



Tommy Kilcoyne.

Tributes to a Football Immortal

Nace O'Dowd

(Sligo)



Tributes to a Football Immortal Nace O'Dowd Sligo 1988

TRIBUTES TO A
FOOTBALL IMMORTAL

Nace O'Dowd

(SLIGO)

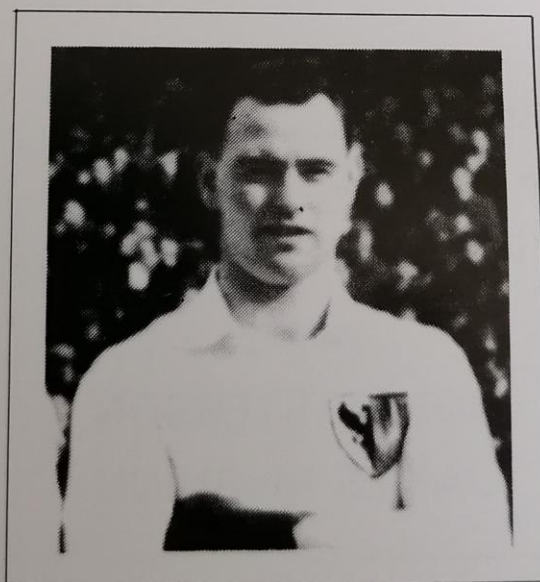
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THE O'DOWD CREST



NACE O'DOWD

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Introduction

*"Lives of great men all remind us,
we can make our lives sublime,
and, departing, leave behind us
footprints on the sands of time."*



I feel honoured to be asked to write an introduction for a booklet on the life of Nace O'Dowd. Nace was a contemporary of my own. I knew him quite well and admired him greatly. He was a great footballer and a true gentleman.

When I went to Tubbercurry as a chaplain in 1956 Nace O'Dowd was already a household name in Co. Sligo. He played football with dedication and commitment and his skill on the field of play became legendary. Few have reached the heights of sportsmanship displayed by him and he carried over into his working life that same striving for perfection which served him so well as a football star.

It is hard to realise that Nace O'Dowd is dead, cut off in the full flower of manhood. I have often been perplexed by the great mystery of life and, especially, by the mystery of death when those who still have so much to contribute to life are taken from us. We are left to count the footprints, and, as we count them we come to realise more and more the contribution which great people have made to life. Greatness is no longer measured by length of years but by the use we have made of those years spent.

In paying tribute to Nace O'Dowd we do not grieve for him. We believe that he has arrived home and is happy in the green pitch of heaven. He lived his Faith and was as committed to its practice as he ever was to Gaelic football. His example here can still inspire us. Our mourning is for ourselves and for the friendship we miss and the kindnesses which are now but a memory.

Some heroes are remembered in statues of bronze, but the greatest of all are those whose names live on in tradition and help to shape the attitudes and inspire the ambitions of new generations. Such a man was Nace.

Go mba fada buan a oidhreacht.

MOST REVEREND THOMAS FLYNN

✠ Bishop of Achonry

3 November 1988



Nace attended Carrowrille National School, Lavagh, Ballymote. This picture of school students was taken in 1937. Back row (left to right): Dessie O'Connell, Joe Finn, May Durcan, Frances Finn, Patricia Crosby, Bridgie O'Dowd, Philomena Gilmartin, Tessie Berreen. Second row: Johnny Dunlevy, Nace O'Dowd, Joe McGuinn, Tommy O'Donnell, Ann Finn (RIP), Annie Durcan (RIP), Bridie Dowd, S. Gibbons, Bartley Roddy, Harry O'Dowd. Front row: —, James Roddy, Ita Connell, Philomena Connell, Tessie Hever, Kathleen Gibbons (RIP), Tessie O'Dowd, Mary McGuinn, —, Mary Jane O'Dowd, S. Gibbons, Michael Gilmartin. Teachers who taught at one time or other in the 1930's included Ignatius Stenson, NT; Jimmy Moran, NT; Tom Kilcoyne, NT; Paddy Collins, NT; Mrs. Brigid McGovern (nee Dolan), and Mrs. Murtagh.

ONE OF SLIGO'S GREATEST FOOTBALLERS

by JOE MASTERSON and LEO GRAY

NACE O'Dowd was one of Sligo's most famous footballing sons. Born in Carrowrile on 1st August 1931 to Tom and Jane O'Dowd (nee Brennan), he was baptised John Joseph Ignatius (Nace) O'Dowd in the local Catholic church. He attended Carrowrile National School and later Tubbercurry Vocational School. After leaving school he worked in Galway, Castlebar and Tubbercurry before emigrating to the United States in 1959.

In December 1969 he returned from America and later purchased the Sancta Maria Hotel in Strandhill. With his wife Bridgie he established a thriving business and the hotel hosted functions of all varieties, especially for sporting organisations.

It is as a footballer, however, that Nace will be best remembered. He carved a special place for himself in the history of Sligo GAA and is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest players ever produced by the county.

He won a county championship medal at Minor level with Ballinacarrow in 1947 at the tender age of 15. He was captain of that victorious team and two years later was skipper of the Sligo Minor team which won the Connacht championship by beating Roscommon in the final. The team was subsequently beaten by Armagh in the All-Ireland semi-final at Lurgan.

Nace went on to become the youngest ever player to don the Sligo Senior county jersey, and his ability and versatility were such that he could have commanded a place on any of the great county teams of the time.

But he remained loyal to his native county and enjoyed a brilliant career. He became a legend in his own lifetime, playing ten times for Connacht, the first Sligo man ever to have achieved this distinction.

The highlight of his playing career was in 1954 when he wore the Irish jersey at Croke Park against the Combined Universities; the same honour came his way the following year when he was on the Ireland team again.

