

## **Amateurism in an Age of Professionalism: An Empirical Examination of an Irish Sporting Culture: The GAA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) has been synonymous with the sporting tradition of Ireland since 1884, and the links it has developed with the parishes and communities of Ireland have been based on the organization's ethos of volunteerism and amateurism in Gaelic games. Modern Ireland has brought with it many challenges for the GAA, especially in relation to internal and external issues. The dynamic of sport in Ireland has changed with the introduction of professionalism in soccer and rugby, and this has caused the validity of the amateur status of the Gaelic Athletic Association to be questioned. The development of professional sports brands, such as 'Munster Rugby', and 'Leinster Rugby', has been achieved through an aggressive marketing policy within the rugby fraternity.*

*This research is an examination of the Gaelic Athletic Association as an amateur sporting organization in an era of professionalism in Ireland. This study is particularly focused on analyzing the elements of the GAA that contribute to its success and investigating the competitive relationship between the GAA and the growth of professionalism in sport. The amateur ethos is defined in this research as a key metric for sustaining an amateur organization in an environment where the era of professional sports is becoming more prevalent in Ireland. The empirical research gathered for this study was based on a qualitative methodology consisting of 18 semi-structured, face to face interviews with individuals who had relevant but varied experience within the GAA, such as players, coaches, managers and administrators.*

*This research study recommends that the GAA adopt an innovative approach, through strategic decision-making, to allow the GAA to maintain its amateur ethos, and, yet, successfully compete in the professional sporting market. The strong links with the community must be both nurtured and enhanced. The GAA and Gaelic games must embrace the challenges that the branding success of foreign sports has brought. Player welfare issues for the elite players must be addressed while continuing to protect the club and its amateur structures. The study looks at the key metrics that are required to evolve the GAA. This entails not only focusing on the perceived importance of the amateur ethos to the GAA, but also developing the marketing, branding and profiling of Gaelic games to enhance the performance of an amateur sporting organization in an era of increased professionalism in sport.*

**Key Words:** GAA, player welfare, Gaelic Players Association, amateur ethos, Gaelic games, professionalism, marketing, elite players.

### **INTRODUCTION**

*The price of success is hard work, dedication to the job at hand, and the determination that whether we win or lose we have applied the best of ourselves to the task at hand,*  
(Vince Lombardi).

The initial objective of the Gaelic Athletic Association was the cultivation of Irish pastimes under a regulated authority that was linked to the Irish perspective on Irish sport. "Founded in 1884, the GAA's chief objective was for Ireland to take control of its own affairs in the field of athletics and games – national in outlook but non-political", (Fullam, 2004:5). It was a significant landmark in Ireland in the late nineteenth century to have an

official organisation established for the cultural promotion of Gaelic sports. The early part of the nineteenth century had seen a huge decline in the popularity of Gaelic sports because of the famine in Ireland and the lasting effects it had on the country for the rest of the nineteenth century. Mangan (2002) states that "Ireland had been decimated socially, culturally and economically by the Great Famine of 1845 – 1851: amongst the major casualties of the Famine were the field games and other traditional pastimes of rural Ireland, which in many areas suffered an irreversible decline", (2002: 59).

The revival of the games of hurling and Gaelic football in Ireland were as a consequence of a general revival of the Gaelic movement which had seen the development of synergies between various organisations steeped in Gaelic culture. Coogan (2004) notes that the influence of the G.A.A. reached out to the political and cultural landscape by stating that "the Gaelic revival in Ireland could be said to have begun with the foundation of two organisations in particular: Douglas Hyde's Gaelic League which he founded in 1893, and the Gaelic Athletic Association, begun by Michael Cusack in 1884. The former brought people of all ages and sexes into classes where they learned the Irish language and Irish dances, and acquired an interest in Irish History. The Gaelic Athletic Association revived Irish games such as hurling and Gaelic football; indeed the hurling stick became a symbol of militant national identity, being carried in demonstrations to such an extent that even during the phase of Anglo-Irish hostilities which concluded in the era of the Good Friday Agreement it was known as 'the Tipperary rifle'" (2004 :16)

According to Keogh (1994), by 1932 there were 1,700 clubs affiliated in Ireland. The *Official Annual Report 2010*, by The Gaelic Association stated that there are now over 2,500 G.A.A. clubs in Ireland with a membership of nearly 1 million people. The growth of the Gaelic Athletic Association over the past 127 years has been attributed to the bond it has developed with Irish people. Cronin *et al.*, (2009), state that "the great triumph of the GAA is that it means so much to so many people", (2009: 16). The G.A.A. has been able to access almost every parish in Ireland by developing a core link between the community and the parish club. The parish club is the lifeblood of the G.A.A. because it is here that the games of hurling and football are developed, where the bonds of friendship are formed that will last a lifetime and where the strong bond between the G.A.A. and the community are nurtured. The G.A.A. club is all about the people who run it, the volunteers that play such an important role in the G.A.A. Howard (2009) examines this point by stating that "one thing all clubs have in common is a desire for more people to get involved. Just going along on a Sunday afternoon will boost club spirit. Look along the sideline at the 'bainisteoirí' roaring encouragement, and beyond them the fans – parents, siblings, friends and fans of the game. The amateur and democratic nature of the game means that everyone involved has a voice. There is no 'them' and 'us' in a G.A.A. club, it belongs to you as soon as you walk in the door", (2009: 55).

