



**Winner Senior Category**  
**Harry Clavin**  
**Meánscoil Gharman, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford**

### **The GAA is at the heart of who we are**

It's recorded in my baby book that when the news of my birth, on 3rd of January 2003, was announced by my father from the maternity hospital, text messages poured in from his home place in Offaly, congratulating him, not on my safe arrival but on my impressive 9 pound 8 ounces weight and how I would make a fine full back some day. My due date was the middle of December but Dad had my poor Mum forewarned not to consider giving birth before the 1st of January - so that I'd get an extra year playing underage, of course. Cradled in my father's arms that first night in hospital, while my mother was tended to in recovery, I imagine Dad must have stared into my eyes, as I wriggled and drooled, dreaming of the day I might line out for my first club match or score my first goal. I didn't know it yet but I was born with GAA blood running through my veins.

As the youngest of five siblings, four of whom had played 'county' at senior level for Offaly, my Dad and all his clan are GAA mad. My Dad's love of football is at the heart of every childhood story he tells me; whether it's about racing through his farm chores after school so that he could go and practise his frees in the fields or about the meticulous records he kept of the GAA leagues at boarding school or about how he played on after breaking his collarbone in the club final to be stretchered off with the cup between his knees, adrenalin still buoying his spirits. How I laughed when he first told me about making a football out of rolled up newspaper and twine after he'd burst the only ball his father had bought him. Another of his much loved stories involves him asking his older brother, Billy, if he could borrow his football socks to which he replied, "*No, you'll only make them too small.*" My favourite stories come from the short period when the four brothers played on the club team together. If a member of the opposition dared to play any dirty tactics against my Dad, they would be sorry because his three big brothers would make sure that the next breaking ball would be theirs. Family loyalty may have fallen short of lending each other football socks at home but on the pitch blood was blood.

Living in Wexford, we would visit Dad's home place in the Faithful County during most school holidays, especially when my Nana was still alive. All the family would gather around her kitchen range, drinking pots of tea, reminiscing about historic match highlights; going over them play by play, arguing about the fairness of referee decisions and laughing so hard that they would have tears streaming down their faces recounting stories of their best known local GAA characters. As a child, I didn't understand their meticulous analysis of the game but what resonated was their heartfelt loyalty to their club, the unyielding friendship with fellow players and their passion for the game.

If my Dad's family were GAA royalty in their community, well then you could say that my Uncle Nick was the King. Nick is twelve years older than my Dad who is the baby of his family, and as a youngster, he looked up to his big brother like he was a rock star. On the field, he may as well have been one. Before his career was cut short by injury, Nick won two All-Ireland Senior medals, four Leinster medals and was selected for the first All-Star team in 1971. You would be forgiven for wondering if my uncle Nick had developed a big head to match his broad full back shoulders but a humbler, more generous man you'll never meet. I've watched him play down his achievements to fans, preferring to refocus the conversation on the talents of his fellow teammates or to tell a witty anecdote about his footballing career to take the spotlight off himself. Nick's star shone a lifetime ago, nonetheless, I have often been asked by

strangers, on hearing my surname, if I'm any relation to Nicholas Clavin. I'm always proud to answer that question and to hear another little titbit about his exploits on the field. The last time it happened, I was walking into my Junior Certificate Irish oral exam. I hadn't gotten past my statutory questions when the examiner looked up and asked me that question – "*Any relation to Nicholas Clavin?*" I just hoped to God Nick hadn't fouled him during some key game. Tentatively answering in the affirmative, his wide smile told me I was safe and I went on to do very well in my Irish oral.

They will give me awful stick for saying it but my uncles are all well past their football playing days but that hasn't stopped their involvement in the local club. I met the 'boys' at the Ploughing Championships in Tullamore last month, where they spent three rainy days on the beat, fundraising tirelessly for the club. That's the beauty of GAA - there's a role for everyone from the four year old starting out in the GAA nursery programme to the old man shouting and cheering in the stands. My uncle Mossy is the football coach at Shamrocks GAA now and this year he has led them to the Senior Championship Football Finals. Next weekend, my Dad will drive from Wexford to join his brother Billy in standing at the sideline to cheer on the next generation of Shamrocks players, some of whom are the sons of their former teammates and to support their big brother as coach. Later that night, Uncle Nick will ring from his home in San Diego to get a blow by blow account of the game. GAA is the language of their love, their shared passion, their childhoods, their link to their deceased father and their homeplace.

There's a place for me and every kid who wants to play gaelic games. I've watched my Dad coach kids in school and clubs over the years and his motto is a simple one - every player that wants to play gets to play and training must be fun. He only wants to share his love for the gaelic games with anyone he possibly can.

Maybe the first time I really understood that the GAA was more than a sporting organisation was at the time of my Nana's death on New Year's Day in 2012. She was waked in the parlour of her farmhouse, located down a long narrow road which doesn't allow two cars to pass in parts. As soon as news spread of Nana's passing, the local GAA club sprang to action like well trained soldiers. One team was dispatched to dig the grave and spread gravel along the muddy stretch that led from the road to the burial ground, another group erected temporary lighting around Nana's house and a third donned hi-vis vests and stationed themselves along the road to direct traffic. Those men didn't leave their posts day or night until the hundreds of mourners had been to pay their respects to my Nana. All they got for their trouble was some sandwiches and scaldy flasks of tea brought out to warm their frozen hands. Just days after my Nana was buried and the temporary lighting had been dismantled, Nana's best friend up the road passed away. Without a word, those same GAA men came out to dig another grave and light the way for their fellow neighbours in their hour of need.

In its core set of values, the GAA outlines its dedication to enriching the lives of its members and active lifelong participation by all members of society. My Dad's family, and by family I mean the wider GAA community, embodies this sentiment. They live, breathe and die by these values. I am proud to have GAA blood flowing through my veins.