

THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY: THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND LOCAL CONFLICT IN  
THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCCER ON THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF WEST LIMERICK

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This paper seeks to examine sport in a geographic context as both a form of communication and as an activity affected by communication both on a local and national level. Geography encompasses the study of the relationships between a person and the wider spatial dimension of place and how that relationship develops through time. Communication refers to those means that facilitate the transfer of information between people. This definition can be sub-divided into two further groupings - direct communications and indirect communications. Direct communication is the transfer of information at a personal level. Indirect communication is the transfer of information through a medium of which newspapers, television, radio and comics are among the most notable forms.

This study is centred on the Rathkeale area of West Limerick. Initially, I will compare and contrast the local and national structures of the two largest sporting groups within Rathkeale; the soccer club and the G.A.A., thus illustrating how both sporting bodies communicate different geographic concepts both at local and national levels. Thereafter, I will focus specifically on the development of soccer on the cultural landscape of West Limerick from the late 1960's to the present. I will argue that the development of soccer owed much to new forms of media which appeared at that time on the local cultural landscape - comics and television. These media forms were certainly in the context of West Limerick, a major influence on the cultural tastes of young people at that time. I also include in my discussion both radio and newspapers, in particular local newspapers. Finally, I will examine the current position of soccer in the cultural landscape of West Limerick. Much of this paper is based on personal knowledge of the Rathkeale area.

The G.A.A. as a sporting body promotes a very strong concept of place. Its local organisation is based on the parochial system as defined by the Catholic church. The teams which compete at this level do so for County honours: there are no divisional teams and the championship is organised by means of an open draw. Thus, the administrative units of local government are incorporated into the

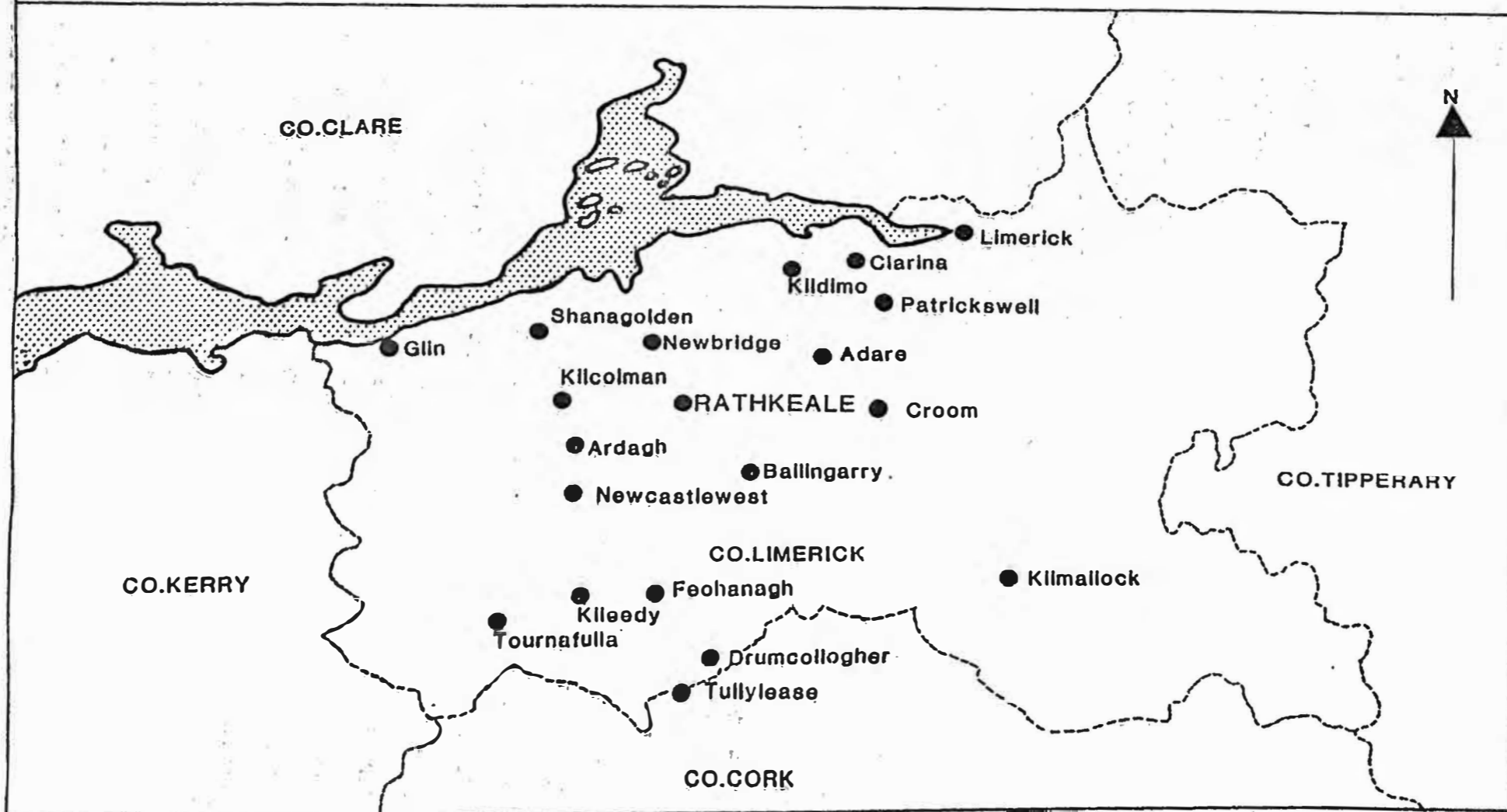
organisational structure. County Teams initially compete for provincial and possibly later All-Ireland honours. The title All Ireland is important as the G.A.A. transcends the border. Teams from the 'Six Counties' have competed annually in all G.A.A. events.

