



Aileen Lawlor, President of the Camogie Association Address to Congress, Saturday, March 29th, 2014

Ard Stiúrthóir, A Iar-Uachtaráin agus a dhaoine uaisle. Is cúis mór áthais dom an oráid seo a labhairt ag deireadh mo dhara bhliain mar An Cumann Camógaíochta. Táim ag baint sult agus taithneamh as mo threimhse mar Uachtarán An Cumann Camógaíochta.

Gabham buíochas óm chroí leis an Ard-Stiúrthóir Joan Ní Fhloinn, foireann na h-oifige agus gach duine a oibríonn ar son an Cumann Camógaíochta.

I am really enjoying my term as Uachtarán of this great Association - and I cannot believe it is already three years since my election as Uachtarán Tofa.

This year's congress will see an election of my successor and I wish the successful candidate the very best of luck, and assure the new Uachtarán Tofa of my help and support in making the transition into the role as smooth as possible.

Another year has gone by and we have had another year of great championships and leagues. We have seen new clubs emerging with an overall increase of 23% since 2003, new initiatives in each province, new sponsors, and lots of signs of positive growth and development, assuring me that the Camogie Association is in a very healthy state at this moment in time. You will see a very comprehensive report on our development in the Ard Stiúrthóir's report so I am not going to duplicate all of our activities for the year.

New Staff

The Camogie Association saw a lot of changes in staff in 2013

- Joan O'Flynn took over as Ard Stiúrthóir
- Caroline Fitzsimons was appointed as our new Office Administrator
- Lizzie McGuinness took over as Fixtures Administrator
- Lisa McAliskey and Niall Jackman joined the Development Team

You are all very welcome! I look forward to working with you during the remainder of my term.

I would particularly like to thank Mary O'Connor for all her help and guidance to me and to you, during her period as Acting Ard Stiúrthóir. She is incredibly hard-working – her energy knows no bounds.

I thank all of the full-time team and all of our volunteers for their commitment and dedication to their roles. Your workload is huge, but your work rate is phenomenal. I want to take this opportunity to wish previous staff members Sinéad O'Connor, Bríd Boylan and Regina Gorman, who have moved to pastures new. I wish them all the very best in the future.

2013 was another great year for Camogie

We started the year on a high at our last Congress when you, the delegates, passed the affiliation motion, to change the membership subscription structure.

I want to thank each and every one of you, your clubs, your counties and provinces for endorsing this change and for seeing the bigger picture.

Valuing the future of our Association

I cannot stress enough, the importance of the Camogie Association being more self sufficient and taking more responsibility for our sources of funding. I sincerely feel that you, the members, have shown you really do value our Association and have respected that need for change. This membership structure linked with the new online registration will enable us to have a more accurate recording of our total membership, across every age group.

This, in turn, will enable us to accurately plan for the future. We will be able to see the exact breakdown of our membership in terms of both geography and age. We will also be able to see trends over time. All of this data will help us greatly in seeing what is going well and where we need to make improvements.

I am delighted that the online registration system is up and running. Thank you all for your patience in using this system. Like anything new, there may be a few teething problems, but it should assist registrars in the future and make their role a little easier.

Our current Strategic Plan “Our Game Our Passion” (2010 – 2015)

We have seen many developments rolled out since the inception of the Strategic Plan, and you will have read a detailed report in your papers of the key performance indicators in the very comprehensive Ard Stiúrthóir report.

Thankfully, we are well on the way to achieving many of the key aims and goals set out in this plan. It has served us well - leading us in a positive direction and keeping us focused.

Soon we will be preparing the follow-on plan for the period 2016 to 2021.

I look forward to consulting with you in preparing this new vision for the future of Camogie.

One Association

Last year, President of the GAA, Liam O’Neill initiated exploratory talks with the Ard Stiúrthóir and I and with the Uachtarán and Ard Stiúrthóir of the Ladies Gaelic Football Association, to see if there was an appetite to join the three Gaelic Games Associations together in a One Association Model.

Having progressed cautiously in these talks, as I said to you earlier, each of the organisations’ respective leaders then met each of the Associations’ Central Councils, where they endorsed the idea of looking at the future for the three Associations, and of developing a vision of how a One Association Model might look structurally.

At the recent GAA and LGFA congresses the delegates voted unanimously in favour of taking this next step. Today, you have done so, unanimously, and I thank you for your support on this. I genuinely believe we are taking the right step forward.

