

Former Clare All-Star Tony Griffin's youth charity has helped him find balance in his own life



Denis Walsh

After Ballyea won the Munster club title in November Tony Kelly, their magic-maker, was interviewed on RTE Radio. Kelly picked up the roses showered at his feet and with note-perfect humility shared them around. He recalled the Ballyea players who dragged the club from obscurity into the senior ranks and then fought relegation battles year after year. In that breath he gave praise and thanks to Tony Griffin.

Remember him? In Ballyea, Griffin was the sorcerer before they dreamed of a sorcerer's apprentice. He was their first Clare hurling star; their first All-Star. Others such as Colin Lynch and Stephen Sheedy left Ballyea to make their names elsewhere and when Griffin was 17 Anthony Daly put it to him plainly: "You know," he said, "if you want to make the Clare senior team one day you'll have to transfer to Clarecastle" — a club of inter-county galls in the same parish as Ballyea. Griffin stayed.

In the second half of Griffin's hurling career he spent four years as a student in Canada. When Griffin would return to his studies in the autumn, though, Ballyea would still be stuck in something. For crunch matches he was always willing to come home and somehow the club would fund the flights. Once they simply reached out to the parish with a church gate collection, certain that their neighbours would recognise a good cause.

One year in particular getting home was hairy. Griffin's flight from Halifax was delayed and he was going to miss his connection in Boston. He pleaded at the check-in desk for an alternative flight but what could he say that might move them? So, he told them he was getting married. Ten minutes later they came back with a ticket to Toronto and upgraded him to first class. In the next seat was Michael Stipe, the lead singer with REM.

Griffin got home with three hours to spare for Ballyea's relegation semi-final but Frank Lohan cleaned him out and Ballyea lost. He stayed around for the relegation final a week later and, with only a few minutes left, came up with the winning goal.

At the time his father was in the final stages of lung cancer. Jerome had never smoked but tearing down and rebuilding British train stations in the 1960s had exposed him to asbestos and that was as toxic as 40 cigarettes a day.

"He was at the game and that was the last time I saw my father out of hospital," says Griffin. "I remember he came onto the field to meet me and he

'Soar is the most fulfilling thing I've ever done. Everything else was leading to it'



Hitting the heights: Tony Griffin was an All Star for Clare, inset, before he got Soar, a youth mental health charity, off the ground. In the past five years Griffin, who became Soar's CEO in 2014, helped raise €2m to accelerate its growth

was very frail at the time. I was flying back that evening so we went from Newmarket to the airport. Probably a month or six weeks later he died."

The impact of Jerome's death shaped Griffin's life for some time afterwards. He felt like he needed to do something about it and was tormented by the prospect of doing nothing. It took him a year to arrive at the idea of cycling 7,000km across Canada to raise money for cancer research.

The cycle was an extraordinary feat of willpower and organisation and endurance and for months it consumed him; there was no other way to do it. On July 1, 2007, Griffin cycled from Dublin to Ennis for a triumphant homecoming but at the end of the road there wasn't the sense of completion or release he had expected. The months that followed were difficult. He found himself drifting, searching for another purpose; behind it were issues of unresolved grief. The cycle had been a giant distraction from his loss but he still hadn't worked it through.

"I was mentally and physically exhausted — exhausted from meeting people who were crying in my arms or crying on my shoulder. I didn't have the skill-set to know how to take care of myself. I was mentally burnt out. I wasn't grown up enough to realise that you need to take care of yourself as well and that's OK. I was taking care of everyone else."

In Screaming at the Sky, Griffin's terrific autobiography, there is an affecting passage in which he describes sitting alone on a riverside near

his sister's home in England and placing an unusual white stone on the river bed. A bereavement counsellor had told him that he needed to make a statement: plant a tree, write a poem, make a scrapbook, something that signified moving on from the bereavement stage to acceptance. He resisted the thought at first; and then he did it. He left his sadness on the river bed.

In life Griffin was still searching. With a business partner he set up a sports management company which did fine for a while but it was the middle of the recession and their target market was depressed. "It was never sustainable," he says. "In 2011 we realised that this has no legs."

