

Great breakthrough still eludes Deise footballers



Those who attend Club Football matches in Waterford know that there's plenty of top-class talent on display most weeks, including Shane Walsh, Mark Ferncombe and Shane Briggs.

Sunday afternoon in Ennis. If one infamous Manchester United's kit had been as the grey as the clouds draping the Banner capital, Alex Ferguson might never have retrieved his squad from that ignominious trip to Southampton, let alone see them again!

I'm spinning towards my parking spot near the home of the All-Ireland Hurling champions when I catch a glimpse of a yellow 'Bus Scoile' trundling through the town's winding streets.

A green and white flag is billowing from its right hand side, which tells me all I need to know - there'd be Courty folk in that there bus, complete with its 'KK' registration plate.

The bus chugs to a halt a few punt passes shy of the O'Connell Pillar, and out get the well-humoured Abbeysiders ahead of their club's Munster Club Semi-Final with Cratloe. This is what the Club Championship is all about. The big day out.

It subsequently transpired that the bus hired by the Courty fans had broken down that morning, which forced the local school bus into commission for the Sabbath.

If anything, this unexpected development only added to the sense of occasion for supporters, and they filed into Cusack Park in great form and full of good spirit.

And while the result may not have gone their club's way, they still went home deservedly proud of a team that's produced some fine football over the past seven months.

Now the wisdom of hurling or football being played at this time of year has long since escaped me, and the manner in which GAA has become a 49-week-a-year operation could well burn out journalists as well as players!

But as long as, let's face it, senior inter-county managements operate with the power of a Roman Governor, prolonging County Championships into the short days of Winter will sadly remain a reality.

That the footballers of Cratloe were forced to play on two successive days last weekend is, to be blunt, down to Davy Fitzgerald.

He will feel justified that the Senior Football Championship in the Banner was so protracted given that six of their clubmen now possess All-Ireland Senior Hurling medals.

And sure Cratloe not alone claimed their first county title, but they also put Ballinacourty to the sword just 24 hours later. Didn't knock a spot of them, Davy might feel like telling me.

But surely this sort of carry-on, made possible by the fact that the GAA is all too democratic - given that Croke Park has no influence over the co-ordination of County Championship fixtures - should be a thing of the past?

Not only should there be no county finals played in November, but the entire hurling and football calendar requires serious and fundamental realigning. Clubs - the bedrock of the Association - and the men and women who line out of them - need prioritising.

Club players crave a day in Croke Park on All-Ireland day, but would they be that upset if the Club All-Ireland Finals were played on a standalone weekend in November or December each year as opposed to St Patrick's Day? I for one doubt it.

The Hurling Final could be played on the first Saturday in December, with an All-Stars match played as part of a double-header, with the Football Final/All-Stars match staged on the Sunday. It would also guarantee Gaelic Games a much higher profile in the national media at a time of year in which it has never traditionally featured too prominently.

The third level tournaments, especially now given the preponderance of college players in senior inter-county panels, should also be played off as an autumn competition, with the Sigerson/Fitzgibbon Cups done and dusted no later than the third week in December.

If such a realignment was achieved, and, though it will never happen given the provincial councils' wish to hold onto what they have, the January competitions were also axed, therefore allowing the League to start earlier, then the club season would have new impetus.

A League starting in mid-January could, in theory, be completed by the end of March, therefore allowing for a six-week window in April and May in which at least three rounds of county championship action could be played, maybe even four.

Between mid-May and mid-June, two rounds of the Provincial inter-county Championships would be completed as it the norm, before another round or two of club matches could be played between mid-June and the first week of July. And if that was set in stone, then most counties would know whom their senior club quarter-finalists will be. Imagine that?

The prospect of any of this happening is about as likely as a woman becoming Pope, but I don't believe the founders of the GAA ever envisaged that the season would have turned into, effectively, the 49-week monster it now is. I'll get back on this hobby horse in a future edition.

As I wheeled out of Ennis on Sunday, noting two merry Ballinacourty souls outside the Bus Scoile in the Dunnes Stores car park awaiting the trip home, thoughts turned to the state of Waterford football.

To those who do keep an eye on it - and there are more than a few of us, even in the east of the county (!), Ballinacourty's display for three quarters of last Sunday's match illustrated the quality of footballer we have in Waterford. Yet still, that great breakthrough at club level frustratingly eludes us.

As Niall Carew told me in this week's big GAA interview (see Sport 6 and 7), there's a real passion and appetite for football in this county, even if the code remains and always shall be, the lesser senior GAA cousin on Suirside.

The Director of Football long since promised for Waterford has not materialised and I'd suspect in these strained economic times, never shall.

De La Salle's joining Gaultier and Saint Saviours at senior level this year is a big positive for the game in this half of Port Láirge, and it will be interesting to see how DLS fare next year.

That we have a group of players in their late teens equally talented in both codes - forget not our minor footballers' win over Limerick and the fright they gave Kerry - says much for the work being done at club and schools' level.

I sincerely hope we don't turn our back on football in the future in a manner similar to what Kilkenny have done - we play Gaelic Games after all, not just one code - and while we may never tackle the Dublins and Kerrys of this world, football should be part of Waterford GAA's future. And that deserves more than mere tokenism at administrative level.