As separate organisations, we run our affairs autonomously and we do so very well. We, in the Camogie Association have been managing our own affairs for 110 years. However, over the years we have had a strong association with the GAA and more recently with the LGFA. These negotiations are not about a takeover of the smaller Associations by the GAA but rather recognition of the reality that all three Associations are grounded in the same Gaelic Games communities and families. We already work closely together and share grounds and other resources. Indeed, many people are already members and volunteers in more than one of the Associations.

Liam O'Neill has acknowledged and praised the thriving associations of both Camogie and Ladies Football. He sees no issue of any 'take-over' but rather has expressed a genuine interest in how all three associations can help and support each other.

In this way, we could achieve the ultimate aim of all our associations; that is to bring Gaelic Games to as many children and adults as possible.

In the last two years I have been visiting clubs from Derry to Cork, Dublin to Galway and many other counties in between. I have had the privilege to present medals in these clubs and counties. A large number of these occasions have been for more than one code, mostly Camogie and Hurling, but sometimes Football and Handball. It's a natural occurrence for some clubs and counties to include all codes of Gaelic Games in all of their activities. Some clubs are already functioning with great co-operation between the codes and seeing the fruits of such a unified approach.

I applaud you for endorsing the decision of Ard Chomhairle to look at the One Association model. We have nothing to lose in discussions over different types of structures. Nothing will be decided until you, the members decide. You, the members will have the final say as to whether this will come to fruition or not. Rest assured in our talks and negotiations we will be protecting the Association that our forbearers fought for, and helped build up to the fine association it is today. If the final proposals are in the best interests of the promotion, growth and development of Camogie, I have no doubt that you will embrace it willingly.

Change can be difficult, and you might say "If it's not broke why fix it?" However, I believe change, in this instance, will sustain and invigorate our games and our Gaelic culture.

Ní neart go cur le chéile.

Féile

There have been considerable changes made to Féile na nGael for the 2014 competition as you all know. You are all very familiar with and indeed many of you have had that incredible Féile experience. When this competition was started over 40 years ago the aim was to provide a weekend experience of fun and games for children under the age of 14 years. This positive experience gave these impressionable teenagers many memories and friends for life.

Féile has been run successfully for many years, with bonds and friendships emerging year after year. Life-long friendships, not only between the players but also between the adults, the parents and mentors who attend Féile weekend, along with the hosting families and mentors. It is a competition where parishes unite in sport.

Some clubs have been very successful in repeatedly winning their county Féile competition, and therefore got many opportunities to return to National Féile year after year, because they are from very strong clubs.

In turn, a huge number of clubs in that County never get a chance to have a Féile experience as the window for players is short given the age criteria in the competitions.

For many children Féile continues to be hugely positive experience, but unfortunately over recent years this experience has changed for many other participants. As a win at all costs attitude has now been adopted by many mentors and clubs, children are not being allowed to enjoy the experience, without feeling severe pressure to compete, to perform and ultimately to win. The enjoyment aspect has been removed from the competition for many and the children's overall experience of being hosted has changed dramatically.

Counties are also now calling this an All-Ireland Championship. This is a competition for teams from all over Ireland, yes, but it is not and was never meant to have All Ireland Championship status.

So, with a seismic change in the Féile experience and the exclusion of many children of this age category from weaker clubs in each county, the time seemed right to re-visit the competition structure.

The GAA with the assistance of the National Féile committee and the National Games Development Committee adopted a new structure, which endeavours to maximise the Féile experience and revive the original aim of the weekend – that of providing games for fun and enjoyment for as many children as possible.

The new structure ensures larger participation, and provides more games, in the host counties and regionally. In summary, Féile 2014 will not only be for the winners from each visiting county.

I hope you can all embrace this change. As I said earlier, change is never easy and is often viewed anxiously. But, if we seriously wish to address the current shortcomings, we need to try a different structure.

Fun and personal development of the children should come first and that's what this new structure endeavours to address.

Sponsors and Viewership

I want to thank all of our sponsors in 2013 for without their continued support and assistance, we would not be in such a strong position to grow and promote our game.

As you will have seen last year and in the early part of this year, advertising through newspapers, through television and radio and through social media outlets have all increased greatly.



The recent advertisements on TV and on billboards around the country for the AIB Club Championships have been welcome publicity for Camogie and increased the profile of Camogie players. We continue to strive to increase our viewership of, and attendances at, games. This is a big challenge, and support by you, our members, is vital.

