of problems which paint a very different picture.

In October 2018, one of the most decorated hurlers in the history of the sport, Kilkenny's Tommy Walsh, said that "we won't have club hurling in ten years"². He was alluding to the damage the current fixture crisis in the club game is doing to hurling. And the challenges are mirrored within club football, leaving the club game in general in a very precarious position. Scattered and disorganized fixtures, last-minute cancellations, leagues and championships crammed into short windows; the horror stories have been growing in number, to a point where many club players have come together to found the Club Players' Association (CPA) in an attempt to bring about a change.³

Not wholly unrelated to the club fixture crisis is the reality that many rural teams are under threat because of the emigration which is devastating rural communities. In fact, it could be argued that the health of a particular rural GAA club can be a useful lens through which to view the health of the wider community. So far, the GAA has been unable to adequately deal with this dilemma.

Then there are the controversies which have emerged in recent years, pointing to the wider trajectory of the organisation. One which stood out was the 'Newbridge or Nowhere' debacle. Kildare were entitled to a home venue in their qualifier match against Mayo, based on the rulebook. Central Council, the GAA's governing body, attempted to relocate the fixture away from Kildare's Newbridge to Croke Park, citing safety concerns. The Kildare team, their county board and their supporters managed to hold fast, threatening a boycott unless the game was reinstated in Newbridge. As a campaign, 'Newbridge or Nowhere' electrified the GAA community right across Ireland. Many were sceptical of the talk of 'safety concerns', highlighting another potential motivation for moving the game to a bigger venue: more money to be made at the gate.

That saga followed in the wake of officials at more than one senior championship game trying to remove Palestine flags from the crowd.⁴ There was also an instance of a mother being told that she must pay for her infant baby to enter a Tyrone match at Croke Park, even though the baby would have been in her arms the whole match.⁵

At the opposite ends of Ireland, stadia controversies rumble on. Huge multi million-pound redevelopments of Casement Park in Belfast and Páirc Uí Chaoimh in Cork have sparked political and financial headaches, while ticket-prices have seen successive increases at virtually all levels.

Those incidents, and others like them, are occurring under the shadow of the TV-rights deal made with Sky, which continues to price GAA fans out of watching an amateur game. The agreement was made in 2014, not two years after the then-GAA Director General Páirc Duffy claimed the Association “wouldn’t get away with selling the rights to the championship to Sky Sports”.⁶

And, of course, all these myriad issues – big and small, local and national – are set within a context of increased professionalisation of the games. The contrasts between the elite and the amateur ends of the sport are greater than they have ever been, and with that has come an identity crisis for the GAA.

Frustration and resentment have been building for well over a decade now. Decrying a “capitalist GAA”, the “Grab-All-Association”, or more generally proclaiming a crisis in the organisation, is no longer the purview of a cantankerous few. Unfortunately, these issues cannot be solved by simply changing the decision makers at the top, as some might desire. The problems are structural. A good example of that is the crisis of the inter-county game.

The (Multimillion-Euro) Inter-County Game

Today’s inter-county game requires a huge amount of resources. To be competitive in the modern game means having a near-professional level set-up. It means having backroom teams of twenty-plus people, including coaches, physios, nutritionists, statisticians, sports psychologists, and more, and all of whom get paid. For a reference typical of the inter-county game, the Tipperary team which won the 2019 All-Ireland Hurling Championship had a backroom team numbering 27

people. Furthermore, keeping up with other teams is only possible with the best training conditions, the best equipment in the best facilities, broken up with extended training camps – sometimes abroad. Neither can any expense be spared for the logistical elements: travel, accommodation, matchday-meals, and more build up over the course of an eleven-month season.

Of course, this is without mentioning the player-specific costs for inter-county players in the modern era. The findings from research conducted by the Economic and Social Research Institute in 2016 should leave us in no doubt as to the effort of inter-county players, with some players spending “up to 31 hours per *week* on their senior inter-county commitments”.⁷ They sacrifice most of their free time, with the report also documenting that many older players even sacrifice the personal relationships in their lives. To subsidise some of this material and emotional commitment, today’s county players are provided with training gear, equipment, gym memberships, mileage expenses and other payments and benefits. Add these player expenditures to the team costs above and we begin to see just how much it takes to be a competitive inter-county team in the present day. When all is totted up, the sums are vast.

