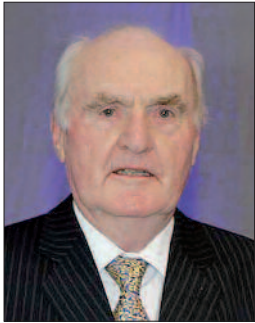


# The End of the Ban on Foreign Games in 1971



by Seamus J. King

**T**he Ban passed away at 11.45 am in the Whitla Hall, Queen's University, Belfast yesterday. Only one voice, that of one of the oldest delegates, Mr. Lar Brady of Laois, was raised in protest after the president, Mr. Pat Fanning, formally declared that Rule 27 had

been deleted from the G.A.A. Rule Book.' So reported Raymond Smith on the front page of the *Irish Independent* on Monday, April 12, 1971. He went on to add that 'A show of hands was not taken as representatives of 30 of the 32 counties, at their county conventions, already had indicated clearly that they wanted the rule to go and, as Mr. Fanning said, he did not believe there was any need for discussion. The process took about one minute. Far from the electric and explosive atmosphere that some outside G.A.A. circles had anticipated, the Ban died quietly and with dignity.'

As well as Rule 27, which was abolished on the proposition of Con Shortt of Armagh and seconded by Tom Woulfe, Dublin (who for many years had advocated the abolition of the rule), went Rule 28, vigilance committees, and Rule 29, which prevented G.A.A. clubs including foreign dances at social functions. Rule 26, which prevented members of the British forces and police from being members of the G.A.A., also on the clár remained. The motion calling for its abolition wasn't even moved, perhaps because of the escalating trouble in Northern Ireland at the time.

## County Board in Favour

At the county convention at Thurles on January 31 under the chairmanship of Seamus Ó Riain, the delegates decided to abolish the Ban. John O'Grady (Moycarkey-Borris), who for many years had called for its abolition, proposed the abolition of Rule 27, which debarred G.A.A. members from playing or attending soccer, rugby, hockey or cricket games, and Rule 28, which set up vigilance committees to enforce Rule 27. The motion was seconded by S. O'Dwyer of Thurles Fennellys. There was little debate and only two opposition speakers, and a show of hands revealed a majority of 134 to 57 in favour of abolition. The abolition of Rule 29, which forbade G.A.A. clubs from running non-Irish dances, was proposed by Michael Ryan of Arravale Rovers and passed by a large majority. Another motion from Arravale Rovers to abolish Rule 26, which debarred members of the British forces from membership of the G.A.A., was withdrawn.

Delegates representing the county at congress in Belfast on the weekend of 10-11 April were as follows: county chairman, Seamus Ó Riain, and county secretary, Tomás Ó Baróid, North division, Hubie Hogan and Martin O'Connor, South division, Phil O'Shea and Jimmy Collins, Mid division, John O'Grady & Michael Small, West division, Michael Maguire and Jimmy Hennessy. While most of them travelled to Belfast by car or train, the North delegates flew from Shannon Airport to Belfast. Jimmy Collins drove to Dublin and took the train from there. He recalls getting up early the first morning and going

for a walk down Sandy Row, without incident! He remembers a great concert on Saturday night, which included the Chieftains.

The ease with which the Ban was abolished at the congress came as a major surprise to most people but the public attitude towards it had changed dramatically in the three years since it last appeared on the congress clár in 1968. It was defeated by 220 votes to 80 on that occasion but, though it wasn't realised at the time, it was the beginning of the end for the Ban. The congress did make a gesture to those who wanted its removal by setting up a committee to examine it but since the members were chosen from the pro-Ban central committee, it was regarded with a certain scepticism. Former secretary of Down County Board, Maurice Hayes, commented that the composition of the committee was 'rather like the Unionist Party appointing a committee of ex-Grand Masters to discuss the validity of the Orange order.' During the years leading up to 1971 in spite of much strong defence of the Ban, the general trend was for its abolition. The committee set up to examine the Ban reported in November 1970 and agreed that the Ban should stay, that 'it was an outward sign of the association's exclusively and national motivation' and that it should be retained for practical and idealistic reasons: 'If Rule 27 were removed this would weaken the idealistic motive which inspires so many people to give voluntary service to the G.A.A. By its demand for exclusive allegiance to a National course, the G.A.A. claims an attribute that no mere sporting organisation can claim. This puts its games above other sports – games with a mission – and it would be foolish to allow that patriotic motive to be reduced.'

