

**Q1: Describe your earliest GAA memory and how you became involved in the GAA?**

I don't have a specific first memory as such, but I recall most of my rather large family crowding into the sitting room at home to watch matches on tv from the mid to late 80s on. As the youngest I was usually squashed into the edge of the couch.

My first visit to Croke Park was for the 1990 All-Ireland semi-final when Galway beat Offaly by 1-16 to 2-7. Cork beat Antrim by 2-20 to 1-13 in the curtain raiser.

That year I joined Tullamore GAA club playing hurling at first and football soon after. It seemed a logical progression as I had always shown a great interest in sport growing up. I dipped in and out of the club over the years, not that my interest or love of the games waned. I had other commitments that my parents sometimes deemed more important and I also lacked confidence as a player.

**Q2: Did your family have a tradition or history of GAA involvement?**

Yes, somewhat. My father, I am told, was a talented player in his youth until a knee injury and other commitments cut his career short. My older brothers would have dabbled in the games without any great success. None of them would have had the same obsessional interest in the games as I had or have.

In later years, my second cousins, Barry and Ronan Mooney, played football for the county but I wouldn't suggest that the lineage was connected in that regard.

**Q3: Did your relatives discuss their GAA experiences with you? What were they?**

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Occasionally, but not all that often. I do remember being told a story about my grandfather who, many years ago, asked a particular person to play in a hurling match. The man in question lost an eye during the game and wasn't 'looked after' by the GAA afterwards which ended my grandfather's interest in the games completely.

My brothers wouldn't have achieved anything hugely significant while playing so I wasn't exactly fattened by stories of lore.

As I said, my father was said to be a good player in his youth and I remember someone told me how former GAA president John Dowling once said he "had great potential".

He isn't one to talk in depth about these things so I have no great stories to tell, though I've always been left wondering why his offspring didn't inherit more of his supposed talent!

**Q4: Tell me how GAA affected your family life?**

As I have said previously, other members of my family wouldn't have had the all-consuming obsession with sport that I have. But for a number of years in the 90s my two eldest brothers and myself would go to all of Offaly's Championship games routinely. It was easy then as the teams were generally doing well.

The only way I can say it really affected my family life is that we would plan well in advance in terms of going to these games. As I am the youngest by some distance, my time playing never overlapped with my brothers.

**Q5: Tell me what it was like to support your club/county when you were young and down through the years (travelling to games, prices of tickets, food, grounds visited, clothes worn, match-day traditions, local celebrations and traditions).**

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Travelling to games was invariably done by car and most of Offaly's big games were played in Croke Park. In a way that was a shame because I later learned that the atmosphere engendered in and around towns like Thurles, Clones, Navan, etc the day of a big Championship game was better than that in Dublin where most of the people walking the streets were oblivious that a big game was on.

Beating Clare in Thurles in 1998 was a really special memory because the square was thronged beforehand and the drive home was great with everyone beeping horns.

In Dublin we would always go to McDonalds on O'Connell street before the game, an exotic treat given that the franchise only existed in the main population centres of Ireland at that time.

I remember my father used to bring a bag packed with all sorts of stuff, sandwiches, biscuits, tea, etc. It was the done thing by everyone years ago but virtually no one does it now.

Prices of tickets were never a great issue for me because no price was prohibitive to me going to a game. I always had my money in order first and foremost so that I could pay my own way into a game. I do remember that the price for a Hogan Stand ticket for the 1994 All-Ireland SHC final was IR£25 and thinking it was quite an amount of money. It was worth it come 5pm though.

In 1995 it was IR£27 for a new Cusack Stand ticket and I wanted a refund after that game!

The celebrations after the 1994 final were brilliant. I played in the pipe band that led the team bus through huge crowds in Tullamore and then Birr which is a very special memory.

As for the club, Tullamore were never really successful at senior level when I was growing up. I was 18 before they won a county title in my lifetime and that was great. I also enjoyed the wins of 2002 and 2007 because I could celebrate them in a social setting by having a few drinks, something I couldn't do when the county was successful in the 90s. The celebrations give an insight into just how much winning a county title means to the people of that area and I think Tullamore people appreciate it more than most having gone 23 years without a title before 2000.