At club level, he played for Tubbercurry in the early 1950's and won two Senior championships and one Senior league while with the South Sligo club. He assisted Castlebar to a Mayo Senior championship victory in 1953 and returned to Tubbercurry for another county championship and two league successes.

In 1957 Nace played with Ballymote and then joined his native Mullinabreena, whom he helped to a famous Senior championship success in 1958.

Nace continued his football career while in New York and graced the playing fields of America with the same style and dedication he had shown in Ireland. He was a tremendous, effective and powerful man whose influence and ability tended to get the best out of his colleagues at all times.

At administrative level, he represented Sligo on the Connacht Council and was also a staunch member of the Coolera/Strandhill GAA club. In recent years he took a special interest in the youth of his area and trained under-age groups within the club. He organised several functions for the Juvenile committee of his local club and was a most generous benefactor in all things pertaining to the GAA.

His depth of knowledge of the game he loved and graced was passed on to the county's Senior footballers when he managed the county team in the late 1970's. His ability as a manager was underlined when the county Under-21 team he managed in 1979 reached the Connacht final and were somewhat unlucky to lose to Galway.

His death at Sligo General Hospital on 16th May 1987 came as a great shock not only to his family, but also to his many friends and admirers throughout the country.

A FOOTBALLER APART

by JOHN JOE LAVIN

(President, Sligo GAA)



NACE O'Dowd was one of Sligo's greatest footballers ever, and in his star-studded career he could and did play in almost every position on the field. He had a masterly touch for each position—in other words, he was a footballer apart.

Personally, I did not expect to see a footballer of his stature in Sligo, or any other county, in my time, as he was an all-rounder of exceptional ability over the years.

The younger people who did not see him play must rely on the stories of his prowess—all of us who did see him will remember his greatness and be proud that he was a Sligo man.

and his term as County Team Manager brought the county to the threshold of success, only to lose narrowly the 1979 Under-21 Connacht final to Galway at Tubbercurry and a play-off for promotion to Division I of the NFL against Armagh at Breffni Park, also in 1979.

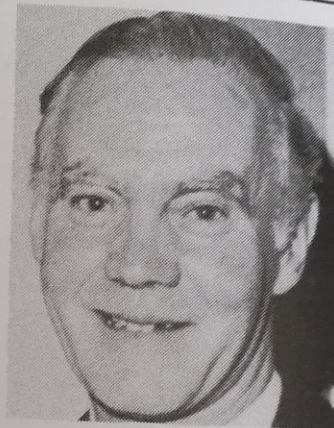
His indomitable spirit never gave up. He always foresaw a bright future for his beloved black and white. At his funeral Mass in Strandhill, as I listened to the highly evocative words of Fr. Liam Devine, who in a few short minutes stirred and reawakened so many half-forgotten memories of the 'fifties, I felt that Nace's final triumph in GAA terms has yet to unfold.

His life and times, and the memories which his very name evoke, will surely yet inspire a new generation of the youth of Co. Sligo to go forth and bring All-Ireland success to our county.

Ní bheidh a leitheid ann arís. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam uasal.

A FOOTBALL IMMORTAL

by JOHN HIGGINS
(Chairman, Sligo County Board,
1982–1988)



NACE O'Dowd, who for me was the doyen of the football immortals, has passed to his eternal reward. My personal recollection of him was of a towering giant who was one of the greatest exponents of the game.

Whether he was a member of a seven-a-side team in a local competition, or representing his county, province or country, as he did with such distinction, his contribution was always the same, and he towered head and shoulders above all others. He was made to perfect the art of Gaelic football and those of us who were fortunate enough to have witnessed his prowess and expertise on the playing fields of Ireland in the late 'forties and 'fifties are unlikely ever to see his likes again.

His funeral cortege from Sligo Hospital to Strandhill bore ample testimony to the high regard in which he was held not alone in his native Sligo but through the whole of Ireland. As I watched the black and white flag of his beloved Sligo flutter in the May evening air, from his shoulder borne coffin, it was hard to accept that our beloved Nace would play no more for us on the green fields of Sligo.

Ta me cinnte nach mbeidh a leitheid arís ann. In iothlann De go raibh a anam dilis.



Tubbercurry – Sligo Senior Championship Winners, 1951 . . . Back row (left to right): N. Brennan, N. Durcan, T. Korrane, C. McCarrick, J. Durcan, N. O'Dowd, P. Kennedy, T. O'Grady. Centre row: T. Nealon, J. Walsh, J. Korrane, C. Mullarkey, J. Masterson, R. Goulden. Front: M. Brett, T. Ryan, T. J. Murphy (captain) and J. Faul.

SLIGO'S CUCHULAINN

by JACK MAHON (Galway)



SUNDAY, 17th May was unseasonably cold. Nowhere was it colder than in windy Strandhill, Co. Sligo, as we travelled with Sligo's greatest footballer, in my lifetime, on this final journey home. It was Summer 1949 that I played against him first, he a raw youth in midfield for the Sligo Minors. I was a raw half-forward then for Galway Minors. It was a re-fixture in Ballymote and I well remember enquiring who this giant of a young man was. Nace O'Dowd then, as later, seemed indestructable, one of the strongest men I ever saw play.

The 'fifties was a great era for Gaelic football in Connacht and each county in the West produced its own Cuchulainn. In Galway we had Sean Purcell. Mayo had Padraig Carney. Roscommon had Gerry O'Malley. Leitrim had a ball of football fire in Packie McGarty, and Sligo had their "Numero Uno" in Nace O'Dowd. I played with and against them all and regard it as a great honour to have so done. Padraic Carney and myself never played together for Connacht.

CONNACHT FINAL 1954

It takes the championship to make the man, or you can reverse that if you like. Nace made many a championship game too. Never more so than against Mayo in Ballymote in 1951, or against Galway in Tuam in the Connacht Final of 1954. You don't see performances like those now. Like Purcell, he could and did play all positions, and though apparently overweight, could last the pace at midfield against any opponent. At centre-half back in 1954 was his Tour de Force. I will never forget one mid-air collision of his with our own durable Billy O'Neill, in the second half of that game, which we were so lucky to win.

