

Ah sport! Where would we be without it? For those who are active on playing field, winning track, golf course, tennis court, wherever, it provides priceless recreation and fulfilment. For countless thousands, who play a passive role, sport is a consuming interest, in many cases a reason for existing. Those of us who were once active in the field, so to speak, but may no longer be even passively involved, still come away in possession of a substantial legacy – a treasure trove of memories which may be dipped into at will.



Pat Daly

Southern Scene

For good or ill, life has become suffused with sport: indeed, the activity may well have the edge over shopping for the right to be regarded as the new religion. Among the masses there seems to be, nowadays, an insatiable appetite for all sorts of codes. We carry the flag for teams representing the Parish, the County, the Province, the Nation, 'These Islands,' even the Continent. It's only a matter of time before we'll be doing so on behalf of a team representing the Hemisphere. In between times we fret about the fortunes of soccer clubs in the UK and teams competing in Grand Prix races. There's no end to it.

While sport did not always demand the scale of affiliation and loyalty that is the norm in the present day, it has long had a considerable impact on society. Rivalries between clubs and counties have grown fat on the lore and legend associated with old clashes on the playing field and with the personalities who participated. Bad blood between neighbours may be traced back to when their grandfathers' loyalties were divided by the formation of a second club within a parish. On the other hand, nothing promotes pride in a community like the sporting success of a local club or individual.

Obviously, sporting events may and do go ahead in the absence of spectators (other than the proverbial man and his dog), but it is the presence of rabid partisans that serves to provide large and important doses of noise, colour, atmosphere and, inevitably, wit and humour. On this occasion it is with the wit and humour associated with sport we will concern ourselves and where better to start than in that most democratic of forums, where freedom of expression is Everyman's right, the terrace? When the legendary soccer player, Charlie Tully,

signed for Cork Hibernians in the late 1950's he was in the veteran class. The twinkling feet were still mesmeric but the hairline had receded a good bit. During the course of a home game at the Mardyke, with the goal at this mercy Charlie rose to head the ball but it skewed harmlessly off his forehead. 'Ah Charlie boy,' came a shout from the terrace, 'why didn't you chalk your cue?'

When Denis Allen played with Cork Hibs in the 1970's he too was once at the receiving end of a truly delightful mouthful of critical analysis, in glorious Corkese, which emanated from an unseen pundit. Played at Flower Lodge, the game in question was truly uninspiring. In fact the only time the crowd got animated was when a small terrier decided it was high time to liven things up by invading the pitch. The little dog's footwork and body swerves were impressive. Selling dummies all over the place he managed to evade capture until finally Denis Allan succeeded in getting him by the scruff of the neck, an achievement he hadn't managed with the football match all afternoon. As the player brought the now-compliant terrier towards the dug-



out the critical analysis was bellowed forth: 'Allen, come off yourself and leave on de dog!'

Generally speaking, when a spectator standing on a crowded terrace hurls a critical remark in the direction of a player on the pitch, the conditions and circumstances rule out a meaningful reaction by the individual at the receiving end. That well-documented incident at a London football ground involving Eric Cantona was a notable exception. The karate kick was an over-the-top response to what was probably merely a mordant comment delivered in choice Cockney. Then again, given the obvious language difficulty, a French national could hardly be expected to effectively trade like for like in a situation requiring an instant response. That was not the case at the compact Turner's Cross ground in Cork on one notable occasion in the 1960's when Cork Celtic's winger, Paul O'Donovan, was barracked, his trademark trickery with the ball having misfired. A disgusted spectator standing just outside the concrete boundary wall and within feet of the playing surface, let rip: 'Hey, Donovan, go home ya fool ya!' There was no problem with interpretation: neither was there any necessity to use the boot because Paul was quick with the tongue. He ran to the boundary wall and looked his tormenter in the eye. 'You're the one who's the fool boy,' he snapped. 'You paid money to watch me!'



It goes without saying that terraces are not the sole source of sport-related humour. Eamon Young, a native of Dunmanway, has long been associated with the GAA in Cork, as a player and a coach. Over the years he also wrote newspaper columns which regularly featured humorous anecdotes. On one occasion, writing about the fierce rivalry which existed between two Cork city clubs, St Finbarr's and Blackrock, he described the scene in a house in Blackrock where an old hurler, a local legend, lay dying, surrounded by contemporaries. When the end came many of those present in the room were unable to accept the reality of the situation. He could not be dead, they wailed, this mighty warrior, this giant among men, this prince of hurlers who had never been bested, who had never yielded the sway in all the years he had hurled for 'the Rockies.' Finally, one man left the room, returning in a few minutes and bringing with him a blue jersey which had the motif, Cumann Barra Naofa, emblazoned across its front in white lettering. At the bedside he held the jersey in front of the dead man's face and waited for a few minutes. Then he sighed and said sadly: 'Yeah, I'm afraid he's definitely gone.'

From the same source came the tale of a young farmer who hailed from a rural area deep in the south-west of the country. He had quite happily quit school after the primary cert in which he hadn't particularly distinguished himself. Anyway, he cared not a fig for education or its trappings and was as content as a pig in you-know-what as he worked the land in the company of his father. However, the fates decreed that one day he should find himself quite unexpectedly in rarefied company, playing on a Gaelic football team representing University College, Cork against a side from Trinity College.

As it happened, the scheduling of the match between the two university teams coincided with a visit to Cork city by the young farmer where he had hooked up with his brother, a student at the University. UCC were short of players on the day so the young farmer, a useful footballer, was roped in, lining out at corner-back. In those days Trinity were no great shakes at Gaelic football: the play was mostly at the other end of the pitch with the result that our farmer wasn't greatly troubled in a footballing sense by his immediate opponent. On the other hand, the fact that the corner forward in question was a friendly chap who insisted on making conversation when the ball wasn't around did constitute a problem, especially when the chat focused on matters collegiate. Eventually, things came to a head when the lad from Trinity asked the direct question: 'By the way, what are you studying?' Oh dear! Now the son of the soil was really plunged into a quagmire of doubt and muddled thought. The questioning gaze of his friendly opponent was upon him and from a place deep in his subconscious, where memories of the wasted days he had spent in his local primary school were stored, he dragged an answer: 'SUMS!'

To conduct a trawl through the country's myriad sporting clubs with a view to unearthing humorous slogans and chants used by their devotees would prove an interesting and rewarding exercise. One little nugget that comes instantly to mind, dredged up from childhood memories, was associated with a rural club called Kilmeen, which had a keen rivalry with a club called Courcey Rovers. It took the form of a rhyming couplet: 'Eggs and rashers for the Kilmeen slashers/Hay and oats for the Courcey goats.' Obviously, at some stage a follower of the Kilmeen club decided that the Courcey diet should be downgraded further, and the original couplet became a full blown stanza: 'Those old Courcey hurlers are a crowd of goats/Feed them on green turnip tops, on rotting hay and oats/But the hurlers of Kilmeen, their parish's proud slashers/Give them the finest fare, free-range eggs and rashers.'

Of all the club slogans that have come to our attention over the years, that which is associated with the Ahane hurling club in Limerick, synonymous with the legendary Mick Mackey, is a personal favourite. Not only is it highly original, it has a wonderful resonance and conveys a sense of pride and never-say-die spirit. Furthermore, it is delightfully earthy and humour-inducing and has, we would like to think, endured. For that matter, try it out for yourself. Next time you meet somebody who hails from the Limerick area with, preferably, an interest in hurling, exclaim, 'COME ON AHANE....!' And see if he doesn't respond by trumpeting, pride in his voice and a smile on his face, 'THE SPUDS ARE BOILING!'

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