Around that time Griffin saw Every Heart Beats True, a powerful documentary about the life of Jim Stynes. The film captured his extraordinary career

in Australian Rules and his battle with cancer but it also shone a light on Reach, an organisation that Stynes had founded to help young people in Melbourne fulfil their potential. In Griffin's mind a bulb lit



I'M NOT OVERWHELMED. GOING BACK HURLING WAS PART OF IT. IT PROVIDES JUST ANOTHER OUTLET

GALWAY CRUISE INTO WALSH CUP FINAL

Galway's hurlers will never have an easier game after first-half goals against IT Carlow from Sean McInerney, Conor Whelan and Jason Flynn saw them qualify for next weekend's Walsh Cup final against either Wexford or Kilkenny, writes Declan Rooney. In the end, Galway routed DJ Carey's second string students, who are in the middle of a Fitzgibbon Cup campaign, 4-37 to 0-15. Victory over DIT last Wednesday saw Carlow get their inter-varsity competition

off to a winning start, but with a clash against champions Mary Immaculate to come this Thursday, Carey only started four of the team that played earlier in the week. Galway manager Micheal Donoghue gave debuts to Kevin McHugo, Gavin Lally and Aidan Helebert, who hit four points before the interval.

But it was Adrian Tuohy's comeback from injury that will please his manager most. Out since last season's All-Ireland semi-final against

Tipperary due to a dislocated elbow, Tuohy easily slotted back into the team and his three points before the interval helped Galway to a 3-21 to 0-5 half-time lead. Sub Shane Moloney caught the eye in the second period with nine points from wing-forward while McInerney rattled Galway's fourth goal.

Elsewhere, Waterford earned their first win of the season in a Munster senior hurling league dead rubber with a 4-21 to 0-15 success over Kerry.

Why am I selling my car?

"So, I'm driving with massive doubt on my way to my cousin and I got a text from one of Jim Stynes' closest friends. He was at his bedside and he only had a few hours left. On the text it said, 'I told him that you guys had come over, I gave him the message that you were going to bring Reach back to Ireland and he got incredible relief out of it.' I had to pull the car over because I burst into tears. It was almost a little sign to keep going. Just keep going. Never look back."

He sold the car for €10,500 and for a while he took part-time work in garden centres to tide him over but that didn't last long. To get Soar off the ground he couldn't ration his time. Griffin and Swan toiled for 12 months and then they hit the jackpot. They entered a competition called Social Entrepreneurs Ireland and won. The first prize was €200,000 in funding and three years of substantial consultancy support. From there it took off.

"It's been the most fulfilling thing I've ever done but everything else [in my life] was leading to it. I was always curious about who I was and sometimes — especially in hurling — that would have made me feel like a bit of an alien. I was interested in life, I was interested in what made people tick, I was interested in what made me tick. Why I'm so grateful is that I've stumbled on something that brings it all together."

Year on year it has grown. There are a dozen people on the payroll now, six of them facilitating workshops in schools in

different parts of the country every day. They work with individuals, they work with families; young people arrive at their office in the centre of Dublin and they do whatever they can to help.

Over time, Griffin's role in the organisation has changed. At the beginning he was on the front line on all fronts, braced for anything.

"It was overwhelming at the start. You're in schools every day and just the emotional weight of that... It took me a while to understand that if you're listening to people and they're offloading their challenges in life or you're working with a room full of people and there's emotional energy flying around that can impact on you. But I was going from there to a board meeting and then maybe first thing the following morning driving to Belfast to meet a funder. Was it overwhelming? Yes."

He stepped back from the workshops and in 2014 the board made him CEO. Generating enough money to keep the organisation growing was the biggest challenge he faced. In five years they have sourced €2m and not a penny from the state.

"It has mostly come from corporate Ireland but we've been very selective with corporate partners. We've said no to people who were just looking for a good publicity vehicle for their brand. A lot of wealthy individuals have helped us, people who are disillusioned by the state. They're looking for causes that are agile and honest and are trying to do a piece of work that the state are failing to do."

Last week he stepped away from the fundraising piece. Soar made a couple of new appointments that represent another down payment on the future. Griffin is hands-on and full-on but not buried in it the way he once was. There was no future in that.

"For the first time in many years," he says, "I have a balance to my life. I'm not overwhelmed now and I have my own little strategies to make sure. Going back hurling was part of it — just another outlet."