FAR AND NEAR

They came from far and near to pay tribute to the great O'Dowd. Sean Purcell, the greatest of them all, Willie Casey of the light step. And so many of those 1954 Sligo men: T. J. Murphy, Frank Gaffney, Ted Nealon, Frank White, Ray Tully, Mick Christie, Joe Masterson and the man who raised the green flag in Tuam that day—like Jimmy Murray of Roscommon did in 1946, and Brendan Nestor (father of Jim

of St. Mary's) did in 1936—Mick Gaffney. I did not recognise Mick Gaffney at all. He looks fitter now than he did in 1954 when he was three or four stones heavier.

I've been through Sligo many a time, on days of Connacht finals too. I have never seen traffic halted in Sligo until Sunday, 17th May 1987. It was a sad day for Sligo—yet a day in which they showed their pride in paying respect to one of their greatest sporting sons. Joe Masterson—the great archivist of Sligo football, talked to me of Sligo greats—Paddy Colleran of the great Colleran family, and of course their own Mickey Kearins of more recent vintage, but it was too much for him when we started to reminisce on Nace.

CASTLEBAR IN 1955

Nace played with Ballinacarrow, Tubbercurry, Mullinabreena, Castlebar Mitchells, Fr. Griffin's, Galway, Sligo, Connacht, Ireland and New York. For Connacht his greatest hour was in Castlebar in the Railway Cup semi-final of 1955 when opposed at midfield by Kerry's John Dowling. It was lovely to play in front of him on the Connacht team. He was as cool as a breeze and always encouraging. He enjoyed playing football.

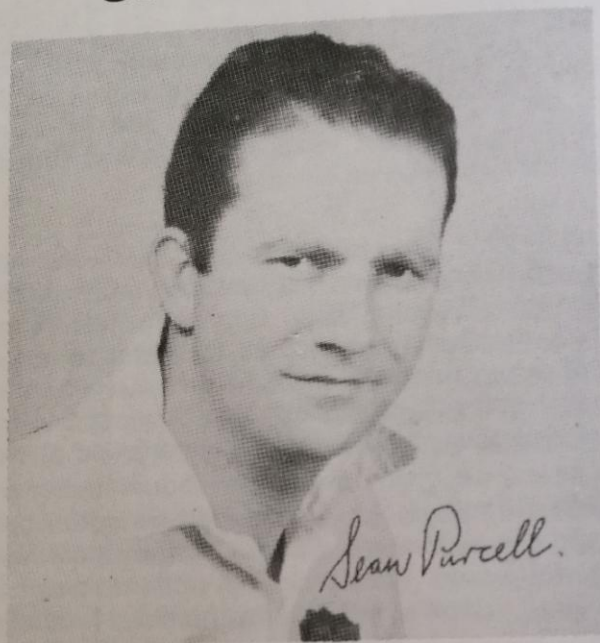
In his latter years he spent hours and hours training the Juvenile players of Coolera-Strandhill. As they carried his coffin down the hill to Strandhill Church, the hearse was flanked by the same Juveniles togged in their red and white strip. The black and white drape of Sligo billowed in the strong wind. Sligo's most indestructible footballer had come home for good.

Ar dheis lamh De go raibh se.

IMPARTIAL REFEREE

IN early August 1959 the *Irish Advocate* in New York highly commended Nace O'Dowd for the "excellent and impartial manner" in which he refereed the Leitrim v Cavan semi-final of the New York championship at Gaelic Park.

A MAGNIFICENT SPECIMEN OF MANHOOD



by SEAN PURCELL (Galway)

I WAS a friend of Nace O'Dowd for many years, one of a multitude to judge from the crowds gathered to pay their last respects to a great footballer and gentleman. A bitter wind blew in from the Atlantic as I waited in Strandhill for the remains to arrive from Sligo.

As I waited I remembered Nace as he was in his prime in the 'fifties, a magnificent specimen of manhood, whose tremendous football ability almost robbed us of victory in the Connacht final of 1954. I remembered a great tussle against Nace in the 1956 Connacht final at Sligo. Mostly I remember the outstanding contribution he made to the three Railway Cups we won, together with other outstanding players such as Gerry O'Malley, Packy McGarty, Willie Casey and others.

I thought of Nace going to the States and how shocked I was to meet him on his return, a pale shadow of the giant I had known before he left. I was delighted to hear how, with characteristic courage and determination, he overcame his bad health and went on with the help of his wife Bridgie to build up a highly successful business in Strandhill.

I enjoyed his boundless hospitality on many occasions, and visits to a match or the races in Sligo will never be the same for me again.

May the sod of your beloved Sligo rest lightly on you, Nace.



Connacht Railway Cup winning team, St. Patrick's Day, 1957 . . . Back row (from left): John Nallen (Mayo), Tom Dillon (Galway), Gerry O'Malley (Roscommon), Nace O'Dowd (Sligo), Frank Eivers (Galway), Noel Blessing (Leitrim), Joe Young (Galway), Sean Purcell (Galway). Front row (from left): Eddie Moriarty (Mayo), Willie Casey (Mayo), Jack Mangan (Galway), Mick Christie (Sligo), Packie McGarty (Leitrim), Frank Stockwell (Galway), Jack Mahon (Galway).

Nace Was a Very Fair Player



by **PACKY McGARTY (Leitrim)**

MY friendship with Nace O'Dowd goes back many years. It was in 1954 that we both played on the Connacht team that defeated Munster in the Railway Cup semi-final at Tralee. Needless to say, I had often read and heard about his exploits on the football field long before that time. Afterwards I played both with him and against him and I came to regard him as one of the finest footballers in the country. A very versatile player, I saw him play in many different positions with great effect—defence, midfield and attack. I can still picture him, his giant figure soaring skywards as those magnet-like hands won the ball from his opponents, and then that cool, calm but powerful march from defence as he safely cleared his lines. Who could ever forget his superb performances for Connacht in both the 1957 and 1958 Railway Cup finals?

