

GAA

Club Champions - Kilcar legend John Carr

John Carr was part of the golden generation with Kilcar and enjoyed success at under-21 level as well as senior level and also helped his beloved side to a Comórtas Peile na Gaeltacht title. He also had a long stint as a referee and off the field he has also been a leading figure and has done so much for the club.

Gerry McLaughlin
Contributor

This is the story of the great John Carr, the Largymore Laoch who played, fought and bled for the pride of Kilcar.

Quiet by nature, John admits that he was a "different animal" when he took the field for the blue and gold and there are many classy forwards throughout the county who have very good reason to remember John when he was really at himself.

From the early 1970s when Kilcar won three U-21 titles in a row, John was part of a golden generation that won SFL titles in 1975 and 1979, four-in-a-row from 1981-84 the Dr Maguire Cup in 1980, 1985 and 1989.

They also won a memorable double in the Comórtas Peile na Gaeltacht in 1989 when they beat Glencolumbkille in the senior final and also won the junior final.

Their last county title victory was in 1993 when they shocked a fancied Killybegs in the final, but John, who is now in his fifth year as club chairman, had retired by 1991.

But his record off the field is equally impressive having served as club treasurer and club chairman on two different occasions.

He has coached and managed several underage teams, was a long serving referee from the early 1980s to 2010 and is always helping out the club he loves so much in any way he can.

In his own words, he has a grá mór do Chill Chartha.

John was born in 1936 in Largymore to Maurice and Nora Carr.

His siblings are Maurice, James and Michael and sisters are Margaret (who is

married to Sean McGinley) and Mary (who is married to Gerard Kane in Mountcharlies)

John went to Shalvey National School where he and many others first came under the influence of 'The Chief', the late and one and only Michael Mac Giolla Easbuig - surely the greatest GAA official that Donegal has ever produced.

John first played U-12 for Killybegs as he went to O'Rourke's College on the Chief's recommendation as there was no underage in Kilcar.

But Gillespie and Hugh Shovlin got John back home and he was part of that three-in-a-row U-21 county champions from 1972-1974.

He was on the bench in 1972 and played the following two years.

"That was the basis of the 1980 county championship winning team with Michael Carr, Aodh Cannon, Danny Gillespie, the two Michael O'Donnells and many others."

"It was a special team, the work was put in and Seamus Gillespie and Barry Campbell were the backbone team."

"That was the start of our great team."

"We beat Convoys in 1972 and PJ Hoey was their top player and we beat Four Masters and Naomh Conaill in the other finals."

Senior debut

John made his senior debut in the 1975 season that saw Kilcar win the 1975 SFL title under the Chief's management. Indeed, the latter was the first person that introduced organised training to the club.

"He was ahead of his time in a lot of ways, and he got underage football up and running and was very much

involved in the development of Towney," he recalled.

"Back in the late 1970s there was a lot of spare filling from the construction of factories in Kilcar and the Chief used it to help reclaim some of the pitch from the sea."

"It was real forward thinking at the time, and he reclaimed it back from the sea."

"And the pitch was officially opened in the Centenary Year of 1984."

Kilcar actually clinched that title with a last match victory over Gaith Dobhair in Fintra and they were a point ahead of Kilcar.

John admits that Kilcar were given a point that wasn't to beat Gaith Dobhair earlier down in Magheragallon which sparked some testy exchanges.

That victory in 1975 sparked big celebrations as this was the first win in many years.

John was a man marker and most of the days "I would have held my own" although he does recall one particular

roasting from Red Sean Gallagher of St Joseph's in the 1975 championship.

"I grew up on a small farm with plenty of work on the land and I would not think anyone of running up a hill."

It took a while for more success to come, and it came in the shape of a league title in 1979 and a long awaited and much celebrated county championship in 1980 and John was at the heart of the action trying to sniff out some of the top marks men in the county.

"Glen were strong in those years and they won a county championship in 1978 and we had some great battles with them."

But 1980 was the real breakthrough and signalled the arrival of Martin



Flashback to 1985 and John Carr was in the thick of the action

McHugh.

John's brother-in-law Sean McGinley was captain and they beat a good Ardara side in the final.

