



**KILLARNEY  
ATHLETIC A.F.C.**

## **THE FOUNDATION AND FORMATION OF KILLARNEY ATHLETIC SOCCER CLUB 1965**

### **AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNT BY DAN HARRINGTON**

#### **The First Days of the Club – 1965**

In September 1964 I joined the Garda and trained at Templemore. Then in January 1965 on the completion of training I was posted as a Garda to Killarney; my 19<sup>th</sup> birthday had just passed. My duties in those early days of my career included foot patrol in Killarney Town Centre.

It was one afternoon in the spring of 1965 that I was patrolling High Street when I saw a group of youths playing soccer in the public car park at the junction of High Street and the Tralee Road. The car park was known locally as the 'Sand Pit Car Park' now the High St Car Park.

I walked into the car park and the immediate reaction from the youths was to start running away. Three of four stayed behind, Donagh Gleeson being one, and I spoke with them. They told me that they were schoolboys from St Brendan's College. I asked why some of the boys had run away and I was told "we were going to run away too because when anyone in authority or from the GAA sees us playing soccer in the car park they tell us off in no uncertain manner".

I told them that I was a soccer player myself and that the following day I would be finished my morning shift at 2pm and that I would come and join in with them for a kick around in the car park. This I did, and we had our first session together. I cannot remember whether I played for the The Oranges or The Bananas but I do remember that Donagh Gleeson, Kieran O' Brien, Tom 'Sossy' Mullins, possibly Don O' Donoghue and others were there. Apologies for exclusion of names.

After that, occasionally, I continued to play with them in the Sand Pit Car Park. I recall also, at other times when I was on patrol in the town and the boys were on their way home from school, informal meetings and chats about a soccer club took place at the Market Cross.

Later on that year more formal meetings took place in the town hall. I was given a room free of charge and it was at these meetings, particularly in the winter of 1965/66 that the plans for the future took place. It was mainly younger players who attended but were also joined by some slightly older boys such as Sean O' Donoghue, John Sparling and 'Big' Jim O' Sullivan. The large Hilliard's shop on Main Street allowed us to advertise in their shop window – mainly about meetings and get-togethers.

As the weeks progressed through the spring and summer of 1965, Mr O' Brien, a builder and father of Kieran (one of the youths) gave us permission to train and play on a patch of land that he owned

next to the St Finan's Hospital wall and at the back entrance of the GAA ground (now Torc Terrace). I remember that scaffolding poles were used as goalposts. However, the strip of land was too narrow for a full size pitch. Nonetheless, we were delighted and grateful for his kind offer and it was here that the players in the U16/minor teams were trained and developed.



**picture 1 names to be confirmed**

### **First Match**

In the summer of 1965 we had a nucleus of U16 and U17 players in the club. A match was set up with Listowel U16. We had no kit, but the players had their own shorts, socks and boots and I borrowed a dozen blue T-shirts from my colleagues at the Garda station in Killarney. All Gardai were issued with 2 blue t-shirts at the time and as some of the shirts were X-large we didn't use all of them, so the team ended up in a mixture of colours. The game was played on the Gaelic football pitch used by St Brendan's (the old 'Sem' field on New Road, now the Community College) and with the Gaelic goalposts in place.

One of our players on that Sunday played minor football for Kerry the following Sunday. I will not name the player but leave it to the memory of his playing colleagues as to whom he was.

## **Club Name**

Throughout 1965 we played probably only one or two matches as we were still only getting the club off the ground. As the months rolled by and following the meetings in the town hall, the club was getting more organised. To raise funds we decided to run a Flag Day collection. We applied for the Garda permit which was granted for the Sunday following Easter Sunday 1966. Donagh Gleeson was always in favour of us going with the name 'Killarney Athletic'. In our discussions, particularly with the GAA's ban on soccer, the word 'athletic' sounded more appropriate for the sale of flags as there was no mention of the word 'soccer'. So it was confirmed and agreed that the club would be called 'Killarney Athletic'. The flag days in 1966 and 1967 were an excellent success and formed a sound financial basis for the future of the club. Donagh Gleeson also became the first treasurer of Killarney Athletic and continued in the role post 1969, the time of my departure from Killarney. Donagh helped me a lot with the organisation of the club in those early years.