The last time I met Nace was at Gaelic Park, New York, in 1964 when my own county, Leitrim, played Cavan in the Kennedy Cup games; at half-time the great hearted Sligo man came into the dressing rooms for a chat and to wish us well.

Above all, I want to say that Nace was a very fair player. Although he had many an opportunity to do so, I never once saw him use his strength to unfair advantage over a smaller or lighter player.

Long may you be remembered, Nace!

A POWERFUL ATHLETE AND FOOTBALLER



by JOHN NALLEN, Mayo

NACE O'Dowd was a big man in every way. He was large in stature, big of heart and spirit. He was also a gentle man, compassionate, understanding and forgiving.

I first met him in 1951. At that time, I was working in Tuam and playing football there and Nace was working in Galway City and playing football with Fr. Griffin's Club. Fr. Griffin's were drawn to play Ballinasloe in the first round of the Galway Championship at Mountbellew and in my misguided youthful enthusiasm I accepted an invitation to referee the game. As things turned out, Nace was injured that day and could not play but was a committed advisor and supporter up and down the sideline. I certainly can remember him disagreeing, very vehemently, with some of my decisions (and I have no doubt but that he had good reason, especially when his team were narrowly beaten) but, after the game, despite his understandable disappointment, he came to me, told me he did not agree with all my decisions but, nevertheless, said he did not want to be unduly critical and appreciated that I did as I thought best and we shook hands. From that day onwards, we became firm friends.

He was a powerful athlete and footballer and was an inspiration to his beloved Sligo and to Connacht. How often he stood between Sligo and heavy defeat and how often did he rally them to come from behind to

victory. What a pity that a good Sligo team of the 'fifties, to which he contributed so much, was not rewarded with a Connacht championship.

I will never forget his utter disappointment after losing to Galway in a very close final in 1954, a game, it could be said, Sligo were unlucky to lose. He was devastated, having given a memorable display in his favourite centre half back position. However, it was as a representative of Connacht teams in the 1950's that he really hit the headlines. He was the only Sligo man to win three Railway Cup medals, in 1951, 1957 and 1958. He was a really versatile player, lining out at full back, centre-field and on the half forward line for Connacht.

He played the game hard but fair. I remember an incident in the 1954 Railway Cup final against Leinster, when he was playing left half forward for Connacht on Leinster and Wicklow's famous Gerry O'Reilly. It was a titanic struggle between two of the country's best footballers and no favours were asked or given. After one especially vigorous clash, Gerry O'Reilly went down and was having attention, when one of Leinster's mentors, a county man of Gerry's, came rushing in from the sideline to take Nace (who was bent down over O'Reilly) to task, and I do not mean verbally. Nace straightened up and told the intruder to have sense, but his advice was not taken and the visitor from the sideline was getting more aggressive. Nace put out a big hand and gave him a push in the chest and the man just staggered back about five yards before coming to rest on his backside, on the ground. The crowd cheered and the aggression was diffused.

He played brilliant football for Connacht for ten years, in an era when the Railway Cup competitions were of the highest standard and when playing for one's province was considered a great honour. His displays on the winning sides of 1957 and 1958, at full back, are remembered to this day.

Jack Mahon, in his book *Twelve Glorious Years* describes Nace as the perfect provincial full-back and the late John D. Hickey reported, after the Connacht versus Munster semi-final in Castlebar in 1955, that he gave a majestic display.

Ballinacarrow, Mullinabreena, Tubbercurry, Sligo, Strandhill and indeed the GAA will be the poorer by his passing.

May the Lord have mercy on his soul.

“Quinnie, I’d love to be out there!”

by PAT QUINN

IT was with a heavy heart that I learned of the death of Nace O’Dowd. I first heard his name when listening to match reports on Radio Eireann on Sunday nights, and reading of his feats on the Monday morning newspapers. It was not until he played with Connacht and Ireland that I saw the man in the flesh. It was then I realised what a truly great footballer he was. He showed all the great skills of the game—high fetching, long and accurate kicking and great participation.

It was in 1970 that I met him personally, and a great bond of friendship grew between us. Now memories come rushing back of days spent at matches, of race meetings, and of a remark he passed to me in Croke Park, when Sligo played Kerry in 1975—“Quinnie, I’d love to be out there”—the remark of a great man. Over our long friendship I came to see the other side of Nace, the loving husband, the great community man, and above all a good Christian. Ireland has lost a true Gael, Sligo one of its greatest footballers, Strandhill has lost a true and caring member of its community. I have lost a true friend, and I would deem it an honour when word of my demise would reach Strandhill, if someone explaining who I was would say, “You know him well, he was a great friend of Nace O’Dowd’s”.



Benny Wilkinson (on left), Chairman, Mullinabreena GAA Club, 1984, makes a presentation to Nace O’Dowd, Captain of the 1958 Mullinabreena team.



Tubbercurry, Senior League and Championship winners, 1955 . . . Back row (left to right): Tommy Grady, Miceal Neary, Padraic Gallagher, Bernard Brennan, Mickey Brett, John Faul, Matty Brennan, Frank Gaffney, Colm Mullarkey, Syl Kearns. Front row: Jimmy Kiernan, A. Finnerty, Sean Colum, Ray Tully, Nace O'Dowd, T. Kilcommins, Harry O'Dowd, Peadar Leonard. Young mascots: M. Brett and Lukie Snee. Inset: Joe Masterson.

