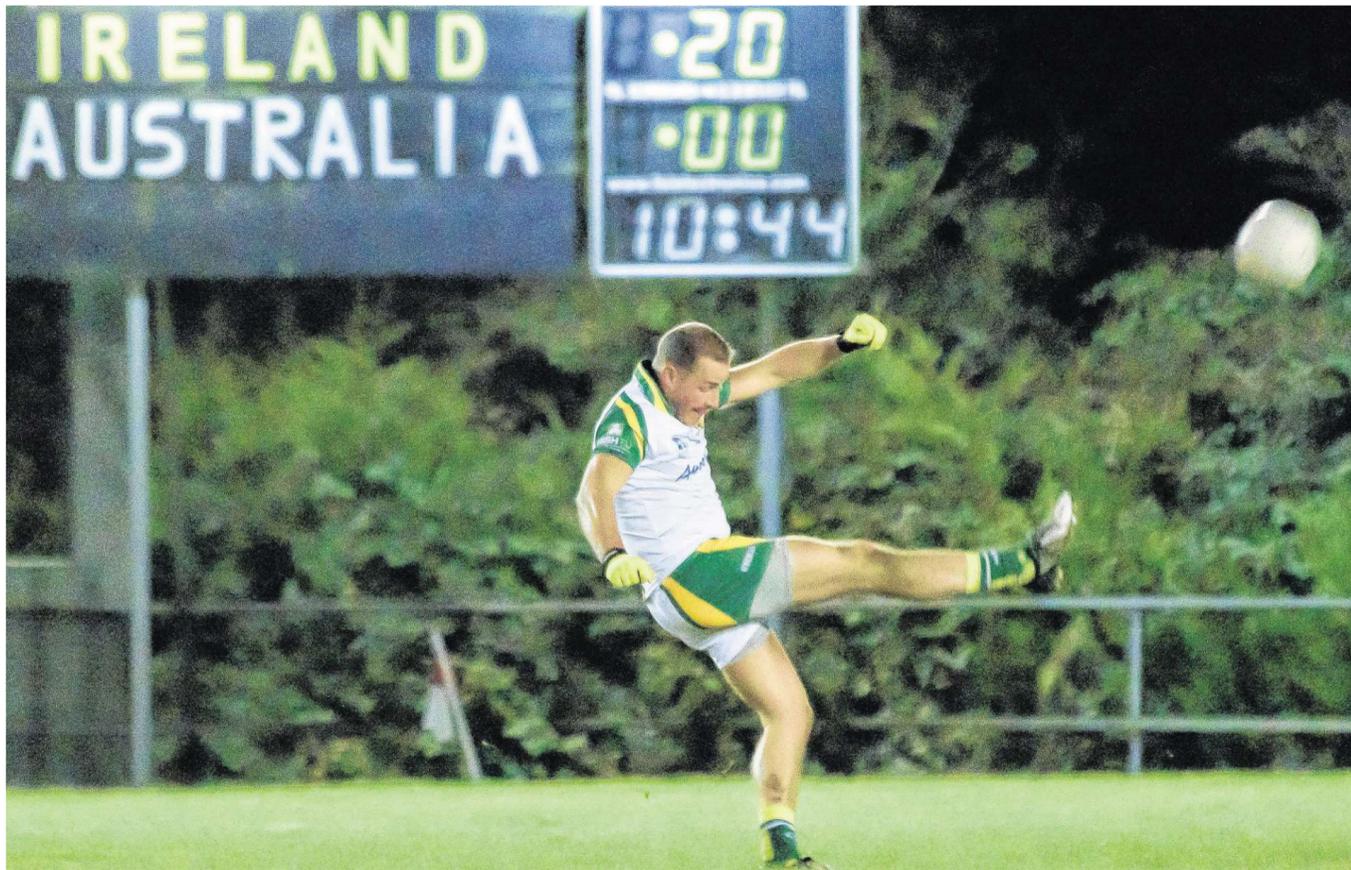


Gaelic Masters Association



Past masters now outside the GAA fold but still enjoying their football



Paul Fitzpatrick

Despite being banned by the GAA in 2009, Masters football continues to survive – and thrive

The first rule of Masters club is you don't talk about Masters club. Wednesday night in east Galway and Gaelic football's secret society are moving through the gears.

