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Meehan back to help an ailing giant

Eamon Donoghue

Retired Galway great was part of St Jarlath's team that last won Hogan Cup in 2002

In the early 2000s few would have foreseen that either Michael Meehan or St Jarlath's College would today be so far from the dominant footballing forces that lit up the Hogan Cup in 2002.

The excitement that surrounded Meehan's emergence during those early years gave no hint of the possibility that his career would be blighted and ultimately ended by injuries before he had even turned 30.

Galway and Gaelic football as a whole eagerly anticipated the next Pádraic Joyce, Michael Donnellan or Seán Purcell to emerge from the county, or rather the footballing nursery of St Jarlath's, obliterating defences nationwide just as he had done up to then.

As for the school themselves, following that Meehan-inspired, record 12th Hogan Cup, few would have considered that 13 years later their wait for the next title would stretch on.

Ceased the option

Today Meehan is back where it all began, teaching, managing and helping St Jarlath's adapt to a very different Hogan Cup landscape, made all the harder for them since 2006 when they ended the option for pupils to board in the school.

He's also coming to terms with all that free time available to him since his decision to hang up the boots back in March. In his third year teaching maths in the school, Meehan is also managing the school's junior footballers, having moved up from managing the first years for the previous two years.

"It definitely helps," he says. "It helps your mind and would keep you occupied, you're involved in it, thinking about the game, working things out, planning, so you're still a part of it.

"I'm lucky enough to have been on the last team to have won the Hogan Cup in the school, and I'm back now. Football is a massive thing for the vast majority of students in St Jarlath's. Walking into the school for the first time they have great designs on being the next Pádraic Joyce or Derek Savage or whoever it is. But first and foremost, you are a teacher and the rest is outside of that."

The corridors in St Jarlath's may still be coated with reminders of years gone by, and no doubt that ambition remains for the young students who attend. Yet the reality is the school no longer dominates the province like it once did; it no longer carries the very best minors from Galway, Mayo, often Roscommon, Sligo and even beyond.

"There've been big changes definitely in the landscape for colleges football, and certainly for St Jarlath's, which had been a boarding school, and likewise for other schools which are no longer boarding schools.

"You're probably not as strong because you're missing those couple of players each year, especially in fifth year and Leaving Cert that would be a big addition to any team.

"There was always the tradition there for people to come to St Jarlath's who were big into their football and wanted to give it a right go, so the school is at a loss without them.

"You have the new schools coming to the fore and a lot of the traditional schools have slipped down and there are schools emerging like St Attractas of Sligo.

Bypassing

"We still have the odd student who would come down from outside the catchment area, in the past especially from Claremorris or places in around Galway city, and they're bypassing schools that are a lot closer to them – but again it certainly is a lot harder as a day student to do that now."

Jarlath's have won 48 of the 87 senior Connacht titles, yet in recent times it's been the likes of St Gerald's College Castlebar who have been leading the way in the province. Perhaps coincidentally, or perhaps not, Galway have won just one provincial minor title and one senior title since Jarlath's became solely a day school.

"I don't know for sure to be honest whether Galway did or didn't rely on the school to help in its development of players, but obviously you would think it would be good for Galway if St Jarlath's are successful."

Galway have won 25 minor provincial titles and 14 of those saw St Jarlath's winning the Connacht senior title in the same year.

"Galway is such a big county though and without the boarding now there shouldn't be that burden [to be a feeding ground for the county] as you're now just talking about being responsible for Tuam and the greater area around it. So if Jarlath's are successful or not, Galway should be able to operate outside of that – although it probably wasn't the case in the past."

Meehan's own Hogan Cup-winning team in 2002 was a perfect example of how the school's success filtered into the county set-up. Three years later a number of the same players, the likes of Alan Burke and Niall Coleman, were central in Galway winning the under-21 All-Ireland.

"I played three years' senior colleges, with the likes of James Kavanagh from Kildare who played for Galway last year, Gary Sice, Damien Dunleavy, Niall Coleman, a lot of lads who went on with Galway."

Football fixtures

NUIG Colleges senior a football championship
Preliminary Round: Jan 28th
A: St Attractas Tubbercurry v St Muredachs, Ballina

Quarter Final. Feb 11th
B: St Geralds, Castlebar v Winners A
C: St Jarlaths, Tuam v St Colmans, Claremorris

Semi Finals: Feb 28th
Winners B v Roscommom CBS
Winners C v Summerhill College,Sligo

Final: March 14th

Galway's Michael Meehan was one of the most exciting forwards of his generation. PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

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Not often do semi-finals overshadow All-Ireland finals but that 2002 team's semi-final extra-time replay victory over Coláiste na Sceilge was one of the greatest ever schools matches – a shootout between two of the games soon-to-be stars, Meehan and Declan O'Sullivan. Unfortunately, both are now retired.