HIS NAME BECAME KNOWN ALL OVER IRELAND

by COLM MULLARKEY



WE first met at the Vocational School in Tubbercurry in 1945—and from then on football became part and parcel of our lives. Only arranged matches with Ballymote VS were on the agenda—but as members of Ballinacarrow Minor team we won a county championship in 1947; this was the only team in our area at that time.

Nace was a County Minor in 1947 and 1948 and together we won a Connacht title in 1949—only to be beaten by Armagh at Lurgan in the semi-final after good wins over Leitrim, Galway and Roscommon. For Nace this was the springboard to a career at county and provincial level—both of which jerseys he wore with distinction—and in the following decade his name became known all over Ireland as Sligo's greatest footballer of that era.

An Irish jersey in both 1954 and 1955 saw him perform at Croke Park. But, alas, no Connacht or All-Ireland medal at Senior level came his way.

Emigration beckoned and the playing fields of New York saw Nace again in a starring role, until his retirement from the active scene.

Home to Strandhill and there with the assistance of his wife, Bridgie, he established a thriving business and I spent many happy hours there in later years.

I remember Nace as a man who contributed so much to his adopted clubs, Tubbercurry, Castlebar Mitchels, Fr. Griffin's, Ballymote and especially to his beloved Mullinabreena, also to his county and provincial teams.

I have never known a player with a greater club spirit than he. He was always very modest about his own achievements, be it at club, county or provincial level. Nace was a tough opponent—many will readily testify to this—yet he was a great sportsman as rivalry ended on the field when the final whistle sounded. His greatest asset was his great heart and never say die attitude, while he never accepted defeat even if his team's position seemed hopeless.

One of the "greats" of his era, a sportsman and true friend would describe this man whom I was proud to call a friend.

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

UBIQUITOUS STAR

by MARTIN BRENNAN

DOWN the years Curry tournaments were renowned for providing feasts of football and the tournament in Gormleys' field in 1959 was no exception. Teams from Tubbercurry, Mullinabreena, Curry, Charlestown, Tourlestrane and a few more parishes took part. The presence of Nace O'Dowd with his native Mullinabreena was a real catch for the organisers and enhanced the tournament considerably as he displayed his skills in royal fashion whilst helping Mullinabreena into the final for a clash with Curry.

Curry had a youthful, up and coming team, brilliantly marshalled by Pdraic Keane, that won its way to the final round. That tournament final was one titanic struggle from beginning to end. Playing sparkling football in the first half, Curry appeared well placed at half time.

Great players soar to spectacular heights in the hour of need and so it was with Nace O'Dowd; he had to call upon his reserves of energy to help his team overcome a gallant and tigerish Curry.

When five minutes into the second half, O'Dowd rolled up his sleeves, left his centre forward position for midfield, friend and foe alike knew the decks were really cleared for action.

To the chant of "Na-sheen . . . Na-sheen" from the small but enthusiastic band of Mullinabreena supporters, he set about the task in hand; time and again he plucked the ball out of mid-air, fed his forwards, set up scores and pumped the ball incessantly into the Curry goals. The ubiquitous star, now at midfield, then in attack, towards the end of the game made a dramatic intervention in defence that saved the day for Mullinabreena. His sheer inspirational play and muscular strength rallied and carried his team to victory.

Shortly after that tournament Nace O'Dowd left for the United States, never to play on Irish soil again, leaving Sligo football all the poorer for his going. The '59 Sligo championship was indeed a "Hamlet" without the Prince affair. The great star who towered over the Sligo football scene for over a decade had suddenly made his exit; the king of players had emigrated.

THE MOYLLOUGH CONNECTION

THREE of Sligo's great footballing sons—Nace O'Dowd, Mick Snee and Mick Christie—were first cousins; their mothers, Jane O'Dowd, Margaret Snee and Ellen Christie, were sisters, being daughters of Michael and Catherine Brennan of Moylough, Tubbercurry. It is interesting to note that Nace O'Dowd (1951, 1957 and 1958), Mick Snee (1936) and Mick Christie (1957) all won Railway Cup medals with Connacht.

THE MEMORIES FLOODED IN



JOE MASTERSON, PRO, Sligo County Board, GAA

WE stood there at Scarden awaiting the funeral cortege, knowing that this was the final parting. Time was on our side, and the guard of honour was broken up into little groups, with Mayo men, Galway men, Leitrim men and Roscommon men exchanging reminiscences of olden days.

Sligo players of the 'fifties were there in force, some had come the previous evening, and in the Sancta Maria Hotel had met to mourn together the loss of "The Man" who had led them on many a far-flung field.

Some of them were now at Scarden again—their leader was being laid to rest, and they wanted to be there to pay their final respects.

Looking down the assembled line from the red and white toggled juvenile footballers to the grey-haired veterans of yesteryear, one realised that this was a composite rendering of grief by the county at large for a great man.

The memories flooded in:

His displays at Club level, from the smallest tournament game to the county finals, from Jimmy Armstrong's field to Corran Park.

His displays at County level, from O'Connor's field in Tubbercurry to Tuam Stadium and beyond.

His displays for Connacht: Castlebar, Tullamore and Croke Park came to mind—in defeat and victory there was a majesty about his performance.

He was the Sligo man in the green jersey of Ireland in 1954 and 1955. The Sligo fans present at the Railway Cup that year and then the Representative match the following day in 1955 saw Nace at his best. It was the time to be from Sligo, and seldom do we relish this situation on GAA fields at the highest level.

I saw him first in action as a pupil in Tubbercurry Vocational School in the 'forties; watched him as he progressed through club and county at all levels to provincial honours, and had the good fortune to be a colleague of his at club, county and provincial level.

Some performances not so well publicised stand out. I remember an awesome performance from him in a Whit weekend tournament at Circular Road in Sligo in 1954; an encounter never to be forgotten between Nace and the Casey brothers of Offaly in Tullamore in 1953; the events differing in that they were from different ends of the football scale, but both events enriched by the quality of his performance.

