

THIS IS
“GAA STORY”
CAVAN!



Football Peil

CAVAN FOOTBALL – A BRIEF OVERVIEW

The GAA was founded in Hayes Hotel in Thurles on 4 November 1884. It was introduced into Cavan in late 1885 or early 1886 by Thomas O'Reilly and John A. Clancy who started the first club in Ballyconnell. They were known as Ballyconnell JG [Joe] Biggars in honour of the MP for West Cavan. Soon they changed their name to Ballyconnell First Ulsters and Ballyconnell is recognised as the birthplace of the GAA in the province. The first recorded game of Gaelic football played in Cavan took place on 25 April 1886 in a field near Ballyconnell between two teams from the town. At a meeting held in McGoldrick's Hotel, Ballyjamesduff, on 27 December 1887, the infant association got its first county committee. The main officers elected were: Chairman, TP McKenna, Mullagh; Secretary, Thomas Mulligan, Virginia and Treasurer, Laurence Fitzsimons, Virginia. In 1888

the county committee ran the first-ever county championship. The final between Ballyconnell and Maghera MacFinns or Fartagh MacFinns, as they were also called, was played in a field near Cavan town and won by the McFinns by 1-4 to 0-1. They were beaten by Inniskeen Grattans of Monaghan in the Ulster Final.

The GAA in Cavan was in decline from the middle of 1889. There were various reasons for this – too much drinking, political interference, rough play and rows. The clergy were critical of the carry on and this influenced the people. From 1892 up until the beginning of the new century the GAA in Cavan was moribund.

In 1903 it was reorganised by JF O'Hanlon, Andy McEntee, Joe Smith and Paddy O'Reilly, all from Cavan town and these men deserve to be remembered for their foresight at the time. The period 1903-1920 was a difficult time for the GAA in Cavan. The association was poorly organised, bedeviled by splits, disputes, fighting at matches, objections and troubles caused by the Tan War. In contrast the 1920's was a period of great growth. In 1925 Cavan travelled to Tralee to play Kerry in the All-Ireland semi-final, but they lost in controversial circumstances by a single point. It was a similar story in 1928

when Kildare beat Cavan by a point in the All-Ireland final.

In 1927 Cavan won the prestigious All-Ireland Junior championship which was played in 1928. Five years later Jim Smith captained Cavan to their first All-Ireland senior title in 1933.



Cavan won the All-Ireland again in 1935 and were beaten by Kerry after a replay in 1937. This coupled with three US tours made the 'thirties a golden era of Cavan football. They appeared in five senior finals in the 'forties [1943, 1945, 1947, 1948, 1949] and won two – 1947 and 1948. The 1947 final was the most memorable in the history of the GAA. It was the first ever final played outside the country and was therefore unique. Cavan, captained by the great John Joe O'Reilly, beat favourites Kerry by 2-11 to

2-7. Fifteen bands welcomed the champions back to Cavan town. In 1949 in the All-Ireland final Meath surprised Cavan who were favourites to win the three-in-a-row. In 1952 Cavan captained by Mick Higgins won the All-Ireland for the last time to date. They got revenge for 1949 defeating Meath by nine points to five after a replay.

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In the 1960s Cavan were very successful in Ulster winning The Anglo-Celt Cup in 1962, '64, '67 and '69 but they fell agonisingly short in the All-Ireland semi-

finals especially in 1967 and 1969. In the past 50 years successes have been few and far between. There have been many near misses, plenty of hard luck stories and no shortage of post mortems. There have been some achievements at underage; most notably at under 21 level and in schools and colleges' but the only senior successes were in the Ulster championships of 1997 and 2020. On both occasions Cavan won the coveted Anglo-Celt Cup against the odds and brought great joy to their families, clubs and fanatical supporters.

OUR CLUBS

The above-mentioned Ballyconnell Joe Biggars, was the first to be affiliated in the Province of Ulster and the club changed its name to Ballyconnell 'First Ulsters' in recognition of that fact. A flame had been set alight which would soon spread to every parish in Cavan. The second club formed was Bailieborough Home Rulers, founded in late 1886, followed by Mullagh Breffnians in 1887. A Convention was held in McGoldrick's Hotel, Ballyjamesduff in December 1887 at which a County Board under the chairmanship of TP McKenna, Mullagh was formed. In February 1888, there was a meeting of the newly-formed Board at which 13 clubs affiliated and plans were made to run a county championship

for the first time. Maghera MacFinns were the inaugural winners defeating Ballyconnell First Ulsters by 1-04 to 0-01 in the final which was played on the 30 April in a field near Cavan town. By March 1889 there were approximately 35 clubs affiliated but during the 1890s most went out of existence and the GAA in Cavan was moribund.

In 1903 it was reorganised and put on a proper footing. After this a plethora of clubs were formed, but many had precarious existences and folded after a few outings, only to re-emerge a short time later under a different name. After the establishment of a junior county board in 1913 and the organisation of a junior championship, most clubs found their level, and both senior and junior competitions have continued ever since. In 1915 an intermediate championship was organised, but it was discontinued in 1926 and didn't resume until 1966. Minor competitions were first played in 1925 and underage in 1926, but for years their existence was sporadic. Currently there are 42 clubs in Cavan and they compete annually in league and championship competitions at different grades and all age levels.