

■ JUST A MEMORY ■ JUST A MEMORY ■ JUST A MEMORY ■

IN 1951, my English parents left cosmopolitan London & started a mohair hand-weaving, cottage-industry start-up, just above Loch Anure, Donegal. They didn't speak Irish, they weren't Catholic and they had no farming background. They played jazz 78s on the wind-up & read Penguin paperbacks. They saw themselves as beatniks, post-war hippies. With that unusual background, I always knew life was going to be slightly different.

When my parents cottage business, aptly named Donegal Design, grew they needed capital and had to move to Dublin. We made regular trips back to Donegal. One summer in the mid-1960s my two brothers and I attended Loch Anure Irish school for a week. In those days, it was highly unusual for Church of Ireland culture children to attend such.

While there I remember seeing my first handball alley and seeing fellow-students play that strange and unfamiliar game. The fierceness, speed and the whole idea of hitting a ball hard with a clenched fist, intimidated me a little. I might have had one pathetic attempt at hand-pucking a ball and retreating wimpishly.

Instead, while there, I had other less demanding adventures, namely, leading my two older brothers across a bog to the cottage where my parents started their weaving.

In the middle of the bog, we got a bit lost and quite wet. We ended up sheltering beside a farmer's corrugated turf shed. Needless to say, the farmer spotted us sheltering there. Once our recognised family name was uttered we were invited in to the warmth of a turf fire, a mug of hot tea and Marietta biscuits.

AS I GREW up, I attended a Church of Ireland national school. I then went to a Quaker co-ed boarding school (Newtown, Waterford) & Newpark Comprehensive, Blackrock. I had had no exposure to Gaelic games, the G.A.A. or even Croke Park. It probably didn't help that my



This different sporting life

by Louis Hemmings

family were bookish and not at all sporty. Cricket and hockey, those 'foreign games' were what was played in those Protestant schools. Times changed in the 1980s. I got married in 1985, and had two boys a few years later. The Good Friday Agreement got passed.

Around the early noughties I was in a typical modern sports shop with my eldest son, who was 10 years old. We decided to buy a hurl. My wife really enjoyed ball and stick games in her school, mainly hockey. So, she and my boys casual knocked tennis balls about in the garden with their hurls.

OUR INVOLVEMENT with Gaelic games proper started when I rang up Croke Park, after The Good Friday Agreement. I provocatively asked them what outreach were they doing to Protestant schools now that the mood of the country was changing. It was probably a bit of a challenge to the person I spoke to. They took on board my point, which was: How can Protestants join Gaelic clubs when a lot of fixtures and news about local clubs are posted only in Catholic schools and church

parishes? After a little bit of G.A.A. history that cited Boothman & The Sam McGuire Cup, that Croke Park representative concluded with 'my best friends are Protestant' but also offered two free tickets to the upcoming semi-finals at Croke.

We joined the throng on the DART and got off at Connolly Station. We saw no one we knew, we literally followed the crowd.

Wandering along among thousands we passed the groups having a drink on the street, the hawkers and the stone-throwing local brats. The modern stands at Croke loomed above us like a huge spaceship. We entered this symbolic edifice totally green and not knowing what to expect. It was an interesting and somewhat exhilarating experience.

Why did so many bring black plastic bags? I later discovered it was instead of rain-gear.

To hear the roar of thousands of supporters, to cringe when players got accidentally or strategically whacked. To see hurls get smashed into smithereens...it all was pretty jaw-dropping, for this slightly-sheltered Protestant, non-sporty, Dublin Jackeen.

In evangelical Protestant Christian circles we were one of the few families to send our boys to Gaelic games. Among friends it became a conversation piece. As for my boys, they both stuck at hurling for a few years but lack of friends to go with became an issue for them. One club received us well, the other club cold shouldered us when it became evident that we belonged to a Church of Ireland school.

Surely more must be done to welcome 'outsiders' by Gaelic clubs with their over-cosy-consensus.

Croke Park has opened up to rugby since 2008. I rejoiced at this liberating move.

Regardless of the ideologies within Gaelic games, the benefits of Croke Park is that cross-community, taxpayers' money has been a wise, pertinent and timely cultural, ecumenical investment for the future of Ireland. ■