Adjectives to describe Nace O'Dowd vary—

He could be the inspiration as he demonstrated in leading Mullinabreena to their 1958 victory in Senior football in Sligo.

He could be invincible as he showed at full-back in his closing years for Connacht especially.

He could be masterful as he showed in 1953 versus Carney at Ballymote and again at Tuam Stadium in 1954.

But above all, my description of him would have to include the word "powerful".

Finesse came second. As Nace gathered the ball, in spite of the opposing forces, his delivery was never of the "henkick" variety. There was a power there seldom seen nowadays as he strode the stage among the greats of his time, and actually excelled as the stage and its players increased in football stature.

Fr. Liam Devine's eulogy at Mass that morning was probably the finest I have heard. He gave his own memories of a man who had "started as a name in a school-jotter as one of the greats in GAA" and who had become a "very close friend" in later years.

And so, Nace was laid to rest in Scarden. A long journey in GAA had come to an end, stretching from the local playing fields of Sligo to Croke Park in Dublin and Gaelic Park in New York. Our ten-times Connacht stalwart now was at peace; we were left with the memories.

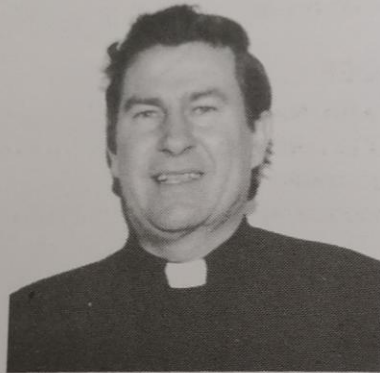
I knew him, as I said before, from his schooldays, and our families were particularly close in the 'forties and 'fifties. His late mother gave me many a cup of tea in the Carrowrile homestead. One feels now that a great talent has passed on, but Sligo men the world over will forever speak of his prowess, and we all know that if there's a team in heaven, then he will occupy a pivotal berth with distinction.

Ar dheis De go raibh a anam.



Picture taken at 26th Anniversary Reunion of Mullinabreena 1958 County Senior Football Championship winning team at Cawley's Hotel, Tubbercurry. Back (left to right): Sean Gorman, Batty McLoughlin, Padraic Gallagher, Frank Lang, Liam Marren, Pat McGuinness, Roger McCarrick, Padraic Gorman, Eamon McGuinness, Gerry McManus, J. P. Kivlehan. Front (left to right): Jimmy Brett, Benny Wilkinson, Peter Gallagher, Padraig Hunt, Nace O'Dowd, Tom Johnston, Harry McGowan, Walter Kivlehan, Tom Kilcoyne, John Higgins.

**Homily Preached by
Fr. Liam Devine at the
Funeral Mass for Nace O'Dowd
ST. PATRICK'S CHURCH, STRANDHILL**



FIRSTLY, on this very sad occasion, I want to extend my own personal sympathies to you, Bridgie, on the death of Nace, and also to Mary, Bridgie and Tess, his sisters, and brothers, Frank, Joe, Mick and Harry; family, relatives and friends. May God give you the grace to bear this very heavy cross of bereavement.

There has been a very deep and tangible sense of loss in our community here in Strandhill since the news of Nace O'Dowd's death broke here on Saturday morning—a sense of loss felt as much by members of the local Under-12 team as by an older generation who knew him for the best part of their lives. Nace was that kind of man. It is a sense of loss that is not confined—it is shared with and felt throughout the county, throughout the province and indeed in many parts of Ireland, wherever football is spoken, Nace O'Dowd was too big a man to confine to a Mullinabreena or a Strandhill; his fame has projected him on to a bigger screen, had him walking on a bigger stage and playing in bigger arenas.

ONE OF THE GREATEST

No doubt, many are here today, and were here last night, because of the memories he provided for them as a footballer. Described by a team mate on the Connacht Railway Cup winning team as "one of the really great footballers never to win an All-Ireland and one of the greatest, if not the greatest of all Sligo footballers"—football men and women do not have to be reminded of the greatness of Nace O'Dowd—at 16 the

youngest player ever to play Senior inter-county football, the only Sligo man to win three Railway Cup medals, selected on two occasions for Ireland . . . one could go on and on. One doesn't have to labour the point . . . he was *one of the greatest, his memory will never fade*. Wherever GAA men gather to talk football, the name "Nace O'Dowd" will be forever on their lips.

But Nace O'Dowd was more than a great footballer. There are many people here who have little or no interest in football, but they know that Nace had qualities far more enduring in the mind than the thrill of a high catch, or a goal scored or a long range point. There are people here who, like myself, know what it was like to have him as a friend, and who know the impression his friendship has left.

THE IMMORTAL HEROES

My own association with Nace evolved from far away boyhood memories of the name "I. O'Dowd" on a Monday morning sports page to a deep friendship that continued right to his last breath. In those far off days of schoolboy innocence we all had our football idols. They were in every county: for us in Roscommon it was Gerry O'Malley; in Galway it was Sean Purcell; in Leitrim it was Packy McGarty; Mayo had Padraig Carney; and in Sligo it was Nace O'Dowd—it was always Nace O'Dowd. As we gathered in a neighbour's field of a Summer's evening and in our little world of make-believe we picked our two teams and we played with all the fervour of an All-Ireland final, even though we had only our jackets for goalposts . . . and we dreamed our dreams, and in our fertile little imaginations we were the Nace O'Dowds, the Gerry O'Malleys and the Sean Purcells, heroes of a tiny townland . . . they were our idols, *the immortal heroes* whom we knew in our heart of hearts that we could never emulate, but still we dreamed and in our school desks that were seats in our minds' Hogan Stand we scribbled their names in our exercise books and we cut their photos from the papers.