The concept of place within the Football Association of Ireland (F.A.I.) structures is far more fluid. While most clubs do promote some measure of sense of place in that they are named after and play within a certain neighbourhood, they are not linked to the parochial network. Whereas in the G.A.A. an individual must either live or work in the parish for which he plays, in soccer a club can have any number of players from outside the parish and there are a number of clubs who do this. When Rathkeale initially joined the local Desmond League, they usually included two players from Adare. In this context, identity with place on a local level is less pronounced. A similar situation exists within league organisations. Limerick has two leagues - The Limerick City and District League and the aforementioned Desmond League. Again, the concept of boundary is ill-defined. Teams from Croom and Kilmallock compete in the City League whereas teams like Breska Rovers (whose pitch is approx. 5 miles from the city) compete in the Desmond League. Also competing in the Desmond League are St. Bens who are based in Tullylease in North Cork. This is due to historical rather than functional criteria. The Desmond League was formed initially from clubs who were newly established and did not feel competent enough to join the City League. Gradually, both leagues became formalised with little inclination for teams to move between leagues (although Newcastlewest did join the Desmond League and Patrickswell joined the City League). Today, the Limerick City and District League still attracts clubs from as far afield as counties Clare, Tipperary and Cork.

On a national level, membership of the F.A.I. was, until the admission of Derry City in recent years, strictly confined to teams from the Republic of Ireland with the Irish Football Association (I.F.A.) administering the game in Northern Ireland. The decision to admit Derry City into the League of Ireland needed the I.F.A.'s approval. Even on an international level the concept of place is weak. The majority of the Republic's players are not Irish born but rather English born of Irish parentage. The G.A.A., on the other hand, is very much an expression of Irishness. It links up with the parochial, county, provincial and island community. The sense of place as

Fig. 1.

# LOCATION MAP OF STUDY AREA



**Key.**  
● Places mentioned in text  
- - - County boundaries

SCALE. 0 9 18 miles

expressed by the F.A.I. is far more confused. Even though it expresses its links with the geographic unit known as the Republic of Ireland, it includes a team from Northern Ireland within its league framework while its international team frequently plays more English born than Irish born players. If the emergence of the F.A.I. is to be seen as communicating a geographic image, it is of a more mobile society less tied to traditional boundaries.

Attention will now be focused on the development of soccer in the study area. The Desmond League only emerged onto the cultural landscape of West Limerick in the late 1960's. It was based in particular along the Shannon Estuary and incorporated a number of smaller communities inland, the most significant of which were Kilcornan, Shanagolden and Newbridge. Initially Rathkeale was only an occasional participant. For young people growing up in the town at that time, however, soccer was clearly the most popular sporting activity, though Rathkeale also had a particularly good G.A.A. club with a large following. Indeed, a Rathkeale man captained the Western Gaels team to their first of three county senior hurling championships in 1963 and he was also making an occasional appearance for the county senior hurling team into the 1970's.