In his life hurling had been sidelined. Anthony Daly asked him to work with the Dublin hurlers as a mental skills coach and because it was Daly who asked Griffin agreed. He did it for two years and loved it but that wasn't a path he wanted to follow.

Last year, though, he decided that he would like to play for Ballyea again. Just a bit of junior hurling. Living in Kildare and working in Dublin kept him away from home and he wanted his young son Jerome to spend more time with his Clare cousins.

So, four years after he last played senior he applied to be regraded. The Clare county board were reluctant to grant permission and Griffin had to plead his case before an eight-man committee. They relented in the end but before they did one member of the committee articulated what they were probably all thinking. "Tony," he said, "my difficulty is that class is permanent."

In Thurles, in November, that would have been the picture of Tony Griffin that came into Tony Kelly's mind.

CPA need better thinking before taking aim at Duffy proposals

Objections to calendar reforms not useful if no alternatives are proposed, writes Denis Walsh

IT MAY sound odd but the escalation in hostilities over the lot of club players is not a bad thing, regardless of where you stand on the diplomatic shemozzling of the last week. For too long the debate was bogged down in catch-all slogans. Like that scene from Father Ted where the parish priest of Craggy Island and his curate stand outside a cinema protesting about a "blasphemous" film with a placard that screams, "Down

With This Sort Of Thing." Everybody accepted that club players were being screwed; everybody could see that it was bad for the GAA; everybody wanted "something done about it". But what? And by whom?

This week the newly formed Club Players Association [CPA] took aim at Parraic Duffy, the GAA's director-general and one of the people whose sincerity and stamina on this issue is

beyond reproach. They don't like his proposal for a round-robin format for the last eight in the football championship and they don't think his proposal to complete both championships by the end of August goes far enough: the deadline they have in mind is August 1.

What the CPA don't have at the moment is an alternative to Duffy's proposal — a masterplan that would take account not just of the calendar and the needs of club players but also the needs of inter-county players and the critical importance of the senior championships as a promotional vehicle for the GAA. What the CPA have suggested is a "Think Tank" stocked with stakeholders.

Another committee? Really?

The proposals that Duffy brought to last year's Congress about the fixtures calendar and player burnout had been influenced by the output of seven different committees over an extended period of time. The headline proposal to condense all activity, club and county, into one calendar year failed marginally to get the required two-thirds majority but that failure wasn't for the lack of relevant data or scoping or husbanded thinking.

Good committees have sat on this issue before and made good suggestions. What has stood in the way of change? The GAA's innate conservatism and sectional self-interest.

This week's argument, however, defects from a core point: the urgent need to hold

county boards to account. Even with the current inter-county structures and with the current calendar there are counties who run decent championships and leagues with acceptable start and finish dates. So, if some can do it, why not all?

In his newspaper column yesterday, the former Meath footballer Bernard Flynn suggested to the CPA that their priority in their first year should have been to conduct a due diligence examination of the fixture committee in every county and come down on every county board "like a tonne of bricks".

What may have escaped Flynn's notice is an existing committee in Croke Park that is systematically trying to bring order to club championships all over the

country. The Central Fixtures Planning Committee [CFPC] has been working on devising a metric that can be applied to any county to illustrate where the pressure points are and where the room for improvement exists.

It is a massive challenge given the diversity of club championship structures across the country, the variance in club populations from county to county and the spectrum of bias from predominately football counties to largely hurling counties and all points in between.

What the committee is endeavouring to establish is what represents best practice and what kind of standards can be applied to every club model across the country. For example, does that mean a

club player is guaranteed a match every 14 days? Is there a clear postponement policy in every county that every club is aware of and every club must adhere to? Is there a date in the year when every club player should still be involved in the championship? If that date is, for example, July 1 must there also be a clause that the club championship has started by then?

Work on this project has entailed gathering data from everywhere. Before Christmas a forum was held with a hand-picked cross-section of about 50 concerned people from all areas of GAA life. That added a little more to their thinking. At last year's Congress a motion was passed to make fixtures analyst an officer position in every county board. The deadline to



Duffy: keen to resolve problem

make these appointments is Tuesday.

The metric is "90%" complete and will be finished at a meeting of the newly appointed fixture analysts in March. Their work is based on detailed research and solid thinking. To make a difference that is the bar the CPA must reach.