Consecutive GAA Annual Reports have described the question of funding the county game as the biggest challenge facing the Association.⁸ Numerous county boards find themselves racking up debts worth hundreds of thousands of euro, and more counties are breaking the €1m mark for yearly spending on their inter-county teams. In 2017, over €25m was spent by county boards on their county teams – up from €23m the year before.⁹ County boards are now heavily dependent on *outside* fundraising, through supporter organisations and, increasingly, wealthy benefactors who want to see their county do well.

Outside of a county’s own methods, the GAA centrally also must contribute, via the provincial councils and Central Council itself.¹⁰ At an abstract level, this means that the Association in its entirety must fund the inter-county game to the tune of *millions* annually. However, as the GAA’s 2017 Financial Report explains, the level of subvention – a “necessity” – means “increasing resources are being directed towards the inter-county game, at the inevitable expense of other sections of the Association”. The extent of the prioritisation of the

county game cannot be overemphasised.

By now, it should be patently obvious that most counties cannot afford this model. It is unreachable for many and unsustainable in the long run for all but the top three or four counties. Significantly, the club game is also not immune from these preparation costs; while the inter-county game is still far ahead in terms of expenditure, the top-level clubs in every county are also caught in a similar, vicious, circle.

This deep-rooted requirement for funding generates a particular set of interests for the main GAA bodies: in order to have a chance of balancing the books, the whole of their activity is now fundamentally shaped by revenue raising. It cannot be avoided. Of all the important dynamics at play in today's GAA, this is by some margin the most important to understand.

The GAA is playing catch-up, and is now forced to do whatever it can, year-on-year, to fill the hole left by top-tier hurling and football. The county game requires such huge resources that every other objective of the GAA is of secondary importance behind the needs of financial growth. Such a state of affairs is starkly at odds with those values to which most grassroots members would subscribe: amateurism, voluntarism, community.

Since the mid-1990s, the size of the figures required has meant that the money-raising methods of the much of the 20th century had become wholly insufficient. Instead, the people who run county boards, provincial councils, Central Council, and the various bodies of the upper echelons of the GAA, are now *reliant* on the commercialisation of Gaelic games. That is, the organisation had to open the games to the market.

The result of this compulsion – for that is the best name for it – to commercialise in order to raise the money necessary to fund our elite-level games, is sometimes obvious, sometimes less so. It can best be seen by looking at three different areas: gate receipts, media rights, and sponsorship. In each section we will see how the GAA has developed new approaches to increase its revenue, and how these approaches have filtered down to hurt the core ethos of the Association.

Gate Receipts

The single biggest source of revenue for the GAA centrally is from people paying into matches. Gate receipts for 2017 totalled €34m, over half of the GAA's

€66m revenue in that year.¹¹ It is worth noting that this income is made up only from those games in the All-Ireland series. Provincial intercounty championship games, as well as national league games, do not count towards this total; the monies from those games go to participating counties via the provincial councils, meaning that the overall money made through ticket sales across the country in a single year is significantly more than the total mentioned above.

For perspective: in the first year of the millennium the GAA's entire revenue was roughly €17m.¹² The money now coming in at the gate alone is double that. And these gargantuan amounts seen today remain *inadequate* to properly fund the intercounty game.

It stands to reason, then, that the GAA would try to maximise gate receipt revenue, and they have been compelled to do so, using several different methods. Most obviously, ticket prices have increased substantially over the past decade, with the staggering €80 charge for an All-Ireland final ticket in 2019 indicative of the trend. This commercialisation of the games now means financial directors up and down the land calculate the optimum prices for tickets, trying to extract as much money from the gate as possible, rather than trying to make our games as accessible as possible to ordinary people.

And there is an even more insidious phenomenon which the inter-county game's need for revenue is directly causing: *the fixture crisis*. The more championship games that are played; the more money is generated. Therefore, there exists a powerful incentive for Central Council to have as expansive an inter-county championship as possible. That means having a fuller calendar of games, with matches sprawling out over many months so that fans can have the requisite disposable income to attend all the extra games.¹³

Of course, club players up and down the country know the reality that that approach has brought to bear on the club game. The club scene – the supposed heartbeat of the GAA – has been denigrated over twenty years, to the point where club teams today can be left wallowing for months without games and 9-time All-Star Tommy Walsh can warn of club hurlings' imminent end.