The G.A.A. grew rapidly after its official formation and the association quickly became a symbol of Irish national pride through the development of the national games. While there were many nationalistic movements cultivating the revival of Gaelic pride in Ireland, it is noted that the Gaelic Athletic Association has contributed more to Irish life than any other organisation. As outlined by Mangan (2002) "the country's cultural revolutionaries of the late nineteenth century can be considered important in that they created, revived and helped sustain ideologies that contributed to the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922. Such revolutionaries did not change Ireland overnight but they did help to articulate the sense of difference and distinction that demanded expression in the shape of an independent Ireland. It can be argued that the foundation of the G.A.A. in 1884 was a crucial point in these proceedings. Although it took several decades to develop into a truly all Ireland institution, apart from the Catholic Church and the government itself, no single body has impacted on Irish life as has the G.A.A. It is as a direct result of the existence of the G.A.A. that Gaelic sports developed to become a significant element in defining Ireland and the Irish people", (2002:58).

The success of the amateur ethos has allowed the GAA to develop a close link to the communities of Ireland and much of the success here has been the relationship between the family, the club and the parish; a bond which cannot be replicated by any other sporting organisation in Ireland. According to Skinner (2011), "a key feature of the GAA is the degree to which it is an organisation for children and families. While the annual inter county and club competitions for senior players are what attract public attention and generate much of the GAA's revenue, sport for children and the work needed to sustain it are what constitute the bulk of activity at a local level. Indeed one might argue that the real foundation of the GAA of a community organisation at local level is the triangular relationship it has built up between families, clubs and schools in providing opportunities for children to participate in organised sport", (2011:101).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

A qualitative approach was used in this study and 18 face to face interviews were undertaken in order to gather the relevant primary data for this research topic. When deciding on the interview candidates the author looked for a wide range of candidates to encompass a range of experiences within the GAA – from players and coaches that have achieved highest levels of success at a national level to those associated with the grass roots of the GAA at club level. The candidates were purposely chosen and included the current President of the GAA Christy Cooney; Minister for Arts, Heritage & Gaeltacht, Jimmy Deenihan; Cork senior hurling manager Jimmy Barry Murphy; Chairman of The Gaelic Players Association Donal Óg Cusack, Professor of Sports Science at the University of Ulster, Dr. David Hassan, and legendary figures in GAA such as Pat Spillane, Colm O'Rourke, Martin Carney, Tony Davis and Ronan Curran. Although the scope of this research was focused on hurling and Gaelic football, the interview process also included Camogie star Gemma O'Connor to develop a more diverse body of knowledge. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with participants consisting of 17 male and 1 female. The secondary research was gathered through the examination of books, journals, reports, and statistics from both The GAA annual reports, and data from the Central Statistics Office.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

*The GAA is more than an athletic association; it is a declaration of national faith,* (O'hEithir, 2005: 210).

## **HISTORY OF THE G.A.A**

De Burca (1989) defines the reasons behind the move to define Irish culture through an official association for hurling and Gaelic football: "Michael Cusack's thesis was simple. National pastimes, he argued, were an essential element of a thriving nation, and any neglect of them usually began in urban areas. The reason for this decline was because Irish athletics were controlled by people hostile to national aspirations. Accordingly, the time had come for the masses to take control of their own pastimes and to draft rules for this purpose", (1989: 119). Fitzpatrick (1977) states that the early influence of the G.A.A. were seen across both the sporting and political divide: "in the early 1900's Gaelic games were more useful to the politicians as spectator than participant occasions. Political schemers and recruiters could mingle unnoticed among the cheering factions, protected from police molestation by the crowd, its emotions heightened by combat on the field. Sinn Fein may have suffocated the Gaelic League, but its relationship with the G.A.A. was vital and mutually profitable", (1977: 130). De Burca (1981) defines the effects that the G.A.A had on the country after its foundation by concluding that "after 1884, the association swept the country like a prairie fire. Few movements in modern Ireland have taken root so rapidly and so firmly as the GAA", (198: 23).

## **AMATEUR ETHOS OF THE G.A.A**

The amateur ethos of the GAA has been one of the pillars by which the association has flourished – the idea of representing the pride of a village or town, parish or county. With the development of professionalism in rugby and soccer in Ireland the GAA has found it necessary to compete as an amateur organisation against sports that have already gone through the change to professionalism. As outlined by Clearly & Connolly (2007), the roots of amateurism in the G.A.A. were linked closely to the values of early foreign sports "the approach to sport that the G.A.A. adopted was ironically very much in line with the ideology that had inspired the British sporting revolution. Amateurism, Christian values and character formation were at least cherished by the Irish nationalist sporting organisation as they had been by the muscular Christians of the English public schools some years earlier", (2007: 195).