**Q6: If you had to choose just one game from all you've experienced, which would you choose? Why?**

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On a personal level it would be the under-13 county hurling final with Scoil Bhride against Scoil Eoin Pol in 1994. I scored the equalising goal with the last puck of the game and we won the replay comfortably. It was the first time I shed tears of joy. I was last into the dressingroom after the game and a huge roar was let up from everyone as soon as I walked in. It was extremely humbling.

A lot of the players on that team went on to greater achievements and that one is probably half forgotten but for me it was undoubtedly the happiest moment of my childhood.

My single favourite moment from following Offaly over the years would be the 1998 Leinster SHC win over Wexford. Johnny Dooley scored a last minute goal to give Offaly a one-point win and it was just bedlam when it went in because a game we had never looked like winning was turned on its head in an instant. It was also a welcome release from my Junior Cert which I was sitting at the time!

**Q7: What impact has the GAA had on your life?**

It's very difficult to quantify, other than to say it has been absolutely huge. It occupies my thoughts throughout the day, every day. I work as a journalist covering Gaelic games because it offers me a vehicle to convey some of those thoughts.

Most people my age take a year out and go to Australia or somewhere like that; I couldn't because I would miss the games too much. I took a seven week break abroad a few months back and couldn't wait to get to a game when I returned home. I love attending matches every weekend and would probably do it anyway if my profession didn't demand it of me.

My passion for the GAA is such that I have gladly allowed it to influence the occupation I pursued.

I can't imagine what my life would be like if it wasn't for the GAA. It would definitely be a lot poorer. I would probably have an interest in some other sport, but I imagine it wouldn't be near as consuming.

The GAA has given me the best moments of my life through supporting the county team when it was successful in my youth, as well as my own rare moments of glory on the pitch.

There is nothing more satisfying for me than an Offaly team pulling off a big result and the success or otherwise of the county quite often dictates my mood.

**Q8: What place and role does your club have in your community?**

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Tullamore is a large town with lots of other distractions and it would be wrong to say that the GAA club is the hub of the community in the way it is in other parishes, particularly the more rural places. It is a bit of a shame really and I would be envious of other clubs around the county in that regard.

The level of participation in Tullamore GAA club across the board should probably be greater than what it is at present and I often think it mightn't be the worst idea for a second club to be established in the town to get more people involved in the GAA in the locality. This is the case in a number of other towns similar in size to Tullamore such as Mullingar and Newbridge.

**Q9: What role did the GAA play as part of your school and/or college life?**

It was there, but on reflection I wonder could it have been more prevalent. I often hear of top players talking about how the school had such a big impact on their development but I never feel it was an all-consuming passion in the schools I attended in the way it was in other schools.

There are a number of players from my secondary school who played with Offaly but the fact that they went to that school is almost incidental in my opinion.

John O'Sullivan, the former Laois hurler, did a lot of good work with us in primary school and coaches occasionally came to the school but I feel a lot more good coaching through school should have been made available to us growing up. It's probably part of the reason why Offaly's success has tapered off so much with the players of my generation.

It played a bit of hurling in DCU and enjoyed it but the GAA set-up in the college didn't appeal to me greatly so it never had a huge impact on me there.

**Q10: Who do you admire most in the GAA and why?**

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Brian Whelahan. He was an absolutely sensational player, blessed with a big day temperament and an abundance of skill. He always played the game in the right spirit and is a fantastic role model and, continuing on the theme above, if he had been sent into schools as a coach in the mid-90s then Offaly hurling would probably be in a much healthier state now.

Probably what I admire most about him is the fact that he continued to play on for Offaly while well into his 30s. This was at a time when there was a minimal chance of success while a number of other players of roughly the same age had already long retired. There was nothing in it for him personally only the satisfaction of setting the next generation on the right path.

Through my work I have gotten to know a number of the players that I idolised while growing up. Some have underwhelmed me but Whelahan has always come across as a thorough gentleman with no airs or graces.

**Q11: In your experience what have been the biggest changes in the GAA?**

There have been many in the last 15 years or so, a period when the GAA has changed more than at any other time in its history. One of the biggest for me was the altering of the competition structures at senior inter-county level to allow teams a second chance when beaten in the Championship. It followed more than 100 years of the Championship being played in more or less the same format. Since then they have probably gone overboard and chopped and changed too often, particularly in hurling. The current structures should be left in place and allowed to bed in for a period of five years or so.

The introduction of sponsorship on jerseys in 1991 was also significant and gave rise to Guinness and Bank of Ireland sponsoring the hurling and football Championships a couple of years later. But it also compromised the GAA's amateur status somewhat, as did big money tv deals later on.

