

GAA Oral History Project

Interview Report Form

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| Name of Interviewer | Paul Kelly |
| Date of Interview | 19/12/2012 |
| Location | 1 Woodville Grove, Lurgan |
| Name of Interviewee (Maiden name / Nickname) | James Smyth "Jimmy" |
| <u>Biographical Summary of Interviewee</u> | |
| Gender | Male |
| Born | Year Born: 1949 Home County: Down |
| Education | Primary: St. Peter's Primary School Lurgan-Waringstown Primary School Secondary: St. Colman's College, Newry Third Level: St. Joseph's C.O.F.E., Belfast |
| Family | Siblings: 1 Sister |
| Club(s) | Clan na Gael [Armagh] |
| Occupation | School Teacher |
| Parents' Occupation | Labourer |
| Religion | Roman Catholic |
| Political Affiliation / Membership | N/A |
| Other Club/Society Membership(s) | N/A |

REFERENCE NO. DN/1/15

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| Date of Report | 29 th August 2012 |
| Period Covered | 1966-2011 |
| Counties/Countries Covered | Armagh, Down, Derry, Tyrone, Cavan, Monaghan, Longford, Galway, Dublin, Cork, Kerry, Roscommon |
| Key Themes Covered | Travel, Supporting, Grounds, Facilities, Playing, Training, Managing, Coaching, Refereeing, Officials, Administration, Celebrations, Commiserations, Fundraising, Sponsorship, Material Culture, Education, Religion, Media, Emigration, Involvement in GAA abroad, Role of Clergy, Role of Teachers, Role of the Club in the Community, Volunteers, GAA Abroad, Identity, Rivalries, All-Ireland, Club History, County History, Irish History, Earliest Memories, Family Involvement, Childhood, Impact on Life, Career, Challenges, Northern Ireland, Ban on Foreign Games and Dances, Professionalism, Retirement, Socialising, Relationships |
| Interview Summary | <p>Jimmy Smyth begins the interview by discussing his upbringing in Co. Down and his experience and enjoyment of the game of Cricket. His introduction to Gaelic games came in school and Smyth charts his development as a footballer, especially in St. Colman's in Newry. He sets out in detail St. Colman's successful quest for a MacRory and Hogan Cup title and sheds light on the place that Gaelic games occupied within the school, with an emphasis on the training, the special treatment afforded to players and the reception they received in Newry on winning the Hogan Cup. The colleges' scene in Ulster is well covered in the interview, not least because of Smyth choice of teaching as a career. He talks about the influence on him – and many others – of Derry's Jim McKeever while a student at St. Joseph's teacher training college and also outlines his ongoing involvement with underage football through his work at St. Paul's in Lurgan and his involvement with Ulster Vocational Schools Committee.</p> <p>The move of the Smyth family from Warrenstown in Co. Down to Lurgan in Co. Armagh is discussed as the early engagement of Jimmy with the Clan na Gael club in the town. Smyth was part of a remarkably successful Clan na Gael team which won three Ulster club titles in a row in the early 1970s and he recalls games, players and various incidents over the course of these years. The success of the 'Clans' did not translate to the inter-county scene and Smyth discusses the lowly status of Armagh football in the early 1970s and the reasons for its resurrection as the decade progressed. The resurgence in fortunes peaked with an All-</p> |