As outlined by Davenport (2005), in relation to the importance of the amateur ethos in the GAA: "Gaelic games are at the core of Irishness; they are enmeshed in the fabric of Irish life and hold a unique place in the heart of its culture. Their resurgence towards the end of the nineteenth century was entwined with the whole Gaelic revival and the march towards Irish independence. The beating heart of Gaelic sports in the Gaelic Athletic Association set up in 1884 'for the preservation and cultivation of national pastimes. The GAA is still responsible for fostering these amateur games and it warms our hearts to see after all this time, and amid the onslaught of globalization

and the general commercialisation of sport, they are still far and away the most popular sports in Ireland”, (2005: 205).

Amateur players have always been the cornerstone of the GAA. “The common thread that runs through all of these games is that they are a means of expressing local pride. Players don’t go into the fray year after year for money; they do it for their club and their county. This is a defining characteristic of Gaelic sports”, (O’Brien, 2000:12). “The basic unit of the GAA is the club, which is based on the attachment to local community and to place. Clubs are not just in, but are of the communities and typically field a range of teams, at all levels and for men and women, boys and girls. Clubs are grouped within their counties. Counties in turn sit within provinces and the entire association is then governed at a central or national level. The GAA is a wholly amateur, community based, volunteer driven and altruistic movement which believes Gaelic activities can improve the quality of individual and community life”, (O’Flynn, 2007: 4).

### **GAELIC PLAYERS ASSOCIATION**

The formation of the Gaelic Players Association has raised the question of professionalism in sport. “The majority of players don’t want a ‘pay-for-play’ policy to emerge: they just want better travelling expenses, better insurance cover, and adequate compensation for out-of-pocket expenses – all reasonable aspirations”, (Mahon, 2000: 257). Ferriter (2004) adds that “hurling underwent something of a renaissance in the 1990’s with traditional non hurling counties coming to the fore. When it is played at its best there is no sport to rival it in the world; the fact that the teams remain amateur when so many of their colleagues in other sports were earning vast sums made the success of the G.A.A. all the more remarkable. Broadly speaking, the voluntary unpaid ethos was cherished and the creation of a Gaelic Players Association witnessed players demanding respect and better treatment by management rather than elaborate salaries”, (2004: 61).

The question of professionalism is addressed by Jarvie (1999) who states that “the Gaelic games movement is implicated in the perpetuation of ethnic nationalist ideas. One can only speculate as to which other global forces may yet impact on the world of Gaelic sport. But it seems inevitable that professionalism will become an acknowledged fact of GAA life, and with that will come the pressure to recruit the best possible players from whatever sporting and, more specifically, ethnic background”, (1999: 20). Sugden & Tomlinson (2002) concur but also add that “it is apparent that commercial pressures have been partly responsible for internal debate within the GAA. The formation of the Gaelic Players Association is a clear response of the greater demands being put on players and the increased revenue accrued by Gaelic games. With sponsorship already a regular feature of Gaelic football and hurling; it seems only a matter of time before ‘shamateurism’ gives way to professionalism at least at county level”, (2002: 186).

### **MARKETING THE GAA**

Coogan (2004) notes the successful marketing of the G.A.A. through the media was derived by the links between the media and the G.A.A. by stating that “the Irish Press, apart from its obvious political impact, had an important and lasting effect on Irish society through its coverage of the G.A.A. As the Irish Press pioneered the giving of substantial space to the particularly Irish sports (hurling and Gaelic football), the other two Dublin daily newspapers, the *Irish Independent* and the *Irish Times*, began doing so also with the result that the popularity of the G.A.A. soared and continues to do so in the era of electronic media”, (2004: 719). Inglis (2008) states that “there were fears particularly in the 1970’s when television began to broadcast foreign sports into most Irish homes, that support for the G.A.A. and Gaelic sports would wither away. The opposite has happened; the G.A.A. and Gaelic sports have thrived”, (2008: 111).

There has been a major infusion of change in the marketing strategy of the GAA with the announcement in 2008 of a new multi sponsor concept which will deliver enhanced corporate value to the association. The deal kicked in from 2010 and will tie the association strategically to many high profile corporate sponsors such as Toyota, Vodafone, Etihad Airways, Super Valu, Bank of Ireland and Guinness. Brennan (2008) contributes that research carried out in 2007 as part of the GAA’s brand review and the development of its strategic plan strongly endorsed a multi sponsor concept. The GAA’s Commercial & Marketing team has been bolstered to oversee the rollout of what we hope will be an effective campaign to promote the GAA championship.