The deletion of Rule 21 was also significant and was the right decision for the Association to make at the time.

I also agreed with the relaxing of Rule 42 though I would have certain reservations about rugby and soccer continuing to be played at Croke Park indefinitely.

The removal of the ban on members playing 'foreign games' in 1970 was archaic and should have been shelved long before then.

Of course, the most noticeable change in the GAA to the average person is the redevelopment of Croke Park, and the general quality of stadia around the country compared to those in soccer and rugby. Croke Park is something that all GAA people can be proud of.

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**Q12: Have changes in your community affected your club and how?**

I'm probably not connected closely enough to the club to answer that accurately but the town of Tullamore has altered significantly in the last 15-20 years and it would be naïve to suggest that it doesn't have a knock-on effect for the club.

The population has steadily increased so it's reasonable to expect that participation levels have too and by all accounts they have at underage level from when I was that age.

**Q13: Do you think the role of women in the GAA has changed over the**

**years and how?**

Not noticeably to be honest. I think it would be refreshing for more women to get involved in the administrative running of the GAA at all levels and would probably lead to less petty squabbles that pop up in boardrooms all around the country.

**Q14: Describe the role of the churches and clergy in your club and how it has changed over the years?**

I would imagine that it's not nearly as strong as it was though in the case of Tullamore I'm not sure if it was ever that strong in the first place. I remember Fr Sean O'Neill used to play with the senior hurlers in the late 80s/early90s and that Fr Gerry Boyle used to get involved with training some of the underage teams.

The current parish priest is a former county board chairman but to the best of my knowledge does not have a significant role in the club at present, which is probably how it should be. The priests seem to be interested but don't appear to get involved in a big way.

A person should only get an administrative position if he/she has a proven ability or potential to make a positive contribution in the position. A collar shouldn't be factored in when weighing this up



**Q15: Was there a connection between politics and the GAA for you, if so what?**

I can't really say there is. Most politicians profess to have an interest in the GAA but I'd doubt how genuine this is in a lot of cases.

**Q16: What have been the main disappointments you have had with the GAA?**

Politics of a different kind dictating team selections. It absolutely destroyed my confidence as a young player. While I was never the most naturally talented player, periodically over the years I felt I had done more than enough to get a chance in a starting line-up. As a quiet young lad I would generally just accept it with frustration and then became conditioned to being a sub which meant when I got a chance I expected to be taken off.

This is prevalent across every GAA club I believe to some extent or other. In a borderline selection call I more often than not missed out and often to a player, say, whose father may have had a prominent role at some level in the club or was friendly with the manager or selectors.

Often there was no such connection but it became an easy decision to leave me off a team as time went on because it had always been that way and I didn't have the confidence to speak up for myself back then.

Of course if I was a super-talented player it wouldn't have come into it, but with my level of ability the best I could hope for was to challenge for a place in the team in say my final year playing in a particular age group.

It may sound like paranoia but with the right confidence instilled in me by mentors I could have done a job as a journeyman player at junior/intermediate level which would have been more than enough for me. Confidence in a player can paper over a lot of cracks.

That's the main disappointment and soured me against certain elements of the club which is a great shame.

**Q17: Did the GAA shape your own identity in any way?**

**REFERENCE NO. (OFFICE USE ONLY):**

Definitely. Having lived outside of Offaly for more than eight years, my identity in coming from what has been a very successful dual county over the past 40 years or so is very important to me. I am very proud to come from Offaly and that pride is probably influenced solely by the GAA.

**Q18: What role has Irish language and culture had in your club and on your personal involvement with the GAA?**

Very little to be honest, though I do feel the language is hugely important.

**Q19: How important are rivalries within the GAA and what are yours?**

They are important but should never reach the point where segregation comes into it. From a county perspective the main rivalries would be Westmeath, Laois, Kildare and Tipperary, all bordering counties. Galway would have been another previously but we haven't met in the Championship since 1994. I take great satisfaction out of beating Wexford and Clare as their supporters tend to gloat excessively when they are successful.

The rivalry with Kilkenny was huge when I growing up but not in terms of bitterness or anything like that. It has dissolved quite a bit in recent years given the one sidedness of it but Kilkenny usually win with grace and lose with dignity.

At club level it would probably be Edenderry and Rhode. Edenderry are a race unto themselves and not particularly popular beyond the environs of their own

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town, if even that.