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| | <p>Ireland appearance in 1977 and this game and the excitement around it are recalled, as are Armagh narrow defeat to Roscommon in the 1980 All-Ireland semi-final. On retiring from county football in 1981, Smyth moved into management with his club and returned in a supportive/advisory role with the Armagh team. From the 1990s, he also moved into broadcasting on GAA matches for the BBC and not along does he outline how this came about, he recalls the great games he commentated upon, including Armagh's 2002 All-Ireland success. The interview concludes with short reflections on a diverse range of topics – from the changes in facilities and the treatment of players to attempts to curtail supporters entering onto Croke Park in the aftermath of All-Ireland finals.</p> <p>00:00:20 Jimmy Smyth is introduced as a great Clan na Gael club person, All-Star, Armagh, Ulster footballer.</p> <p>00:00:35 Interviewer notes that Smyth, an 'Armagh icon', was born in Co. Down.</p> <p>00:00:49 Introduction to sport through cricket, playing Warrenstown up to and including the Graham Cup, which was under 15. Played alongside the Harrisons and Michael Reith, well known cricketers. Says his last game of cricket was in 1967, the day before the Armagh minor final. Mentions enjoyment of cricket and the fact that the game was 'an illegal activity as far as the GAA was concerned.'</p> <p>00:02:00 Talks about being introduced to Gaelic football in primary school by Gerry Fagan, his teacher and later Armagh county secretary.</p> <p>00:02:38 Recalls breaking finger and playing alongside Colm McKinsty. Mentions that he lived in Warrenstown in Down and attended St. Peter's College, Lurgan. Mentions moving to Lurgan and also his years as a 'boarder in St. Colman's, Newry.</p> <p>00:03:42 Comments on the difficulties of travel and the choice of going to school locally or boarding.</p> <p>00:04:15 Discusses the first year leagues in St. Colman's and where they trained. Mentions the MacRory cup team that won in 1963, eventually losing a St. Mel's team on which Liam Mulvihill played. Names other players who played on the 1963 MacRory Cup teams.</p> <p>00:05:20 Comments on the high standard of football in the school, his lack of involvement in underage football.</p> |
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| | <p>00:05:50 Discusses the 'accident' that brought him to join Clan na Gael. Tells story of how he went to play with one club and ended up another in 1966.</p> <p>00:07:30 Mentions not making teams in other clubs in the mid 1960s. Recalls Fr. Taggart making a 'pleasant remark' after he saw him in training and the impact this had on him.</p> <p>00:08:58 Recalls trying out for the Ranafast and MacRory cup teams – playing MacRory Cup at corner forward in 1966 and 1967.</p> <p>00:09:10 Talks about delight of making school team, about the role of team trainer Fr. John Trainor, a former pupil who came to Violet Hill in the 1950s. Recalls participating in a tournament in St. Malachy's in Belfast and the arrival of a new teacher, Gerry O'Neill, later Armagh manager and a brother of Northern Ireland soccer player and Premiership manager, Martin O'Neill. O'Neill was a former Sigerson and Derry player who brought new ideas.</p> <p>00:10:50 Fr. Trainor is described as a traditionalist, but it is noted that views are also to be found as an underpinning philosophy in the Crossmaglen success story. It is also mentioned that the same core principles informed Burren's All-Ireland club success and St. Colman's MacRory Cup successes. Smyth comments that what Fr. Trainor preached was 'so simple and so basic, and so right'.</p> <p>00:11:54 Recalls playing St. Pat's Armagh in MacRory cup final in Dundalk. Names some of the players on the same team, including John Purdy and Peter Rooney, who later won All-Irelands with Down; and Con Daly, who later a career in Irish League soccer; and Frank Toman, then only 14.</p> <p>00:13:00 Recalls playing training game in Drogheda prior to Hogan Cup semi-final and being moved to defence. Resulted in his positional move to defence.</p> <p>00:13:38 Hogan Cup final versus St. Jarlath's, Tuam in Mullingar, April 1967. Won by a point.</p> <p>00:14:28 Remembers the lead up to the Hogan Cup final, Fr. Trainor's Hogan Cup dream, life in a boarding school in the 1960s. Mentions the improved food provision for Hogan Cup team, training after mass in the morning at 8 am, 'stamina' training.</p> <p>00:16:13 Recalls the morning of the Hogan Cup final and Fr. Trainor bringing team into a dormitory and setting out 'gold'</p> |