Dominated

That game was dominated by Michael Carr and Martin McHugh and Sean McGinley had a long career.

The last comparable victory was in 1952 when Martin McHugh's father James was playing.

Kilcar were the team of the decade and should have won a few more titles.

They took the Dr Maguire Cup again in 1985 by beating Four Masters and getting revenge for that shock final defeat in 1982.

Kilcar played in seven county finals between 1980 and 1993 and won four and John was a key part of a strong physical side that had the unrivalled finishing power of Martin McHugh who quickly became a very youthful general.

James McHugh arrived in later years to add another dimension.

"We had three teams in the early 1980s and there was a fair bit of employment and any team that beat us went on to win the county championship."

"In 1986 Martin McHugh was in the US."

Kilcar then lost two county

finals on the trot in 1987 and 88 and lost to Aodh Ruadh and Killybegs.

"We really left it behind against Killybegs and we were managed by Ian Hegarty and Seamus Hegarty who also played."

The key man was Martin who was the guiding light on and off the field and he was a great tactician, could see things and was giving the orders.

"Many of us were older than him but he had great confidence, but he really was great in 1980 as a young lad who had not even played county minor but hit o-b-k."

In 1989 Kilcar beat Aodh Ruadh in the county final and they also won the Comórtas Peile na Gaeltacht in Glen in senior and junior grades.

John usually picked up either Paucir or Seamus Carr in those matches who were very alike in those days.

"I remember one day in Towney and I was marking Paucir Carr and Seamus was playing as well."

"And then at half time they swapped jerseys so I was picking up the wrong man and Ian Hegarty told me John you are marking the wrong man."

"They are no relations as Carr is a very common name here."

He added: "We won a championship and beat

Killybegs who were going for three-in-a-row and there was a poster saying Kilcar says No to three-in-row."

"We were actually bottom of the league that year, but we got our tactics right and it was a great victory and the last until 2017."

Officer

Meanwhile John was serving the club off the field as treasurer and the year after Kilcar won the county championship in 1980, they were three main officers were players: John "Nixon" Hegarty, Peter Hegarty, Paddy Sweeney, James McHugh, Charlie Dillon and Nelly Byrne all would have been club officers."

"That is pretty unique by any standards we had a lot of players who were also club officials with the likes of Sean McGinley, Peter Hegarty, Paddy Sweeney, James McHugh, Charlie Dillon and Nelly Byrne all would have been club officers."

John was treasurer for quite a while and is now in his second stint as club chairman as well as being an ex-chairman of the minor board.

He is now in his fifth year in the chair and it has seen Kilcar win a most welcome county championship in 2017 and league titles in 2017 and 2019.

John has also coached a lot



The Kilcar senior team of 1980



The victorious Kilcar side of 1989

of underage teams and was involved with the senior team in the early 1990s.

So how does John stay as a chairman so long as you need a real strong skin and the diplomacy of a Vatican courtier.

There will be negativity sometimes and that is only when we don't agree all the time, but when push comes to shove this club pulls together and that is one of our great strengths.

"And I have been playing since the mid 1970s and have a great grá for the GAA."

He added: "I was a referee for around 30 years and started while I was still playing in 1980."

"I refereed underage finals and a few B finals and U-21B finals."

"But I had a hip replacement in the early noughties and that interrupted the refereeing, but I stayed on until 2010."

By then, John was 54. So what was the thing that attracted him to refereeing?

"I think it was the underage and I would have been coaching underage as well and I really enjoyed refereeing and it helped me to develop a tough skin as you have to listen to a lot."

"I understood it better and as a player myself I was a different animal and referees over the years would have got

a lot of instructions on how to ref a game.

"So I had a good sense of where players were coming from which was a good help."

There were lean years from 1993 to 2016 with emigration a big factor and Kilcar went down to Division Two.

"For many years Michael Hegarty would have carried the team on his shoulders for many years."

Proud

Meanwhile in 2004, John was a proud man when Kilcar hosted the Comórtas Peile na Gaeltacht Championship in Towney.

The pitch was redone, and the club built new dressing rooms and did a big job on the surrounding area.

Those were tough times, but John says the club has always had great support financially with weekly bingo and the lotto was well supported.

