

## The late Nicky Whelan — a tribute from Kill GAA Club

An already traumatic year for the Kill GAA family was magnified by the recent sad death of our President and one of our greatest clubmen, Nicky Whelan, who passed away peacefully at home in his native Carrigphilip on Monday, November 26th. Born in 1938, Nicky went to school in Kill, on foot, with some of his siblings, while more of the clan went east to nearby Ballyduff. At the age of 10, he came under the influence of Principal Dan O'Brien, where "How To Play Gaelic Football" by Kerry's Dick Fitzgerald was central to the boys' education.

From early on, Nicky exhibited a natural agility and athleticism which he put to good use in later years. As a young man he played football and hurling with Ballyduff — there being none of the latter in Kill at that time — and kept goal in a junior county hurling final for the Reds.



The late Nicky Whelan (front, third from left) lines out on goal for Kill in the victorious county junior hurling final of 1966

However, in 1962 he was back in the green jersey, or should we say blue (more about that later). For some reason he became "a free agent" and when Kill came calling halfway through their breakthrough senior football campaign, Nicky came on board. Arriving into the dressing-room, by his own admission he was petrified looking around at the likes of the great Tom McGrath, Noel Power and Monty Guiry of Waterford fame.

That sense of foreboding was exacerbated when Nicky was unexpectedly picked on goal to face our great rivals Kilrossanty in a quarter-final at the Sportsfield, having never been selected there in football before. He was shaking in his boots but, keeping a clean sheet, he helped us beat the Comeragh men for the first time in the championship. The the rest as they say is history — though his initial moment of glory was delayed.

Nicky sustained a serious head injury in the second half of the historic '62 decider, which he remembered little of, and, knocked out cold, had to be taken to hospital by ambulance, missing that night's celebrations. On his release the following Friday, another huge bonfire was lit and Nicky was carried shoulder-high into the village to a hero's welcome — those rapturous scenes captured on camera by his sisters, home on holiday from England.

Nicholas Whelan had found his calling. What he lacked in height, he made up for with cat-like reflexes and astute positional sense, combined with those trademark left-footed clearances to his wing-backs.

He proved irreplaceable between the Kill posts for the next two decades; completing a quartet of county senior titles in the sixties, including the historic '66-68 three-in-a-row, along with four Phelan Cups and numerous tournaments.

While he won his major honours in football, hurling was his first love. He was also Kill's custodian with camán in hand, possessing a great eye for the slotar, and on his day he could stop lead-shot. He was in the goal when Kill won their maiden

junior hurling title in the double year of 1966, and remarkably 20 years later, at 48, he lined out as cúlbáire as Kill defeated Modeligo in the county junior 'b' hurling final. It didn't end there and in 1988, just few months shy of his 50th birthday, Nicky togged out one last time in Cleaboy in junior hurling. His legendary status in An Chill was complete. After his playing career was finished, he threw himself into administration, which eventually led to two terms as an energetic chairman. He was instrumental in the club fulfilling his lifelong ambition — purchasing our "own" pitch. That came to fruition in 1988 with the official opening of the present-day grounds by GAA Úachtaráin John Dowling

Like the Bull McCabe, Nicky minded that field as if it was his own. And when his days were over as chairman he was to become groundsman with his good friend Tommy Mooney by his side. No job was too big or too small and collectively they oversaw continuous improvements. Nicky was equally generous financially as he was with his time; so much so he donated his first-prize winnings (a substantial amount) in a confined club draw. Fundraising and promoting various initiatives, Nicky was always thinking of the club. Even when playing cards with his neighbours, it would always be for a Déise Draw or GAA National Draw ticket.

An expressive voice at AGM time, Nicky was his own man, someone who always had a view on any topic of the day, GAA or otherwise, and guaranteed an interesting conversation or observation, whether about society or sport in general. He loved rugby, and couldn't wait for the Six Nations every February during the "off" season. He also loved the sing-song with his neighbours — a "little drop" of whiskey thrown in for good measure. Indeed, Nicky's altruistic spirit was always evident whenever one called to the Whelan household.

His keen sense of community was shown when, in 2000, millennium year, Nicky was to the forefront in developing a monument to his beloved Carrigphilip: simply known as "the rock" in local circles.

Befitting his stature and popularity, the arrival of his funeral at Kill Church on Thursday 29th November was flanked by a GAA guard of honour, with a huge club and community presence paying their respects. His coffin was draped in Kill's white goalkeeper jersey as well as a "blue" Munster jersey that he borrowed from his good friend and team-mate Monty Guiry whilst minding the Kill net in the '60s.

That was Nicky Whelan, a unique personality — in the words of Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way". Sincere sympathy is extended from the Kill club to Nicky's wife Nancy, son Fergal, daughter Marie, brothers Mike, Anthony, Tom, sisters Ann and Mabel, grandchildren Blaithin and Shoda, nieces, nephews and the extended Whelan family. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.