The ability of the G.A.A. to successfully market both association and the games of hurling and football was hampered for many years by the unavailability of Croke Park to foreign sports. Beech & Chadwick (2007) state

that “the venue marketing of Croke Park is restricted by regulations imposed by the Gaelic Athletic Association that only G.A.A. affiliated sports can be played at the ground. This limits the scope of sports marketers ability to secure bookings for the venue”, (2007: 76). In relation to the possible value of the GAA’s infrastructure, incorporating Croke Park, Gullan concludes that “in 2006 the Gaelic Athletic Association was able to propose a figure of €2.8 billion as the market value of its premises and sports grounds”, (2009: 141). The opening up of Croke Park to foreign sports brought with it a vortex of opportunity for the G.A.A. to market their games and facilities throughout the world.

McAnallen *et al.*, (2009) adds that the issue with G.A.A. developing its brand is that it is in direct competition with global sports: “the challenge for the GAA today is that English games are no longer English but global with an appeal that, in the case of soccer, extends to every corner of the world. It is also highly marketable and its leading players can expect to earn vast sums of money”, (2009: 226). The importance of corporate sponsorship is cited by Parkhouse (1996), “on a worldwide basis, sports organisations and corporations have entered into partnerships wherein each agrees to assist the other in forwarding their own objectives. One such partnership is sponsorship. For sports organisations, it’s an effort to obtain funds from sponsors to operate their sports events and programs. For corporations, it’s a chance to get their products into the minds of consumers”, (1996:290). Prior (1997) adds that “well over a century after its foundation, the GAA is only now beginning to discover the full potential of Gaelic games. Now both the football and hurling championships attract massive sponsorship deals, as well as television rights being sold around the globe to the multitudes of Irish expatriate communities”(1997: 71).

Sheard (2000) also outlines the success of the Croke Park redevelopment by adding that “it is not uncommon to see a once proud venue slip into disrepair and become bleak and unwelcoming, however loyal its supporters. Yet to effect a real transition, to create a place where people can once again take pride in their surroundings, is often a difficult step to take, and one that required almost superhuman tenacity and the clearest of visions. This was the vision of Liam Mulvihill, Chief Executive of the GAA. It has therefore been very pleasing to see the master plan at Croke Park taking shape; not only to see the beginnings of a massive new venue which will be comparable with the best in the world, but also to note how wonderful dreams can indeed be realized, despite the doubts of those without ambition”, (2000: 167).

As outlined by Stradling (2009), “on 24<sup>th</sup> February the crowds gathered for a historical rugby union match between England and Ireland in Croke Park, Dublin. It was the 2007 Six Nations Championships and for the very first time, the Gaelic Athletic Association had agreed to host the rugby internationals at Croke Park, while the national stadium at Lansdowne Road was closed for development. A stadium that came into being solely for the purpose of promoting Gaelic sport, Croke Park was a symbol of Irish independence and allowing the game to take place there signified a new era in Anglo Irish relations. The Irish republic, less than a century old, was welcoming the English and proudly taking its rightful place on the international playing field”, (2009: 90). According to the GAA Annual Report (2010), “in 2010 Croke Park hosted 60 matches, on 27 fixture days, involving 26 different counties and attracting an average attendance of 38,174 per match. Croke Park was also the venue for 15 development days, when children from all over the country had the opportunity to train and play in the stadium”, (2010: 29).

#### **G.A.A & THE IRISH DIASPORA**

According to Gribben (1999), “on December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1990, in her inaugural address Mary Robinson drew all the people of the Irish Diaspora to her when she said: ‘There are over 70 million people on this globe who claim Irish descent. I will be proud to represent them”, (1999: 16). Brighton (2009) states that “the events forming the modern history of Ireland illustrates the impact of colonialism, conflict and the social, political and economic processes that led to and caused the Irish Diaspora. That history makes it clear that not all leaving Ireland were part of the proletarian collective; rather Irish left the homeland under diverse conditions and circumstances”, (2009: 40). “In 1890, the Gaelic Athletic Association of America was set up. In spirit it mirrored the original version back home, but, from its inception it retained an independent streak that has prevailed. Often the reward for the top inter county player is the annual All Star awards and the pilgrimage to foreign shores as part of the marketing strategy to bring the stars of the modern game to the GAA Diaspora overseas. Since the inception of the GAA in 1884 the games have been developed and embraced in countries all over the world, most notably in the USA which has seen New York compete annually in the All Ireland Senior Football Championship. The

Diaspora have played a huge role in the success of the GAA by keeping Irish emigrants entwined in our national games and raised the profile internationally of the association, (Duggan, 2004:194).