2017 was a huge development when the new training pitch was opened.

He was chairman that year but the main men behind that were "Kevin Doogan, John Curran and Michael McShane."

2016 was a big breakthrough and Martin McHugh brought tactics to new levels, but Glenswilly were just too good on the day and Michael Murphy and Neil

Gallagher were superb.

But it was joy unbounded a year later when Barry Doherty led the team to victory over Naomh Conaill in a torrid affair.

Kilcar did not mind as a great weight had been lifted and the second generations were walking tall.

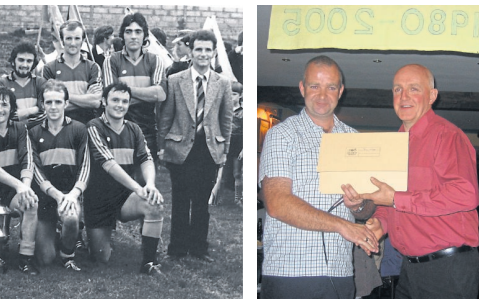
"The structure was there, the players were there and the hunger was there to make up for 2016 and we did just that."

He added: "It was no surprise that we won it and then we had a great win over Scotstown but I don't want to say too much about that county final win over Naomh Conaill as my daughter Orla is married to Naomh Conaill manager Martin Regan."

"Orla played for the county ladies and she was on the Donegal team that won the All-Ireland Intermediate Championship in the noughties."

"To beat Scotstown in Clones was a great achievement and then we came up against Slaughtneil and we had the chances to win but maybe a lack of experience of playing at that level let us down."

"Paddy McBrearty showed great leadership and can get the rest of the players going and he will let you know if you are not pulling your weight."



John Carr pictured at a reunion in 1980



John Carr with his sons James and Luke and daughter Orla after Kilcar won the Gaeltacht championship

"Sadly he was injured and then we lost Ryan and Mark got injured in the quarter-final in 2018."

"In 2019 Gaith Dobhair beat us in the county semi-final and they scored three goals which were crucial and that was our downfall that day."

He continued: "In the early noughties there was a big emphasis on underage and now we have Paddy, the three McHughs, the McCleans and Conor Doherty with Ciaran McGinley for a bit of power."

"There is a talented bunch of players all around the same time and that is always a help."

County Final

Last year they got revenge on Gaith Dobhair in the county semi-final and are still waiting on the 2020 county final to be played."

"The final could have gone ahead on the last Sunday in September but a combination of some players picking up the virus and a lack of communication between the county committee/team management and the CCC did not help either, in my view."

"It did not happen, and Croke Park pulled the plug."

"I think there must have been pressure on Croke Park whose main priority was to get the All-Ireland Championship finished."

"And they were under pressure from the scenes that went on after some county finals and we still have a number of county finals to be played."

"Winning county finals is very much about the community, and it was a bit naive of the GAA to think that there were not going to be celebrations."

"And when the All-Ireland final was played there were pubs open all over the country packed all over the country and was a recipe for disaster."

"It is interesting that our elite status has now been taken away."

"The other sports were going on and players were going to be tested but there were no tests as such in the GAA."

"The GAA would be mixing a lot all over the country and there are risks."

"I am still not sure why the elite status has been taken away from the GAA and they have not for it and there must be a reason why they have not fought for it."

He added: "The underage must be started first in March

and we could have underage competitions going ahead in Donegal as the youth have been affected most in his pandemic."

"Last year's club league did not work, and I am not too sure that we should be going down that road again."

When asked if late April or early May would suit Kilcar and Naomh Conaill to play the county final he said: "If both clubs were given four of five weeks to prepare with special permission and have your county players available to both teams it might happen."

"That might be the best way to go but there is a lot of uncertainty."

"The problem for us and Naomh Conaill if it was any later, is that we might not have our county players available to us."

Memories

But overall Kilcar has given John some great memories.

"I always had my heart in the GAA and stayed involved in various ways."

"The grá is still there... long may it continue John and there is a pitch to be re-developed and a new clubhouse to be built so John will still be there, at the heart of the club he loves as much as life itself."

"Outside my family the GAA is the biggest part of my life," he concluded.