

Inter-county commitments

So how many are going the distance for their counties?

Malachy Clerkin and Eamon Donoghue

With many players based in cities, particularly Dublin, organising inter-county teams remains a significant logistical challenge for several counties

Monday teatime and Mattie McGleenan is in the car, beating up the road to Dublin. The Cavan manager is headed for Abbotstown, there to take a training session with the 16 members of his panel who are based in the capital.

Chances are, when he gets there, he might bump into Dennis Connerton of Longford or Brendan Guckian of Leitrim, there on the same mission. Bringing the mountain and saving all his city-based Mohammads the round-trip.

"Where at all possible, we go to them as much as we can, rather than make them come the other way," McGleenan says.

"If you take a fella working in the centre of Dublin – and we have plenty of them – it takes him an hour and 15 minutes to get out of the city, never mind find his way to Cavan. That becomes a two-and-a-half hour trip before they walk into the dressing room."

"We try to leave them up there as much as possible. Sometimes it suits us better to take the rest of the team to Dublin to train so we go to Abbotstown. It really depends on availability of pitches, players, proximity to matches and so on. We have 16 in Dublin, one in Limerick and one in Tipperary so it's all just part of the whole organisational thing. Where at all possible, we try to be about a month in advance with our planning, out of respect for the players."

In the dog-black days of January, this is the reality of life in virtually every inter-county panel outside of the cities. As the accompanying graphic shows, most squads live a thoroughly split existence at this time of year. With the football and hurling leagues beginning next weekend, all squads are in the process of being trimmed down in the coming days so it would be wrong to claim absolute precision when it comes to these numbers. But there's enough in them to convey the flavour of the situation.

As a nationwide broad brush stroke, the numbers show that counties are generally working with an average of 11 players based away from home, either for work or college. If we take Dublin, Cork, Galway and Antrim out of the calculations, the average rises to almost 14 per panel. The notion of county panels living in each other's pockets from early-November onwards would amuse most inter-county managers. If they can get everyone in the same room once a week, they're doing well.

"It's a huge logistical challenge," says Kilkenny selector Mick Dempsey. "We have 15 outside the county. With the exception of one, they're all students. We have 11 in Dublin, a couple in Limerick and a couple in Cork. We have some in Waterford as well but the travel involved there wouldn't be significant."

"Obviously, you want as many players as possible at training, not just to work on specific hurling things but also to foster a team spirit and a morale. But at the same time, you have to be sensible about it and you have to take into account the player himself."

Full attendance

"If their work can be done without having to come down to us, that's what we encourage. If it's conditioning work, they obviously don't need to come to Kilkenny to do it and when it comes to the lads in Limerick and Cork, they don't travel during the week. We wouldn't ask them to do that. No matter how you go, that's a five-hour round trip so we only see them on the weekend."

For some counties, the numbers are eye-watering. Roscommon have 27 of the early-season panel based outside the county. The Monaghan footballers have 25 players in Dublin and one in Belfast. Louth have 22 players in Dublin but since they train in Darver, 40 minutes from the M50, it's no big hardship. By contrast, the contingent of Donegal players in the capital – 14 – effectively rules out full attendance beyond weekend sessions.

"We don't see our players during the week," says Donegal selector Paul McLoughlin. "That's pretty much the way of it and the way it's always been really. We've seen the medical effects over long periods of making lads travel up here midweek before. So it effects us more

■ **Kevin McStay:** "We're only bringing them down once during the week during the league phase, and they're down home for the weekends."