But God's call was to fields other than McHale Park or Croke Park and in the pastoral beck of 1971 it was to Sligo to meet at last and for the first time one of my boyhood idols. More than just to meet him, but to get to know him as a friend. No longer now a name scribbled in an admiring schoolboy's copy book. The man was bigger than his name, the reality was greater than the dream. Nace O'Dowd was much, much more than just a great footballer. One had come to realise that football, after all, is just a part of life rather than life being part of football.

NO GREATER FRIEND

One got to know, as I am sure many here got to know down through the years, that when you had Nace O'Dowd as a friend there was *no greater friend*. He was faithful and strong, yet so gentle, kind and understanding. And so caring! His generosity was proverbial; a day's outing at a match or a race meeting and he just showered you with

kindness. His understanding and feeling for someone in need was well known. He could read a situation of human need or human pain just as readily as he would read the GAA page of Monday's paper. He always showed great concern for the poor; there are many stories of how he helped those in need, some of them known only to the people concerned and some of them only between Nace and God.

He ran his very successful business with honesty and integrity at all times. I am sure there is many a married couple here who have happy memories of their wedding reception in the Sancta Maria where Nace and Bridgie provided such a happy atmosphere with their personal touch. Despite the demands on his time that his business made on him he was always willing and ready to give his time generously to the coaching of juveniles. A lasting picture of Nace for me is seeing him standing in the football field in Ransboro, football in hand, surrounded by a group of juveniles listening to every word of advice gleaned from years of experience on the football fields of Ireland and the United States. Those boys loved him and admired him and nothing meant more to him than to see his advice put into practice in a game in a high catch or a long accurate kick. For the boys there was the added bonus after the match of the sweets and lemonade.

A MAN OF FAITH

But above all Nace was a *man of faith*. A devout Catholic who loved Mass and the Sacraments, his faith came to the surface as he faced the end and battled bravely for life like holding on desperately to a one point lead and playing into a strong wind. It was then that God seemed to speak to the very depths of his soul as he talked about his mother and father in Heaven and his brothers, Pat and Gerry, who had gone before him. Just as he drew on his experience in many a situation on the playing fields, he drew on his faith as he faced the end. Nace never missed the 7.30 a.m. Mass all during Lent last year. One felt that he too got his values in a country townland, and no doubt he too kicked football on a Summer's evening and had his boyhood heroes from another era. Such innocent pastimes produced great people.

It is hard to believe that Nace is dead. Only a few short months ago we talked about the death of my fellow countryman, Frank Kelly, over our favourite meal of bacon and cabbage, the countryman's a la carte. He reminisced that it was not much over 30 years ago since they had both played together on the Connacht team. Little did Nace know that he would be the next to get the Manager's call to the sideline. Such is the uncertainty of life and the inevitability of death. Death is no respecter of persons, as John Milton said, "Death lays his icy hands on kings".

Death and illness can break the human body, it can reduce, as it did, that once massive frame that stood so majestic on the edge of many a square . . . but one thing cannot do, it cannot break the bonds of love. If death could do that it would have the final say. But death, rather

than breaking the bonds of love, only strengthens them. That is where death loses every game because it lost the first with Christ. His love prevailed over death. So while Nace is gone and the human bonds are broken, the spirit and the love is still there. We must suffer and die to attain glory. The grain of wheat must fall into the ground and die if it is to produce the harvest.

HIS NAME WILL LIVE ON FOREVER

For Nace life has blown its final whistle, but the victory celebrations have just begun for him. I am sure when a player wins an All-Ireland medal he forgets the pain and suffering and the sacrifices of training. Players don't just train for nothing, they train to win, to achieve. Life isn't just about nothing. If we could only see as far as the grave a funeral would be a very hopeless event. But if we have our Good Fridays we also have our Easter Sundays. It is our faith that enables us to look beyond the grave. It is your very strong faith, Bridgie, that is your greatest source of comfort today. Nace was a very loving and kind husband, he loves you now from Heaven. He has left you so much love and so many memories that can never die. Nace O'Dowd's *name and memory will live on forever* young in the minds of Sligo people and among all his friends or wherever football is talked about. And if there is football in Heaven you can be sure that Nace is right there in the middle of it. You can imagine him now, huddled in a corner of Heaven's Ard Comhairle with his GAA friends who have gone before him. He knows now who will win this year's Connacht championship, who will win this year's All-Ireland. In Heaven there are no mysteries, no unanswered questions.

THANKS AND GOODBYE

Personally, I thank God that he gave me the grace to know such a great man, and that He gave me the Grace as a priest to be with him at the moment of his death to commend his gentle soul to the Lord. It was God giving me the opportunity to say "thanks" and a last "goodbye" to one of the greatest friends I ever had.

Ar dheis De go raibh a anam. Ni bheidh a leitheid aris ann. Amen.



Reunion (1984) of Sligo's 1954 Connacht Final team . . . Back (left to right): Paddy Kennedy, Joe Masterson, Luke Nangle, Mick Gaffney, John Cogans, Frank Gaffney, T. J. Murphy, Fr. Eddie Durcan, Frank White, Austin Briody. Front (left to right): Ray Tully, Mick Christie, Padraic Dockery, Ted Nealon, Nace O'Dowd, Paddy Christie, Paddy Mullen, Sean McCormack. Missing from photo: P. McGovern.