Throughout the late 1960's, Rathkeale was among the county's strongest junior hurling teams. Throughout those years the young of the parish continued to play soccer. This, I believe, can be attributed to three media forms. The first of these was television. Those who grew up in the 1960's were the first generation of Irish people to grow up with television. As a form of communication, it allowed many to witness the playing of soccer - through occasional showings of the edited highlights of English and Irish league games. Every year the F.A. Cup Final was broadcast from Wembley, while in 1966, England won the World Cup. All these occasions could be witnessed in our own living rooms.

England's winning of the World Cup led to an explosion of interest in soccer in England. This led to the marketing of a new kind of publication both there and in Ireland; the soccer comic. Most young people in Rathkeale began to read comics like Goal, Tiger, Jag, Roy of the Rovers and later Shoot which featured a strong soccer flavour. Most of these comics featured pin-ups of soccer stars and soccer teams. Goal and Shoot were exclusively soccer magazines and frequently featured articles about, and interviews with, soccer stars.

At this point, many young people in Rathkeale associated with and supported English teams; Manchester United, Liverpool, Leeds United, Chelsea, Coventry City and Wolverhampton Wanderers. All had supporters in Rathkeale. An article dealing with any of these clubs was essential reading for their young fans.

The final medium to help generate and hold interest in soccer was radio. At that time B.B.C. Radio 2 could be received clearly throughout Ireland. Every Saturday afternoon it featured a "live" second half commentary on an English League game. Throughout winter afternoons these commentaries were listened to. On Monday mornings, discussions were held about the previous Saturday's events. Irish soccer never seemed to hold the same appeal. While many people supported Limerick and while the likes of Kevin Fitzpatrick, Al Finnucane and Andy McEvoy were heroes at that level - the real magic lay in the likes of Georgie Best, Peter Osgood and Derek Dougan, among others. A strong association was being built up between person and place.

Yet, this was the era of the ban. If anyone wanted to play the traditional games offered by the G.A.A., they could not play soccer. Indeed, the G.A.A. was the only sporting outlet at a formal level. In 1971, the ban was removed. Also in that year, Shannon Meat the main local employer sponsored a new soccer team (Shannon United) in the town by donating a pitch. At this point, it is necessary to look briefly at who played soccer during this time. Initially, soccer was an all male preserve in Rathkeale and the team members were exclusively from the town. The membership of the club focused strongly on the housing estates. It would not be untrue to say that the sport was dominated by the lower middle class and working class. The rural areas were to remain the region where the G.A.A. was dominant. However, a division occurred in the club in the late 1970's resulting in the formation of a second club - Deel United. This forced both clubs to seek rural players if they were to survive. This competition also extended into neighbouring parishes with Ballingarry providing a number of players, particularly for Shannon, over the years - before the formation of a club in Ballingarry. The Shannon-Deel divide also saw a change in the age and class structure of the teams. In order for both teams to survive, it was necessary to attract more young people into the sport. The Shannon Club had already established schoolboy and minor teams. After the split, Shannon retained control of both these teams initially

though they lost control of the schoolboys in 1985. Any local player to show promise was encouraged to join the club. Gradually, the club extended its links with both the rural and urban middle-class sectors of the community. The strength of club organisation at this level can be deduced from the fact that the team attracted players at one stage from as far afield as Newcastlewest and Croom where minor teams did not exist.

After the split, however, Deel showed greater ability at junior level. While they were originally an offshoot of Shannon, they showed the greater ability to attract players from the town's working class estates. Indeed, the original core of players - even officials of Deel - came from the largest of these estates. This is not to say that either club could be said to be exclusively working class or lower middle class in make-up. However, Deel could be said to have been most successful in drawing players from the estates. Shannon thus became a club based on lower middle class support and increasingly drawing from rural areas, outside parishes and (as more of its players left to join Deel) younger players within the parish.

A further feature of the level of competition between the two clubs was the development of ladies soccer within the town.

Initially, Deel officials identified the need to provide women within the parish with a sporting outlet when they included a womens' competition within their annual 5-a-side festival-of-soccer tournament in the early 1980's. However, no official was available to develop a ladies team. The loss by Shannon of control of the school-boys, however, had the initial effect of increasing bitterness between the clubs. Partly arising out of this bitterness and partly from the fact that Shannon now had officials available to look after a womens team, a decision was made to introduce training over the winter period with a view to entering a womens team in the Limerick league the following year, should interest remain strong. Two facts emerged from the training. Firstly, womens sporting needs in the town were not being met. Secondly, younger women in particular proved to be very interested in the possibility of joining a soccer club. Within a year, ladies soccer in Rathkeale had been launched. It has to be said that interest in this aspect of sport also centres strongly, though not exclusively, on the council housing estates.

