

GAA: NEW LIMERICK SENIOR HURLING MANAGEMENT

How rugby stole a march on the GAA in Limerick

In a new book about the early days of the GAA, historian **Richard McElligott** looks at how rugby established a foothold in Limerick

When he founded the GAA on the 1 November 1884, Michael Cusack ushered in a sporting revolution in Ireland.

The GAA initiated the mass participation in organised sport among ordinary working class Irishmen. To use Cusack's own words, the Association spread across Ireland 'like a prairie fire'. Within five years it was reported that there were 777 affiliated GAA branches in Ireland.

To put this in context, in 1890, the Irish Football Union had only 124 clubs affiliated while there was a mere forty-seven rugby clubs registered in the country in 1885. Yet despite this remarkable success, the 1890s would witness the almost total collapse of the GAA in Ireland.

The implosion of the GAA in 1890s Ireland would facilitate the rise and spread of the rugby union across Limerick and much of Kerry. In fact the renowned association of Limerick as 'the home' of Irish rugby can in large part be ascribed to the sport's ability to exploit the misfortunes within the local GAA.

That rugby should have attained popularity around south-west Munster is not surprising. The traditional and anarchic game of Caid or 'rough and tumble'; a form of folk football, was popular among the peasantry in the Kerry and west Limerick area for centuries.

The game was played cross country, over fields and rivers, between teams of men from two neighbouring par-

ishes. As late as 1885, a team from Ballymacelligott in Kerry was issuing challenges in local newspapers for a match of 'rough and tumble' with any parish in Munster.

Rugby first spread into Limerick and parts of Kerry in the late 1870s and this was greatly facilitated by the characteristics the sport shared with caid. Both games used oval footballs. Likewise, both involved scrimmages of men attempting to gain possession, before passing to the more fleet footed players hovering on the wings, who ran with this ball in hand.

It seems likely the rules for rugby as they evolved were having a growing effect on caid. Increasingly the game began to forgo its cross country element and became confined within a select playing field, between two even number teams.

For example in October 1878, there is a Limerick newspaper report of a match played between the Kileton and Shannon clubs. Two teams of twenty-one aside had assembled after mass in the local Ballylongford church near the Limerick border.

Both sides had marched to the ground headed by a fife and drum band and followed by vast crowd, having first partaken of lunch served by the Kileton club. The growing influence and spread of rugby can be seen from the match report of the game, which stated the method of scoring involved carrying the ball over the opposition's defensive area or 'cool'.

Rugby was quick to spread into the larger urban areas

of the region. In Limerick, Rathkeale became the first club from Munster to affiliate to the sports then governing body, the Irish Football Union.

During 1876, Limerick Rugby Football club became the first affiliated club to emerge in Limerick city. In 1884, the renowned Garryowen club was founded and it quickly became the leading club in the county. In Kerry, Tralee Rugby Club was formed in 1882. Sometime after, it also officially affiliated with the sports new governing body, the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU).

Tralee RFC, along with Garryowen and Rathkeale took part in the inaugural Munster Senior Cup, in 1886. The growth of the game in south-west Munster bares all the hallmarks of how the sport had first spread across England.

Rugby was predominantly spread across the region through a combination of the presence of British military garrisons and by former university students who had become acquainted with the games during their studies in Irish and, more importantly, British educational institutions. Once they returned home they brought with them knowledge of the sport to local men in the area.

However the arrival of the GAA presented a challenge to rugby's popularity. In Limerick, the local GAA quickly developed a county administrative structure. In April 1885, the St Michaels Temperance club became the first Limerick team to affiliate to

the Association.

In early 1887, the first county board was formed in Limerick and the Commercials football club of Limerick city went on to win the inaugural All Ireland football championship that year. In Kerry, a County Board was not formed until November 1888.

Yet no sooner had the GAA established a foothold in Limerick, than it began to tear itself apart. By end of 1887, the county had actually two separate county boards in existence.

When the original board fell under influence of a Fenian chairman, Pat O'Brien, a breakaway board of anti-Fenian elements was established by Father Eugene Sheehy, a Land League campaigner and the parish priest of Bruree. This internal conflict, severely weakened the Limerick GAA, and further facilitated the spread of rugby in the county.

Though the GAA in 1886 passed a rule which stated that members of other sporting bodies could not become members of the Association the relationship between Gaelic football and rugby in Kerry and Limerick, in these first years of co-existence, remained ambiguous.