"Both games went to extra-time, they were incredibly even matches and it was cruel for anyone to have lost given the effort and the football that was played.

Shackle him

"Declan O'Sullivan was their main player and he was excellent, as he went on to be for Kerry – he played his football between the half and full forward lines as he did for the next 10 or 12 years and we tried out a lot of lads to try and shackle him."

O'Sullivan, of course, joined Meehan in retiring through injury late last year, although in the Galway man's case he hasn't left the door entirely closed.

"We were under a bit of pressure with the club [Caltra] last summer so I came back later into it and togged out for a few games, but it was limited enough."

Of course, every Galway and genuine GAA fan will cling to any hint of a return but at this point Meehan is no closer to knowing if or when that return might happen.

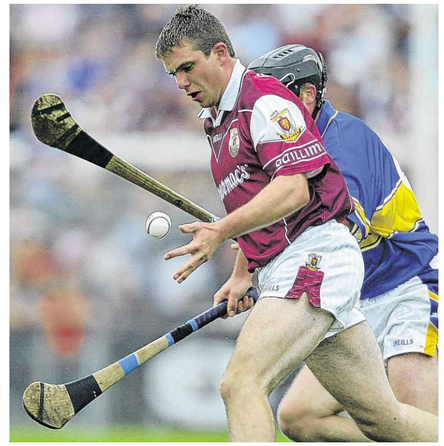
The door still isn't closed, such is his passion for the game, but for now we'll have to be content that the country's most famous GAA nursery is in safe hands.

"It's very unlikely I'll be doing anything this year. I had a knee operation a month ago to clear up a problem there and I just need to get that right and see.

"Of course, I still think about it but I'm not that concerned right now either. I'm just getting on with it and whatever will happen will happen."

Galway schools ready to punch their weight under new system

The likes of St Brigid's Loughrea confident they can mix it with the best schools in Ireland



Rory Gantley in action for Galway against Tipperary in 2003. "I think the new system is excellent." PHOTOGRAPH: MORGAN TREACY/INPHO

The new post-primary hurling championship gives Connacht schools an improved chance of competing for national glory, according to former Galway hurler Rory Gantley.

The Athenry Vocational School teacher says that for years Galway's strongest hurling schools have been their vocational schools – partly explaining the county's dominance of the national vocational competition in comparison to the sole Dr Croke Cup success of St Raphael's Loughrea in 1995.

Starting in 2014 the new post-primary school competition has allowed both colleges and vocational schools to compete in the one championship, incorporating the very best of the province into a senior 'A' round robin series.

"I think the new system is excellent," says the former All-Ireland-winning minor who hurled senior with Galway for seven years. "I suppose it's new and only time will tell if it'll bring success but the challenge is now there to compete for All-Irelands.

"St Brigid's of Loughrea were a point last year off the All-Ireland champions and they came from the vocational schools.

"The likes of St Brigid's and Athenry no doubt would have won and been competitive for a lot of All-Irelands down the years if they could have played, as they were the best schools in Galway.

"It is hard to understand how only one Galway school has won it and the county have had so many minor and underage successes but it's a very hard competition to win.

"The only big boarding school in Galway hurling for a long time was Garbally which was big in rugby and then you have two schools in Loughrea, two in Athenry and a lot in the city so it would be a lot stronger if there was just the one like in other counties."

Unlike the intercounty scene, where the Galway senior team are already competing in the Leinster championship due to the absence of competition in the province, and at underage level where the county have made public their desire to follow suit; there are absolutely no intentions to move the Galway schools anywhere according to the Connacht council.

"It would be an awful lot more difficult to organise schools travelling to Leinster – logistically I couldn't see it being feasible. County level is different, it's just bringing the one team around the country," said Gantley.

Eamon Donoghue

Hurling fixtures

NUIG Colleges Senior A hurling championship Round Robin

Round 3: Jan 29th
Presentation Athenry v Portumna CS
Gort CS v St Brigids,Loughrea

Semi Finals: Feb14th

Final: March 1st

Hurling squads

Gort Community

Coaches: David Moloney Michael Healy and Sean Hehir
Captain: Ronan Monaghan Captain: Ronan Monaghan
Squad (* for last year too): A Keane, J Prendergast, S Cosgrove, B Burke, J Keehan, L Forde, M Buckley, S Glynn, R Monaghan*, J Cronin Rodgers, B Mullins, C Noonan*, E Fahey*, C Fahey, M Smyth, J Massey, M Caulfield, M Lynskey, N Fahy, D O'Brien, J Fawle
How school performed in 2014: Semi-final defeat against Loughrea
County players/Prospects: Clare's Ronan Monaghan along with Cathal Noonan and Enda Fahey are side's most experienced players.

