

Sports Weekend

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How GAA stars face into the home stretch

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The sudden death and lasting influence of Cormac McAnallen



Gordon Manning

Twenty years ago today, Cormac McAnallen's death devastated the entire GAA, but his memory remains a touchstone for his family and Tyrone

Bridget McAnallen is making tea in the small kitchen at Páirc Chormaic. Just beyond the door, in the foyer of the pavilion, is a portrait of her son, Cormac. She assigns tea bags to the various cups and waits for the kettle to boil.

It's late afternoon in east Tyrone, crisp but sunny, and somewhere behind the rolling drumlins there is grass being cut around Eglis. At the pitch entrance, a cluster of advance party daffodils have already hoisted their trumpets, searching for spring.

Cormac McAnallen was just 24 when he died in his sleep on March 2nd, 2004. He was the Tyrone captain at the time and one of Gaelic football's bona fide stars. His death sparked mourning on a scale rarely seen in Ireland for any sports person, before or since. Within hours, it had transcended the world of sport.

The impact of his death crossed all sorts of political and cultural barriers, among the sympathy letters received by the family was one signed by the Republican inmates in Portlaoise Prison and another from the Imperial Grand Black Chapter of the British Commonwealth, an elite society of Orangemen.

His wake and funeral were attended by thousands. For those few days, the entire country seemed to descend on a small corner of Tyrone.

Páirc Chormaic is a peaceful place, tucked down a narrow tree-lined lane and sitting inside a slow bend on a country road. It was officially opened in 2012. The pavilion was added in the summer of 2023. On the occasion of its inauguration Cormac's brother, Dónal, captained the Tyrone masters against Armagh.

It was Dónal who found Cormac in his bedroom on the night he died. In an instant, everything changed for the family. Bridget and Brendan lost a son, Dónal lost a younger brother, Fergus lost an older one. Then, in August 2022, they lost Brendan too.

"I think we both reacted differently when Cormac died," says Bridget. "Brendan grieved more openly than I did, I was numb, I turned my feelings off. The loss of a son... you are in shock for a while, really."

In the home dressing room is a large



image of Cormac playing for Tyrone, ball in hand, cheeks puffed out, eyes scanning forward. Bridget and Dónal sit on the wooden bench. Bridget has her tea while Dónal holds a small gold heart-shaped pin badge in his hand, the symbol of the Cormac Trust, which is drawing to a close on the 20th anniversary of his death.

"Daddy always wore the wee gold pin on his suit lapel," says Dónal. "It was a subtle statement, sort of a way of saying he never forgot."

It was on his suit when he was buried.

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Seán Cavanagh remembers the shriek of the phone puncturing the stillness early that Tuesday morning in March 2004. His dad brought an end to the racket by answering, but suddenly footsteps were rushing up the stairs. It couldn't be good. Lying in his bed, Seán braced himself.

"Dad came in. 'Cormac died last night.'" His first thought was: "Car accident." Just a week earlier, he and Cormac had sat together on the team bus after Tyrone's McKenna Cup final win over Donegal in Ballybofey. Cormac talked about the driving he had been doing between working as a teacher in St Catherine's, Armagh and going to see his fiancée, Ashlene, in Derry.

"When I heard what happened, I was in a daze, it didn't make sense." It seemed like only yesterday that they were carefree high-spirited kids playing basketball outside Seán's house in the Moy. Cormac's grandad, Charlie O'Neill,

lived beside the Cavanagh homestead. If ever the McAnallen crew were visiting and spotted the Cavanagh brothers out front playing basketball, invariably they joined in.

But nothing could have prepared Seán for seeing his deceased friend and team-mate.

"When they took the lid off the coffin, it was one of those moments. I can still hear those around me, All-Ireland winners, squealing with pain. People were distraught. It's probably the toughest thing I've had to see in my entire life."

Cormac, though young, was Tyrone's leader. Seán recalls a futile effort to dodge a recovery session one evening in 2002, having spent the previous night overindulging after a Tyrone game. When Cormac arrived to pick him up, Seán huddled under the duvet.