Against the backdrop of that fixture crisis, the format changes of 2018 introduced *more* championship fixtures. In football, the Super 8s added a round-robin format at the quarter final stage, while hurling saw the

round-robin added in the provincial stage. That officials in the upper echelons not only ignore the fact that club fixtures are *the* fundamental crisis engulfing us, but also intervene during this situation to add *more* inter-county games, points to the depth of the compulsion to commercialise within the GAA.

Finally, since the beginning of the millennium there has been a spate of developments of inter-county venues. The GAA was not immune to the developer-led property bubble of the Celtic Tiger. Add into the mix the fact that county boards across Ireland were struggling to make ends meet and looked to the biggest potential revenue source available to them (increased gate receipts), and the result was the development of close to twenty GAA stadia across Ireland.¹⁴ Some have been worthwhile upgrades and a source of pride for the areas they serve. Some have been mired in controversy. Colm O'Rourke, a man not given to radical sentiments, proclaimed that "We'll all pay the price for Cork's Taj Mahal", referencing the extravagant nature of Cork's Páirc Uí Chaoimh and the huge overspend bill being footed by the GAA centrally.¹⁵ And there is cause for concern more generally, with Munster Council official Enda McGuane arguing that "only Croke Park and Semple Stadium have the potential to be self-financing".¹⁶

Meanwhile, the Casement Park redevelopment saga in Belfast has exemplified that worst of this potent mix of stadium expansion and the neoliberal politics of development. Despite safety warnings against having any capacity over 32,000, the initial plans unveiled were for 37,000 seats. The promises to the social club, and the local community about facilities were reneged on; in their place were even more corporate boxes. Seen in the light of the Antrim County Board, and the Ulster Councils, need to raise money, their decision to go ahead with 37,000 seats, backed to the hilt by local politicians, appears less the result of an administrative blunder and more a potentially disastrous outcome of the need to get as many people through the turnstiles to fund the insatiable demands of inter-county teams.

What ensued was a remarkable campaign waged by residents, members of the GAA community in Belfast, and People Before Profit, which managed to argue that these plans were excessive, dangerous, and not in tune with a community that itself has had a longstanding attachment to Casement Park.

Media Rights and the Sky Deal

The income generated by the sale of the GAA's media rights is having a similar effect on fixtures. In recent years, deaf to a cacophony of criticism, the GAA sold the rights to some championship games to Sky Sports, locking coverage behind pay-per-view TV.

The world over, TV sports deals tend to result in a common set of outcomes; initially they provide a large injection of cash, and more generally serve to ratchet up the media value of the sport, forcing traditional terrestrial broadcasters to pay more. The pay-per-view (PPV) TV companies pay over the odds for the broadcasting rights because, for them, it is *not necessarily* about the profits to be made from that particular sport. Rather, as the man who pioneered the PPV model – media billionaire Rupert Murdoch – revealed as far back as 1996, they "use sports as a battering-ram" to get into new domestic markets.

Overpayment then distorts the coverage of the sport and can create a dependency for the organisations involved. For example, RTÉ estimated that the Sky deal was worth €55m over 5 years; were Sky to pull out, there is no other corporation that would be willing to pay as much for the games it receives.¹⁷ The GAA's financial managers would be hard pressed to fill such a vacuum and are unlikely to want to end the Sky deal any time soon.

Secondly and relatedly, PPV deals influence the quantity, timing and structures of the fixtures themselves. In the case of the GAA, it now needs to provide enough top-tier games to satisfy both RTÉ and Sky (see the introduction of the Super 8's which trebled the number of quarter-final matches), and to schedule as much as possible to work around other sports competitions (see the recent calendar changes).

Thirdly, PPV agreements can erode aspects of the culture and heritage surrounding a sport. This is among the most insidious aspects of the Sky partnership, and some of its most lasting effects will not become fully visible for years yet. Because, at its root, whereas the money traditionally made by the Association off the backs of amateur players was for the Association (however mismanaged), Sky now make a *private* profit from the same.