## **The Acquisition of Killarney Athletic's 1<sup>st</sup> Home Pitch – The Half Moon**

One day in early 1966, I was walking through the Demesne when I noticed some Gaelic goalposts on the land that I later learnt was loaned by Mr McShain to the seminary (St Brendan's). From enquiries, I became aware that the solicitor Michael Casey was the solicitor for the estate. I knew Mr Casey professionally from his work at the local district court and I asked him if he would ask Mr McShain for the use of a pitch on the estate in order that the youth of the town could play soccer. In early 1966 Mr Casey contacted me and told me that Mr McShain was delighted to give a pitch to the youth of the town to play soccer. He stipulated that when we picked a location for the pitch that we should not encroach on the pitches already allocated for the seminary boys to play on. Mr McShain had also said that the Killarney youths could have the pitch free of charge for as long as they wished to play soccer on it. The Killarney National Park took control of the lands in the early/mid 80s again through the generosity of the McShain family.

Mr Casey asked that once we had selected the piece of land that we thought appropriate for our needs that I should inform Mr Michael Downey, a member of Mr McShain's staff who looked after the land and was a resident at the Lodge House (the entrance was better known as the 'Golden Gates'). I was asked to tell him of our selection and to show him the area we had selected.

Mr Downey accompanied me to the Half Moon field and I pointed out to him the area we would use as a pitch and Mr Downey regularly cut the grass on the pitch for us.

Within a few weeks of getting use to the Half Moon field, Donagh Gleeson and I selected a location in the centre of the field. The ground was flat and it was well away from the trees and a long distance from the area allocated to St Brendan's. We measured out a full size pitch and then went on to line it. At the same time other purchased the wood for the goalposts in Castleisland. The wood was cut to make full size goals by a Mr O'Mahony whose son Paudie played with us. Goal nets were obtained from a trawler man in Fenit. So, our first goal nets were in fact sea fishing nets. Nonetheless, the nets did an adequate job for a number of years.



picture 2 Front L/R -Sean O'Donoghue, Johnny Heffernan, Dan Harrington, Don O'Donoghue, Pat Doody,  
Back L/R - John Sparling, Byran Holmes, Jim O'Sullivan, Donagh Gleeson, Roland Stinakar, Donie Doyle.

### **Memories of our Home Games**

Because of the tourist attraction of Killarney, all the teams in the Desmond League loved the games in Killarney and many of them brought their families with them for the day out.

I remember that for most of our home matches we seemed to get the same referee. Our enquiries found that his wife had connections in Killarney and the small fee he got helped towards their expenses for the day out.

I also recall that Glasheen Rovers minor team from Cork City also came in for a game. This came about as I had played once for Glasheen minors when I lived in Cork. Barry McGann the famous Irish rugby out-half played for Glasheen on that day.

Later, I also arranged for another junior team from Cork City to come to Killarney for a game. Again I would have had a lot of connections with clubs I played with and against.

### **Attention from the GAA and County Board**

From the outset and throughout my time running the club, at no time did I have any personal confrontation or objection from anyone in Killarney. This includes the GAA executive members or

local councillors and I can also say that for my Garda superiors. But we were obviously making enough of an impression to draw their attention and concern.

By 1966 and 1967 the club was well established. We had minor and junior teams registered and playing in the Desmond League. Older players had joined the club. These include people like Johnny Heffernan who came from Dublin and was married in Killarney; Sean O' Donoghue, John Sparling, Don O' Donoghue, Greg Collins, the Culligan brothers; Rinhart Stinakar and his brother Hans (both Germans who worked in The Hotel Europe); and I was player-manager in the team where Sean Dorgan was the regular goalkeeper at that time.

Once the pitch was set up and we were registered to Desmond League, we played our first 'official' junior match in Killarney. For the first time this stirred up concern from both local politicians and the GAA board. The GAA ban of course was in place.

Unknown to me, a representative of the GAA county board approached the Garda chief superintendent Donovan in Tralee and requested that I should be transferred out of Killarney to protect their GAA ethos and to protect the youth of Killarney from being deflected from the GAA by the introduction of 'official soccer' in Killarney for the first time.

The immediate consequence was that as far as I was concerned, 'out of the blue', I was to be transferred to Ballyduff in North Kerry. A date was set and I had to prepare to go.

