

GAELIC GAMES RISING UNDER THE GOLDEN GATE BRIDGE

Liam Reidy, San Francisco GAA PRO, on the development of a new home for the association, Treasure Island

Having had a life-long association with the GAA growing in the small village of Broadford in west Co. Limerick (bring on Crossmaglen Rangers! On Feb 21!), it was only when I moved permanently to the West coast of the US that I realised that many gaelic players in Ireland take their local GAA field for granted.



Young members of the Boys and Girls Club on Treasure Island wait for Gaelic Football practice to begin.

While many GAA clubs throughout the country have inherited playing fields from earlier generations of Gaels, only newly formed clubs know how difficult it is to acquire land for GAA activities.

This is especially true for new clubs with a short Gaelic games tradition, especially in the suburbs of large cities, that invariably take on the enormous task of raising money to acquire, develop and maintain playing fields. Field development is not an easy task, even where land and space is plentiful and comes at a reasonable price.

When I arrived to San Francisco in 1997, hurling and football matches were played in a variety of sports venues, which included local school fields that were invariably American football pitches, municipal and city parks, the famous Kezar stadium (former home of the San Francisco 49ers) and fields on an old Naval base at Treasure Island.

As a player (with the Naomh Padraig hurling and football club) I often wondered why the local GAA did not have its "own home".



Kerry natives, Philip McCarthy, Jimmy Cotter, Jim Barton (Keel, Co. Kerry), Pat Cooper, and Liam Lynch (Ballyduff, Co. Kerry)

After settling permanently in the city by the Bay, I soon realised that property and land values here in San Francisco made it virtually impossible for a small locally run amateur organisation to own its own fields. And so, the GAA here has always rented or leased fields to carry out the local championships.

Gaelic games in San Francisco are as old as the city itself. The first account of hurling here dates back to May 4th, 1853, when a local hurling match between a gathering of Irish men made frontpage headlines in the "Daily Alta California" newspaper in the rapidly expanding gold rush town.

Despite its long history of activity, (156 years and counting), the fate of Gaelic games here has waxed and waned over the years in response to emigration from Ireland, due mainly to world wars, political unrest in the north of Ireland, changing US immigration and political policy, and economic expansion in Ireland during the last decade.

However, back in 1994, the seeds of change in the San Francisco GAA community were sown, when a group of adult Gaelic Football players decided to change its philosophy on developing Gaelic games in the Bay area.

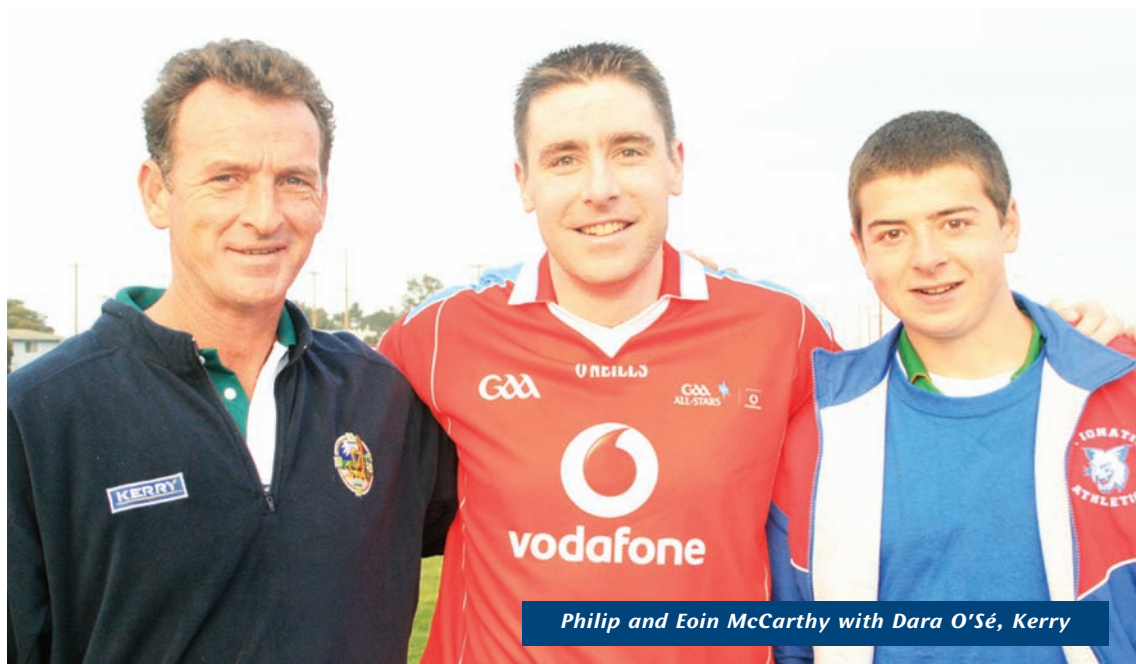
No longer could local teams depend on the infrequent influx of Irish born players, to preserve the games of the Gael in the city. Progressive members of the GAA decided it was necessary to start investing time and energy in setting up an underage GAA program to teach their children how to play Gaelic football and hurling. The approach was "Today's Juveniles are Tomorrow's Seniors."