Today, soccer is a socially respectable sport in Rathkeale. It is played by a large number of people transcending both class and sex

structures within society. The two clubs are also united today into Rathkeale A.F.C. Local newspapers and in particular the Weekly Observer reflect the arrival of soccer on the cultural landscape of West Limerick. Throughout the year, both the G.A.A. and soccer compete on its sport pages as the predominant sport covered. While recognising that the G.A.A. season is not yet in full swing, the Easter week edition of the paper featured two and a half pages of soccer and one and a half pages on G.A.A. activity. While in the Summer months, coverage of the G.A.A. will undoubtedly increase, that of soccer-related activities will also continue to feature as both schoolboys, minor and ladies competitions are played off. The Limerick Leader tends not to feature the same level of local coverage as the Observer (a fact reflected in a decline in its sales in Rathkeale since the launch of the Observer). The Leader's feature of soccer in its county editions looks in particular at the area's local representatives in the League of Ireland, Newcastlewest and Limerick City. Its interest in the Desmond League is limited to publishing both the fixture lists and the league table. They display little or no interest in featuring match reports.

The club's involvement in social activities is widespread. Apart from participation in the team or through support from the side-lines, it manifests itself in an after-match drink. During the period when two clubs were in the town, both developed links with different pubs. Shannon United players and officials were linked with "The Dutchman" while Deel built up links with "John Magners" and "The First & Last". Both "The Dutchmans" and "John Magners" sponsored the respective teams with a set of jerseys. The raising of funds also centres heavily on the pubs and over the years various fund-raising ventures such as pool tournaments, football pools and raffles have taken place therein. Since the amalgamation of the clubs, the direct links between individuals and respective pubs have broken down but the links between the new club and these pubs remain. An interesting aspect of the linkage also is the actual position of the pubs in relation to club membership, "The Dutchmans" pub is in the town square. Figuratively in that sense it is at the town centre, thus making it an ideal centre for the more dispersed elements that constituted Shannon United. Both "Magners" (St.Mary's Park) and "The First & Last" (Abbeylands and Abbeycourt) were the pubs ideally suited to service the town's principal council estates. Other aspects of social life centred on soccer are trips to

other areas to play challenge games and the organisation of trips to soccer matches in England. The clubs final expressions on the local landscape in terms of social activities occur through the annual supper social and the festival of football. This latter event is a two-week 5-a-side tournament which incorporates teams at all levels from schoolboys to Inter-Pub (over 30s only) and both sexes.

How does the development of soccer in Rathkeale fit in with general trends in West Limerick? It has to be pointed out that both soccer and G.A.A. retain strongholds. Undoubtedly, soccer is the stronger sport in Rathkeale but this appears to be the general trend throughout the area around the Shannon estuary running from Glin to Kildimo and indeed extending as far as Clarina. The G.A.A. remains strong in a number of strong hurling villages around Newcastlewest; among them, Tournafulla, Killeedy, Dromcollogher and Feohanagh. In the village of Ardagh and the town of Newcastlewest, both codes appear to compete on a fairly even basis. Newcastlewest today maintains a League of Ireland team though the majority of players come not alone from outside the town but also outside the wider West Limerick region. This factor may suggest that the level of soccer played is not of sufficiently high standard for the League of Ireland.

I have attempted in this article to illustrate how both the sporting activity of the G.A.A. and F.A.I. are forms of geographic expression. I then progressed to examine the role the media played in the evolution of soccer on the cultural landscape of West Limerick with particular reference to the town of Rathkeale. I looked at how local factors, particularly the conflict between two clubs has helped the development of the game. While soccer as a sporting activity does not foster as strong an association between person and place as the G.A.A., it has expanded because of local factors and the emergence of new and external media influences. This expansion continues today because of the willingness of those involved in soccer to develop new outlets for groups not already catered for sportswise. The presence of schoolgirls and ladies soccer teams within the Rathkeale club illustrate this point. The clubs success in fostering social activities has also been demonstrated.



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