

**Junior Winner****Lily Van Den Bergh****Dunamase College, Railway St, Moneyballytyrrell, Portlaoise, Co. Laois****Teacher – Emma Scully****A GAA Legend**

My head hammered like a drum in my chest. My clammy palms clutched the rod of my drooping flag until the flimsy plastic bent under my clenched fists. Crowds swarmed around me like a hive of bees buzzing with loss and victory. Disgruntled glances were cast my way and I defiantly set my shoulders in a stance of stubborn loyalty to my team. With my chin held high I mounted the stone steps, worn smooth with the thousands of apprehensive feet and gripped the barrier so tightly I was sure I had imprinted it with a mold of my hand.

I cleared the stairs and slouched against the railing, staring wide eyed at the museum. GAA legends smiled down from the towering walls and I could have sworn I saw one of them glance towards me. Snapping out of my reverie, a cacophony of voices roared down from the hidden stands above. Suddenly my trepidation ceased and a swell of excitement propelled me into the throng of expectant spectators surging toward the entrance to the stands.

The first thing I noticed was the fresh, clean smell of outdoor air. The next was the anticipation that hung like a blanket, weighing down on the supporters, mixed with the sharp scent of freshly cut grass. Clouds drifted in a pale blue sky and a breeze drifting lazily through the stadium carrying with it the hushed conversations of my fellow companions. Light filtered through the steel bars of Croke Park's open air roof casting slices of light onto the tense faces above. I wove through the densely packed

crowd, past people of all ages in a range of colorful jerseys. After strenuous searching I found the familiar faces in a sea of GAA fans and shuffled clumsily into my seat, the plastic digging reassuringly into my spine. Though each and every person was clad in their unique county colors, I felt a connection, a link that bonded us together. A sport that no other country could call their own. Gaelic football.

I took in the sea of bobbing heads floating around me and heard the raucous cries of passionate supporters. All at once the noise muffled as if my ears had been filled with cotton until the only thing I could hear was my own heart thumping in my chest. The anthem blared out on the loud speakers and I stood proudly. As I placed my hand over my beating heart I knew. This is where I belong.

As the sixty minutes wore by I became increasingly more agitated. A maelstrom of strategies whirled through my mind like leaves caught in a tornado and I clutched at the only thought I could grasp. This isn't going well. I yelled at the top of my voice, hurling insults like knives at the enemy team but to no avail. The world blurred over as the sharp, piercing sound of the final whistle blew. I glared through my tears at the euphoric team as a well of bubbling anger boiled inside of me threatening to burst out. A lump formed in my throat as their anthem blared and I ran from the stadium desperate for escape.

The next half hour was a wash of anguish incorporated with the bitter taste of failure. The world was a smear of grey shades with the occasional slice of garish color the only reminder of the outside world. Stares cut into me and the sniggers that followed were vague noises in the vortex of sounds resonating from the now far away stands. We were so close. With an elongated sigh I thought to myself "there's always next year".

I trudged towards the museum despairingly, my thoughts fixated on the new sliotar waiting for me to buy with the money my father had given me out of pity for my loss, in the gift shop. So intent was I on my goal, I was oblivious to the slender silhouette looming in front of me until a blanket of shadow emerged overhead, blocking out the sun. I tipped my head forward to identify the sharply angled face towering over my small body so high, I had to crane my neck to pinpoint the person. As the light shifted, revealing the mystery person's features, I heard a sharp intake of breath and from somewhere far inside my conscience I realized it was my own.

Sarah Carey stood in front of me still in the muddied jersey she had been playing in mere moments ago. She was looking at me with curiosity, and I stared open mouthed as she asked me my name. All I could do was stare, eventually I stuttered out a feeble "S-Sophie". Then I could finally discern my thoughts through the haze of

amazement and words poured out of my mouth like a torrent of water released from a dam. "I was watching the match t-today, it was a pity we lost, you played really well though. You're the best player on the team! Would you maybe sign my jersey....."and I trailed off into silence.

During my rant I had never once looked up from my pocket sized shoes and when I raised my head, expecting pity or even indifference on the face of Sarah Carey, I saw instead amusement and admiration playing across her face. "Thank you, that means the world", she said softly in her lilting limerick accent.

"Do you play?",

"Yeah, I play for my town"

"Are you any good?"

"Yes" I stated with absolute confidence. Sarah let out a short laugh "You sound very sure of yourself". A flush crept across my cheeks and I looked away from her stormy gray-blue eyes. "Em...yeah, well my coach says I am." I murmured, and willed away the hot blood that came pounding to my cheeks. "Well I have no doubt you are." My heart swelled with pride and I felt like I was floating on a cloud high above the bustling crowds of Croke Park.

She knelt down so that she was eye level with my own emerald green irises and produced a black marker. I could feel my heartbeat in my fingertips as she scrawled an elegant signature across the bottom of my jersey. "Thanks", I whispered, and she flashed me a smile before turning to walk away. I stood stock-still reliving the past 5 minutes, memorizing them so I would never forget. As I turned to run back to my parents, the sliotar forgotten in the jumble of thoughts swirling around my head, I could not help but wonder what I was going to tell my parents about my encounter with one of the best GAA legends.