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| | <p>and 'silver' tops from milk bottles.</p> <p>00:17:30 Triumphant return after winning Hogan Cup. Being paraded through Newry on a lorry and back to college.</p> <p>00:18:00 Talks about winning MacRory Cup again in 1968 and the teams beat along the way. Playing Belcamp in Hogan Cup semi-final in Croke Park and losing a 5 point lead with 2 minutes left. Refers to the sense of disappointment.</p> <p>00:20:10 Mentions that there were more Armagh than Down players on his St. Colman's MacRory cup winning team.</p> <p>00:20:43 Discusses the impact of the 'Education Act' on Ulster football – the response of the Down county board in using the secondary schools, Banbridge and Castlewellan, to train Down senior team. Mentions St. Paul's Lurgan, opened in 1962, and playing in the Down leagues.</p> <p>00:22:23 Links the 'strength of Clan na Gael' with St. Paul's, Lurgan and lists the players who came through it.</p> <p>00:22:45 Mentions arriving in Clan na Gael and playing Minor among these players, who were managed by Harry McGarry.</p> <p>00:22:53 Refers to juvenile success of the 'Clans' who won 3 Juvenile's in a row – then proceeded to win 3 Minor championships in a row, 1965-67.</p> <p>00:23:01 Refers to Jim Burns from Fermanagh, who would practice his free-kicking. Mentions other players on team and his own position as a forward for the Clans.</p> <p>00:24:40 Describes his 'short-lived' experience as an Armagh minor.</p> <p>00:25:50 Leaving St. Colman's and going to train as a teacher and meeting Jim McKeever. Credits McKeever with 'shaping Gaelic football in Ulster between 1960 and the present day' and explains why. He brought a 'concept of coaching Gaelic football' and the influence he had on those who coached teams in Ulster schools. McKeever's philosophy was brought into schools throughout the province.</p> <p>00:28:00 Talks about the quality of players who attended the 'Ranch' – the St. Joseph's teaching trainer college – and their record in college's competition.</p> <p>00:30:38 Beginning to play senior football with Clan na Gael. Recalls being watching a Davitt Cup match and being asked to play.</p> |
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| | <p>[00:31:10 Sound is interrupted temporarily by static from a mobile phone and again 00:32:20]</p> <p>00:33:10 Talks about the Clans management when he started playing senior football.</p> <p>00:33:30 Refers to the playing Crossmaglen and their reputation in Armagh football at the time. Beating Clann Éireann in the 1968 County final and the subsequent 'Battle of Coalisland' against Ardboe.</p> <p>00:34:30 Aftermath of the 'Battle of Coalisland' – the suspension of players, fielding the junior team in all competitions and winning every game, the return of suspending players and losing first match.</p> <p>00:35:10 Beating Crossmaglen in county final of 1969 and the introduction of rule 'if you don't train, you don't play.'</p> <p>00:36:10 The 'great run' of Clan na Gael in the early 1970s.</p> <p>00:36:17 Mentions that he was briefly in London in the summer of 1971, when he won a British championship with Sean Treacy's. Refers to the exiles interest in Gaelic football and to meeting, many years later, the referee who officiated in their London final against Parnells. Smyth alleges that Parnells fielded 14 illegal players.</p> <p>00:37:40 Discusses the Ulster club final of 1971: recalls the loss to Bellaghy and how good a team they were.</p> <p>00:38:38 Reflects on winning the Ulster football championship in 1972, 1973 and 1974 – considers the opposition and the players who lined out with them, including Frank McGuigan for Ardboe.</p> <p>00:39:34 Tells story about changing before big game in Irvinestown and players singing 'Here, here, the blues are here' and the reaction in the neighbouring dressingroom.</p> <p>00:40:27 Reflects on Clan na Gael's performances in All-Ireland club championships – losing to St. Vincent's of Dublin in 1972 in Croke Park; defeating star-studded UCC team (who walked from train station to ground) in 1973 semi-final and losing to 'inter-county' UCD team in replayed final.</p> <p>00:42:34 Interviewer and interviewee consider the media coverage – newspaper and television - of the 1973 club final.</p> <p>00:43:10 Discusses playing for Armagh from 1968 when Clan na Gael players were brought in – recalls his first games.</p> |
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REFERENCE NO. DN/1/15