I don't know why, but for some reason women do not support women's sport. They will regularly attend hurling, Gaelic football, rugby and soccer before coming to watch a Camogie match or even a Camogie All Ireland in Croke Park!

Why is this? I don't quite understand. I would think that having played and supported your club or county throughout the year, you would attend the biggest day on the Camogie calendar and that is the second Sunday in September in Croke Park.

It's the one opportunity a year to see Camogie played by the top athletes at the highest level.

It is important that we reflect back, to commercial partners, in this case Liberty Insurance and AIB, and the support they are providing to us, by ensuring we attend and support our games and players. We are building and developing excellent relationships and it is important that all Camogie units endeavour to show the same faith, support and belief in the game, as typified by the strong and visible support of both partners.

In 2013, when I asked you to pass the affiliation motion, I highlighted the importance of valuing our game and you responded positively. Once again, I am asking you that same question but in a different context.

In front of you, is a motion to reduce the compulsory purchase of All Ireland tickets by each club from two tickets to one ticket. There is some confusion around this compulsory requirement. It was introduced a number of years ago to encourage our members to attend All Ireland day in September and boost our attendances. This was later increased to three tickets. While continuing to increase our audience, the extra ticket or third ticket was to assist us with revenue in view of the absence of a major sponsor for a considerable length of time.

You will remember at Congress last year, in the light of sponsorship being secured, you voted to reduce the compulsory purchase from three to two.

There is now a proposal to reduce this to one. I feel this would be a backward step. To continue to increase the profile of our game, we need to have a high attendance at all our games and particularly in September. One ticket per club does not make sense and in the main people usually attend matches with one other or in groups, hence the reason for the purchase of two tickets. At a time when we are seeking to develop the Association, the reduction in both revenue and attendance at the finals would be a retrograde step.

I would love to see proposals coming forward which would help to increase the attendance at the All-Irelands by up to 50% in the next few years. Wouldn't it be great if there was a keen hunt for Camogie All Ireland tickets the same way there is for Hurling and Football All Ireland tickets? I know our players deserve that. It will be difficult to maintain our credibility with commercial partners and broadcasting outlets, if we, as an association, don't continuously strive to produce a bigger attendance at our games.

I am constantly listening to members saying that we don't get equal coverage in papers or on TV. Did you ever ask yourself why this is? Prior to the All Ireland Club finals in March, I received an email from a man in Galway wondering if the All Ireland Club finals in Croke Park would be televised? He enquired, "if not, then why?" and highlighted, in his view, that this was unfair to women's sport.

I duly replied and outlined that it was not being televised but pointed out that we have made progress, from a position of having no games broadcast to now having our All Ireland finals broadcast in addition to championship and league highlights and other games available on on-line platforms. I explained further that we have two of our three club finals taking place in Croke Park in March, providing our players with the opportunity to play in such an iconic stadium, a venue that all Gaelic games players aspire to play in. In addition, I highlighted that on the part of TV broadcast units, they consider the merits of broadcasting games, taking into account popularity, demand and anticipated attendances.

I explained how we now have two of the three club All Ireland finals in Croke Park in March giving many club players the opportunity to play in this fantastic stadium. I outlined how TV broadcasters take a whole host of factors into account, before broadcasting, such as audience demand, expected attendance at game the overall presentation and packaging of games. It is challenging to expect newspaper and TV coverage of our games, if we, ourselves have a lacklustre approaching to attending and supporting our own game, particularly on the biggest day of the year, that of All Ireland finals.

I strongly urge you to think of the bigger picture. Our gates have been decreasing year on year, with a loss of €36,000 recorded in 2013 and there is a projected loss of €15,000 if you as delegates, choose to vote for a compulsory purchase of one ticket only. This will in turn negate the financial benefits of newly acquired sponsorship, and rather than facilitating opportunities to progress, we will have taken a step backwards.

Female referees

One of my aims at the commencement of my Presidency was to increase the number of female referees on the National Referee panel.

I am delighted to say that there are now 11 females on the panel, five of whom are involved in the National Referee Academy. In 2011, there were only three female referees. This is a very welcome increase. Our Strategic Plan set an aim of recruiting ten female referees to the National Panel by 2015 and we have already exceeded that target at the end of 2013. I would like to thank the great work of the National Referees Committee led by Peter Downey to reach this figure. However, we don't want to stop there and I urge you to encourage as many females in your club and counties to take up the whistle and assist the committee in continuing this campaign.