"I shouted down to my da, 'Tell McAnallen I'm not going anywhere near Omagh tonight'. But the type of man Cormac was, he got out of the car and came up to my bedroom. 'Seán, come on, we're going'. I told him to leave me alone but he wasn't having it. He literally pulled me out of the bed."

Seán retired in 2017, walking away as Tyrone's most decorated footballer with three All-Ireland senior titles. But it could have been more.

"Cormac was the most natural leader I've ever seen," he says. "People say you can never be sure about anything in life – but I know that if Cormac hadn't died our standards would have been even higher in that golden era. And I've no doubt we

■ Cormac McAnallen's brother Dónal and his mother Bridget outside Páirc Chormaic: the home of Eglis GAA club was named after the late Tyrone football star in 2012. PHOTOGRAPH: OLIVER MCEVEIGH

would have won more than three All-Irelands, 100 per cent."

In 2008, Seán captained Ireland in the International Rules Series in Australia. Ireland won and he got to lift the Cormac McAnallen Cup.

"It was my friend's cup I was lifting, Cormac's cup. It was quite emotional. I still classify that as one of the greatest things I managed to do in the game."

Seán has regularly taken the short trip out the Gortestown Road from the Moy to Eglis. "I would still go to his grave," he says. "Particularly throughout my Tyrone career before a game, I would have gone. He had that influence on me – when Cormac was present there was calm, order, leadership. I still feel that presence visiting his grave."

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Bridget and Brendan were the driving forces behind the Cormac Trust, a charity which raised awareness of Sudden Arrhythmic Death Syndrome (SADS), donated or subsidised more than 300 defibrillators, trained approximately 2,500 volunteers to use AEDS and CPR in emergency situations, contributed £180,000 to research projects and helped create the Tyrone and Armagh Communi-

ty First Responders.

"When Cormac died, there was an immediate realisation that something needs to be done," recalls Dónal.

"Other bereaved families were getting in touch with us. Cormac's profile was one that people could channel this issue towards, so it sort of happened almost automatically."

The Trust wasn't just a family initiative: much of the early groundwork was done by the Tyrone County Board and Club Tyrone. But Brendan and Bridget were its pillars.

"My parents have been incredibly strong to keep at it for as long as they did," continues Dónal. "There was almost a sense of duty, a certain fortitude of character to keep going."

The family don't claim all the credit for the improved awareness around SADS or the increased number of AEDS in the country over the last 20 years, but when you pass a defibrillator in your locality today, directly or indirectly, it's likely at some stage Cormac's death or the Trust had some part to play in it being there.

Brendan was the main point of contact in the office in Benburb and his passing, just two months after a cancer diagnosis, left a void.

He was also a fiercely passionate historian, a committee member of the O'Neill Country Historical Society since the 1980s, and in 2011 he published *The Book of Eglis: Where the Oona Flows*.

"Daddy was a real doer. You can't underestimate the vacuum he leaves behind," says Dónal.

"Everything he was interested in was hewn out of rock, old buildings, stone walls. He had a deep sense of tradition. You only come to appreciate it all the more now he's gone, but he was a rock to us too."

Brendan is buried alongside Cormac in the new graveyard in Eglis.

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Seán Kelly was the GAA president when Cormac died. In November 2023, he had presented Cormac with his All Star.

"It was shocking when the news came through about Cormac. It was the first time I could remember such a thing happening to a GAA player," says the Kerry native.

"I'll never forget Cormac's funeral, and it stuck with me for a long time afterwards, the sheer size of it, and yet there was great dignity shown by the family and appreciation for everybody who attended."

"The scale of it was not lost on us. I was reminded of it again at Dillon Quirke's funeral two years ago, the way both communities rallied around their people."

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Cormac's room hasn't changed much over the years. It's not exactly a time capsule, but so much of his life remains within – swapped jerseys, medals, clothes, schoolbooks, video tapes of basketball matches.

His 2003 All-Ireland SFC final jersey has been framed and now hangs inside the pavilion entrance at Páirc Chormaic. On the opposite wall is a cabinet which houses, among other things, the football he clasped as if his life depended upon it after captaining Tyrone to victory in the 1998 All-Ireland minor final.

In 2017, Dónal wrote *The Pursuit of Perfection*, an exceptional book on the

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