And so from an initial group of 92 children in the spring of 1994, in addition to volunteers, coaches, coordinators, and parents all helped to form the Irish Youth Football League (IYFL). Today, the IYFL boasts about 800 underage Irish-American kids between the ages of six and 18, who play competitively.

In addition there are some 23,000 school kids (and growing) playing gaelic football throughout the year as part of their school sports curriculum programmes managed by the Catholic Youth Organization, the YMCA, and also by the Boys and Girls Club of America.

Much of this expansion has been achieved by our Gaelic Games Administrator, (GDA) Paul Bayly (formerly of St. Fechains, Co. Louth) who works full-time to develop Gaelic games programmes throughout the Bay area. Our GDA position is made possible with financial support from the GAA at Croke Park, Dublin, the North American and Western Divisional boards and IYFL.

In the recent past, hurling has exploded onto the scene at Bay area college campuses, including the world famous Stanford University and University of California, Berkeley. Both of these college teams play each other this spring in the very first intercollegiate GAA championship match. Much of this growth in hurling at third level colleges has been made possible by Co Armagh native, Eamonn Gormley.

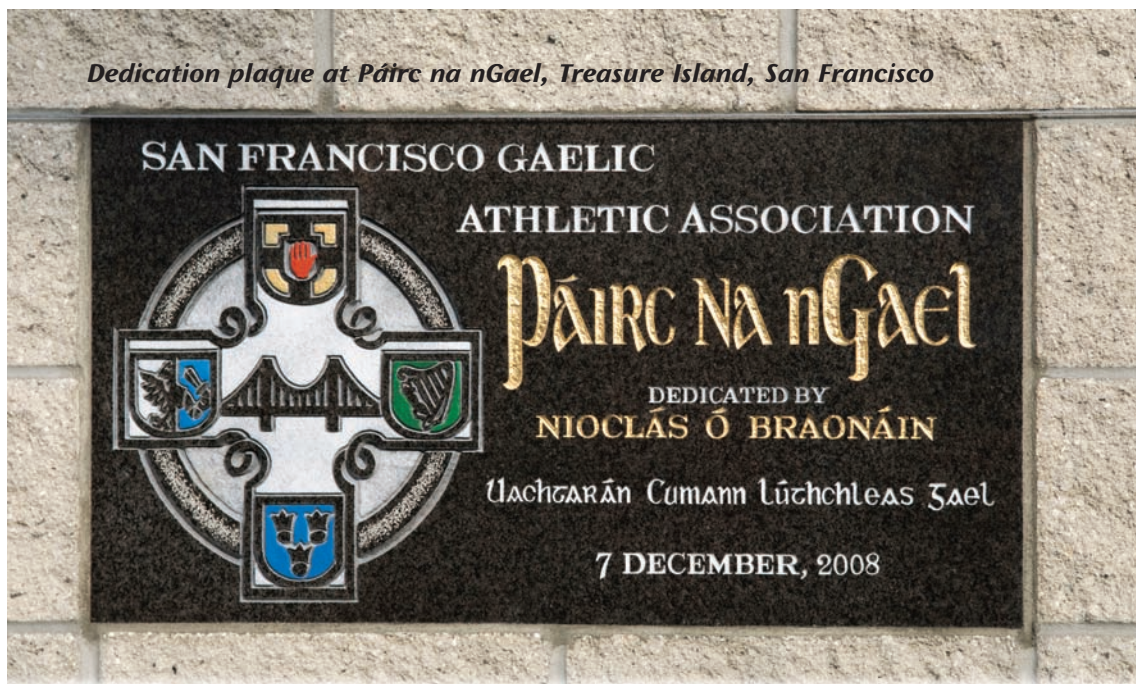


Philip and Eoin McCarthy with Dara O'Sé, Kerry



Tyrone's Sean Cavanagh at Treasure Island, San Francisco.
Photo by: Martin Lacey

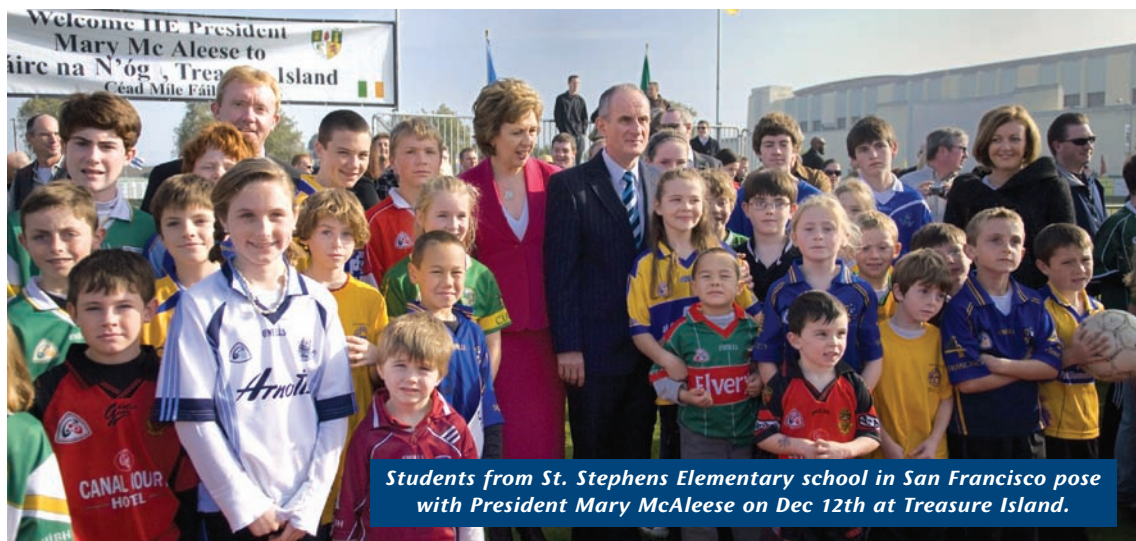
Dedication plaque at Páirc na nGael, Treasure Island, San Francisco



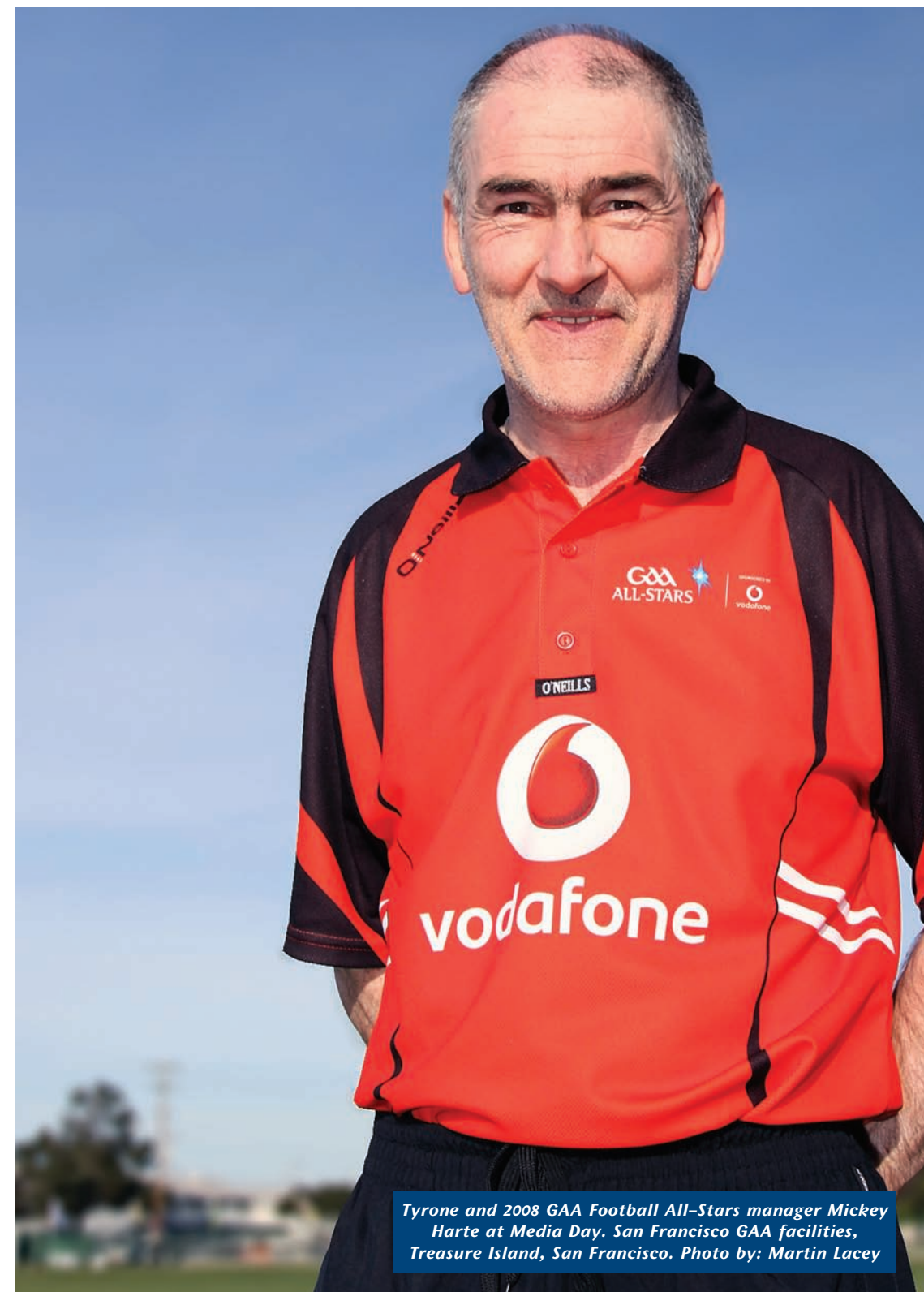
When you include the 400 adults actively registered with the 14 clubs in the San Francisco division (seven men’s football, four ladies football, two hurling, and one camogie club), available playing space becomes a challenge.