This is not surprising given the similarities between caid, rugby and early Gaelic football. Rugby was popular enough that at a meeting of Tralee Mitchels GAA club in October 1888, some members enquired about forming their own rugby club in the town only to be reminded that the constitution of the GAA did not allow this.

Evidently this did not deter some from the attractions of the game. At a meeting of Mitchels the following February a charge was brought against four members for playing rugby in the town. Despite the presence of rugby, the GAA in Kerry witnessed remarkable growth.

By 1889, the number of affiliated clubs had reached thirty-three in the county. However, as in Limerick, this early success proved illusory. As early as mid-1890, with the effects of a long term agricultural depression in Ireland already evident, GAA activity in Munster suffered notable decline. This should not be surprising seeing as at least 61.8% of GAA members were involved directly with agricultural.

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While the economic situation took its toll, the downfall of Charles Stewart Parnell, as the leader of Irish nationalist politics and the Home Rule movement, had huge implications for the Association. In November 1890, Parnell's affair with his married mistress Kitty O'Shea made headline news across the world.

The scandal caused outrage among many political and church leaders in Ireland. Its fallout split, not just Parnell's Home Rule movement, but broader Irish nationalist opinion. Parnell had been one of the first patrons of the GAA.



Dr Richard McElligott has written a new book on Limerick and how rugby managed to

Like other sections of Irish society, the Association became deeply divided on the issue.

Throughout 1891 this would lead to bitter and heated arguments in the national GAA, between pro and anti-Parnell supporters. In Limerick, the split led to a collapse in the number of affiliated clubs, the abandonment of local competitions and ultimately the demise of the Limerick County Board.

Additionally the 1890s saw the re-emergence of large scale rural emigration due to the economic situation. Census reports showed Ireland's population decreased by 15% in the decade after 1891. The combination of these factors almost destroyed the GAA as an organisational body.

For example, the numbers of affiliated clubs across Ireland had imploded from 777 to less than 118 by early 1894. By now the GAA had effectively collapsed in twenty four out of the thirty-two counties

U-21 football honours for Loch na Garra Gaels

LOCHNA GARRA	1-12
CAPPAMORE	2-7

U-21 FC 'B' FINAL

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Two points inside three minutes of added time gave the combination side of Croom and Crecora the honours in the county final of the U-21 'B' football championship at Killebree as they deprived Cappamore in a well contested match.

Nobody would have complained with a draw and it looked very likely that would be the result in the closing seconds with both teams fighting hard to secure a late, late victory.

Under the banner of Loch na Garra Gae, named after the lake on top of Tory Hill, a new name was inscribed in the Limerick roll of honour. Luck was with the Croom-Crecora boys in the final minutes. As stated a replay was on the cards but fair play to the winners they came good just at the right moment. It must be recorded that this decider was most sporting as never once did rough play enter the domain.

The Gaels showed great promise from the start, taking the lead with pointed points from play by Kieran Larkin, Eoin Farrell and Conor Burke but Cappamore were back into the match with their first attack in the tenth minute. The ball fell kindly to Aaron Daly who shook the rigging with a fierce kick to serve notice that the boys from Mulcaireside had no intention of leaving without a fight.