In the meantime one of my sergeants told me of the background of the situation. At the same time as running and playing for Killarney Athletic, I was assisting the Presentation Convent Girls' debating team, who eventually won the Munster Final. The theme of the topics for debate was road safety. Hence, my input and help to the debating team was to help them understand traffic law and Highway Code, together with examples of road traffic offences and how the Garda dealt with road traffic accidents and traffic control.

One of my sergeants suggested that I should go and see Fr Sheehan, the bishop's representative and tell him that despite my contribution to the good of the young people of Killarney that the GAA county board had approached my chief superintendent in Tralee and asked for me to be transferred from Killarney to North Kerry. I did see Fr Sheehan and discussed the situation with him.

The outcome of the discussion was that on the morning of my proposed transfer, as I was packing to catch the train to Tralee, one of my sergeants came to my bedroom in the Garda barracks. He told me that the transfer had been cancelled and that I was to work the afternoon shift on town patrol that day.

Of course, the previous evening I had a 'going away' night out with the team who gave me a present of an electric razor. There was surprise and great celebrations when I met the young players as I was on patrol that day and at subsequent meetings. I informed them that the 'dream would live on'. We continued to play in the Desmond League and everything came back to normal.

Sometime later a strange thing happened; I was on patrol in College Street when I was approached by Pat O' Meara. Pat was a licensee in College Street and an ardent GAA and Legion man. He said that he wished to apologise to me for his involvement with the GAA issues and that he did not know at the time that I was the Garda involved. By now I was married and renting a house in Fair Hill. As a

token of apology Pat offered me one of his houses to rent in Lewis Road. Having thanked him for his generous offers (houses were hard to find for rent in Killarney), I told him that I did not need the house at the time. I told him that one of our players, who came from Dublin and had married a local woman, was looking to rent. Subsequently Pat rented the house to them.

I had great respect for the man for realising that he had erred in his view of my role in promoting soccer to the youth of Killarney at the time.

#### **40 Years Later**

On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the formation of the club (2005), I was with club members when we were entertained by the Town Council at Killarney Town Hall where the club were given a civic reception to mark the sporting contribution the club had made to Killarney. It was then that I learned of a reference in the town council minutes in 1966 about the concerns of the councillors for the 'first official' soccer match played in Killarney. On the occasion of the visit, it was great to see that attitudes towards soccer and the views held in the mid-1960s had disappeared from council members and that soccer was part of the hearts and minds and culture of the people of Killarney.



**picture 3 back l/r - Brian McCarthy, Donie Doyle, Pat Doody, Joe Grant, Noel Clifford, Greg Collins, Donagh Gleeson, Philip Culligan & Don O'Donoghue, front l/r - Sean Culligan, tbc, Don Harrington, Jim O'Sullivan & Brendan Culligan.**



## **Continued Progress**

With my transfer issue out of the way I was able to continue to steer the club as it flourished with a juvenile team, a minor team and also a regular junior league team. The older more mature players included: Brian McCarthy from Dublin,; as well as Greg Collins, Pat Doody, Don O' Donoghue, Sean O' Donoghue, Big Jim O' Sullivan, Simon Twomey, John Sparling, Donagh Gleeson, the Culligan brothers, Byron Holmes, a player from Wales who joined in '68 and of course Tom 'Sossy' Mullins amongst others. I continued as player manager in the team. This culminated in the team reaching the Desmond League Cup Final played at Askeaton. I recall Mike Looney played in goal that day. The team lost by the odd goal on the day. (Apologies for exclusion of any names, but these can be added in due course for the record).

Throughout this time, apart from Donagh Gleeson looking after the finances, we never formed a club committee. I organised the games, trained the players and picked the teams and also drove Dero's buses and cars as well as driving the loaned cars from Jimmy the Master garage (situated at the top of the New Road). It was simple, collective and constructive and responded to the requirements of the club at the time.

I also recall that we used the Glebe Hotel, where the College St car park now is, there we would practice our 'throw ins' and other set piece moves. We also trained in the St Mary's Parish Hall, and occasionally went for road runs out the Muckcross Rd and over Woodlawn Rd, Ballycaheen and up the Pike Hill (near Castle Heights) before returning back into town.

## **The Desmond League**

Some people ask why we played in the Desmond League. At the time the Kerry League did not exist. Before I start to explain, a little knowledge about my youth will help. Whilst I was born in Cork City, when I was young my father, a bus conductor with CIE, was transferred to Newcastle West. The family moved with him. When I was 17 years, the family returned to Cork City with the introduction of one-man buses.