## Abolished by Acclamation

However, fewer G.A.A. followers were willing to subscribe to such lofty ideals. In the same year as the committee reported there were demonstrations against the South African rugby team in Dublin and the G.A.A. Ban was compared with apartheid on the Late Late Show. The Ban was seen as discriminatory as the practices in some Dublin golf clubs against Jews and women. It was also likened to the Berlin Wall. All-Ireland footballer and Government Minister, Sean Flanagan expressed the opinion that the G.A.A. would become 'an empire without citizens' if it didn't remove the Ban. There were protests against the Ban outside Croke Park for the Leinster football final of 1970. A motion passed at the 1970 congress called on all clubs and county boards to put forward their views on the Ban before the next congress. If the pro-Ban people were hoping that the grass roots would come down in favour of the status quo, they were badly disillusioned. A substantial majority of clubs and counties came out in favour of removing the Ban and thirty out of the thirty two counties had motions in favour of removing Rule 27 at congress. As if anticipating the outcome of the congress a picture appeared in the *Irish Independent* some months before the event showing Kerry football legend, Mick O'Connell, standing in a crowd at a soccer match.

The expectation was best expressed by Mitchel Cogley, sports editor of the *Irish Independent* in an opinion piece on the front page of the newspaper on the Saturday morning of congress weekend: 'The matter has been comprehensively threshed out at club and county level over the past few months,

with an overwhelming majority at all levels for the removal of the Ban . . . it would appear that the Ban must go! . . . If it is not then what price DEMOC(K)RACY?'

### Origin of Ban

The Ban didn't spring full-blown into existence but evolved from the first moves in 1885 to exclude foreign influences from the new association. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ban as we came to know it, was in place. At the 1902 convention as a result of a motion by T. F. O'Sullivan, Rule 28 was amended as follows: 'That any member of the Association, who plays or encourages in any way rugby or Association Football, hockey, or any other imported game which is calculated to injuriously affect our national pastimes, be suspended from the Association and that this resolution apply to all counties in Ireland and England.' The Ban as we know it today had arrived. The same convention also sanctioned the setting up of Vigilance Committees for athletic purposes. The idea was put forward earlier in the year at a central council meeting at Thurles, proposed by T. F. O'Sullivan and seconded by J. D. O'Brien of Tipperary. Counties were requested to appoint committees 'to report illegal meetings and detect illegal practices in connection with athletics under G.A.A. laws. The police rule came back at this time as Rule 28A: 'That police, soldiers, sailors in the British Navy, pensioners from the British Army or Navy, be prevented from playing hurling or football or competing at athletic meetings under G.A.A. laws.' By 1916 the Ban was firmly established.

### Implementation of the Ban

It's difficult to measure how the Ban was implemented. There were so many aspects to it, not to play foreign games, not to attend foreign games, not to organise foreign dances, etc that the vast number of G.A.A. members must have faithfully obeyed or else the Ban was poorly enforced. The main implementation arm of the G.A.A. was the Vigilance Committee but not every county had one. There is the well-known story of Mick Mackey, the outstanding hurler of the 1930s, who was a great lover of rugby and an alleged frequenter of rugby matches. The Limerick county board were fearful that he might be caught so they made him a member of their Vigilance Committee! On the other hand not every county had such a committee and if they had and if they were active one would expect many more members of the G.A.A to have been suspended.

There is an interesting case study from a North Tipperary G.A.A. Board meeting, as reported in the *Nenagh Guardian* on July 11, 1936. The meeting was called to hear an objection by Bawnmore-Eglisish to Ballingarry being awarded a junior hurling championship game, which they won by 10 points to 8 points on June 14, the same year. The grounds for the objection were that two Ballingarry players, John McKenna and Dan Treacy, had attended a rugby dance in the Oxmantown Hall, Birr on December 26, 1935. The chairman, S. F. Gardiner, quoted the rule under which the objection was made that any member of the G.A.A. 'who plays or encourages in any way rugby or Association Football, hockey or cricket, or participates in dances under the patronage of British soldiers, etc suspends himself from membership of the G.A.A. for 2 years.'

Mr. Kelly, Eglisish presented the case for Bawnmore-Eglisish. Edward Horan, a witness for club, stated that he saw McKenna go into the hall on December 26, 1935. The chairman asked why the witness hadn't reported the matter before then.

Mr. Kelly intervened to say it was the duty of the Vigilance Committee to do so. The chairman replied that they had enough to do in North Tipperary without going into Birr. He went on to say that it looked bad that the witness hadn't reported the matter and added: 'It seems to me now you did it

in the interests of the club and not in the interests of the G.A.A.'

Mr. Cronin, a member of the board, said the witness wasn't in the hall and couldn't see the man. The chairman asked if the person could go into the hall and not to the dance. The witness replied: 'I do not see what other business he would have in the hall.'