The argument could be made that companies have been profiting from Gaelic games for decades; through

sponsorship, matchday intake and the likes. While this is true, these are all *off-field*. Similarly, it could be argued that companies such as Setanta, Eir Sport, Premier Sports, etc. preceded Sky by having pay-per-view formats. However, the sheer scale of Sky's involvement means we are now on new terrain. The decades long work by volunteers up and down the country to bring GAA stars from the early days of toddler-clumsiness to the warrior-like artistry of their prime is now fed upon by a capitalist vampire who sucks up this product of Irish society, putting it behind exorbitant monthly costs and sacrificing all that is worthwhile about the GAA on the altar of Sky's shareholders and their ravenous pockets.

And despite the problems with RTÉ's coverage at times, there is room on the state broadcaster to question and to debate the structure and organisation of the GAA itself. Expect no such critical eye from Sky about the commercial trajectory of the GAA when they are a prime beneficiary. With high-levels of commercialisation, whether in the form of multimillion-euro sponsorship deals or PPV contracts, comes a pressure to depoliticise the sport, like the removal of Palestinian flags referenced above. It does not matter that Sky may not have asked the GAA directly to tone down outward political expressions – it is enough that intense commercialisation brings about a culture where investors must be kept happy, where politics represents a risk, and where *radical* politics are beyond the pale.

Finally, the touted motivation for the deal with Sky: increasing awareness and participation in our games. This was nothing more than a ruse. Even had the Sky deal been about the promotion of Gaelic football and hurling abroad as claimed, and not the desire to boost media revenue, it is still a damning indictment of the hierarchy. Of course, pay-per-view deals do not help promote games. The viewing figures for audiences outside Ireland are extremely low.¹⁸ Cricket has found that out the hard way and is attempting to return to terrestrial television as a result. Relying on Sky Sports to disavow their use of indigenous sports as a “battering ram” and actually care about the latter's development is akin to relying on the turkey to organize Christmas.

The primary fuel for the growth of Gaelic games abroad is the enforced emigration of the island's young people. In this context, it would seem utterly bizarre to

enter into a contract which aimed at the spread of the games outside Ireland, while many of the communities which form the bedrock of the organisation struggle so desperately.

This is not to fall into a “look after our own first” style argument. Rather, it is to point to the priorities of the upper echelons of the GAA. The reality is that the push to develop the GAA abroad stems from the fact that ‘abroad’ is a *new* market, a potential goldmine. Contrast this to the absence of any concentrated call from the Association for the government to address rural depopulation and under-investment in these same years, and we see the real human cost of the GAA's commercialism.

Sponsorship and the General Distortion of the County Game

Large sponsorship deals have, arguably, been a feature of the GAA since the mid-1990s. In recent years Gaelic games have attracted international sponsors, propelling the revenue to new levels. The attendant effects are similar to some of those noted above, especially as regards depoliticisation and competition structure.

More so than gate receipts and media rights, sponsorship directly influences the world of individual players. The Gaelic Players' Association (GPA) seeks to maximise the opportunities for elite inter-county players to act as ‘brand ambassadors’, and by all accounts, they do so very effectively. Indeed, it was a struggle over the right to do so which led, in part, to the origin of the GPA.

These instances of commercialisation, and their effects, are only the more blatant examples. The list of consequences is huge, taking in areas as diverse as coaching, health & safety, GAA democracy, etc. It is also influencing the county game itself. Dublin's dominance of the Men's Senior Football Championship has caused worry that their significant commercial advantage over other counties is leading to an unhealthy gap, with the rest of the country struggling to compete.

It is important not to denigrate the effort and talent of that Dublin team, who are undoubtedly among the sport's all-time greats. However, it is worth noting that even if the GAA believed that Dublin's commercial prowess had to be reigned-in in order to level the playing field, they would find it extremely difficult to do so. That is because of how crucial Dublin are to the Association in financial terms. Due to the magnitude of their

support, if they have a bad year it can affect the GAA's main sources of commercial revenue. As Páraic Duffy admits, "In terms of the finances, they are important and we need them [...] if Dublin were unsuccessful that would have a huge impact on the [TV] contract because of the huge viewing figures they attract".¹⁹

Commercialisation has resulted in a situation where the wealth of a county will greatly affect its chances on the pitch. This essentially contradicts the amateurism of the Association. As the previous sections demonstrate, the current trajectory poses a serious risk to the fundamentals of the GAA itself. How did we arrive at this point?