NACE O'DOWD: HE PLAYED ON MANY WINNING TEAMS

- 1947:** A member of the Ballinacarrow team that won the County Minor Championship.
- 1949:** A member of the Sligo Minor team that won the Connacht Championship.
Sligo: T. McVann, M. Watters, G. Hannon, L. Nangle, W. Sheerin, C. Mullarkey, J. Jennings, F. Quigley, N. O'Dowd, A. Farry, R. Young, D. Blighe, P. Burke, P. Lang, A. Durcan, P. Dwyer, J. Haran, R. O'Hagan, J. Mullen, P. Christie, N. Durcan.
- 1950:** A member of the Tubbercurry team that won both the Senior League and Championship.
Tubbercurry: P. Faul, J. Faul, P. Kennedy, T. J. Murphy (capt.) W. Sheerin, J. Durcan, T. Kirrane, N. O'Dowd, F. Gaffney, P. Gildea, J. Masterson, B. Brennan, J. Kirrane, P. Brennan, P. Barrett.
- 1951:** A member of the Tubbercurry team that won the County Senior Championship.
Tubbercurry: R. Goulden, Ted Nealon, Paddy Kennedy, Colm Mullarkey, Mickey Brett, John Durcan, T. O'Grady, Nace O'Dowd, Eddie Durcan, J. Walshe, J. Kirrane, Tommy Ryan, John Faul, Joe Masterson, T. J. Murphy (capt.).
A member of the Connacht team that won the Railway Cup.
Connacht: J. Mangan (G), W. McQuillan (R), P. Prendergast (M), S. Flanagan (M, capt.), E. Boland (R), H. Dixon (M), E. Mongey (M), S. Purcell (G), G. O'Malley (R), E. Keogh (G), P. Carney (M), J. Gilvarry (M), M. Mulderrig (M), T. Langan (M), P. Solan (M), N. O'Dowd (S), M. Flanagan (M), F. White (S).
- 1953:** A member of the Castlebar Mitchells team that won the Mayo Senior Championship.
Castlebar Mitchells: M. Corkery, F. Horkan, F. Mongey, S. Downs, P. King, S. Durcan, M. Flynn, N. O'Dowd, T. Durcan, P. McGowan, J. J. McGowan, M. Stewart, J. Munnelly, D. O'Neill, M. Flanagan.
- 1954:** Selected on the Ireland team.
Ireland: P. McGearty (Meath), E. Morgan (Armagh), T. Conlon (Louth), K. McConnell (Meath), P. Driscoll (Cork), M. O'Hanlon (Armagh), B. Lynch (Roscommon), N. O'Dowd (Sligo), D. Kellegher (Cork), T. Lyne (Kerry), J. J. Sheehan (Kerry), S. White (Louth), T. Langan (Mayo), A. O'Hagan (Armagh), I. Jones (Tyrone).

- 1954:** Senior League winners.
Tubbercurry: H. Eivers, P. Maher, M. Brett, C. Mullarkey, J. Brennan, N. Brennan, T. J. Murphy, N. O'Dowd, F. Gaffney, H. O'Dowd, S. McCormack, P. Leonard, J. Faul, J. Masterson, M. Skeffington.
- 1955:** A member of the Tubbercurry team that won both the League and Championship.
Tubbercurry: M. Neary, J. Kiernan, M. Brett, C. Mullarkey, S. Kearns, R. Tully, T. O'Grady, N. O'Dowd (capt.), F. Gaffney, M. Finnerty, B. Brennan, H. O'Dowd, S. Colum, N. Brennan, J. Faul, J. Masterson.
 Selected on the Ireland team.
Ireland: J. Mangan (Galway), W. Casey (Mayo), P. O'Brien (Meath), D. Murphy (Kerry), P. Casey (Offaly), T. Dillon (Galway), N. Maher (Dublin), M. McEvoy (Armagh), N. O'Dowd (Sligo), T. Lyne (Kerry), M. McDonnell (Meath), S. White (Louth), M. Grace (Meath), A. O'Hagan (Armagh), P. Sheehy (Kerry), J. Taggart (Tyrone), J. Mahon (Galway).
- 1957:** A member of the Connacht team that won the Railway Cup.
Connacht: J. Mangan (G, capt.), W. Casey (M), N. O'Dowd (S), T. Dillon (G), G. O'Malley (R), J. Mahon (G), E. Moriarty (M), N. Blessing (L), J. Nallen (Mayo), F. Eivers (G), S. Purcell (G), P. McGarty (L), J. Young (G), F. Stockwell (G), M. Christie (S).
- 1958:** A member of the Connacht team that won the Railway Cup.
Connacht: A. Brady (R), W. Casey (M), N. O'Dowd (S), T. Dillon (G), J. Mahon (G), G. O'Malley (R), M. Greally (G), J. Nallen (M), F. Eivers (G), M. McDonagh (G), S. Purcell (G), P. McGarty (L), G. Kirwan (G), F. Stockwell (G), C. Flynn (L).
 A member of the Mullinabreena team that won the Sligo Championship.
Mullinabreena: Liam Marren, F. Lang, Gerry McManus, Eamonn McGuinness, S. McGuinness, Joe Gorman, Peter Gallagher, Roger McCarrick, Patrick Hunt, Tommy Johnson, Nace O'Dowd (capt.), Harry McGowan, Padraig Gorman, Batty McLoughlin, Padraic Gallagher.
- 1959:** Selected on the New York team.

NACE O'DOWD MEMORIAL TOURNAMENT

AN invitation tournament inaugurated in 1988 to commemorate the memory of the late Nace O'Dowd was won by St. Mary's, Sligo, who defeated Knockmore, Co. Mayo, in the final. Eight teams took part and the Nace O'Dowd Memorial Trophy was presented by Mrs. Bridgie O'Dowd (wife of Nace O'Dowd) to Hubert Gilvarry, captain of St. Mary's. The 1988 tournament was a tremendous success.

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THE FINAL WORDS

THIS little booklet about one of our greatest GAA footballers is in no way aimed at covering his whole career or his life outside football—rather it is a collection of the tributes paid to him by his contemporaries when he passed to his eternal reward.

Together with those, we listed his football achievements from club to county to provincial level—gathered what photographs we could lay hands on—so that future generations of Sligo footballers would appreciate that the name of Nace O'Dowd was synonymous with the best in Sligo GAA on playing fields near and far in the eyes of all football followers.

Master