At this stage another witness, William Shanny, stated he was at the dance. The chairman said he couldn't accept his evidence because he had automatically suspended himself by being there and his evidence could not be accepted.

Mr. Kelly stated that if the chairman wanted further witnesses he could ask the Offaly county board as one of their Vigilance Committee was present. The chairman replied it was that person's duty to report the matter to the Offaly county board, which in turn would have reported the matter to him.

In further discussion Mr. Kelly asked if the chairman would accept the evidence of a band member. When there were further refusals to accept the evidence given, Mr. Kelly suggested that the board investigate the matter further and give the club a chance to bring forward some more witnesses. The chairman refused and in his summary he said that the only evidence produced was that of the driver of the car (Horan), who stated that he saw McKenna going into the hall and questioned why he didn't report the matter until now. He left it to the members to decide. When the vote was taken the number voting for the objection was 9, those against 16 and abstentions 14.

It is difficult to know if this was the usual way breaches of the Ban were dealt with. Every effort was made by the powers that be to belittle the evidence of the Bawnmore-Eglisish and to cast doubt on the motivation of it. It is important to know that John McKenna was a high profile figure, having won a senior hurling All-Ireland with Tipperary in 1930. Also a fellow member of the team was Mick Cronin, who contributed at the board meeting.

### 1938: A momentous Year

In 1938 there were two high profile cases involving the Ban. The first involved the Tipperary hurling team and it was known as the 'Cooney Case'. Jimmy Cooney attended a rugby match in Dublin in February of that year. He was reported and suspended for six months. While he was suspended he declared for the county, which was a requirement for players who weren't residing in the county in which they were eligible to play. Because Cooney's declaration arrived at Central Council while Cooney was still under suspension, it wasn't accepted. The Tipperary county board disagreed with Central Council and played Cooney in a Munster championship game against Clare. They won the match easily but Clare objected to Cooney and were awarded the game. As it turned out Tipperary would have won the game without him and might have gone ahead and won the All-Ireland.

The second case was of national importance. President Douglas Hyde, who was a patron of the G.A.A., attended a soccer international in November 1938 in his capacity as president of the country. The G.A.A. believed that as patron of the association he was offending against the Ban in doing so and suspended him from the association. There was national uproar at the action but the G.A.A. stuck to its guns and President Hyde wasn't invited to a G.A.A. function for the remainder of his term in office. The G.A.A. had a way out which they didn't use. There was the case of Guard George Ormsby, a noted Mayo footballer. He attended a soccer match in Sligo on February 6, 1938. Sligo county board suspended him for being in breach of the Ban rule on foreign games. When it transpired he was at the match in his line of duty as a guard, he was re-instated. As this happened early in the year that President Hyde was suspended, he could equally have been

absolved as he was attending the soccer match in his line of duty as President of Ireland.

### Progress to Removal of the Ban

In the 1947 congress a motion to remove the Ban was defeated by 180 votes to 5. In 1953 the Lord Mayor of Waterford, Alderman Martin Cullen was suspended from the G.A.A. for attending a foreign game even though he attended in an official capacity.

In 1954 Radio Eireann caused consternation in Gaelic Ireland circles by broadcasting a soccer match on St. Patrick's Day in spite of strong protests. An interesting case was the suspension of Eamon Young of Cork in the early fifties for writing for a Sunday newspaper. This wasn't allowed since about 1940 and the decision by the Cork county board was ostensibly to uphold the spirit of the G.A.A. In fact it is believed the real reason was Young's stance on the personnel to travel with the Cork football team, as league champions, to New York. The board included Jim Barry as 'trainer' instead of the real trainer, Corporal O'Brien of Young's club. Young's appeal against the suspension to the Munster Council was lost with only Kerry supporting it. There is a further interesting episode from Moycarkey sometime in the 1950s. Fr. Dinny O'Meara from the club got Mutt Ryan and Paddy Maher to go into the county convention and vote against a Ban motion, despite the fact that the club voted 80 – 2 the other way. Sean Barry and Der Shanahan, the official club delegates, were refused admission to Scoil Ailbe and told that the club was already represented inside!

*The Nationalist* reported in February 1956 on the application by Eamonn O'Duibhir, Main Street, Clogheen for reinstatement in the G.A.A. According to him he was automatically suspended for playing rugby with Rockwell College but that he had been compelled to play rugby at the school, where the game was compulsory.

The Ryans of Cashel were a famous sporting family in the fifties and most of them played rugby as well as hurling. The Cashel team that played Thurles in the Munster Junior Cup in March 1958 had six brothers on the team, Donal, Gerard, John, Eddie, Dick and Tony, Ger was in line for a place on the Tipperary minors but was suspended for playing rugby, but never got his notice. Apparently he was listed on the team as J. Ryan, and the suspension was sent to John by mistake!