Need for Playing Fields

To meet the needs of our growing numbers, in late 2007, a board of directors was selected and formed the San Francisco Treasure Island Gaelic Athletic Association comprised of board members of the Western Divisional Board of the GAA and the Irish Football Youth League, along with community members.



Students from St. Stephens Elementary school in San Francisco pose with President Mary McAleese on Dec 12th at Treasure Island.



Tyrone and 2008 GAA Football All-Stars manager Mickey Harte at Media Day. San Francisco GAA facilities, Treasure Island, San Francisco. Photo by: Martin Lacey

We signed a lease with the city and county of San Francisco to acquire 13 acres of derelict land and former playing fields on Treasure Island (an island in San Francisco Bay which was formerly a US Naval base until its closure in 1997) to upgrade them for use as GAA playing fields.

The board commenced a \$5.2 million renovation of the playing fields in March of 2008. For the next six months, teams of volunteers, operators, and labourers toiled six days a week to plough the fields, amend the soils, and grade the playing surfaces to get the fields finished by late summer, so that the fields could be used for the 2008 All-Star Gaelic football tour last December.

This project was the largest of its kind undertaken by an Irish organization in the city since the construction of the United Irish Cultural Centre in the early 1970s.

Coalisland native and Brackaville Eoin Roe's clubman, Paul Campbell, owner of Powerscreen (Northern California) was delighted to be involved in the history-making project.

“It was a lot of hard work, getting everything organised and in place to successfully complete the work on time. Mountains of soil and rock were moved around, graded and reused in the project, and Powerscreen was glad to help out,” he said.

Paul was also involved with his Brackaville clubmate Seamus Canning in raising money for Phase One of the project. Canning declared that, “locals gave freely to the fundraising effort once word got out that we were actually moving ahead with the multi-million dollar project.”

There were a few skeptics in town-including Corkman and Bay Area GAA Hall of Famer, Dave Kenneally (who won a 1959 North American hurling championship title with San Francisco).

“I gave it a 5% chance of succeeding when I heard about the project—but once I saw it for myself what was going on with all the heavy equipment—I said to myself—these guys are serious and will actually get the thing done,” he said.

Fields project manager Mike D’Arcy from Mountrath, Co. Laois-said that, “these playing fields could very well be the legacy this generation leaves the Irish community just as the Irish Cultural Centre was for those before us.”

Funding for the Treasure Island fields project during the past year came from the GAA Overseas National Finance committee who contributed \$500,000, the Dept. of Foreign Affairs branch of the Irish government gave \$500,000, while the remainder came from the Irish-American community in the Bay area. However, much more fundraising needs to be done to pay off the debt taken on to renovate the fields.

The playing fields at Treasure Island-Páirc na nGael and Páirc na n-óg-were officially opened on Dec 7th and 12th respectively by GAA President Nickey Brennan and Mary McAleese, President of Ireland.

Next year in 2009, San Francisco GAA and its new fields host the Continental Youth Championships.

“Having the fields available for this competition will be an invaluable asset to host and run this competition,” said John O’Flynn, Chairman of the IFYL.

So the future of Gaelic games looks bright here in San Francisco having secured our new home on Treasure Island, but while the fate of the GAA in San Francisco down through the years has reflected emigration from Ireland, we have not seen a huge influx of, “new emigrants” lately due to the downturn in the Irish economy, however-Neosfaidh an aimsir!-Time will Tell!

For more information go online to www.sfgaa.org



Action from an underage match at Treasure Island on Sunday Dec 7th, 2008