The Irish Over-40s (Masters) side may be littered with stars as they dismantle their Australian counterparts but they're doing their thing off-Broadway now. Still, this is where Gaelic football's great and good go when the glory days have passed them by – but if it's flabby thighs and coolers of beer you're expecting, think again.

This is fun, we quickly discover, but it's serious, too. Sixty players attended trials to earn their shot and the squad trained together over 10 weeks.

It shows. By the end of the first quarter, Ireland are 33-0 up and the Aussies are gasping, Sligo All-Star Eamon O'Hara inflicting most of the damage.

And when Donegal man David McShane sends over a point from long range, we even detect a fist pump.

"It is about the social end to a degree but from the perspective of Tyrone Masters football, we train and we train hard," says former intercounty star Damian Gormley, the Irish captain.

"But there's a great deal of enjoyment in terms of the social thing. You can have a few pints and have the craic not worry about training on the Wednesday night."

Gormley, a three-time Ulster SFC medalist, wandered into Masters football by



Eamon O'Hara, former Sligo footballer and All Star in action for Ireland Over-40s and, left, former Tyrone players Kevin Gormley, Damian Gormley, Mark Gallagher and Gavin McElroy. PHOTOGRAPHS: MARTIN MCINTYRE AND PAUL FITZPATRICK

chance. Having dabbled in other disciplines, a chance meeting snared him in and he's been hooked since.

"I liked to stay in a some sort of shape and the fella that was running the Masters in Tyrone grabbed me one day and said 'Gormley, you must be nearly 40 now, would you come out and play?'" he laughs.

"It went from there. It's really good. I did a lot of things after I quit football but Masters football, a team sport and the craic in the changing-room with the lads, even the physicality of it, has more reward for me than triathlon or cycling or running."

Went underground
So far, so good – but there's more. Conspicuous by their absence here in Clonbeirne – where the novelty factor has attracted a 300-strong crowd – are any GAA officials of note. Masters football ran under the auspices of Croke Park from 1990 until 2009, when the authorities decided to ban it.

True to form, the game went underground. The rebel Gaelic Masters Association sprung up and set about organising competitions on community pitches, attracting sponsorship. The numbers quickly rose; next year, 15 counties will take part.

The authorities' unwillingness to sanction it – the suspicion here is that they were concerned with the costs of insurance –

has created a strange situation.

Genuine football legends are permitted to take their chances against the mean and lean upstarts in senior club football, yet their own age group is banished to the margins, forced to pull favours just to find a pitch. And while there's an air of co-operation and positivity about the whole thing – the teams offer three cheers for each other and supporters stay on to help tidy the stand – there's a lingering resentment, too.

"I feel that the GAA are discriminating on the grounds of age. There are guys here who are an example to young people, they keep themselves so active and so fit," says Gaelic Masters Association treasurer James Breslin, who played with Longford's Fr Manning Gaels till he was 50.

"I'm a schoolteacher and we hear about sugar taxes and this kind of stuff but schools could take these guys as examples. "Some of our players are 45, 46, and it's a credit to them. That's the kind of sports culture we should be putting forward."

Breslin is concerned with the direction the GAA has taken.

"The GAA seems to be going very elitist. It should be sport for all. Our chairman, John Pat Sheridan, has a saying, 'we don't pack up football because we get old, we get old because we pack up football'. It just seems foolish of the GAA."

Clubs on the ground, he says, are "very

supportive" but he mentions occasions when headquarters has stepped in and "pulled games at the last minute, saying we weren't covered by insurance. But we have our own insurance in place".

O'Hara, the top scorer on the night, who played in the series at senior level, concurs.

"It gets us out and about, meeting guys you played against and meeting new guys. But there's a bit of a bite, seeing can you still do it. Everybody wants to win, no matter if you're playing cards or tiddlywinks or Gaelic football or International Rules."

The fact that it's outlawed almost adds to the charm, he reckons. "It's like sort of street football. It is what it is, we have to be grateful that clubs are willing to allow us to play on their fields. But, yes, it would be lovely if it was recognised."



