**Historic 40th Year of 7-aside**

As the 2016 seven-a-side kicks off, it is remarkable to think that this is the 40th consecutive year that Killarney Athletic has run the tournament. Having been part of the organising committee in the first 7-a-side in 1977 it is fantastic to see the competition reaching this milestone year.

Through the founding of the club in 1965 and the formation of the Kerry District League in 1972, Killarney Athletic had run 7-a-side competitions in the Half Moon and also in the Áras Phádraig pitch prior to 1977. But the ‘77 tournament was planned and organised to ensure that soccer would reach a higher level of promotion in Killarney and in the surrounding areas. The tournament was also the starting point for many players before playing or entering clubs in the Kerry District League. The competition also provided many people with the opportunity to manage a soccer team for the first time and all of the local clubs today are fortunate to have such committed club officials and volunteers who gained an interest in organising teams through involvement in the 7-a-side at underage or senior level.

Teams with players from Ballyhar, Mastergeeha and Kenmare were all keen competitors in the 7-a-side and of course the majority of players who played with the Killarney Albion team that were runners-up in the 1977 final joined Killarney Rangers to form Killarney Celtic in the 77/78 Kerry District League season.

The dawn of the first underage 7-a-side tournament in 1978 became a nursery for young players in Killarney and surrounding areas, while the first Ladies 7-a-side in 1990 proved to be a major success, displaying and promoting the excellent female footballing talent that exists in Kerry. An over 35s competition followed in 1993, becoming very popular by allowing the ‘ageing stars’ to continue to show off their skills and prove that 7-a-side football can be enjoyed even when the joints and limbs have slowed down.

**Success of the Tournament**

There is no doubt that there were many contributing factors as to why the 7-a-side became such a popular local sporting event over the years with participation and a sense of community to the fore. The hosting of the tournament in the Áras Phádraig pitch from 1977 to 1998 with the support of the Franciscan community was key to the tournament’s popularity, growth and success. The venue in the heart of Town ensured a ‘buzz’ in the area throughout the summer months with friends and work colleagues forming annually into teams with all sorts of colourful names. Supporters too added to the atmosphere in the Áras as many just came to watch and were entertained with the efforts of players that varied from ‘silken skills’ to ‘honest endeavour’ with a few attempting to emulate the superstars of the professional game.

The format of the tournament starts out with teams in groups ensuring a minimum number of games for each team. The more serious competition begins with the knock-out stages with teams thereafter competing for the Premier and Reserve Cups. The ‘no off-side’ rule also makes 7-a-side soccer more enjoyable for players and spectators and makes the referee’s life a little easier. The small group of referees who officiated the multitude of games over the years can also look back with pride at the contribution they have made to the event.

**Early Years of the 7-a-side**

The 1st seven aside in ‘77 had 20 teams entered with each team restricted to only two registered club players from the Kerry District League. This rule forced teams to gather players who were not playing soccer in the Kerry League at the time while also encouraging work colleague and friends to form teams. This rule changed after a few years with the increase of players registering and playing in the KDL thereafter.

Work firms such as Tuf Shoes, Scotts Tools and Liebherr all entered teams into the ‘77 tournament with many other notable firms competing in the following years and to the present day.

Sponsored teams from the Laurels, Tatler, Sweeneys, Corkerys, Belvedere and Old Kentucky were all to the fore of competition in the early years and some still endure to the present day. Ryans and The Castle Heights Hotel also entered teams in the ‘77 event while a competitive team from Scartaglin were the first ‘out of town’ team to challenge for the Killarney Autos sponsored cup. The event also had the added attraction of prize money for the winners and runners-up and this was first sponsored by Con O’Leary of the Laurels Bar. As well as promoting the game locally the club also donated a contribution of funds raised to a number of local charities with St Marys of the Angels in Beaufort being a beneficiary of the early tournaments.

**Support of the Local Media**

The coverage and support of the local media also contributed hugely to the growth of the tournament over the years as the event got massive exposure as an annual local sporting community event. This media exposure also encouraged the local business community to support the event through sponsorship of the tournament and competing teams. The support and sponsorship of the tournament was also a major contributing factor that allowed the club to purchase and develop its own pitch facility in Woodlawn in 1993.

**End of an Era in the Áras Phádraig Pitch**

The 1998 seven-a-side was to prove to be the last staging of the competition in the ‘Áras Pitch’ as the Lewis Road ground was purchased in 1999 by the Urban District Council so as to provide another Bus and Car Park for Killarney. This indeed marked the end of an era for the tournament but the years of 7-a-sides in the Aras at underage and senior level with the sporting and social outlet it provided will always remain in the minds of those who enjoyed the pleasure it brought.

The moving of the 7-a-side to the club’s ground in Woodlawn in 1999 represented a major change for the tournament but to the credit of all who organised, promoted and supported the event over the years it continued to prosper in the new venue. This year’s tournament also marks the 18th year of the 7-a-side in Woodlawn.

Little did those of us who were in the organising committee of the first 7-a-side back in 1977 think that we would see the tournament run annually for the following 40 years but the credit for its longevity is ingrained in the spirit it captured through the support of the whole community and something that we all can be proud of. Mike O’ Sullivan