How we got here

For much of the GAA's history, there existed a natural cap on how much of their everyday lives participants gave up because they were amateurs with jobs. This was true even for the best teams. In the 1950s, some county teams began to go above this cap, with week-long training camps being held during the season. To attend, players either took holidays or asked for support from their county. The phenomenon was a result of the intrinsic competitiveness of the games; teams wanted to win and thus were compelled to ever-increase their efforts. The GAA responded to these developments at the time by banning the practice, warning that it fell foul of the amateurism of the organisation.²⁰

So, what occurred to bring about the inter-county game we see today, where players contribute up to 31 hours a week? The overall transition required three related developments. First, a culture of elite performance resembling today's levels gained a foothold. That is, a core number of teams significantly upped their commitment, creating a new competitive dynamic within top tier hurling and football. Secondly, players and teams had to gain access to the material support necessary to ensure the hike in time and energy would continue and would not be rolled back. And thirdly, the GAA itself had to be wealthy enough to give the players and teams the means to cover this added demand. It is worth looking at each of these in a bit more detail.

Culture of elite performance

Denis Walsh credits Ger Loughnane's Clare hurling team in the 90s, and their brutal training sessions in

Crusheen for the qualitative shift in commitment, with a previously unseen standard of preparation and near-professional effort. They ran themselves into the ground for two seasons, and got the reward of an All-Ireland in 1995, their second ever and first for 81 years. They helped spark hurling's 'revolution years'.

Hurling had traditionally been dominated by the big three: Kilkenny, Cork and Tipperary. From 1994-1999 however, they were beaten back by some of the less successful counties: Clare, Wexford, Offaly and Limerick. These 'weaker' teams brought a degree of intensity which blew the top three out of the water. The latter were slow to register what was happening around them, but eventually realised that pure talent alone would no longer cut it; they had put in their own 'Crusheens'. At around the same time, whether coincidentally or as a result, Gaelic football began to go down a similar road.²¹

These county teams were set-up essentially on an amateur basis. How long could they sustain this near-professional commitment?

Players gaining access to material support

In 2002 Cork hurlers went on strike and were soon joined by their footballing counterparts. Their reasons were clear and their demands were simple: they were sacrificing huge parts of their lives for the sake of the sport and they wanted better treatment. For them, it wasn't about "pay for play" or professionalism. They wanted a level of player welfare proportional to the endless hours and material commitment they were giving under this new highly competitive dynamic.

During their struggle the players displayed a tremendous degree of radicalism. Going up against a Cork county board renowned for its power, they stuck to their guns and eventually won most of their demands. They could cover the added cost of travel, they were better insured against the greater risk of injury brought about by the increase in intensity, they were better fed and helped with costs of all the extra gym work being done. Crucially, they gained access to the welfare supports that were necessary to maintain their gargantuan sporting efforts, opening the door for inter-county players everywhere else to do the same.

And there was a cultural element as well. The new standards for hurling and football were occurring

alongside commercial changes within the wider organisation. While players' efforts had gone through the roof, the GAA's revenues were doing similar. The Cork strike gave voice to the idea that the sacrifices they were making deserved more respect, especially considering the significant rise in the Association's commercial intake. Mark Landers, a Cork footballer at the centre of the strike, put it bluntly: "We had the GAA on one side, we had the sponsors on the other side, and we had the players in the middle. The GAA were creaming off the sponsors, the players were getting fuck all!"²²

The founding of the Gaelic Players Association (GPA) predates the Cork strike, but the latter really propelled the GPA into being a decisive power within the GAA community. The Cork players' victory opened up a new chapter in Gaelic games.

Despite resistance, the GAA now provides large funds to the GPA itself. Some blame the GPA for the increasingly-capitalist trajectory of the GAA, and there is no doubt that they are at the heart of drives for additional commercialisation.²³ However, their birth was a symptom of the changes ongoing in the GAA at the time, not necessarily the cause.