Gaelic games are core to the social structure of the Diaspora in Irish communities abroad. "All-Ireland finals in hurling and football are events which define the autumn in our culture, great gatherings of the clans, afternoons when a farmer from Mayo will sit down to watch the same game as a labourer in the Bronx or a displaced schoolteacher in Sydney", (Cronin, 1979: 70). According to Kirsch *et al.*, (2000), the Irish Diaspora brought Gaelic games to all corners of America: "In 1888, an 'American Invasion of more than 50 athletes toured the United States, competing in hurling contests and track and field meets in several cities. All of this activity spurred the creation of the first Gaelic Athletic Association in the United States, organized in Chicago in 1890. In New York the Irish American Athletic Association yielded control of Gaelic football and hurling to the Irish Counties Athletic Union in 1904. The organisation later became known as the United Irish Counties. Ten year later a New York City branch of the GAA was founded and it took over the administration of that city's Irish sports. Unlike in Ireland in the late 1800's, the teams in New York and later in Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco were named not after counties, but after Irish nationalist leaders and patriots such as Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone", (2000: 174). Duggan (2004) portrays the importance of Irish GAA in New York by stating that "it is impossible to pigeon hole Gaelic games in New York. Like the very fact of Irish life in the city, it is too complex and deeply ingrained for that. It was to New York, after all, that Michael Cusack and Maurice Davin looked when trying to promote the organisation in 1888", (2004: 193).

#### **DISCUSSION AND MAIN FINDINGS**

According to Barrett (1997), the Gaelic Athletic Association the represented the core value of our culture for the majority of Irish people. This research has found that 66% of respondents determine that the success of the Gaelic Athletic Association is built on the sense of community spirit that is formed between the local parish club and the people within the community itself. The pride of the parish is something that is embedded deep within the culture of Gaelic games and the ability of the Gaelic Athletic Association to integrate hurling and football into the focal point of community spirit is one of the core values that attracts people within a community to want to play hurling and football and represent the community through participation with the parish club. "I suppose that it's the sense of community spirit. It's about belonging to something which is unusual and different". Skinner (2011) states that the "significance of children and families in the process of community engagement, and in the construction of sports as an element of civil society is the success of the GAA. A significant finding of the research was that the family traditions played a significant role in the attractiveness of Gaelic games. The passing of the games from generation to generation of family members has immense importance in the traditions of the Gaelic Athletic Association and there is immense honour in representing your family through Gaelic games. One participant notes that "from a very young age it was the pride of playing for St. Finbarr's that was the initial draw, and because my family was so involved in the club you become indoctrinated into it".

As outlined by O'Flynn (2007), "it is fair to say that friendship and the spirit of competition, rather than results, inspire the club". The ability of the Gaelic Athletic Association to develop links between the schools and the club help to strengthen the bonds between players because often, especially at a young age, the kids playing together on the hurling team will also be found in the same class in school. One respondent states that "it's the build up and the connection with the school from an early age, you know it's the first major attraction that is open to you as you are probably going to go with your friends".

40% of respondents in this study feel that where the historical importance of the Gaelic Athletic Association is not appreciated is among the younger generations, and that for "too many of them now, it's just a sport". The changes in Irish society through the boom years have played a part in how younger generations within the G.A.A. do not appreciate fully its historical importance. One respondent states that "a lot of children would have grown up through the Celtic Tiger, during the boom times and a lot of them didn't want for anything and they just don't seem to take in the whole aspect of the history behind the G.A.A".

This study examines the importance of social and cultural factors within the Gaelic Athletic Association and the relevance that they have in relation to Gaelic games in different regions in Ireland. As outlined by Jarvie (1999), it is important that "one must recognise that the Gaelic Athletic Association is a cultural as well as a sporting organisation", (1999:24). 80% of respondents felt that people within the Gaelic Athletic Association, link the pride

of playing Gaelic games to their own cultural background and it is defined as part of their own culture. The Gaelic Athletic Association has historically been associated with providing parishes all over Ireland the chance to compete equally irrelevant of social class. One respondent suggested that “coming from poor economic areas, traditionally, it was something that they could always compete with on a par with other area’s who would be seen to be more financially secure”.

McWilliams (2005) states that “the traditional urban / rural divide appears to be blurring. Go to a GAA match between Dublin and Meath and hear the number of Dublin supporters with children in Meath kit to get a flavor of just how much the old lines are blurring”, (2005:26). A finding of note in this study is that irrelevant of the rural and urban divide, it is the love of our national games and the rivalries that creates between clubs that define who we are in terms of the G.A.A. One contributor states that “the parochial nature of the rivalries is what makes every club or county in Ireland the most important one to its own people”. The development of strong parish links in smaller rural communities can help develop a tradition of involvement in Gaelic games, which s defined by another contributor who adds that “When you play a rural team you see how all the fella’s tend to stick together because the hurling and football means everything to the parish”. This is something which can be harder to develop in larger urban areas due to the competition with other sports and activities. Another respondent states that “when you have a bigger community it’s harder to keep that bond there among players”.

According to Allison (1986), the GAA in Northern Ireland has always been about creating clubs where political troubles can be forgotten and where both men and women can find sanctuary from the troubles. 60% of those interviewed believe that the counties in Northern Ireland have a defined cultural appreciation for Gaelic games because of the political situation that has evolved within the communities of Ulster. One contributor states that “the G.A.A. is culturally important to every part of Ireland but if you look at our present situation, we gained our independence from the British a long time ago now while the north of the island is still under occupation”. The importance that is attached to the Gaelic Athletic Association within the catholic communities in Ulster cannot be under estimated as it has become a visual aspect of their identity. One participant concludes that “in the north the G.A.A. club was the badge of identity for nationalists and Catholics in the six counties”.