I feel the GAA are discriminating on the grounds of age. There are guys here who are an example to young people, they keep themselves so active

Aspace
"There's a lot of support given to all county players and there's a body being built for club players and I think there's a space for the Masters somewhere."

"We're not going to interfere, hold up any calendars or anything, but it would be nice to be recognised a little bit more. It's difficult when you're trying to get support for it, to fund it, but we're standing on our own two feet, we got a great crowd tonight and we'll be back for another crack at it in Denn [Co Cavan] on Saturday."

One theme keeps recurring. To a man, each of the 37-strong Irish squad still play ball, coach kids, sell Lotto tickets and all the rest. They're GAA to the core, they say, yet feel they're not wanted.

"They're giving it all back to the GAA and the GAA are saying, 'you know what boys, you're over 40, good luck to yiz'. That doesn't sit well with me," says Gormley.

This afternoon in Crosskeys, Co Cavan (2pm), the sides meet for the second AFL, the Aussies – with just one former AFL player, goalkeeper Brent Staker – having shipped 101 points in the opener. "We're playing football to play football and it's a great honour, we'll keep organising it ourselves," says Gormley.

The Fatboy Slim song (*Renegade Master*, of course) couldn't have put it any better; power to the people, indeed.

Weekend fixtures Club football and hurling senior championship

Sunday

Cavan SFC final replay
Castlerahan v Ramor United, Breffni Park, 3pm – This replay will bring a bumper crowd to Breffni following the pyrotechnics of the drawn game. Ramor waited 24 years to play in a county senior final: now they get two in a fortnight.

They somehow conceded 1-3 without reply after scoring 2-8 in the drawn match to give Castlerahan, who has former Armagh stalwart Justin McNulty on the coaching ticket, another chance. If Castlerahan can get through with Adrian Cole, they may make Ramor rue their missed chance.

Clare SFC final replay
Cratloe v Kilumry-Ilbrickane, Cusack Park, 3.15pm – The drawn game offered the works, including a half-time brawl and a late equalising point from Cratloe's Cathal McInerney in a final featuring two of the contemporary powerhouses of Clare GAA. The teams were level eight times in the drawn match and the replay is likely to continue in that tense, close vein. Cratloe may have the

natural scoring edge up front.

Galway SFC final
Corofin v Salthill-Knocknacarra, Pearse Stadium, 3.30pm – If it's October, it must be Corofin. The perennials in the Galway championship showpiece, the east Galway club seek a fourth successive winter with the Frank Fox Cup. Gary Sice was among the three goalscorers as Corofin rolled past Mountbellew in their semi-final and they have playmaker Michael Lundy back in harness. Salthill, managed by former Galway star Val Daly, has a new wave of talent coming through but this final may be a year too soon.

London SFC final
St Kierans v Tir Chonaill Gaels, Greenford, 3pm – The Gaels won this fixture by 3-10 to 1-12 in a memorable final and although St Kierans are an emerging as the main opposition to the London standard bearers, they may have to play second fiddle again on Sunday.

Roscommon SFC final
Pádraig Pearse v St Brigid's,

Kiltoom, 3.30pm – The circle of life and all that: Shane "Cake" Curran has managed Pearse's to this final and has not unexpectedly come up against his old club, managed by his friend Frankie Dolan.

Should be a dull old sideline. St Brigid's have been on the road but remain a formidable outfit and were imperious in the semi-final. This is a repeat of the 2012 final: Pearse will need the performance of their season to seize this chance.

Ulster club SFC final
Loughgiel (Antrim) v Slaughtneil (Derry), Athletic Grounds, 2.30pm – Stunning achievement by Slaughtneil to pair their recent county football championship win with this Ulster final appearance. They fell short at this stage last year and will be outsiders once more against the bluebloods of the Antrim game.

Laois SFC final replay
Borris-Kilcotton v Rathdowney-Erill, O'Moore Park, 4pm – The drawn game may have been the best game never seen: 2-26 a piece, with late scores on

both sides bringing the crowds back for his eagerly anticipated replay.

Rory Delaney of the *Leinster Express* wrote that this was "the greatest senior final, probably ever, to take place in the county". The game itself was like an advert for the strides Laois hurling has made. The likely winner is anyone's guess. Just go see it.