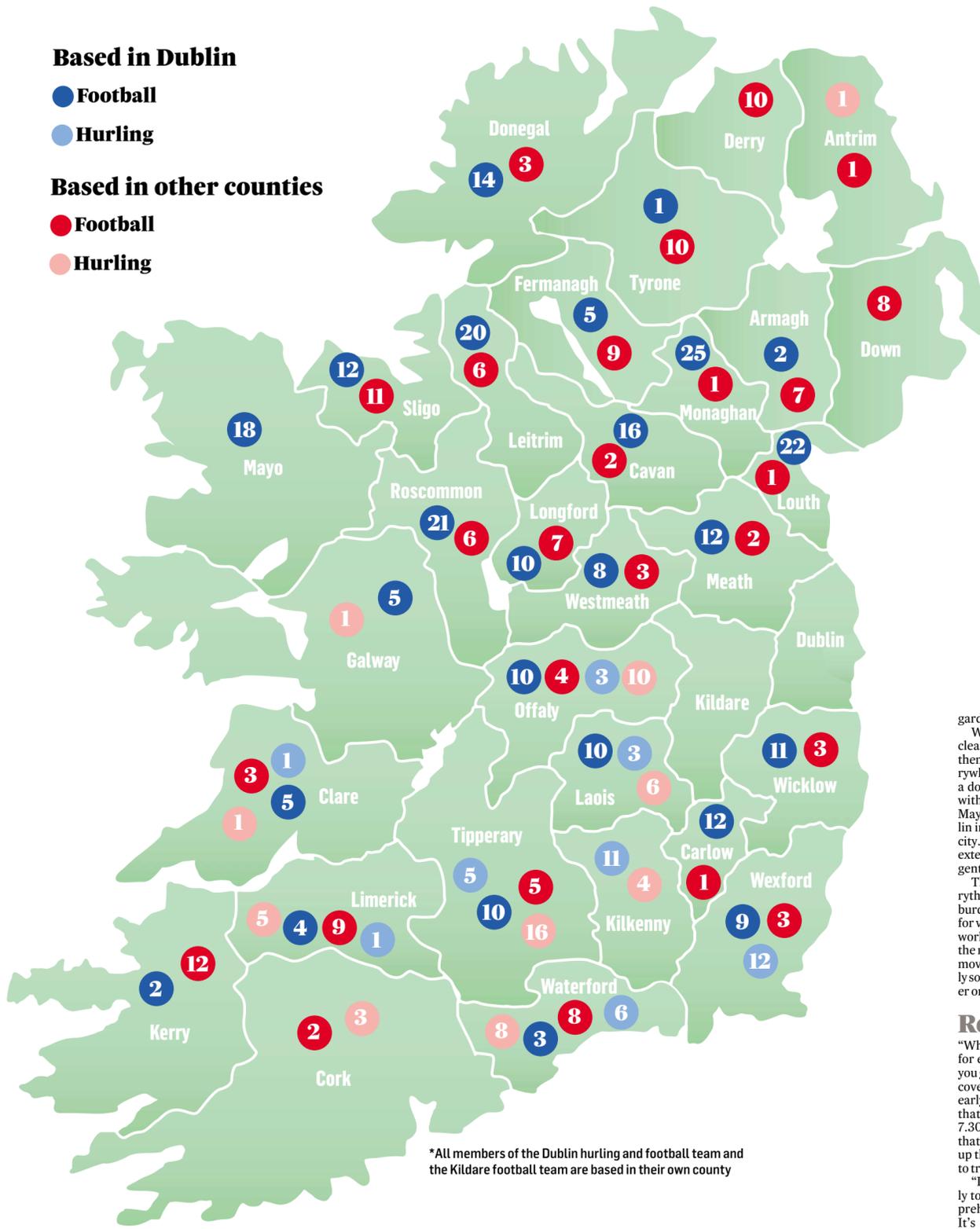


Based in Dublin

- Football
- Hurling

Based in other counties

- Football
- Hurling



*All members of the Dublin hurling and football team and the Kildare football team are based in their own county

gard." When summer comes and the colleges clear out, the numbers obviously regulate themselves to a certain extent. But not everywhere. The Waterford hurlers have half a dozen players working in Dublin, same with the Donegal footballers. Of the 21 Mayo players who saw action against Dublin in last year's final, 11 were based in the city. As of now, with added students on an extended winter panel, their Dublin contingent stretches to 18.

The upshot for players is a life where everything becomes geared to lessening the burden. Ross Munnely has lived in Dublin for virtually his whole inter-county career, working in DCU and dashing up and down the road to Laois for training. Recently, he moved across the city – not for work, purely so as he could make the training run easier on himself.