According to the GAA Annual Report (2010), in relation to the club v county issue, it is stated that “we still need to see stronger leadership from county officers in defending the rights of the clubs and confronting county managers who are unreasonable in their demands to have first call on players for inter-county players”, (2010: 15). 100% of people interviewed expressed concern over the ability of the Gaelic Athletic Association to successfully manage the demands of the clubs as opposed to those of the county. One respondent states that “it is definitely hard to juggle the two because both are so organised now”. The problem stems from the fact that both the club and county teams are essentially drawing from the same pool of players, so trying to balance both demand streams brings significant problems. As another respondent concludes “it’s a uniquely Irish thing really that ever inter county player is a club player also”.

70% of respondents would be against the notion of developing elite inter county panels because of the traditions of Gaelic games which are steeped in the community and parish spirit. This would have an adverse affect on the relationship that the G.A.A. has built with the people of Ireland who do not want to see the ethos of Gaelic games compromised. One participant states “i think that would really destroy what the G.A.A. is all about because once you set up elite groups like that then I don’t think the public would buy into that”. The elite players will always exist in Gaelic games because of their ability to play the games, but the ethos of the G.A.A. is that every player and every club is equally important. Another contributor comments: “I just don’t think that you can say that you are going to play with Cork and you are not going to see your club, I just don’t think that’s going to be the case because your club is never going to progress”.

Sugden & Bairner (1993:43) outline that “there are elements of professionalism that will contaminate the amateur ethos which has been one of the Gaelic Athletic Association’s most important guiding principles for more than a hundred years”, (1993: 43). 100% of interviewees felt that the modern G.A.A. players, especially, at inter county level, would put the equivalent amount of commitment, preparation, time and sacrifice into their sport compared to the commitment given by professional sportsmen playing rugby or soccer. One contributor states that “in terms of preparation I would see a very small gap between what the amateur inter county G.A.A. player does and how he prepares for a game as opposed to the professional”. Peter (1999) concludes that “the

amateurism of Gaelic games symbolized the friendship and camaraderie in which games were meant to take place", (1999:171). A finding of note in this research is the importance placed on achieving success for the parish club with the friends you have grown up with since childhood. For players, to win a county championship in such a unique environment can be overwhelming. One club payer relays that "after playing together with lots of guys since we were 5 or 6, to actually get up to senior and win it with all the lads you grew up with was just an incredible feeling. I will just never forget it".

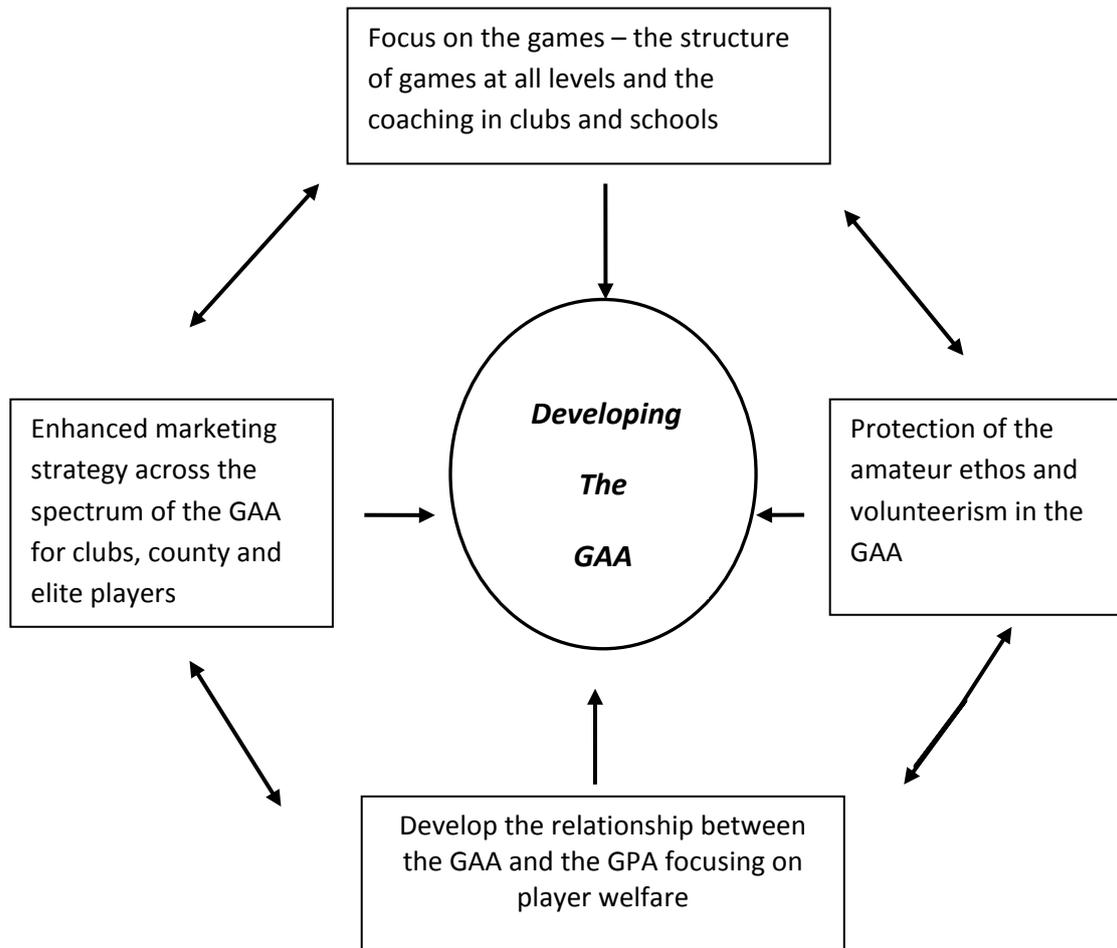
According to Davenport (2005) Gaelic games are integrated into the core of Irish culture and it is the Gaelic Athletic Association that is responsible for the fostering of these amateur games. 72% of respondents felt that the Gaelic Players Association was initially seen as a renegade group who would be a negative influence on the Gaelic Athletic Association. One interviewee relays that "it seemed to be initially an elite group of people who are somewhat renegade in their ways". 80% of people interviewed felt that once the objectives of the Gaelic Players Association were clarified they would support an increase in the development of player welfare: "the players are the people playing the game, they are the people out on the pitch winning the dirty ball, making the commitments coming from work straight to training so they should be looked after".

