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Sport – 3rd Place

GAA, PRO OR NO?

Why GAA shouldn't go professional

When you think of the word 'amateur' what comes to mind? Unprofessional? Inexperienced? Well when I think of 'amateur' I see commitment, passion and drive. I see men and women taking the time out of their normal lives to train and play GAA for club and county. Money is the last thing that comes to mind. Our sport has the most committed and passionate community I have ever seen. These are ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

These men and women are extraordinary because they manage to live a double life, a life of work and a life of sport. Many of those you see next to you on the pitch, be it training or a match, are there because they want to be. They forget their working life and leave it all out on the pitch to do their club proud and bring home the silverware, not for money. Ordinary people just like us finding time in their daily lives to go, whatever the distance, to training out of sheer commitment is what makes our sport special. Teachers, nurses, bankers closing up shop in the evening and hopping in the car, with the gear bag packed already, to go to training that night with the same intensity as those being paid hundreds of thousands a week is a testimony of the passion and drive of our ordinary heroes. Dublin camogie player Ali Twomey puts my ideas perfectly into words "People aren't playing for money or fame, there's no pay check. People wonder how you juggle college, a part-time job and training but just seeing the others on my team and how much they give up is a huge motivator for me".

Many of our heroes were forged on pitches made more of mud than grass, from farms out in the sticks or backstreets of cities. But they got where they are today because of their passion, commitment and drive that's so evident in our sport. Take for example a local man Seamus Harnedy whose recent enough success story of getting on the Cork senior panel was the talk throughout the GAA. Seamus played for and still does for St.Itas, a tiny rural club right next to the beach on the outskirts of Youghal. Back in my grandmother's time, she recalls famers lending their land to the club so they could train. Today St.Itas is a place where the two changing rooms are shipping containers, where the pitch is more marram grass and sand than actual grass and where you can cool down after a training session by walking forty yards into the sea. You can see Seamus walking around Youghal doing his shopping because he's just like us, a citizen humbly playing for county.

GAA should never go professional as it would "create a divide that just doesn't belong in our game" as Donegal senior football captain Michael Murphy stated in a recent interview. "What makes the player any different to the people at the gate collecting money, or those sorting the car-park?" That's what makes our wonderful sport unique, the way our players are on the same level as us, the fans. We can

look them in the eye and see another normal human being just like us, with a job and family staring back at us.



However players need to be compensated for the sacrifices they make when playing inter-county to make sure, as many others have done before, that they don't burn themselves out and possibly put their career on the line. It's not like the money isn't there, after all the GAA has plenty of money made from advertisement deals. We're not talking about issuing pay checks to our players, no, I'm talking about compensating those who are forced to miss work for a match or training. That's not too big of a demand.

GAA at the moment for many inter-county players is not sustainable as many are putting their passion before their profession. Dublin senior footballer Bernard Brogan has openly admitted to choosing the easiest career path in order to maximise his chances of getting on the panel.

By compensating players it avoids the rift between player and people that we fear will be caused. Our players will still be just like us but instead not burnt out. Through compensation, if anything, it will enable our everyday heroes to put even more effort into the game and help them focus on achieving their potential whilst still being able to comfortably hold down their job. Doing this will make GAA a sustainable sport and passion for many.

It is stories like Seamus' and people like Ali and Michael that make the GAA is what it is today. There's one similarity between these three people, can you guess what it is? They are all where they're at today because they wanted to be, not because of some allure of being paid big money. That's what GAA is all about and we should never, ever lose sight of that.

Judges' Citation:

It's the debate that has felled rain forests to supply the paper to accommodate all the column inches - should the GAA remain perhaps the last bastion of amateur sport or is it time to embrace the professional era?

And because so much has been written about it, the difficulty in tackling the issue is that it's hard to bring something new to the table - but one of our winners today found a way.

This piece is part opinion - but that opinion is also backed up by the views of others with an insight into the sport. It is excellently structured and researched, cogently argued, perfectly presented and beautifully wrapped up.

For all of those reasons - for his article entitled GAA, Pro or No - third place in our Press Pass Sports category goes to Colm Breslin of Pobalscoil na Tríonóide, Youghal, Co Cork.

