Catholic Institute Athletic Club

by Flann Brennan

The story of the founding of the Catholic Literary Institute in 1875 and the expansion into sporting activities, in the form of the Catholic Institute Athletic Club, has already been recounted in this journal. This article looks at some other aspects of the sports and club activities through the decades.

The field sports generally played in Limerick in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were rugby, soccer, hurling, Gaelic football, and camogie. However, access to sports such as cricket, hockey and tennis was difficult for Roman Catholics, as these sports were played mainly by the Protestant population in institutes such as Limerick Protestant Young Men's Association, the County Club and Villiers school. One must remember that in 1910, Ireland was under British rule.

The provision of sport facilities in conjunction with the Catholic Literary Institute was mooted for some time, but it was not until 1909 that the idea materialised. A sports committee was formed, which included members of prominent Limerick Catholic families and a decision was taken to rent six acres of land, which was part of a fourteen acre parcel of land, at Rosbrien, which was originally owned by the Major William Richard Godd Adams estate.

The new sports club was named the Catholic Institute Athletic Club. During this era the Catholic Church and the Gaelic Athletic Association had a close association with each other through competitions such as the Dr. Croke Cup and the Dr. Harry Cup and the Archbishop throwing in the ball to commence the All-Ireland hurling and football finals in Croke Park. The G.A.A. controlled athletics (track and field) until the foundation of the National Athletics and Cycling Association in the late 1920s. Using the word athletics in the title instead of cricket, hockey or tennis avoided offending the sensitivities of the G.A.A. These sports were deemed to be garrison or Protestant sports and banned under the infamous Rule 27 (known as the Ban). The rule was later deleted from its rule book at a G.A.A. convention in the early 1970s.

The new club grounds consisted of four tennis courts, three cricket pitches and a playing field suitable for hurling and rugby. The pitch was used for short periods by Bohemians and Young Munster rugby clubs, whilst awaiting development of their own grounds. It was also used for hurling by St. Munchin's College while it was based in Henry Street. The grounds were formally opened in June 1910 by the Mayor of Limerick Timothy Ryan and Mr. William Holliday, and distinguished guests. The Mayor was invited to unfurl the club colours of cistine and black with the initials C.I.A.C. emblazoned thereon. The Industrial School band played 'Garryowen'. His worship the Mayor bowed the first ball in a cricket match with the High Sheriff batting.

In October 1924 the club purchased the six acres of ground from Christopher Sheahan, farmer and victualler and decided to finance the project by issuing mortgage debentures. The issue was fully subscribed and the necessary sum of £800 was raised. On 1 January 1930 following an E.G.M. of club members Mr. James O'Brien, 4 Victoria Terrace, South Circular Road and Mt. John Corboy, 'The Crossways', Ennis Road, Limerick were appointed debenture trustees, and the three existing club trustees were instructed to convey the club grounds unto the debenture trustees as collateral security for the said debentures. A person joining the Catholic Institute Club would by way of joint membership, also be a member of the Catholic Literary Institute. After a dispute in the men's hockey section around the year 1930 a breakaway faction formed Landsdowne Hockey Club. As a consequence of this dispute an E.G.M. of the club was held on 1 January 1953 in the Catholic Literary Institute Hall, Sarsfield Street where a decision was taken to abolish the debentures trustee positions and transfer the legal rights of the Catholic Institute Athletic Club trustees to the Diocesan trustees, 'in order to obviate disputes or differences in relation to management of the club in the future'. Thus the lands and the club, purchased and developed by the members, was transferred free gratis into the control of the Diocese of Limerick, whose trustees were Rev. Patrick O'Neill, Rev. Robert O'Sullivan and Rev. Dr. James Cowpar.

In 1984 the club was planning a major development in the form of the construction of a new clubhouse, incorporating dressing rooms, and a glass-backed squash court. The financing of the project was by means of a term loan from Allied Irish Bank. The bank required the deeds of the club as collateral and security for the loan. Bishop Jeremiah Newman initially refused to sign a letter of consent, but later agreed, on condition that the club would sign a lease agreement with the diocese. On 2 December 1985 the club trustees described as 'tenants' signed a agreement with Bishop Newman who was described as 'landlord' whereby the club was granted a 55 year lease with a ground rent of £1,000 per annum. This action copper fastened the ownership of the club by the diocese into the future.

In 2002 the club was granted a €150,000 capital sports grant for the construction of a new astro-turf floodlit hockey pitch and other ancillary works. The additional financial required was arranged through the Bank of Scotland. The 1985 lease had now been reduced to 18 years and
was not acceptable to the bank as security for borrowing purposes. After protracted negotiations with the dioceses the lease was extended by five years and the pitch was completed.