I played U14, minor and junior soccer with Newcastle West in the Desmond League. Jimmy Walsh, who ran and trained Newcastle West soccer teams was also a member of the Desmond League board. Therefore, it was an easy matter for me and Donagh Gleeson to attend a Desmond League meeting in Newcastle West to register Killarney Athletic. Tralee Dynamos and Listowel also had soccer teams and played in the Desmond League for a number of years around the same time.

I also recall Donagh Gleeson, Brian McCarthy and I being selected to represent the Desmond League in the 1968 Oscar Traynor Cup. We were narrowly beaten on the day by a team from the Southern Command. Donagh and Brian played up front while I played at centre-half.

## **The 1966 World Cup and its influence on soccer in Killarney**

Everyone who follows soccer knows that England won the World Cup in 1966. After hosting the tournament England beat West Germany 4-2 in the final at Wembley Stadium to record their first and only World Cup trophy. It was also the last time that the tournament was recorded and shown on black and white television. Some pubs and hotels in town were showing the games, and I was approached by many strong hearted GAA people who for the first time had seen soccer being

played. Many of the comments were about how they had not appreciated the high level of football's skills of the game. Generally their comments were to praise the high level of skills displayed by many wonderful players representing many countries from around the world. In ways maybe this was the start of the realisation for many Irish people that soccer was a global and worldwide sport and not just a game for the English.

A particular example was John O' Grady, a harness maker and repairer who had a workshop in the laneway off the Market Cross. He told me that he was amazed with the skills of the game. He had never seen soccer until he saw it on the television in one of the pubs in town. He went on to say the he understood why so many young people wanted to play and that is was good that I had started up the club in town. I was most impressed with his honesty and his personal support. He was a gentle, supportive and hospitable man. Regularly when I was on town patrol I called in to see him in his workshop and tell him how things were going. Mr O'Grady was also a local councillor and Legion GAA man, and I do recall training with the Legion when I first came to town and also wore the Kerry jersey when playing with the Kerry guards.

Teddy O' Connor, an ex-Kerry footballer and a publican in High Street, was also very supportive. On one occasion he asked me to referee a soccer match in Sneem between the staff of two large hotels. I agreed and he drove me there and stayed to watch the game.

I was also very good friends with Con and Anne O'Leary of the Laurels bar and was delighted to hear that Con was the first main sponsor of the club's 7-a-side tournament when it started in 1977. It is heartening to know that many of the contacts I made in the early years were there to support the club after my departure from Killarney in 1969. The friendship that I and my friend Brian Gilhooly forged with the Franciscan Friars in the early years of the club was another seed that would blossom for the benefit of the club for the following 4 decades.

### **1967 European Cup Final**

Another significant landmark in broadening the local view about soccer was the 1967 European Cup Final won by Glasgow Celtic.

I was approached by an individual who had a film of the match. He told me that the Friary members were interested in seeing the film. I made contact with the Friary and it was agreed that we would share the occasion and use the hall at the Friary to show the film. We also agreed that the club could charge a small entrance fee to cover the cost of the hire and showing of the film. No charge was made for the use of the hall by them, and they were just keen to watch the match themselves. We advertised the showing of the film at the Friary. There was a large turnout of players and local people included a large turnout of members of the Friar community.

I am of the opinion that the subsequent excellent links between Killarney Athletic Soccer Club and the Friary were forged by sharing in the viewing of that European Cup final in May 1967. Thereafter the Aras Padraig pitch was to become a home base for the club as a training ground and of course the venue for the club's highly successful 7-a-side tournament up until the time it was sold to the Killarney UDC in 1999 - now it's Lewis Rd Car Park.

The Franciscan youth club teams under the watchful eye of Brian Gilhooly and Fr Vivian Molloy were also to become the nursery for young players who joined the club in the 1970<sup>ths</sup>



## **Dero and Dero's Taxis**

One cannot comment on the 60s life of Killarney Athletic without mention of Dero's transport, known locally at the time simply as 'Dero's'. Denis 'Dero' O' Sullivan hired out minibus transport to us for away games. Initially he supplied a driver but later I drove the minibus as this reduced the cost. We travelled to play teams in Co Limerick such as Newcastle West, Foynes, Askeaton, Pallaskenry and Ardagh. On the way home we regularly stopped off at the Devon Inn pub in Templeglantine near Abbeyfeale for a drink. Usually we were also entertained by Pat Doody who played tunes on his accordion. The most popular 'sing-along' was 'We All Live In A Yellow Submarine'. Our team colour at the time was yellow shirts.