As outlined by Coakley & Gallagher (2010), the Gaelic Players Association has been the prominent organisation in highlighting the issue of player's welfare, even to the government level. A finding of note in this research is that while the majority of people would be in favour of complete retention of the amateur status. 75% of respondents were of the opinion there should an improved system in place in relation to player welfare. One participant states that "the G.A.A. and G.A.A. players are better served by remaining as amateurs. While saying that I believe that all the other structures should be put in place to make sure that players are looked after".

As outlined by Carey (2004), Croke Park is part of the Irish psyche, deeply embedded in the sporting culture of the county and the journey to Croke Park is seen as a pilgrimage. 100 % of respondents stated that Croke Park was one of the most important institutions of the G.A.A. "It's massive; it's the whole symbol in the G.A.A. of the past and what's gone on there". 43% of those interviewed state that they believe the Gaelic Athletic Association has done a satisfactory job in the marketing of Gaelic games at inter county level. As out lined by Armstrong *et al.*, (2010), hurling and Gaelic football are extremely marketable games because of the passion associated with the games and the influence of the Irish Diaspora abroad. One of the factors associated with this has been dealing with the issue of the tough economic climate that currently exists in Ireland. One participant concludes that "the most important thing for us this year is that we are seen to be doing something positive to reduce our prices, putting special packages in place for families, trying to maximize the number of people coming to our games and I think it has paid off for us". 38% of respondents conclude that the greatest success of the GAA has been volunteerism and the retention of the amateur ethos. One contributor sates that "to retain our voluntary status and to continue to be the hub of most communities has been core success of the GAA". Volunteerism has been the driving force behind every GAA club in Ireland: "the G.A.A. as an organisation has done most things right and continues to do most things right and it's because of that large volunteerism that permeates right throughout the length and breadth of the organsiation that has created that".

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**A Model for Practice  
'Protecting The Amateur Ethos'**



The findings from this current research have discovered immense potential for the further development of the GAA as an amateur organisation. This study examined the complexities of the GAA model and how it has grown indigenously into the one of the most successful amateur organisations in the world. The amateur ethos has been the core value of the GAA and that now represents one of its greatest challenges. In an age of evolving professionalism the GAA needs to enhance its cultural and sporting importance while embracing the opportunities that been uncovered in this study. Contributors to this study gave informed opinions on the complexities that are associated with the GAA, but also enhanced their views by making astute observations and suggestions for change and improvement that could result in a more robust and dynamic Gaelic Athletic Association.

The research study determined that there needs to be a redefined focus on the structure of games and coaching, especially at schools level. For the coaching process to improve the GAA has to develop a scenario where they have a presence in every school in the country for at least one hour per week to develop the skills of players and also enhance young people's attachment to the games of hurling and Gaelic football. The study has shown that there has become a malaise in relation to teachers taking school teams and this trend needs to be challenged by

the GAA at government level so that our national games have a continuous visible presence within the social structure of the school curriculum.

For the development of the games themselves the GAA must develop a structure whereby players, especially at club level, have a definitive program set down for matches that does not change during the course of the season. There needs to be a centralized structure developed and circulated by Croke Park that clearly defines the season for clubs similar to the structure for county games, so that club players can identify times in the season where they cannot have games suddenly imposed on them. Players should be able to determine at the start of the season their own structure of games and identify the periods of the season that can be set aside for holidays and family commitments.