In 2009, a sub-committee was formed to examine the principle of short term leases, which were not suitable for borrowing from financial institutions. The committee sought the advice of Michael Binchy, Senior Counsel, who stated that under the 1971 (Amended) Landlord and Tenant Act, the club was entitled to a 99 year sporting lease. Mr. Robert Cussen, Solicitor, Newcastle West, acting on behalf of the club, informed the dioceses of the club’s entitlement. The law agent for the diocese agreed with Mr. Binchy’s advice and granted the club a 99 year sporting lease with conditions, thus ending the difficulties of short term leases.

However, a more deep rooted problem remains concerning the rules of the club, which prevents it being administered and organised in the same manner as any other functioning sports club. In the clubs constitution there are two items, which are outdated and inappropriate, for a modern sports club.

**Item 6**

The president shall be a priest nominated by the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Diocese of Limerick, and the priest so appointed shall be elected as president by the said members at an A.G.M. The sitting president shall hold office until such time as another priest shall be nominated for the office of president and such nomination and nominee shall be elected in the manner aforesaid.

**Item 44**

Amendments to this constitution may be made by a majority of members present and voting at an E.G.M. of the club. The notice convening the meeting must specify the proposed amendment. Any proposed amendment shall have the approval of the Roman Catholic Bishop of Limerick for the time being, and such approval is to be notified to the Honorary Secretary by the said bishop in writing, before notice of the E.G.M is given to the members.

The following are the names of past clerical club presidents: Canon D. McNamara, Rev. Fr. L. Kelly, Rev. Fr. F. Moriarty, Rev. Fr. M. Cussen, Rev. Fr. R. O'Sullivan and Rev. Fr. J. O'Carroll.

This constitution was revised in the early 1980s when Bishop Jeremiah Newman was in charge of the diocese, and it is most likely that the current Bishop Brendan Leahy is not aware that these items exist, and with a shortage of priests he has far more important duties, than appointing them to chair mundane meetings of a sports club. The last clerical president appointed resigned in 2010 due to pressure of parochial duties and inadequate time to devote to club business.

Since then and up until 2016 the club has been governed by an ad hoc interim committee. It has also been without a president. This is unsatisfactory and leaves the club without a prominent officer of the governing body. There are approximately 150 members contributing circa €50,000 annually in subscriptions. Ideally the club president should be elected by the members at an A.G.M. The person should be familiar with the everyday business of the club and also act as a public relations officer, and lead it forward into the twenty first century.

Over the past hundred years the club has facilitated the following sports: cricketer, hockey, tennis, table tennis and squash. Many famous sportsmen and women have graced the pitches and courts of Catholic Institute Club over these years and some deserve to be remembered.
Cricket

At the end of the nineteenth century cricket was played throughout Ireland with approximately 100 teams competing in various tournaments throughout Munster. There were quite a number of games played in the club during the 1910 season. Institutes opponents were: Crescent College, Mr. O’Shea’s XI, Mungret College XI, Shaw’s XI, L.P.Y.M.A. and St. Michael’s Temperance C.C. Prominent individuals playing for the club in those days were L. and N. Nestor, W. Burke, Dr. Roberts, A. Spain, G. Bowles, E. Tracey and S. E. Ebrill. In the 1920s Ireland was a troubled country and cricket went into the doldrums and it was not until after the Second World War it made a short revival. The most famous cricketer to visit Limerick was the great West Indian test all-rounder Leary Constantine, who was coaching in Trinity at the time. During his visit he coached Institute and L.P.Y.M.A. Harold Pinter, Nobel Laureate, who was on tour with the Awen McMaster group, played with the Limerick Unknowns against Institute. He took 4 wickets and scored 25 runs, obviously a good cricketer as well as a playwright.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s a group of young schoolboys encouraged by Jim (the fox) Foley joined the cricket squad. In 1959 they won the Munster Junior cup and then progressed to the final of the Irish Junior Cup, where they met Cloughfera of Antrim, but unfortunately on the day the Antrim team was the better side winning by 78 runs. The Institute team was: J. Geary (Capt.), J. McDermott, T. Foley, B. Murphy, J. Foley, B. Fox, B. Cross, H. Elliott, L. Dineen, C. Mulqueen, and R. Hurley, and 12th man J. O’Brien. Later Hugh Elliott’s architectural firm Elliott Maguire designed the new clubhouse. This era was the zenith of cricket in Institute. In the early 1970s a stone dust all-weather hockey pitch substituted the grass pitch and this together with a lack of support contributed to the demise of cricket in the club. There is always a possibility of a revival in the future.