And most importantly, since players got their hands on proper reimbursement, professionalisation has increased in all the other aspects of the inter-county game.

The GAA in the Celtic Tiger Years

It is debatable whether the organisation today is coping with the results of these changes. What is undeniable, however, is that the GAA could not have handled these drastic developments had they occurred in the decades before the 1990s. What enabled this increase in expenditure on the county set-up was the Celtic Tiger economy.²⁴

As ex-President Nicky Brennan said, the reason the GAA was able to enact a new sponsorship model in these years was how well the economy was doing: "the Celtic Tiger was well and truly running around the country".²⁵

The commercialisation of the GAA sustained the on-field changes which began in the 1990s, and in turn, drove them further. But importantly, there were some influential outside actors who during the boom years saw the increased cost of the county game as a godsend.

It provided them with the added justification for bringing in that significant commercialisation during the Celtic Tiger years. The forces in question are the forces of Irish capitalism. Capital cannot afford to turn down a profit, and here was a vast cultural institution which could claim to reach into the everyday lives of more Irish people than the Catholic church. Much more could be written on this aspect of the modern history of the GAA. It is enough to say here that for some, this process of marketisation has been very lucrative.

Uncomfortable Decisions

It is worth recapping the central argument made here about the commercialisation of the GAA: the defining dynamic is one in which the inter-county game is so expensive that the Association as a whole is compelled to prioritise commercialisation. This is affecting countless strands of the organisation and is most visible in the degradation of the club scene for the sake of the revenue generated by the county game.

There are only two possible endpoints for the GAA under this model. The first is that things carry on as normal, with the corrosion documented above allowed to continue unabated. The second prospect is that the existing dynamic is allowed to reach its logical conclusion with some form of pay-for-play for county players. This much has already been demanded by some prominent ex-players, and while it might ease a few short-term headaches by codifying a process already well-underway, long-term it would undermine amateurism at every level of the GAA. To see this, take the most obvious issue arising from pay-for-play: how will the wages be funded? Either the Association does so, and as a result it remains locked into the commercialism we see today. Or alternatively, some counties go towards a professional set-up, where they are run as private businesses and at which point the present crises will be thought of as the 'good old days'.

That there are no other potential outcomes is based on an uncomfortable truth: today's inter-county game is incompatible with a GAA free from marketisation. The former depends on the latter. If the GAA was to begin to turn its back on marketisation, by curtailing the inter-county season, significantly reducing ticket prices, ending PPV TV deals, and not adhering to the demands of sponsorship agreements, then it would *also* have to

limit the spending on the inter-county game. Central council would have to reduce the level of player welfare and subvention to county boards. Counties themselves would have to limit their spending on backroom staff, logistics and team preparation.

These changes would meet huge resistance – and not only from those powerful bodies with a deep-set commercial agenda who would fight tooth and nail against them. It might even come from those of us who consider ourselves fans. Because to watch the latter stages of the championship season is to continually be left in awe, and to tackle commercialisation means taking apart the conditions which have provided us with those wonderful displays of Gaelic games.

The choice facing grassroots members of the GAA is a bitter one. It is a choice between an increasingly-capitalist GAA, alongside on-field play of historic quality, or returning to an Association once again rooted in the values of mass participation and voluntarism, but with a less elite county game. As difficult as that decision may be, it is one for the members to make; all of them, in every club and parish in every nook and cranny of Ireland. We have never been properly consulted on the developments that have brought us to where we are now. But it is our organisation and we should be the ones to decide its future.

Taking Back the GAA

The GAA was founded towards the end of the 19th century and was both a cause and an effect of tumultuous changes washing over Ireland at that time. It accompanied revivals in the Irish language and other aspects of Irish culture which, in turn, coalesced into renewed momentum for Home Rule, and eventually, independence and self-determination. It was set up, in part, to counter British influence and control in Ireland – to be a cultural bulwark against the erosion of Irish identity, and a means of bringing Irish people together and instilling confidence in them. And, of course, its central concern was the promotion of distinctly Irish sports.

