

MARIE HOYE - CLANN EIREANN LEGEND



There are moments when local tribalism between GAA clubs is put to one side. Last Wednesday night at Clann Eireann Park was one such occasion. Close neighbours and rivals Clann Eireann and St. Peters were about to do battle when the terrible news of Marie Hoye's death spread around the ground. Her eleven-year battle with cancer was over and she had lost. It is one of the few tasks ever asked of her that she failed to conquer. The players and supporters of both clubs walked silently away, many visibly upset. Equally respected within both clubs, the emotion was tangible. Despite the old saying, there are times when the show simply must not go on.

Marie was born on February 8th 1960, the fifth child of Harry and Lily Henderson. Generations of the Henderson family have given their talent to local GAA and in particular to Clann Eireann. Harry was a stalwart throughout his long life, winning a Senior Championship medal in 1954, while Marie's uncle, Isaac, was a member of Armaghs 1953 All Ireland Final team. Marie was hugely proud of this tradition and it was inevitable that Clann Eireann would play a big part in her life. It is only the scale and quality of her input that leaves us in awe. To try to assess the full impact that Marie had on Clann Eireann and its children, or the esteem in which she was held would be an endless task. The club supports a diversity of activities unrivalled in the county. This requires a huge number of volunteers with a broad range of skills. Within this group of volunteers that is so essential to the survival of every GAA club, Marie's contribution was unsurpassed.

Her roles within the club are too numerous to mention; secretary, team manager, youth worker to name but a few. Her versatility was astonishing, her standards high; she was a master of all trades. All of the roles were filled with passion and the pursuit of perfection. Her attention to detail was legendary and her organisational skills knew no bounds. Marie was passionate about Clann Eireann, not in a loud, ostentatious way, but in a subtle manner. A steely determination lay beneath her gentle smile, and anybody mistaking that smile for lack of commitment would be left trailing in her wake.

Without such determination, she would never have fought off her illness for so long. And that illness was an aspect of her life that was understated. In the thankfully many days of good health that she enjoyed, it was easy to believe that she had finally pulled through, or even to forget that she had ever been sick. Even in tougher times when she was physically weak, there was no self-pity and certainly no less enthusiasm. Only a simple resolve to make the best of the situation and carry out her duty as efficiently and diligently as always. So despite all the medical advice and the apparent inevitability of her passing, the final announcement came as a heartbreaking blow.

Perhaps, if pushed to suggest one contribution that will be her lasting legacy, it would be the development of football for girls. The process began in 1993 with the formation of Naomh Mhuire, with Clann Eireann taking up the baton in 1995. In 2005, Clann Eireann

Senior Ladies won the Ulster Intermediate title, beating Newtownbutler in Clones. The All-Ireland title proved a bridge too far, losing to a strong Abbeydorney team in the final. But in the short space of 10 years, Marie and her management team had nurtured a team from infancy to the All-Ireland Final. An incredible achievement.

Marie did not just give herself to Clann Eireann, she gave her daughters too. Martina played in that All Ireland Final, while Laura had suffered an injury that denied her a place. Aine at 15 and Maria at 13 were simply too young, but both are playing at under-age level. To these girls Marie was a mother, but her family extended way beyond these four lucky girls. Marie was mother to hundreds of girls and boys who walked through the door of St. Colmans Hall. They were never just a number on a register to Marie. They were individuals whose ability was crying out for direction. And she gave that direction, as any mother would.

Her influence was also clearly visible at county level when Armagh Ladies defeated Sligo in the All-Ireland Final last autumn. Six of her club mates wore the orange jersey that day and never did Marie more clearly demonstrate her courage than on that glorious occasion. Having just completed a course of treatment, she defied her bodys weakness to join her girls in celebration on the Croke Park turf. To these girls, winning the All Ireland was special, but nothing when set beside Marie's determination to share their moment.

This tale too, had its humble beginnings. The story goes of a time not that long ago when Armagh had not even jerseys to wear or players to fill them. With the team on the brink of dissolution, Marie raised her hand and volunteered her entire team to represent the county. They did. They lost. But the corner on the road to recovery and ultimate triumph had been turned.

The BBC recognised the quality of Marie's work when in 2004 she was named as their Sports Personality of the Year Unsung Hero. Never again will Marie's heroics be unsung. The stream of visitors from far and wide to her home, and the incredible scenes at her funeral will ensure that. As she left Allenhill Park and turned into Lake Street for the last time on Saturday afternoon, her coffin was met by a guard of honour that sent shivers down the spine and brought tears to the eye. Both sides of the street were lined with the bright orange of Clann Eireann, boys and girls, men and women stretching almost as far as Clann Eireann itself. This generation now tasked with delivering Marie's dreams. Despite the occasion, it was a strangely beautiful moment, one that nobody present will ever forget as her body was carefully, almost jealously protected by those who loved her. This was how Marie wanted it, and her club did not let her down.

The universal nature of her appeal was evident again when on turning into North Street the cortege was greeted by a guard of honour made up of the children of St. Peter's GAA club. St Mary's School also paid its tribute as the coffin emerged from St. Peter's chapel. Similar scenes greeted Marie on the return journey to St. Colman's cemetery; at no stage was she left unaccompanied or alone. And despite the huge numbers, there was no sense of disarray, no lack of organisation. The procession moved as one in a measured and dignified manner. Marie would have liked that.

Often when remembering the recently departed, a level of artistic licence is used to enhance the character of the deceased person. An age-old habit and harmless fun, it has brightened many a wake. In Marie's case, the danger is on the reverse side of that coin, which is to fail to recognise all her achievements. This tribute would not claim to be comprehensive, merely a few memories of some of those she touched closely. Everybody has his or her individual memory of Marie to add to the rich tapestry of her life.

Clann Eireann has a history of producing fine administrators and volunteers. The names and photographs of these great men and women adorn its walls. Indeed the lyric to a song in tribute to its founders, penned by Marie's sister Roisin, hangs in the social club. Perhaps the most fitting tribute to Marie Hoye is that she can now proudly take her place at their side. Not in their shadow, but as their equal.

The collective grief of Clann Eireann is great, most especially among the Ladies Football teams. The work that Marie did will continue, but she will not be replaced. She cannot be replaced. However, Clann Eireann recognises that those in deepest pain are her family members. We extend our deepest sympathy to her husband Whitey, to her beautiful girls Martina, Laura, Aine and Maria, her brothers Gerard, Harry and Tommy, and her sisters Roisin, Margaret and Eileen. Finally to her precious grandson Niall, too young to fully understand what he has lost. Our shoulder is there in your difficult days ahead. Do not be afraid to cry on it.

Clann Eireann