Recovery

"What was right for me might not be right for everyone," he says. "But especially as you get older, every minute you save for recovery is important. From my mid-20s to early 30s I was based in Clontarf. It meant that on training nights I was leaving at 7.30 in the morning to start work early so that I could leave earlier and try and pick up the DCU students and take them down to training with me."

"I try to get down to training an hour early to do my foam rolling, my mobility and prehab work and practice some kicking. It's a good habit I got into very early. I would have left at half seven in the morning and I was finding that by the time I was home at night it was after 11."

"One of the main factors of me moving location then closer to the Red Cow was the extra hour sleep I was getting as my journey home from training was nearly halved. And I could stop off home on the way to Portlaoise after work, for some food and sometime a power nap."

"It breaks the commute and gives me a better quality of snack. It's made a massive difference because as you get older you do need that bit more recovery. Maybe if you're in college you get that bit more time to relax. But this has allowed me to get better quality of sleep, to get a mental break in the day, to make me that bit fresher and allow me to perform better in work."

Munnely isn't complaining, by the way, not in the slightest. At 35, he has long since passed the point where anyone has a gun to his head to keep the show on the road and he's doing it now for pleasure alone. Moving across the city makes his work commute longer and his training commute shorter. It's a choice he's made, taking all that's important in his life into account.

As with most inter-county players, it wasn't a difficult one.

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organise lifts and make sure everything is planned. Our guy in Carlow, he gets a lift with the guy in Enniscorthy but if there's a day when he has a day off, the first lad is in trouble. We had to organise a taxi for him to get him home one of the times. That's only once it's happened now since I've been involved but I thought that kind of thing would have been gone a long time ago."

Night session

Tipperary players generally get the train, either down from Dublin, up from Cork or over from Limerick. Monaghan's training centre in Cloghan is strategically placed just off the Dublin road, only three-quarters of an hour from the airport, facilitating a Tuesday night session on top of whatever they do on a weekend.

Roscommon, famously, invested in a bus to ferry players up and down to training from Dublin, such was the weight of numbers studying or working in the city. After a couple of years, however, it became impractical. If everyone was in one spot

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waiting to be picked up, that would have been something. But life is never that neat and tidy.

"We have 21 players based in Dublin," says Kevin McStay. "So we've got three taxis going down. We've stopped using the Roscommon bus as it was too inflexible – with twisting and turning and trying to drop lads off in different locations. I don't have the data, but my sense is that this is a western seaboard expense that a lot of other counties don't have. You could link it to access to third level institutions too."

"In terms of our financial model, we have an outrageous transport expense, in terms of the taxis but then with others there's mileage too. We're only bringing them down once during the week during the league phase, and they're down home for the weekends then. But that's not a financial decision, it's a rhythm thing so we're not killing them. Our base is in Kiltoom, and that's only been tied down since I've been in charge. Last year it was in Kiltoom and sometimes AIT. Before that it was down to Kildare – a further 45 minutes beyond and back."

"Our panel's profile is changing from student to working as we did a lot of our blooding in the last two or three years. So a lot of them are coming to the tail of college or starting working. Our crowd are a very tight bunch and a lot of that seems to stem from lads' college experience. The Dublin lads are very close and a lot of them are the same age-profile and living in college campuses together."

Advantage

For the counties with cities and universities in their environs, it's an obvious advantage that comes baked in. As it happens, both All-Ireland champions from 2017 have virtually all bodies present and correct within the county boundaries as of now. The only Dublin footballer who may have to travel for work is Jack McCaffrey, who is due to be based in a regional hospital at some point.

Niall Burke was the only Galway hurler working in Dublin last year but he has found employment back west in 2018. They have one college student, Thomas Monaghan, in Mary In Limerick.

"But even then, the commute is very easy now with the new road," says manager Micheál Donoghue. "We're very fortunate this year in that re-

■ **Ross Munnely:** "Especially as you get older, every minute you save for recovery is important."