Ladies Hockey

Since the foundation of the club ladies’ hockey is the strongest section, due to a good supply of young players from the underage section, and the post primary schools. They competed successfully in the Munster Junior and Senior Cups and Munster Senior League. In 1950 they won the Irish Junior Cup beating Sandown of Belfast 1-0 with the solitary goal scored by Cecile Kelly. Institute Ladies hockey over the years has produced many fine players at Munster and International level. The Senior International caps are: Mary McMahon 1959 (1 cap), Hillary Cunningham 1965-66 (3 caps), Jackie Begley 1967-69 (15 caps), Marie Bartlett 1969-82 (60 caps). Marie also has the distinction of entering the Guinness Book of Records, when she became Ireland’s most capped player on reaching her 60th cap and in 2007 she was inducted into the Irish Hockey Association Hall of Fame. Sarah Devane 1975-81 (13 caps), Marie Crawford 1979-83 (36 caps), Rosie Nagle 1980-1999 (16 caps), Eimear Cregan 2002-2011 (171 caps). Eimear (niece of Eamon Cregan, Limerick hurler) is the most capped player, in either in men’s or ladies’ hockey, in this country. Elaine Brodell 2003–7 (7 caps). Ladies hockey is currently becoming the strongest section in the club and is very competitive in all aspects of Irish hockey.

Men’s Hockey

Men’s hockey is not as strong as the ladies section, due to the fact that it has depended on an underage section for a supply of players and also hockey was not played in many of the post primary schools. Their greatest achievements were in 1930s and 1940s when C.I.A.C. teams won the Munster Senior Cup, Flynn Cup and North Munster League. In the early 1950s they reached the finals of the Irish Junior and Senior Cups. Paddy Reid of the 1948 Irish Rugby Triple Crown team was also a member of this team. Unfortunately, due to a dispute amongst the hockey players, the majority of the team including Paddy, left Institute and formed the Lansdowne Hockey Club. Two years later Lansdowne won the Irish Senior Cup, a unique achievement for a small club.

The following players played on the Senior International team: Eddie O’Connor 1949-52 (9 caps), two of which are on display in the club bar. Paddy Kean 1950-51 (5 caps), Noel O’Dwyer 1951-63 (42 caps). Noel also toured South Africa as a Hockey Lion and was inducted into the Irish Hockey Association Hall of Fame in 2002. Eddie Cummins 1978-79 (67 caps) was also inducted into the Irish Hockey Association Hall of Fame in 2010. Eddie was also a very talented tennis and squash player. Several other players were capped at Under-23, Under-21 and Schoolboy level.

Tennis

Since the foundation of the club tennis has been played on grass courts. The playing season was generally from May until September and depended totally on weather conditions and natural light. Up to the late 1950s there were eight grass courts in the club arranged 4 by 4. With the construction of the new pitch and putt course in the early 1960s two grass courts were removed. These were replaced with two hard courts at 7 and 8 and as also later were courts 4, 5, and 6. In the late 1970s the last of the grass courts 1, 2, and 3 were replaced with hard courts complete with floodlights. During the 1980s all eight courts were upgraded to be floodlit and all-weather synthetic grass.
The tennis section has not produced the same high achievers of the past, but the sport is still very strong and healthy.

**Pitch and Putt**

Jim (the fox) Foley, then a member of the governing body, came up with a novel idea of constructing a Pitch and Putt course, as there were only two others in Limerick at Ardnacrusha and Bruff. Jim sought the help of Eddie Lynch who made contact with Mr. J. Daly the Limerick Golf Club professional, to act as course designer. In 1962, after a lot of voluntary labour and much effort a 9 hole course was blessed and opened by Fr. Frank Moriarty the then club president. In 1964 the course was extended to 18 holes. Unfortunately, in the late 1980s many of the members moved on to golf and the game went into decline. In 2004 the hockey section built a new state of the art astro-turf floodlit pitch and this heralded the demise of Institute's pitch and putt section. Maybe in the future an outdoor bowling green may compensate for this loss and provide a social and recreational outlet for an ageing population in the adjacent housing estates.

**Squash**

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the game of squash became very popular with a commercial enterprise Squash Ireland establishing a chain of facilities throughout the country, including Limerick. Its strength was that it provided a very good workout on an internal court, and therefore was not affected by weather conditions. In 1973 Institute built two squash courts, another glass-back walled in 1981 and a further glass-back walled court with spectator terracing at the rear, in 1989. At the peak of its popularity it had approximately 400 members, making it the largest section in the club. Currently the game is in decline and about ten years ago one court was converted into a gym. Squash as a competitive sport, within the club, is currently in the doldrums and will require a dynamic committee to restore it somewhat, to its former glory.

The following players played at International level.


**Spirit of Dundrum Golf Society (S.O.D.s)**

In 1999 a group of about fifty members of Institute descended on the Dundrum Country House Hotel in Tipperary for a weekend of golf and merriment. The general ethos was that golf would never get in the way of enjoyment. This evolved into a full blown golf society which manages to hold seven or eight outings per year. These events are greatly enjoyed by all participants.

For the past one hundred years the Catholic Institute Athletic Club has provided excellent sporting facilities for the men and women of Limerick. It draws its membership from all religious denominations, and none. Continuous development and improvement into the future is paramount, under its motto Ad Unum Omnones (one for all–unanimous).

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Tennis team winners of North Munster Cup 1937
Back (L-R) J. Guinan, Mrs. Clancy, N. Buckner, T. O'Riordan, E. McCarthy, M. O'Sullivan, T. Doyle.

North Munster Cup winners, 1960