Inspired by Daly's goal, Cappamore moved up a few gears to take control of the

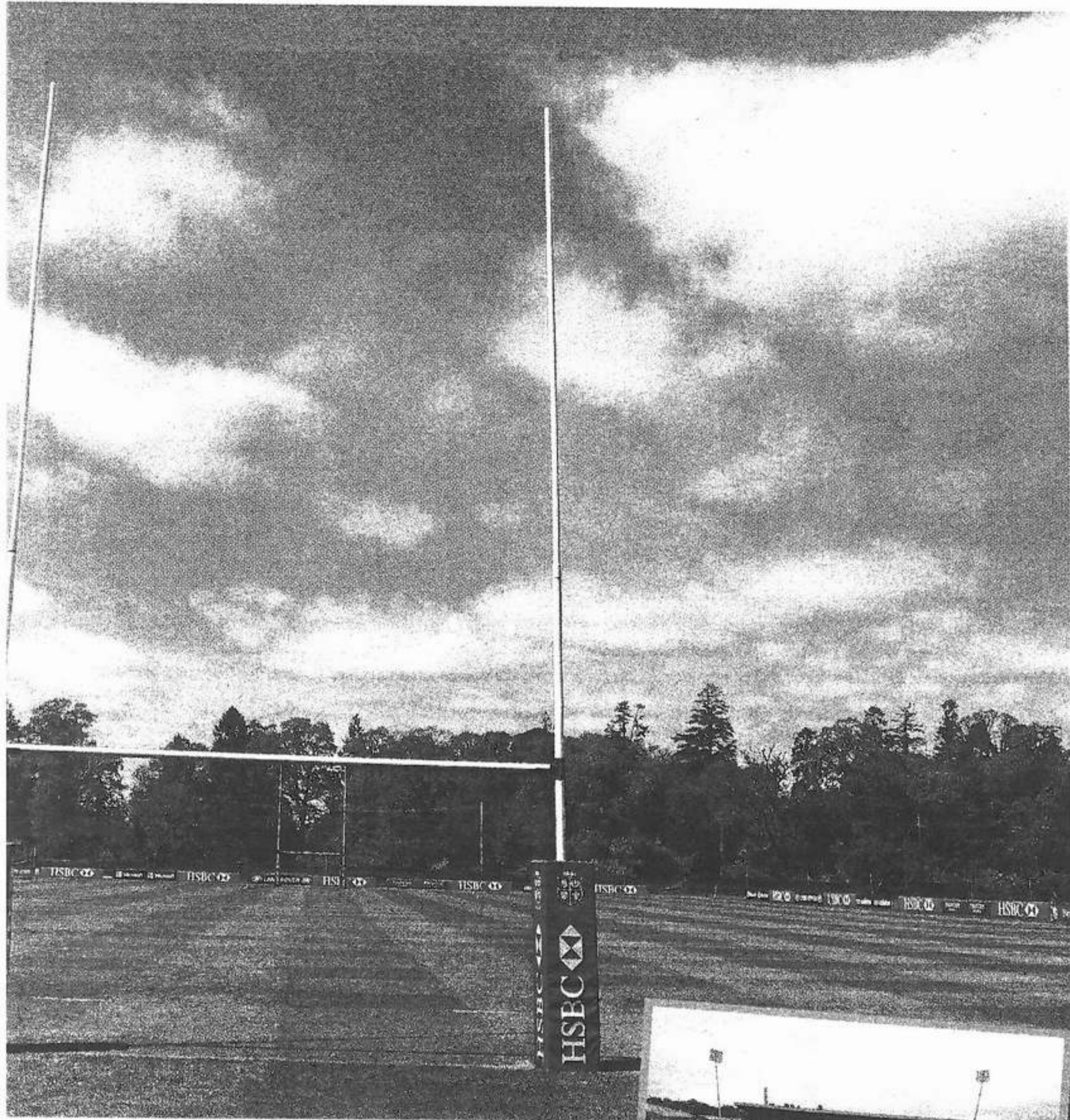
second quarter. Colin Ryan sent goal number two to net and now it was the east Limerick team who were in control. They were pegged back with points but they held firm to lead 2-4 to 0-7 at half time.

Cappamore worked to increase this lead and would have certainly made progress were it not for efforts of Kieran Larkin, Mark Reidy, Eoin O'Farrell, Jamie Shinnors, John Quirke, David Macken and James Malone who led the Croom-Crecora boys to resist the best that Cappamore could offer. Every moment of the second period was intense, coupled with an abundance of fine football.

A replay loomed but the winners made it for the line once the end of the hour was passed and the win was cemented at a vital stage when Daniel Lucey, punched the ball to the Cappamore net at a time when it seemed that the match had turned in their favour and then came to last three minutes of added and two superb points by Jamie Shinnors to clinch a famous win for Loch Na Garra Gaels.

Cappamore had really good performers in Colin Ryan, Conor Sheehan, Peter O'Brien, John Ryan, Con Berkery and Bill Creamer. They deserved to fight another day but they had no luck in the closing moments and left Killebree a most disappointed outfit.

LOCH NA GARRA GAELS: Aaron Burke; Garvin Sheehan, John Quirke, Timmy Moloney, Mark Reidy, Kieran Larkin (0-3), Paul Byrnes; Eoin O'Farrell (0-2), David Macken; Conor Burke (0-2), Jamie Shinnors (0-3), James Malone (0-2); Daniel Lucey (1-0), Brian Burke, James Lynch. Subs. Peter Cregan, Dominic O'Connor, Sean Vaughan, Ryan O'Shea, Liam Quirke.
CAPPAMORE: Willie Birrane; Eamonn Sheehan, Con Berkery, Richard Leonard; Denis Leonard, Colin Ryan (1-0), Kieran Hanley; Conor Sheehan, Peter O'Brien; Jack Walsh, John Ryan (0-4), Bill Creamer; Jamie Murphy, Aaron Daly (1-0), Eoin O'Donoghue (0-3)
REFEREE: John Scully (Galbally)



out the early days of the GAA in Kerry but there is some very interesting material in relation to itself in parts of the city and county as the GAA struggled to find its feet

including Limerick while in Kerry, the Association ceased to exist for more than three years after 1897.