Education sector

I want to applaud the promotion and development of Camogie in our primary schools second level schools and at college levels. I have visited many primary and secondary schools in the last two years and seen first-hand the development and growth here. The love of the game starts at a young age, therefore the development and nurturing of our future players as they go through their formal education is hugely important.

The continuation of the player's pathway from primary to secondary schools remains quite a challenge. The linking of school players with a home club is vital in retaining the player in order to progress to the adult player.

Projects like the Green Card Referees course for TY students and Camogie participation in the Gaisce awards are great initiatives for personal development of the player assisting them to take on responsibilities and achieving personal goals.

Third level

Congratulations to CCAO for another very successful year. 2013 saw the Ashbourne / Purcell / Fr. Meachair competitions hosted in Belfast at Queens University. This was a unique year for the College's competitions as Queens University hosted all of the Gaelic games family third level competitions. Camogie, Hurling, Ladies and Men's Football took centre stage, over four weekends, playing qualifiers and finals at the superb Queens campus in Belfast. It was a great success. We now look forward to 2015 and to joining with all of our third level units and celebrating 100 years of the third level colleges' competition, the Ashbourne Cup. I know they are already busy making plans to mark this milestone and I wish them well for their preparations, and every success for the coming year.

Finally, a big thanks to all the teachers and lecturers in the schools and colleges for your part in developing the game of Camogie. Your contribution is much appreciated.

Abroad

The growth and development of Camogie outside the island of Ireland is phenomenal. Camogie is thriving, in London, Europe, New York, and on the North American continent, in Asia, New Zealand and Australasia. Over the last few years we have seen a dramatic rise in the number of teams participating abroad. The development is incredible, and a real testament to the volunteers and the full-time staff of the GAA for driving this forward. Recent developments include the formation of a County Board in the Asian/Gulf region and another in the Middle East. There are delegates attending Camogie Congress from London, Europe and the NACB and I would like to thank them for travelling and assure them of our continued assistance and support. I would also like to take the opportunity to wish New York well in their upcoming centenary celebrations.

110th year Birthday celebrations

It doesn't seem like that long ago when we were preparing for our Centenary, and here we are now in our 110th year. I often wonder what our forbearers would think of our Association if they were alive now. I think they would be very impressed with the standard of the game we see today. The fitness levels of our inter-county players, the speed of the game, the evolution to 15-a-side, the volume of games in Croke Park. All changes which have helped to enhance and ultimately progress the game.

You will have recently seen our 110th year logo which we will be using on all promotional materials and at our events throughout the year, to highlight our birthday celebrations in a very unique and special year. There will be a number of different ways in which we will mark this celebration. We intend to identify and select a "County Player of the Decade" and honour, this particular team at half-time in the 2014 All Ireland Final in Croke Park. We are also aiming for an attendance of 18,000 at our All Ireland finals and we intend to create a photo exhibition of events and players over the last decade.

Other events include balloon releases at different events during the year including Camán to Croker, at County and Provincial U14 Blitzes and club open days in conjunction with the Eat Smart, Hurl Smart Week. It promises to be a great year and I hope you will all play your part in marking this important milestone.

Kay Mills

A group of very dedicated people campaigned last year to have a bridge in Dublin named after one of the most decorated and accomplished Camogie players, Kay Mills of Dublin. Unfortunately, they were not successful losing out to Rosie Hackett. However, whilst the result did not go in our favour, the enormous publicity and public awareness created of Kay Mills was immense and the committee did a fantastic job in bringing this remarkable player's career achievements back into the limelight.

Appreciation

This year's Congress marks the end of the terms of two Vice-Presidents, Eamonn Browne and Kathleen Woods. I want to thank both Eamonn and Kathleen for their time and commitment over those three years. I thank them both for deputising for me throughout their terms. Rest assured, they have represented their provinces very well at Central Council. I would like to welcome the incoming Vice-Presidents Bridighin Heenan and James Moynihan.

Also, I would like to thank the three outgoing members who have served on Central Council for the last three years, Miriam O'Callaghan, Sheila O'Donohoe and Phyllis Breslin and welcome incoming delegate Brona McIntyre. In the case of Eamonn Browne and Miriam O'Callaghan, their election on Friday night (March 28th) as Coaching and Games Development and Finance Representative to Ard Chomhairle respectively, means they will now sit on Ard Chomhairle in a new capacity.

Congratulations to Patsy Powell from St Brigids who was the Camogie Recipient of the CLG Gradam an Uachtarán. Finally, congratulations to Marion Conway who is this year's recipient of the Síle Nic an Ultaigh award for Distinguished Service.