Limerick SHC final
Ballybrown v Patrickswell, Gaelic Grounds, 3.30pm – Ballybrown have made terrific progress to transform themselves from an intermediate club into a team on the cusp on a senior title over the last half-decade. However Gary Kirby, who won 10 senior titles with Patrickswell, is hoping to manage his club to a first championship in 13 years. They are favourites to do so.

Mayo SFC final
Ballyhaunis v Tooreen, Tooreen, 3pm – Tooreen may be the traditional kingly of Mayo hurling but Keith Higgins and company have dominated this championship over the last decade, claiming all but one title

since 2008. Of the Mayo side that won the Rackard Cup this year, 16 are Ballyhaunis men and nine come from Tooreen. No change.

Meath SFC final
Killyon v Kiltale, Páirc Tailteann, 3.30pm – Kiltale are after their third successive title which would level their level with Killyon on seven Meath championships. They are favourites to do so here.

Offaly SFC final
Birr v St Rynagh's, O'Connor Park, 3pm – Old rivals seeking new eras here and both have been the in-form teams throughout the Offaly championship.

Very closely matched, with Stephen Quirk firing 1-2 off the bench in the semi-final win for Rynagh's while Emmet Nolan and Eoghan Cahill have been dangerous for Birr.

Rynagh's may just edge this for a first title since 1993.

knock-out stages to help shoot Ballygunnar back to a final. This is a repeat of the 2013 final, when Passage manufactured a famous win.

Owen Connors has been in sensational form for Passage but Ballygunnar's form line is ominous and they are on target for a three-in-a-row afternoon.

Westmeath SHC final
Clonkilly v Raharney, Cusack Park, 2.30pm – Clonkilly, no strangers to this stage, were deeply impressive in their semi-final win and have recruited former Galway manager Anthony Cunningham to their backroom as they attempt to defeat Raharney in a second consecutive final. Eagerly awaited final: Clonkilly to edge it.

Wicklow SFC final replay
Bray Emmets v Carnew Emmets, Aughrim, 2pm – Carnew managed two late points to secure a replay here, including the equalising point struck by 43-year-old Don Hyland, sent in as a substitute. Bray may finish the job this time however.

Roscommon SFC Final

This is our chance to help Pearse to promised land



Eamon Donoghue

The importance of this final is not lost on one Irish Times sports journalist

Sunday
St Brigid's v Pádraig Pearse
Kiltoom, 3.30pm
TG4

Tomorrow our Pádraig Pearse team play St Brigid's in the Roscommon senior championship final.

Eleven years ago Pearse faced St Brigid's in what was my first taste of a senior county final, as it was for a number of my current team-mates.

Our under-14 team had just recently won the Féile All-Ireland and we were presented to the crowd at half-time. The senior team were in their first final since 1968 that day. They were denied a maiden championship title however. A young, hungry St Brigid's team had too much for them.

I still remember the disappointment walking down the steps of Dr Hyde Park, and being back in the clubhouse that evening. If Pearse hadn't won it by the time we were senior it would be okay, we would do it. Much of the core group who led that St Brigid's team to victory in 2005 are still to the fore today – their current player-manager Frankie Dolan, Karol Mannion, the Kilbride brothers, Darragh Donnelly. And our own manager, former St Brigid's and Roscommon goalkeeper – Shane Curran.

That St Brigid's team embarked that day upon the start of an incredible dominance of club football in the province that accounted for eight county titles, four Connacht titles and an All-Ireland in 2013. They set the benchmark, and not only in Roscommon.

Same opposition
Tomorrow the fixture repeats itself once more. It's the same opposition at the same stage. Many of the same St Brigid's faces. The nucleus of this Pádraig Pearse team though stems from that Féile squad. And those of us who have won under-16, minor, under-21 and even intermediate championship titles on the way to this final. The aim is the same however – to win a first ever senior county title.

Before 2005 St Brigid's had lost three finals. They were the nearly-men of Roscommon. They'd endured a 28-year wait of their own.

Since 2005 Pearse have lost three senior finals. Sunday will be a third final in five years. Last year our near neighbours Clan na nGael bridged an almost 20-year gap to claim the title.