In the midst of these difficulties rugby survived principally in Limerick City and larger towns like Tralee. To try and entice players back to the Association, the GAA removed its ban on members playing 'foreign games' in 1896.

Yet the removal of the foreign games ban only increased the popularity of rugby in the south-west. No longer affected by any stigma associated with the sport, and in the absence of Gaelic activity, those young men who were in a position to, crossed over. With no organised Gaelic activity men in the larger urban centres in Limerick and Kerry, who may otherwise have played GAA, turned to rugby.

Towards the end of 1898, public meetings were held in Killarney and Dingle to

re-form rugby clubs here. It is fascinating to note that St Brendan's Seminary Killarney, now the celebrated "nursery" for Gaelic football in Kerry, actually played rugby as its principal sport during this time, it being introduced under Robert Cruise, a Garryowen player who taught there.

The introduction of a par-
"Due to the strength of rugby in Limerick city and the fact that rugby there managed to transcend traditional class divides, Gaelic games found it hard to re-establish the support they once enjoyed"

ish based junior club competition in Limerick also greatly facilitated the spread and support of the game in

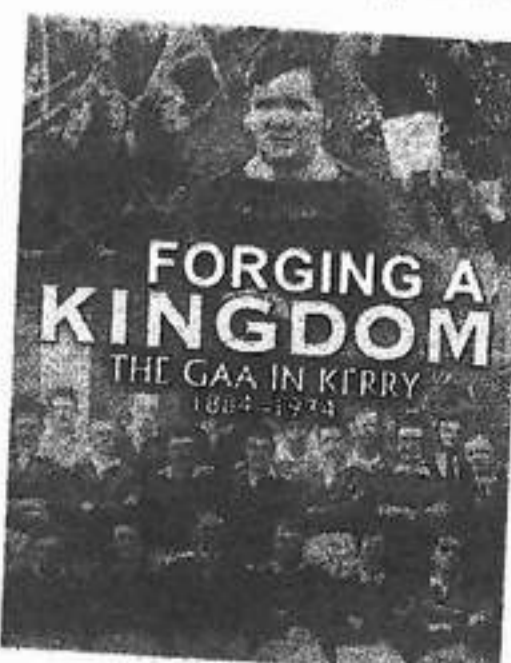
the towns in the west of the county.

Rugby was soon revelling in a new found popularity in the region. While the Kerry GAA managed to reorganise in 1900 and was able to assert its sporting dominance over the next decade, the situation in Limerick proved much more difficult.

Due to the strength of the game in Limerick city and the fact that rugby there managed to transcend traditional class divides, Gaelic games found it hard to re-establish the support they once enjoyed. While hurling was eventually able to dominate much of the sporting life of rural Limerick, by 1900 rugby had made the city its home.

BIOGRAPHY
 Dr Richard McElligott lectures in modern Irish history in UCD. He

is also the chairman of the Sport History Ireland Society. His first book, *Forging a Kingdom - The GAA in Kerry 1884-1934*, has just been published by The Collins Press. It is available in all good bookshops priced €17.99 and also from: www.collinspress.ie



LIMERICK GAA FIXTURES AND RESULTS

RESULTS

County U-21 A Football Championship
 Shannon Gaels 0-11, St Patrick's 0-5

County U-21 B FC Final
 Cappamore 2-7 Loch na Garra Gaels 1-12

County Premier U-21 HC
 Dromcollogher Broadford 3-14, St Mary's/Sean Finns 1-13

City East Minor Hurling Championship
 Murroe Boher 2-12, Pallasgreen 3-10

HE GAA Intermediate Hurling League
 Limerick IT 3-12 Carlow Institute of Technology 2-13

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13

County U-21 A' FC Final
 Galbally v Shannon Gaels in Mick Neville Park at 8.15pm

SATURDAY, DEC 14

County Premier U-21 FC Quarter Final
 Fr Casey's v St. Mary's Sean Finns in Mick Neville Park 7pm

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 15

County Premier U-21 FC Quarter Final
 Shamrocks v St Kierans in Ballyagran at 12noon