Michael Dundon, former editor of the *Tipperary Star*, has an interesting account of his suspension under the Ban. He was one of seven members of a local soccer team in Thurles that was going well in the second half of the sixties, four of them from Thurles Sarsfields and three from Kickhams. They were suspended at a county board meeting in 1967. Dundon was at the same meeting as a reporter for the *Tipperary Star* and heard of the suspension afterwards, because it never came up at the meeting! Having contacted the county G.A.A. secretary he was informed it had come up and the seven of them suspended! At any rate none of them were ever officially notified of their suspension nor informed when they could return. It seemed to be a case of finding unimportant victims to show that the board was serious about the Ban. In their case their suspensions didn't make much difference as they all played junior hurling. When it came to dealing with the county's star hurler, Jimmy Doyle, the treatment was different. Jimmy was reported for attending a rugby match and summoned to a board meeting. He attended and explained that when taking the dog for a walk along the Brittas Road he saw a rugby match in progress and wandered in to see what was happening. 'And did you watch the match', he was asked. 'I did,' replied Jimmy. So the board was in a pickle. He was guilty and would have to be suspended but you couldn't have the county lose its best forward for six

months! Eventually they found a solution. 'And did you pay to get in?' 'deed I didn't!' replied Jimmy. 'Ah!, you're okay, so!' he was informed.

### Tom Woulfe

One of the great proponents of the abolition of the Ban was Kerryman, Tom Woulfe, the chairman of the Dublin Civil Service G.A.A. Club. According to Cormac Moore 'His personal motivation stemmed from an incident in 1948 when he was involved in a Vigilance Committee for Dublin county board, where a person was suspended for playing a foreign game and that person subsequently took no further part in the G.A.A. Woulfe was disgusted by the experience and refused to act as a vigilante again'. Instead he set about campaigning for the abolition of the Ban starting with an investigation into the usefulness of the Ban by his own club. He kept the Ban high up in the agenda at congresses during the 1960s. The division between the two camps became entrenched and the debate more and more acrimonious during this decade. The motion to remove the Ban was defeated by 282 votes to 52 in 1965. The World Cup and its television coverage in 1966 gave a great boost to the spread of soccer. In the same year Tomás Ó Fiaich claimed that the Ban didn't help the G.A.A.'s aim to end Partition. Minister for Education, Donagh O'Malley came out strongly for its removal. In 1967 there was talk of removing Jack Lynch from the G.A.A. because he attended a rugby match. The following year he spoke out against the divisive nature of the Ban. In spite of these arguments the official G.A.A. stood solid behind the Ban as indicated by the vote for its abolition in 1968, defeated by 220 votes to 80. In the light of that vote it is incredible the transformation in opinion over three years to the extent that it was abolished by acclamation in the 1971 congress.!

### Bibliography

The most comprehensive history of the Ban, 'The Steadfast Rule' by Brendan Mac Lua, was published by the Cuchulann Press in 1967. It traced the evolution, extension and retention of the Ban from the beginning of the G.A.A. There is a substantial amount about the Ban in Cormac Moore's, 'The G.A.A. v Douglas Hyde: The removal of Ireland's First President as G.A.A. Patron', which was published by the Collins Press in 2012. A fine account is to be found in Paul Rouse's 'Sport and the Politics of Culture: A History of the G.A.A. Ban 1884-1971', which was his UCD Master's Thesis. For individual instances of the Ban in operation a survey of contemporary newspapers is very revealing. There were some very strong supporters of the Ban. Canon Hamilton (1894-1969), who was chairman of the Clare County Board for twenty-five years from 1920 and was responsible for having the 1947 All-Ireland football final played in New York, was a staunch advocate of the Ban, though he held the opposite view for some time after the Treaty, gave a lecture on the Ban, which was produced in booklet form by Club Camán Peil in 1955. In the same publication the Listowel writer, Bryan MacMahon had a supplementary article giving nineteen reasons for the Ban. The most prominent G.A.A. official in support of the Ban was Pádraig Ó Caoimh, who was general secretary of the association from 1929 to 1964. According to Cormac Moore he was 'an unbending advocate of the Ban . . . who firmly promoted the Irish-Ireland movement and he saw the Ban as the cornerstone of that movement.' During his time in office he worked hand in hand with Pádraig McNamee, who was president from 1938-1943 and who moved with little debate in 1938 that Douglas Hyde had ceased to be a patron of the G.A.A. by his action of going to a soccer match.