Playing Rhode at underage level was always the greatest challenge and they usually got the better of us. Clara would probably be next.

I think the general nature of the rivalries within the GAA is one of its great strengths. Although some parishes can boil over and become ridiculously bitter, it's great that, by and large, GAA rivalries are of the more friendly variety than those associated with other codes where hatred is the norm. If that ever changes the GAA will have lost a lot of its appeal for me.

**Q20: Comment on the role of volunteers within the GAA?**

It is crucial. Without them the Association would cease to function and a lot of people are oblivious to that fact. While players are the most important facet of the GAA, without volunteers there would be no one to facilitate these players coming through from a young age.

It is important that the GAA bears this very much in mind and doesn't alienate these people which is in danger of creeping in.

**Q21: Describe your experience with teams as a player, manager, committee member or supporter.**

I've never had an involvement in a club committee or in a managerial capacity.

I have outlined my experiences as a player in answering other questions but I always enjoyed training and generally approached it in a positive mindset. It's something I miss now and would like to return to it while I'm still in my 20s.

I often think I would have been a much more useful player if I approached games in the same light rather than expecting to be either a substitute or substituted.

Supporting the Offaly teams growing up are probably my best memories in the GAA and I hope there are more to come. I understand how fortunate I am to come from a county that was successful and it is a large part of the reason

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why I have such an interest in the games.

**Q22: Describe your experiences, if any, with the GAA outside Ireland.**

The only real experience of it that I have is travelling to Australia to cover the International Rules series last autumn. It was a very enjoyable trip and gave the considerable Irish diaspora in Australia a chance to come together to support a team representing the biggest sporting movement in Ireland.

**Q23: Describe how media coverage of GAA in your lifetime has changed.**

Hugely. Up until 1994 the only live games shown on tv were the All-Ireland semi-finals and finals. The GAA changed that in 1995 and then gradually increased the number of live games year on year so that there are now 50 Championship games shown live each summer as well as a number of National League and club games.

It's proven to be a wise decision, particularly in an era when the number of new teams making a breakthrough was refreshing. It made the GAA a good news story.

A few new national radio stations have also appeared in the last decade or so and their coverage of the games and affairs of the GAA has also helped.

Newspaper coverage of the GAA has also exploded to the point where four senior correspondents attending an All-Ireland final press night seems a lot longer ago than it actually is.

The British tabloids with Irish editions have taken an interest in Gaelic games

that they hadn't previously and I'm obviously grateful that they did.

It's been good for the GAA too and it's no coincidence that attendances have never been higher.

**Q24: What in your opinion are the biggest challenges facing the GAA in the future?**

At some point it seems inevitable that there may be a challenge to the amateur status of players in the GAA. If it proves successful it would radically alter the GAA's appeal to me and may even sour me from going to games completely.

I don't think there is a genuine desire collectively for professionalism among the elite inter-county players of today but there may well be among future generations. It must be quelled.

One of the things that appeals most to me about the GAA is that I could walk down the street as a youngster and see one of my heroes who had lit up Croke Park the day before. He was just another ordinary person behind it all and I could relate to that.

Elsewhere, while the GAA is the largest sporting organisation in Ireland, it is generally the number two or number three sport in large population bases. This needs to be challenged rather than the GAA hoping to retain its current market share. Extra clubs need to be established in these areas and, in fairness, the GAA has committed to doing this in its strategic plan.

In some ways, the biggest threat to the GAA is the GAA itself. Players are more militant now than they have ever been and justifiably so with the amount of training that is now done by teams, not just as county level but with clubs also. They are less prepared to tolerate administrators who have their own agendas at heart.

The game of hurling needs special treatment also to avoid it being played at a high level in even less counties than it already is. The recent introduction of the Christy Ring, Nicky Rackard and now the Lory Meagher Cups are a positive move in that regard in that it gives hurlers an opportunity to play on

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good pitches in the summer for their county when previously they only played a few token National League games in the winter. The Ulster counties should be taken to task on the virtual absence of the game in the vast majority of the province. The same goes for counties in Connacht and even parts of Leinster. National director of hurling Paudie Butler is attempting to spread the game but ideally there should be a director in each province working specifically on hurling with Paudie as the figurehead.