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| | <p>00:44:24 Talks about attitude of players to training, reaching the 1971 Ulster final against Derry and the newspaper representation of both teams.</p> <p>00:44:54 Playing for Armagh in 1972, with Gerry O'Neill as manager.</p> <p>00:45:13 Contrasts success of Clan na Gael with lowly status of Armagh team – mentions only 13 players turning up for a National League game against Leitrim. Arrival of Peter Makem and return of Gerry O'Neill and John Morrison as trainers in 1975.</p> <p>00:46:15 Talks about the transformation in Armagh's fortunes: reaching Division 3 final in 1976.</p> <p>00:47:20 Restoration of confidence and championship losses to Derry in 1975 and 1976.</p> <p>00:47:40 Discusses the championship of 1977: placing on bet on themselves; beating Cavan, Monaghan, Derry to Ulster championship. Recalls interview with the BBC.</p> <p>00:49:55 Talks about All-Ireland semi-final versus Roscommon, drawn game and replay. Refers to preparations (including practicing frees) for the games and describes passages of action in both games.</p> <p>00:52:48 Preparations for the All-Ireland final: talks about the excitement in the county, media interest, crowds attending training, flags in Lurgan town, the team walking in front of Armagh supporters in front of the Canal End, the first all ticket final.</p> <p>00:54:45 Reflections on All-Ireland final day: the rain prior to game; Dublin staying in the dressingroom; Jimmy Keaveney's goal; the quality of the Dublin team; Armagh's second half performance.</p> <p>00:55:55 Recalls Joe Kernan's assessment that not all Armagh players believed they could win in 1977.</p> <p>00:56:27 Rues the missed opportunity to win an All-Ireland in 1980, when they lost All-Ireland semi-final to Kerry.</p> <p>00:57:19 Discusses his decision to retire from inter-county football in 1981.</p> <p>00:57:35 Mentions being asked back to help with the Armagh forwards in 1982.</p> <p>00:58:00 Returning to coach forwards in 2000-2001 and</p> |
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| | <p>reflections on the games played in the course of that campaign, in particular the game with Galway.</p> <p>01:00:18 Taking over as Clan na Gael player/manager in 1980. Winning county championship in 1980 and 1981.</p> <p>01:02:50 Talks about teaching in St. Paul's, Lurgan and his early involvement in Gaelic games. Recalls taking team away to play – and beat - St. Mark's, Warrenpoint. Mentions subsequent loss in an Ulster under 14 final.</p> <p>01:04:50 Talks about his desire to win an Ulster title with St. Paul's. Recalls being beaten in 1988 final where 5 players went on to play with Armagh in 1992 All-Ireland minor final.</p> <p>01:05:11 Finally winning Ulster colleges title in 1999 and again in 2001. Mentions Mark Wilson, a member of 2001 team, who later played for Stoke.</p> <p>01:05:35 Discusses other St. Paul's players who went on to play Premiership football – Pat McGibben, Neil Lennon ('a brilliant Gaelic player).</p> <p>01:06:06 Mentions Croke Park Skills Initiative in 1980 and the involvement of the Lurgan clubs with St. Paul's.</p> <p>01:06:50 Administration: discusses his involvement on various Clan na Gael committees from 1972 onwards and more especially, through the Vocational Schools.</p> <p>01:07:00 Reference is made to being Chairman and Secretary of Vocational Schools Committee. Explains the reasons for the setting up of the committee – refers to the secondary school network in Armagh and the involvement of other notables in the Armagh committee, including Seamus Mallon, MP.</p> <p>01:08:28 Recalls the importance of the Ulster Vocational Schools receiving sponsorship from Ulster Bank, then in its 15th year. Refers to its value to the Ulster Bank and what they brought to it.</p> <p>01:09:20 Mentions GAA decision to abandon Ulster Vocational Schools competition. Attitude to Vocational Schools is contrasted with that to the Colleges.</p> <p>01:10:20 Talks about the reasons for the improved standard of schools and colleges football – pays credit to teachers and to the coaches from the Ulster Coaching Committee. Mentions seeing the value of the coaching on younger children leaving Primary schools.</p> |
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| | <p>01:11:30 Discusses the involvement of clubs, county and schools in creating better players.</p> <p>[00:11:50 Interview is temporarily interrupted by a phone call]</p> <p>01:13:00 Talks about being rang by the head of BBC Sport and beginning work as a broadcaster in 1983. Recalls flying to Cork for All-Ireland semi-final replay, Cork V Dublin. Tells story of arriving at ground in a black limousine and being confused with Charles Haughey.</p> <p>01:15:30 Moving from radio to match commentary in 1990 and the following year BBC winning rights to cover Ulster championship.</p> <p>01:16:20 Comments on how BBC helped elevate the quality of Gaelic games coverage. Mention the coincidence of live coverage with the rise of Ulster football.</p> <p>01:17:20 Comments on maintaining neutrality when commentating and selects his 2 greatest games: Down V Derry in 1991 Ulster semi-final and the point by Eamon Burns; 1994 Ulster championship first round, Down V Derry.</p> <p>01:19:48 Interviewing Eamon Coleman in 2003 and lamenting the absence of a 'back-door' system in 1994.</p> <p>01:20:34 Interviewer recalls returning defeated from a League final in 1994 with a Down supporter.</p> <p>01:20:57 Discusses rise in Armagh football from 1999: recalls the impact of Maurice Fitzgerald on Armagh's ambitions in 2000; losing to Galway in 2001; and returning in 2002.</p> <p>01:22:22 Talks about the drama of the Armagh-Dublin semi-final in 2002.</p> <p>01:22:50 Talk about 1953 in the count-down to the 2002 final, Oisín McConville missing a penalty and later scoring a goal. Recalls various incidents in the 2002 final and commentating on the final moments.</p> <p>01:24:55 Arrival of satellite television: tells story of broadcasting over 1 million people in the early 1990s, pre-Setanta.</p> <p>01:25:50 Being approached by Setanta to commentate on games.</p> <p>01:26:19 Interviewer tell story of being in Nairobi on business and watching Armagh play Fermanagh on television.</p> |
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REFERENCE NO. DN/1/15