There were also strong class dimensions to the Association's origins. Speaking about the British form of athletics which obtained in Ireland at the time, one of the GAA's founders, Michael Cusack, describes them as something people do, "in fine weather after having

undergone several weeks of careful nursing and when nobody outside their own class is allowed to compete." They were sports "not for the amateur, but the gentleman amateur". Contrasted to the British approach to sports were the aims of Davitt, another founder, who was adamant that their new organisation had to cater to the 'working man' who "seemed now to be born to no inheritance other than to labour." As such, games were played on a Sunday, the traditional day of rest in the Irish countryside, allowing most of those labouring masses to participate (the sports of 'gentlemen' were confined to Saturdays).²⁶

At a time when British approaches to sports in Ireland were narrow and conservative, along came the GAA in the 1880s, helping to set alight a cultural revolution and a new chapter in Ireland's anti-imperialist, revolutionary tradition. It was a sports organisation not for the gentleman amateur, but the working man amateur, based on the mass involvement of poor people up and down the country. Thus, while the GAA's subsequent history was riddled with contradictions, it was founded on two pillars: Irish cultural tradition and a dedication to the activity of the ordinary masses.

This history is important, not because reigning in commercialisation necessarily means returning to the 1880s. Rather, in today's capitalist world the idea which inspired the founding of the GAA is one worth holding on to: mass participation in a sport which is democratically owned and managed by the participants themselves, and whose practices are interwoven with the cultural heritage of this island. The very fact that the Association, however unevenly and however intermittently, manages to give life to that vision at all makes it imperative that we intervene to change its current course. The difficult decisions that need to be made along the way pale in comparison to the tragedy of standing by and allowing this unique sporting institution to destroy itself under the auspices of the market.

However, on top of the moral reason, there is also a strategic case for caring about the future of the GAA. Its history is not without blemish. As an institution it was too often used by the powers that be in the southern state to further their own aims. It frequently acted as an enforcer of conservatism as well as a medium for the clientelism which dominated politics in many communities.²⁷ In some places this culture remains, in

others it is much weaker. But it is precisely because of the way in which the forces of the right have continuously tried to use it for their own nefarious ends that those of us who wish to see a fairer, socialist Ireland cannot afford to ignore the GAA. A struggle will be fought over the organisation's future, and we should be in the middle of it.

Finally, there are some lessons worth bearing in mind when considering how to go about changing the direction of the GAA. The first is the recent experience of the Club Players' Association (CPA). It was set-up specifically to advocate for issues affecting club players, the prime one being the fixture crisis. And while they were hugely successful in gaining members and supporters, they have found it much more difficult to get the central decision-making bodies of the GAA to pay them any attention. The latter brushed off demands, eventually stating the GAA was a democratic organisation and that if the CPA wanted any movement on issues affecting club players they had to go through the "proper channels".

From the beginning one of the CPA's most prominent members, Liam Griffin, ruled out any kind of strike action. Setting aside the question of whether a strike by club players provides the right way forward, this stance signalled immediately to GAA authorities that they did not have to worry. The Association had long experience in dealing with highly militant GPA action since the Cork dispute of 2002, with inter-county players being consistently willing to stand up to the GAA if necessary.

Instead the CPA followed the route of quiet diplomacy urged by the GAA, organising its members to try and get motions passed at Congress, the GAA's AGM. Many of their motions did not make it to Congress, involving as it did, making it through club, county and provincial levels first. All those that did reach Congress were shot down. The manner in which events unfolded, from top-level GAA officials refusing to meet with the CPA, to CPA motions failing to make it through the system, was not surprising. The modern architecture of central GAA revolves around the county game and its commercialisation. Hence, it was not for a lack of solutions that the CPA made little headway – they have had some very worthwhile ideas. Any demand about the club scene by the CPA was, by its very nature, going to come up against the interests and objectives of county

boards and above, no matter how well crafted it was.²⁸

The democratic deficit within the GAA was confirmed by the vitriolic reaction to one of the CPA motions which did manage to make it to Congress. It sought to reinstate a rule which ensured the way in which delegates voted at the GAA's highest decision-making body had to be recorded. That this rule was ever done away with was disgraceful, but arguably worse was the dismissive way the CPA's motion was defeated.²⁹

Thus, the structures of the GAA today are wedded to a commercial model which they will not give up without a fight. The lessons of the CPA's recent efforts, as well as those of the Cork players in 2002 and others like them, is that it will require radical action to pull the organisation back from the cliff of marketisation. In other words, we need a mass movement of ordinary, grassroots members to remove the insatiable commercialisation of today for the sake of the democratic and amateur participation of tomorrow.