Schools should also be continually targeted with coaches, of which there can never be enough. A lot of counties have failed to truly recognise this, particularly when things were going well at the highest level and they are paying the price now. That challenge must be met by all counties in at least copperfastening the numbers they currently have playing the games.

Diving and feigning injury is also a cancer that is creeping into the games. The GAA should show a level of courage that hasn't yet been evident in other sports by issuing straight red cards to these players. It is the worst possible advertisement for the games.

I'm sure there are other challenges that aren't springing to mind right now!

**Q25: What does the GAA mean to you?**

Again, it's very difficult to quantify in words. It probably means more than is healthy for any one person!

The happiest moments of my life are virtually all associated with the GAA and I would like to think there are plenty more to come.

It has given me pride in where I come from and two of the greatest field games in the world with just the right mix of skill and physicality, and I am someone who appreciates most sports.

The GAA has an unspoken ethos which doesn't relate to other sports, 'the GAA way', which appeals to my personality.

It receives unfair levels of criticism that isn't directed at other organisations but, when I think about it, there is not that much about the GAA that I would change if I could.

But most of all, the GAA means that I have something to look forward to every weekend.

**Q26: Do you have any pictures, documents, video etc. that you could share with us? Please provide a brief description.**

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**Do you know any songs or poems about the GAA in your local area that you can send us or write in here?**

**Can you think of anyone else in your locality or in your family circle who we should contact for this project? Who are they and why?**

Nothing really outstanding – though I remember there was 'The Hurlers' Prayer' in Brendan Fullam's book Hurling Giants which I'm sure you have access to.

As for others I know who could contribute to this project, Paul Rouse has probably already nabbed them!

**Q27: Is there anything else you would like to say about the GAA?**

Long may it continue to prosper!

May I live to see Offaly win many more All-Irelands and for Tullamore to win an All-Ireland club title and at least a county senior hurling title!

I hereby assign the copyright of the answers above to the GAA Oral History Project on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner. I understand that I am giving the GAA Oral History Project the right to use and make available to the public the content of this questionnaire.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Pat\_Nolan \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ 10-2-2009 \_\_\_\_\_

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\*\*\*Please Note: If you are aged 18 years or younger this must be signed by your parent / guardian. Failure to do so will mean that we are unable to include your responses in the Archive\*\*\*



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### **Data Protection Information**

The GAA Oral History Project aims to record the fullest possible picture of what the GAA has meant to the Irish people, in their own words. The project will record face-to-face interviews with thousands of people in Ireland and internationally, including GAA members and supporters, current and former players, managers, officials and administrators; anyone who has ever had any contact or involvement with the GAA. In addition, in order to reach the largest number of people possible, the GAA Oral History Project is also requesting that people fill out one of the questionnaires or send the project a letter or email about the place of the GAA in their life.

At the start of each questionnaire are a number of biographical questions, which we hope will be completed by each respondent. By including this section we aim to build up a profile of the socio-economic, religious and political composition of the people involved in the GAA. As this project aspires to be the largest public history project carried out in the state to date, the material collected will provide possibly the richest source of material to the sociologists of the present and the historians of the future. By including biographical information such as religion, political affiliation, education and occupation this project will allow academics, family or local historians and interested individuals to build up a picture of the composition of the GAA in a locality, a county and in the country. The interviews that are conducted and the questionnaires that are collected will allow current and future family members of participants to hear and see their ancestors, to view their handwriting, to learn about how they lived and the place of the GAA in their lives.

The interviews, questionnaires, letters, documents, recordings and photographs gathered will be preserved as the GAA Oral History Project Archive – a permanent resource on the history of the GAA in particular and Irish society in general. Samples of the collected material will be made available to the public on our website [www.gaahistory.com](http://www.gaahistory.com) and may be used in: public performances, lectures or talks; publications, including print, audio or video cassettes or CD ROM; public reference purposes in libraries, museums and archives; on radio or television; in educational establishments, including use in a thesis, dissertation or similar research; publication worldwide on the internet.

The entire GAA Oral History Project Collection, i.e. the full length interviews, questionnaires, letters, photographs, documents and recordings, will be made available to the public through the GAA Museum and Archive.

It should be noted that all contact details provided will be kept entirely confidential and will be accessible only by the staff of the GAA Oral History Project Team. Your contact details will only be retained so that we can contact you to clarify factual information, to send out a thank you note for your contribution, or to request clarification on items that you may have donated. Under no circumstances will your details be passed on to a third party, without your prior consent.