

Runner-Up Senior Category

Eoin Brenner

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The Greatest of Connections

In all of Simon's fifteen years, he's never seen anything that brings the community together quite like a GAA match.

His first exposure to this culture, this spirit, came at the tender age of three, pucking a sliotar off a wall as best he could as his club, roared on by almost two thousand people bedecked in green and white, won only their second county title under floodlights in Páirc Uí Chaoimh. Simon still hasn't seen anything quite like that night – the incredible atmosphere from an hour before the throw in, the screams of joy and groans of disappointment, the raw outpouring of emotion when their captain lifted that shining silver cup. That's his most vivid memory of that night – the cup shining through the fog, emerald and white streamers fluttering from the handles. Nearly the whole parish was in attendance, from Father Tim the balding old priest to Johnny Danvers the greengrocer and even the thirty-strong squad that last won the title, way back in 1974.

Simon himself has been inside the brilliant machine that is the GAA since he could write - "Start 'em young," his dad used to say, and he did just that. Simon's played in countless matches and been to more training sessions, and his father was on the sideline for each and every one. He was a fine player himself, midfield for the club for ten years. He loves to say that the club is in his bones, and it's as true for Simon.

The club has been through some hard times, and Simon hopes that when his own children are playing in the green and white that he can tell them, "I was there for all of it." The relegation battle, the long, hard climb back up. It wasn't just the club that suffered around that time – the factory closed down, and the village shops nearly closed down. But when the going gets tough, the tough get going – his father's favourite phrase. The shops managed to scrape enough money together to sponsor the club, and it's telling that in their hour of need it's the GAA club where the priorities lay.

Three years ago, when a young man playing for the minor team died suddenly, the entire parish lined the streets as he was laid to rest. Hundreds more from the surrounding areas also paid their respects, many only knowing the lad from competing against them on the pitch. The mournful, respectful silence as the procession walked the streets still fills Simon's heart with respect – it was GAA that brought all these people together. It was the GAA that held many of them together after the crash, when the hundreds laid off work chose to stay for the club. They could've left, probably should've, but they knew well that that mass exodus would cripple the club beyond repair, and they stayed. They stayed because they couldn't leave the club suffer.

Simon knows know that's how much the club means to people. It's more than livelihoods.

Simon's father is full of other stories about the parish that make this same point – but his favourite is that of Tommy Westerling, the former chairman of the club. He played with them for 33 years, all the way from U6's, and then served as chairman for five successive terms. He's 83 now, and Simon remembers him cheering on their U14 team during a match in godforsaken weather up in Meath – the club is his life. It's at the heart of who he is, and the same for so many others in Ireland and around the world, from Dublin and Cork to Sydney and London – it's a community and binds us together. It's a spirit that permeates all of us, and Simon hopes he'll see it in full force today. He knows he will. After years of pain, the club are back where they belong – the county final.

This is the day the whole parish has been waiting for, hoping for, praying for, and it's here after twelve long years. Simon knows he'll see Father Tim's bald head tonight as he roars on the team, he'll hear Tommy Westerling's deep rumble as he screams at the ref. And he knows the entire parish will be there, because these nights are what they live for. Because the GAA is at the heart of who we are.