The amateur ethos and volunteerism are the core values of the GAA and this research has found that there is no climate for change in regarding any deviation from the amateur ethos. The research in this study has proved that people do not have the appetite for a professional game, there is no appetite for the development of elite panels for the county teams, and the importance of the club to the community must ensure that there will not be a push for any form of professionalism. The GAA needs to continue to provide resources to the clubs to put structures in place to allow the volunteers to develop the young players through the clubs. Furthermore the continuous integration of the club and the community, especially the schools, will be key in enabling the GAA to continue to grow as an amateur organisation.

The relationship between the GAA and the GPA must become more dynamic. There are three main aspects to this relationship that must be kept in focus. Firstly the club player must be integrated into the strategic view of player welfare because as these findings show the club players are often affected most by the inadequacies of the GAA structures. The GAA has to develop structures for the club players by developing a club season that is in the interest of the club player and not just developed to suit the county team. Secondly, the elite players within the GAA should have a more prudent player welfare system available to them. These are the players who create the revenue that is created for the GAA through hurling and football, but as diverged in the findings, there is no payment for players or no drive currently for the introduction of professionalism. The GAA needs to develop a player welfare system that will protect the elite players, while always retaining the amateur ethos. The research has suggested the implementation of better education opportunities for elite players that would incorporate Elite Education Grants, the creation of a better club and county balance by a centralized directive from Croke Park, the creation of a players fund for county teams that would be based on a percentage of the revenue generated from a county's participation of championship games and the ability of players through the GPA to have a more direct input into the centralized decision process regarding the rules of hurling and Gaelic football. This current research study recommends a strategic review of the marketing policies implemented by the GAA. This research has clearly identified that there are many concerns for players, coaches and administrators on the marketing of the GAA. The marketing of county games needs to embrace the fixture process of the GAA so that games are constantly visualized through the media and broadcasters. The GAA must also implement a strategy for the creation of a 'player's brand' through the profiling of our elite players to build visual role models for young players. The GAA does not embrace the profile of its players in any meaningful way in comparison to rugby who constantly market their games by enhancing the profile of their elite stars such as Brian O'Driscoll and Paul O'Connell. The benefit of this strategy is that rugby can build links to young players through their most successful players; the GAA needs to address this issue. For the club games it is often left to the local media to promote local games, but the GAA need to develop a corporate marketing directive for provincial councils and county boards for the marketing of club games. This should embrace the use of social media and technology to provide a modern mechanism for people to access information on the GAA at a local level, and should include a directive from Croke Park for each club on the development of club websites. Technology can also play a major link in developing the existing links between the clubs and the Irish Diaspora abroad.

## **CONCLUSION**

The amateur ethos of the GAA has traditionally been the most distinct value associated with Gaelic games, but as an amateur organisation there are many challenges for the GAA in modern Ireland due to the emergence of professionalism in sport. Historically, the GAA has been the most successful sporting organisation in Ireland because the association promotes the national games of hurling and Gaelic football which have a unique cultural attachment to the country. Traditionally, the GAA would have been the games of choice for young people in

schools and the links fostered between schools and clubs determined a constant supply of young players for the GAA. Modern Ireland has brought with it the emergence of professional sports and the marketing machines that are attached to these organisations. The ability of sports such as rugby and soccer to profile their games and their brand had become a huge challenge for the GAA.

This study has determined that it is imperative for the future success of the GAA to protect and enhance its amateur ethos, but there is an immense opportunity to develop innovative strategies that will enhance the ability of the GAA to flourish in the age of professionalism. The marketing of the GAA needs to be refocused to become more visual all year, not just during the peak summer months of the championship and embrace the opportunity to promote the elite players as role models for the younger generations of players. The GAA has to protect the club and the club player by developing better strategies that will allow players to have a structured season without the constant postponement of club fixtures. The relationship between the GAA and GPA must be vigorously enhanced so that the shadow of professional does not hang over the GAA thus protecting the amateur ethos, but from the perspective of the elite players there must be a more dynamic system of player welfare implemented that recognises the contribution made by players at the elite level.

The innovation that is required to develop the GAA in the professional area must start fundamentally with the schools, to implement new strategies that embrace the challenge of professional sports competing for the traditional GAA market. The coaching structures at schools and club level for the younger players is critically important because it is through these structures that young players develop their love for hurling and Gaelic football, and establish their relationship with the parish club. The marketing expertise that sports such as rugby and soccer possess suggests that these games will continue to be a visual presence in Ireland and the GAA cannot underestimate the influence that high profile professional sports can have on the participation rates of the next generation of players.

The success of the GAA has been built on its ability to grow indigenously for over 127 years without ever losing focus of its critical success factors. Its success has been built around the ability of the GAA to protect the amateur status of Gaelic games and constantly reinforce the bond between the games and the people. In summary, the amateur ethos will remain crucial to the future success of the GAA because it will perpetually be the core value of Gaelic games, but it is aptitude of the GAA to use the amateur ethos as the catalyst for growth that will define its success in an age of growing professionalism in sport.

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