Donagh Gleeson paid Dero for our travel out of the club funds. The payment meetings with Dero were always a friendly affair especially if it was accompanied by a pint of stout in one of the local pubs when a 'minor adjustment to the cost' was agreed.

There was no doubt that indirectly, Dero and his transport became an integral part to the running of the club. He never let us down for transport and never overcharged us.

This service was much appreciated at the time and is still recognised today.

On the odd occasion when we travelled to Tralee and Listowel, I would borrow a minibus or a car from 'Jimmy the Master', a Ford garage at the top of the town and directly opposite the Sand Pit Car Park (now the site where the Department of Tourism is located). As time went by some players had their own cars. For example we had two German brother Rinhart and Hans Stinakar playing with us and they would not only transport other players but on many occasions also supplied beer and sandwiches for all after the match. Both worked at The Hotel Europe.

On occasion also, Donagh Gleeson's dad would lend me his shop's Morris Minor van to go to away matches. Transportation costs was a big issue for the club when we were playing in the Desmond league and was also a contributing factor to the club pulling out of the league in 1970, I believe.

## **The sad passing of my wife Monica**

In June 1967, I married Monica and initially we lived at Fair Hill and later at Green Lane. Monica was a huge supporter of the club. She travelled to away matches, washed the kit and set up some drinking soirées for the more outgoing older lads and some of the club's 'biggest followers' at the time Teddy O' Shea and Gerry Doyle ('Ger Bomb'). All have since passed on to the next life. Monica's unexpected death occurred on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May and came as a great shock to me. We had both hoped to be back to Killarney in September for the 50<sup>th</sup> year celebrations.

## **Leaving Killarney**

In 1969 I left Killarney to take up a post as constable in the West Yorkshire police. I served for over 35 years and retired in 2004 in the rank of superintendent. Most of my service was in the criminal investigation department.

I still like the game of soccer and I am a season ticket holder with Huddersfield Town. I played soccer with the local teams and with the police divisional teams until I was in my 40s. Still, though, I recall my years as player manager with Killarney Athletic during the time of my more formidable years as a

footballer and the satisfaction I got from playing with such talented players, many of whom have since passed away.

### **Final Comments**

Whilst I was responsible for the formation and early years of the club, after I left in 1969, many other people with even more commitment pursued the club's further development and expansion. Whilst I do not know all their names, looking back now on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary it is abundantly clear that their commitment and passion for the club ensured its existence today.

I know that after my immediate departure Donagh Gleeson, who was probably my closest associate and friend in the club when we started out, continued along with Big Jim O' Sullivan and Sean O' Donoghue to keep the administration of the club going for as long as possible in the Desmond league and Byron Holmes also took a 'stab' at managing the junior side for a while.

As already mentioned, I am aware that Brian Gilhooly contributed hugely to the club through the Franciscan youth club teams and indeed his son Peter also served the club very well as a secretary and player in the 1970s.

Joe Grant also deserves mention for his contribution to the club particularly at the time when the Kerry District League was formed in 1972. It was nice to hear that he, along with Don O'Donoghue, took up an active role again in 1990 at the time the club celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

It was also at this time in 1990 that I was contacted again by the club and Monica and I were invited to attend the 25 year celebrations where I met many of my old club friends and teammates as we recalled our early memories and the formation of the club.

This was also the first time I met Mike O'Sullivan and we have continued to be close club friends since then. Mike was a very forward looking chairman and indeed the longest serving officer of the club, serving 16 years in the post, and initiated the purchase and development of the Woodlawn pitch.

He along with the support of many others has maintained the 'original ethos' of the support of youth development within the club. Over the years there is ample evidence of this and it is particularly satisfying to have seen Diarmuid O'Carroll who signed for Glasgow Celtic and Brendan Moloney who signed for Nottingham Forest reaching the professional ranks of the game in England.

All those involved in the progress and development of the club must be highly praised and remembered for their personal effort, their expertise and the time they devoted to the club since it was first founded by me 50 years ago this year.

Dan Harrington,

Founder and President of Killarney Athletic A.F.C.