We have put in 130 sessions from early in the year to late October, certain that this Sunday is the time for us to create

our own history. I made my first senior championship start in 2010. Against St Brigid's. They went on to reach the All-Ireland club final that year, falling one score short of the title they would claim two years later.

That team had a steely focus about them, an ability to grind out a win. They were relentless and I still remember clearly how difficult that game was. All the kind of characteristics our own group now prides itself upon. Those that develop with time, from the victories, and the losses.

Many of our team were involved in the 2012 final, also against St Brigid's. Pearse were incredibly young that day, facing the eventual All-Ireland champions of that season. We lost by five points.

We have already met twice this year, once in the championship. We were the top two in the group phase of the competition, qualifying directly into the semi-finals. So the teams certainly know each other well. Both teams are in the final quite simply because they have worked the hardest.

We have been the two best

“Both teams are in the final quite simply because they have worked the hardest. We have been the best two teams

teams this year. As a guest speaker told our squad recently there is no such thing as luck – what some call luck is just what happens when preparation meets opportunity.

Playing a county final is a lot like the night before Christmas. The date has been in the back of the mind all year.

There's been the lengthy build-up, the clubhouse is decorated, the red and white flags are all out. It's there, right in front of you. You can almost touch the trophy, see the celebrations. But you remind yourself that you don't always get what you want, what you deserve or what you think you deserve. And I suppose that's what keeps you so intently focused. Sunday will all be about who has the greater desire.

The focus is on what it will take and what it will mean for us. And what it will mean to the great club men involved in our team, those who watch our training from the sidelines, those who never miss a match – and those who are no longer with us.

My late uncle John Donoghue managed the team in 2012. He was a player back in 1968. In 2012 he continued his commitment to the team despite being treated for cancer throughout the campaign. All to win that first senior title.

That goes some way to showing just how important winning this game on Sunday is, to so many people. It's something not even us, the players, wholly grasp. Him and those like him will be there with us too in Kiltoom.

So come Sunday, on St Brigid's home patch, we'll arrive knowing that we couldn't possibly be more prepared and, that there is no better opportunity than this.

Tyrone SFC Final replay

Bradley builds platform for Killyclogher victory

Killyclogher 0-20
Coalisland 0-6

Killyclogher romped to victory over 14-man Coalisland last night's to take their second title.

Tyrone star Mark Bradley led the way with a sublime display of finishing, hitting eight points, six of them from play. Bradley was on fire in the opening half, tormenting three different markers as he flashed over the game's four opening scores.

Tiernan McCann added another and they were seven ahead by the time Cormac O'Hagan hit Coalisland's first score, from a 45.

Bradley's sixth score from play made it 0-8 to 0-1, and Conall McCann stretched the lead to eight points with a 45 as Coalisland went in at the break trailing by 0-9 to 0-2.

Second booking
Pádraig Hampsey's second booking reduced Coalisland to 14 men, and it was plain sailing from there to the finish for Killyclogher.

Aidy Kelly, Simon O'Neill and the McCann brothers all landed scores, and Bradley, who had already overtaken Clono's Danny McNulty to secure the top scorer award, knocked over a free to open out a 12-point margin midway through the half.

KILLYCLOGHER: S Fox, M Swift, D Gorman, G Sludden, T McCann (0-2), E Bradley, G Wallace, C McCann (0-2, one 45), F Meenagh (0-1), A Kelly (0-1), S O'Neill (0-4, 20), N Donnelly (0-1), E McFadden, M Bradley (0-8, two frees), L Meenan. **Subs:** F Flanagan for Kelly, J Carrin (0-1, free) for O'Neill, D Connelly for Sludden, D Carrin for E Bradley, N McFadden for M Bradley. **COALISLAND:** J Curran, S Hughes, L O'Neill, M McKernan (0-1), E Hampsey, N Kerr, D Fee, P Hampsey, P McGahan, P Kane (0-1), C O'Hagan (0-1, 45), S McNally (0-2, frees), C Quinn, B Toner, D Thornton (0-1). **Subs:** P Donnelly for Fee, C Bayne for O'Hagan, J Carberry for Quinn, S Carr for Hughes (0-1), G Toner for McGahan, N Fox for E Hampsey.