Portumna Community

Coaches: Ruairi O'Tuairisg, Tom Breheny , Sean Treacy
Captain: Conor Treacy
Squad (* for last year too): C Ryan*, L Casey*, S Heagney*, D Mc Loughlin, S Costelloe*, J Madden*, J Mc Loughlin*, J Madden*, C Treacy*, S Whelan*, K Hanney*, C Ouirke, E McEvoy*, M Dolan, D Jordan, J Madden, N Duane, J Jennings, C Tully, J Broderick, R Egan
How school performed in 2014: Beaten by Presentation College Athenry at semi final stage
County players/Prospects: Currently three players involved with Galway minors

Presentation Athenry

Coaches: Joe Kelly, Finian Coone, Colm Larkin, Michael Rourke.
Captain: Brian Burke Squad:(* for last year too): J Fitzpatrick*, B Concannon*, M Fahy, A Martyn, W Corcoran, I Haverty, A Greaney*, C Salmon, S Loftus*, T Cormican, R Shaughnessy, E Callanan, S Minogue, B Burke*, B Callanan, L Heneghan, N Burke, D Maloney, C Burke*, T Forde, R Doyle*, D Earls, M Molloy, E Niland*, I O'Shea, F Garvey, R Hardiman*, L O Grady, S Parr, M Kennedy, C Walsh, P Donoghue, S Bannon*, C McDaid
How school performed in 2014: Won the Connaught title by beating St Brigids Loughrea in the final. All-Ireland quarter final beaten by Doon, Limerick
County players/Prospects: Brian Burke, Richie Doyle, Evan Niland, Sean Loftus, Brian Concannon, Cian Burke were all part of Galways Minor hurling panel last year.

St Bridgids
Vocational school Loughrea

Coaches: Martin Raftery, David Burke
Captain: Fintan Burke Squad:(* for last year too): B Moran, C Connor*, C Mahony, C Molloy, D Finnerty, D Gilligan*, D Towolowi, E Murphy, F Burke*, J Kenny, J Lawless, J Haverty, K Jennings, K Roche, M Broderick, M Lynch*, N Broderick, N Horan, P Boreham, P Flynn, P Hannon, R Glennon, R Murphy, S Fahy, S Molloy, S O'Brien, S(hane) O'Brien*, T Gordon, T Murphy, D Morgan
How school performed in 2014: Beaten by St.Kieran's Kilkenny in All-Ireland quarter final
County players/Prospects: County players include Fintan Burke, Michael Lynch, Shane O'Brien and Damien Finnerty.

Football squads

St Jarlaths

Coaches: Carl Leonard, Clive Monahan , Niall Coyne
Captain: Colin Brady
Squad: League Panel: C Brady, D Halloran Forkan, D Moran, P Neenan, B Mashengele, J Boyle, M Boyle, C Newell, K Molloy, D McHugh, M Daly, D Dunleavy, L Long, S Garrett, C Brady, C Brady, B Raftery, E Wilson, J Boyle, J Lyons, D Quinn, A Broderick, B Steede, C McDonagh, C Marsden, D Canney, B Cummins, C Carty, D Silke
How school performed in 2014: Beaten by St. Attractas Sligo last year in semi final
County players/ Prospects: Colin Brady (Corofin) (County minor last 2 years)

St Geralds

Coaches: Daniel Forde (Manager), Eoghan Reilly (Selector), David Gavin (Selector)
Captain: Matthew Ruane
Squad (* played last year): M Benson, K Finnan, E Gibbons, P Burke , D Feeney , E Heneghan , A O'Boyle, D Gallagher, B Tolan, C Stenson, M McCormick, D Cannon*, D Conlon, E Morrin , J Maughan*, R Collins*, N Regan, C Kyne , S McDermott* , J McGinty* , C Mitchell*, R McLoughlin*, P Walsh* , A Campbell* , J Byrne*, C Carter, G Walsh, M Ruane* , C McManamon*, M Gallagher*, J Gallagher*, J O'Malley* , J Dolan*, D Judge
How school performed in 2014: Won Connacht. All Ireland semi-final
County players/Prospects: Matthew Ruane (Mayo U-21 Squad) Dylan Gallagher (Mayo Minor Squad) Dylan Cannon (Mayo Minor Squad) Johnny Maughan (Mayo Minor Squad) Rhyne Collins (Mayo Minor Squad) Calum Kyne (Mayo Minor Squad) James McGinty (Mayo Minor Squad)