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| | <p>01:26:26 Tells story of getting a call from San Francisco to correct a reference made in a match commentary, 1993.</p> <p>01:27:16 Assesses the relative quality of Gaelic football in the 1970s and 1980s. Remarks on changes in conditions for players, quality of facilities (mentions washing in a river when in St. Colman's), jerseys, training kit etc.</p> <p>01:29:44 Interviewer, who is involved with the Armagh senior team, tells story of expectations of modern players.</p> <p>01:30:00 Smyth recalls attitude towards keeping or swapping jerseys in his playing days.</p> <p>01:30:20 Comments on the practice of supporters running onto field after All-Ireland finals and GAA efforts to curtail it.</p> <p>01:31:51 Discusses the GPA.</p> <p>01:33:00 Interviewer pays credit to GAA President, Christy Cooney, for his recognition of ex-players.</p> <p>01:33:20 Talks about his involvement in the 'Seat for Life' initiative.</p> <p>01:35:05 Mentions what the GAA has meant to him and his advice to his son.</p> |
| <p>Involvement in GAA</p> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> Supporter <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Player <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Manager <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Coach <input type="checkbox"/> Steward</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chairperson <input type="checkbox"/> Committee Member <input type="checkbox"/> Grounds-person</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Caterer <input type="checkbox"/> Jersey Washer <input type="checkbox"/> Referee <input type="checkbox"/> None</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify): _____</p> |
| <p>Record as a Player (Titles won; Length of time played)</p> | <p>1966-1985. McRory-Hogan Cup-Ryan Cup-College, University</p> <p>9 Senior Championships and 3 Ulster Club-with club</p> <p>2 Ulster Senior, 3 National League, Railway Cup, All-Star-County</p> |
| <p>Record as an Administrator (Positions held; how long for)</p> | <p>Armagh Vocational School's Committee 1971-2011</p> <p>Ulster Vocational School's Chairman-1993 to 2010. Secretary 2011</p> |

REFERENCE NO. DN/1/15

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| Format | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Audio <input type="checkbox"/> Audio-Visual |
| Duration | Length of Interview: 01:35:47 |
| Language | English |

To be filled in by Interviewer:

I hereby assign the copyright of the content of the above to the GAA Oral History Project on the understanding that the content will not be used in a derogatory manner. I understand that I am giving the GAA Oral History Project the right to use and make available to the public the content of this interview.

Signed: _____

Date: _____