Endnotes

- 1 GAA Financial Report 2017: <https://www.gaa.ie/api/pdfs/image/upload/dpngzz6dhxfr7i6nl601.pdf>
- 2 <https://www.newstalk.com/sport/tommy-walsh-we-will-not-have-hurling-in-10-years-499672>
- 3 For a taste of these see: <https://gaclubplayers.com/horror-stories/>
- 4 <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northernirelandnews/2018/05/22/news/ulster-gaa-confirms-palestinian-flag-not-allowed-in-grounds-1335396/>
- 5 <https://www.irishnews.com/news/2017/09/01/news/tyrone-gaa-supporter-refused-entry-to-croke-park-after-being-asked-to-provide-ticket-for-her-nine-week-old-baby-1125374/>
- 6 Michael Moynihan, *GAAconomics: The Secret Life of Money in the GAA*, 2013, Macmillan. Ch. 16.
- 7 ESRI, 2018, Playing senior inter-county Gaelic games: experiences, realities and consequences: <https://www.esri.ie/publications/playing-senior-inter-county-Gaelic-games-experiences-realities-and-consequences>

- 8 GAA Ard-Stiúrthóir Report 2016: <https://www.gaa.ie/api/pdfs/image/upload/kilcx3etcksfvh68xfjw.pdf>; GAA Financial Report 2017; GAA Financial Report 2018: <https://www.gaa.ie/news/gaa-ard-stiurthoir-tom-ryan-launches-2018-annual-report/>
- 9 <https://www.independent.ie/sport/Gaelic-games/revealed-here-is-how-much-your-county-spent-on-its-teams-in-2017-with-dublin-only-the-second-biggest-spenders-36576369.html>
- 10 The GAA's structure resembles a pyramid. Clubs feed into county boards, which feed into provincial boards (Ulster, Leinster, Connaught, Munster), and these boards in turn feed into Central Council, the GAA's highest decision-making body. Revenue is funnelled downwards in the organisation, while all the individual units on the pyramid also have their own revenue-raising capabilities.
- 11 GAA Financial Report 2017
- 12 <https://www.independent.ie/sport/hurling/so-this-is-exactly-what-the-gaa-does-with-all-their-money-26094501.html>
- 13 *GAAconomics*, Ch. 5.
- 14 *GAAconomics* Ch. 4
- 15 <https://www.independent.ie/sport/Gaelic-games/colm-orourke-well-all-pay-the-price-for-corks-taj-mahal-37652174.html>
- 16 *GAAconomics*, Ch. 4.
- 17 <https://www.rte.ie/sport/gaa/2017/1212/926823-roscommon-again-pass-motion-to-end-sky-association/>
- 18 <https://www.sportsjoe.ie/gaa/rte-dwarf-sky-gaa-viewing-figures-clash-204047>
- 19 *GAAconomics*, Ch. 16
- 20 Mike Cronin, Mark Duncan & Paul Rouse, *The GAA: A People's History*, 2014. Pg. 56.
- 21 Denis Walsh, *Hurling: The Revolution Years*, 2005, Penguin.
- 22 Denis Walsh, *Hurling: The Revolution Years*, 2005, Penguin. Ch. 10.
- 23 *GAAconomics*, Ch. 10
- 24 *The GAA: A People's History*, p.71.
- 25 *GAAconomics* Ch. 36.
- 26 *The GAA: A People's History*. Ch. 1.
- 27 One example among many is the case of the Sports Minister between 2002-07, John O'Donohue, giving his own area of South Kerry more money than 17 other counties combined in the one round of funding. *GAAconomics*, Ch. 31.
- 28 The CPA have since been given a seat at the GAA's fixtures task force, but on the evidence available it would seem highly unlikely that the necessary changes will be won.
- 29 <https://www.irishtimes.com/sport/Gaelic-games/cpa-dismayed-by-lack-of-transparency-at-congress-1.3406478>