St Colmans

Coaches: Vinnie Walsh, Gareth Duggan & Kevin Gallagher
Captain: James McCormack
Squad(* played last year): K Saunders, K Lydon, J Oates*, S O Donnell, D Barry*, C Henry* , J Vahey, J McCormack* , C Diskin, D Takkos* , S Diskin* , C Walsh* , M Higgins, N Joyce* , E Ronane* , C Mullee, M Macken, C Keane* , D O Brien , J Mullee, R Donnellan, O Brady, S Treacy, B Connaughton, D Gilmore, E Clarke, P Barry, F Regan, L Murphy, E Roe, D Hernon, M Ring, S Vahey
How school performed in 2014: lost in the 1st rd to Summerhill.
County players/Prospects: Keith Saunders (Goalie) James McCormack (midfield)

St Muirdachs

Coaches: Michael Jackson, Karol O'Neill, Brian Queenan, David O'Mahoney, Paul Barrett, Ciaran Sweeney.
Captain: TBC
Squad(* played last year): C Barrins* , N Dee, J Doherty , L Doherty , K Doherty, P Durkan, S Durkan, J Egan* , A Ferguson, J Flynn, C Gaughan, C Gilvarry, N Greavy, R Grimes, C Igoe* , C Harney* , J Irwin* , C Keane, J Kilkenny, D Langan, S Leonard, A Mc Ginty, C Mc Gurrin* , D Molloy, C Naylor, A Neville* , C Noone, C O'Dea, J O'Hora, I Smyth* , J O'Neill, S Sheridan, R Tighe* , J Timlin, D Tolan, C Upton
How school performed in 2014: quarter finalists
County players/Prospects: 4 on 2015 Mayo minor provisional panel, 1 on Sligo equivalent

Summerhill

Coaches: Barry Convey, Keelan Watters, Liam Og Gormley
Captain: Darragh Cummins
Squad(* played last year): N Crawley, O Conway , C Jordan, C Mc Govern, L Heneghan, C Feeney, C Mc Govern* , A Cummins, O Kelly, B Mc Gowan* , A Selby* , F Morrissey, E Tuffy, S O'Hehir, T -O'Kelly Lynch, E Flanagan, P Mc Namara* , D Fallon, S Mulligan, S Power, A Mc Cormack, H Moussa* , K Banks* , D Cummins* , J Ballintyne, R Hickey, D Kilrehill , K Cawley* , N Rooney* , S Mc Callion, D O'Hara* , D Mulcahy* , G Davey* , A Murphy, C Lally* , P O'Connor, C Herron, S Callaghan, R Sweeney, C Hough
How school performed in 2014: Beaten in Semi Final by St Geralds
County players/Prospects: Conor Mc Govern, Kevin Banks, Darragh Cummins, Kyle Cawley, Nathan Rooney, Darren O'Hara, Diarmaid Mulcahy, Cian Lally, Patrick O'Connor, Cathal Herron all county players

St Attractas

Coaches: Colm McGee, Pat Kilcoyne, Gary Gaughan, James McDonagh
Captain: Stephen Connolly
Squad(* played last year): E Mc Donagh, P Gorman, E McGuinness* , A Kearns* , P Burke, C Gilmartin, J Lang, O Kennedy, S Connolly, B Morahan, N O'Dowd* , N Mullen* , J Perry* , L Reilly, D Kilcoyne. R Munnelly, K Gannon, R McCarrick* , D Henry* , E O'Donnell, G Perry* , C Doyle, D McDonagh* , C Walsh* , G Feely, L Gaughan* , J Gallagher* , Darragh Brennan* , John Kerrigan, Kenny Gavigan, Ryan Kelly, Jack McIntyre, A McGowan, S Kennedy, N O'Donnell* .
How school performed in 2014: Runner up. Lost to St Gerald's of Castlebar in final
County players/ Prospects: Currently there are 8 on the Sligo minor panel for 2015

Roscommon CBS

Coaches: Seamus Heneghan and Willie Hegarty
Captain: Rotation
Squad: A Duignan, J Brandon, P Brandon, J Brennan, J Casey, S Casey, B Cleary, E Concar, D Cunniffe, R Cunniffe, T Doyle, R Farrell, M Feeley, C Feeney, J Fetherstone, D Foley, N Gately, J Gunning, R Horan, R Hughes, G Keenan, R Kilcline, A Lyons, O Lyons, J McDonald, B Mullen, C O'Connor, S Doorley, C Shanagher, E Tully, J Walker, S Walsh, A Whyte, K Whyte
How school performed in 2014: Beaten in the first round of the B Championship
County players/Prospects: Noel Gately - Roscommon U21s