

NICK MCGRATH
THE GATEKEEPER FROM DROGHEDA
COUNTY LOUTH -IRELAND



NICK MCGRATH (1927- 1995)

The noted American writer Arthur Schlesinger Jnr once said: “That history is full of surprises.” In the case of the life of **Nick McGrath**, Arthur was ‘centimetre perfect’ because Nick’s extraordinary life is the ‘stuff’ of which books can be written.

Nicholas Joseph McGrath was born in **County Louth**, Ireland in 1927. He was one of two children born to Joseph and Kathleen McGrath.

Note: ‘**McGrath**’ is an Irish clan name which is said to mean: ‘to prosper.’

Nick’s early years were spent in **Drogheda**; a town which lies between Belfast and Dublin and on the famous River Boyne. Following his school years, Nick was employed with the ESB (Electricity Supply Board of the Republic of Ireland); and it was during these years that he became actively involved in the **Gaelic Athletics Association**. The **GAA** is an amateur organisation which promotes sport and outdoor pursuits.

Nick was well-known for his compassion and empathy towards others; and his willingness’ to assist disabled people was typical of his generous attitude to life. In 1964, Nick was nominated to travel to **Tokyo** with the **Irish Paralympics Athletics Team** as a trainer/ support official.

It was a great honour for Nick; and, although Ireland failed to win a medal, the courageous efforts of that Irish team were to remain a highlight of Nick’s life.

In 1966, Nick travelled, alone, to **New Zealand** to help establish a wheelchair athletics association; and then he worked on the construction of the **Manapouri Hydro Power Station**, situated in the Fiordland National Park, on the South Island. The following year, the family sailed to New Zealand aboard the **SS Australis** and joined Nick and a new and exciting life began for the ‘McGraths of Drogheda.’

Note: The names of the six McGrath children are: **Marion, Theresa, Dorothy, Nick (Junior), Margaret and Claddgha**. Claddgha was the only child not raised in Ireland. Claddgha was born at the Mackay Base Hospital, Queensland in 1971. ‘Claddgha’ (which means the ‘shore’) is of Irish origin and the name given to a suburb of **Galway City**.

Four years later, the McGrath family arrived in **Dromana** where Nick worked on the sewerage tunnel that was laid under Arthurs Seat.

Note: The family also spent a brief period of residency in **Mackay** in Queensland, During that time, Nick was employed on the site of the **Peak Downs Coal Mine** at Moranbah-160km south west of Mackay).

It was in Dromana that Nick found a liking for Australian Rules football; and despite the ball being different in shape, there were some similarities in skills with the **Irish** national game. Although Nick’s first love was Gaelic football, he offered, with some warm encouragement from **Graham Stelling**, to become involved in the operations of the Dromana Football Club sometime in the early 1980s.

Note: In those days, Nick shared his spare time between the **Dromana Football Club** and the **Gaelic Sports Club at Keysborough** (off Perry Road) where he was an active and influential personality in the life of the GAA. He also served as **President of Gaelic Park** during his years there.

Nick became the **gatekeeper** on match days at **Pier Street**; and steadily won a reputation as a friendly, obliging and witty official who found time to welcome (and chat in his lilting Irish brogue) all supporters as they entered the gate at home games.

Nick appreciated the responsibilities of a gatekeeper like the 'back of his hand'; and he was 'well-drilled' and business-like in checking membership tickets, controlling entry and safeguarding gate receipts.

It has become part of DFNC folklore that: "Nick was so proficient, regarding his duties on the gate, that the wind had trouble getting into the ground."

Such was Nick's contribution to the club (in many quiet and unseen ways) that an annual club award known at the '**Nick McGrath Trophy for the Most Determined Player**' was struck in his honour.

Recent winners of the trophy include: **Dustin Douglas (2000) , Brad Allen (2003), Michael Gillis (2004) , Andrew Bakker (2007), Aaron Coyle (2014) ,Billy Quigley (2015), Daniel Marchesani (2016)** and last season **Jackson Quigley** took out the coveted award.

Sadly, Nick died on the **28th April 1995**. It was a sorrowful and testing period in the club's history as another of the Dromana's notable characters, **Eddie Moule**, had passed away just one week earlier. Nick McGrath's burial service was held at the **Gaelic Park**; and hundreds of members of the **Australian-Irish** community packed into the **GAA Hall** to pay their respects and say 'farewell' (as only the Irish can do) to their genial friend.

Several members of DFNC also attended the service; and it was regarded, by all, as a truly moving and fitting celebration of the life of an 'Irish gentleman' who had worked so hard to make life better for others in Australia. One of the listed speakers who paid tribute to Nick McGrath was Melbourne's champion ruckman **Jim Stynes**.

Very few people are aware that on Jim Stynes' arrival, in Melbourne to play with the Demons, Nick McGrath, along with other Irish compatriots, was instrumental in helping Jim settle into his 'new surrounds.'

A note about Jim Stynes: Younger readers may not be aware that Jim Stynes (born in **Dublin**) was one of the first Gaelic footballers to play Australian Rules Football. Not only did Jim embrace the idea of the game but he became a dominant player in AFL ranks. Jim Stynes played 264 AFL games with Melbourne FC; and, among a long list of honours, won four club **Best & Fairest** awards and was awarded the **Brownlow Medal** in 1991. Jim was also selected in the **Melbourne Team of the Century**.

Jim passed away in 2012 at the 'young' age of 45 after a lengthy, brave but exhausting battle against cancer.

Other Gaelic footballers to be recruited to Australian Rules football in those early days of the 'Irish Experiment' include: **Sean Wight, James Fahy, Paul Early, Brian**

Stynes, Tom Grehan, Dermott McNicholl and Tadg Keneally. What started as 'slow trickle' has now become a rivulet of Gaelic footballers 'trading places' and 'swapping codes.'

Nick McGrath is buried at the **Mornington Cemetery**; and his daughter, **Theresa (Stelling)**, remembers her father as man who gave his time willingly to others and centred his life about helping those in need.

Nick McGrath would be extremely proud of what his family has done for DFNC over the years. His son (**Nick Jnr**) played football for a short while; and his daughter **Margaret** served on the DFNC Board of Management in the 1980's and 1990's. Furthermore, his Granddaughter **Cathy Stelling** was an enthusiastic and active member of the DFNC Board of Management. Cathy, her sister, **Tara Borthwick**, and cousin, **Clare Harvey**, have also been involved in club life in various roles and duties including gatekeeper over the years.

With the introduction of an electronic scoreboard at Pier Street in 2017, Nick's **Grandson, Tom Harvey**, now plays a vital role in operating the board at both Senior and Junior home games.

As is well known, Graham and Theresa Stelling are **Life Members of the DFNC**; and Nick's **Granddaughter, Erin**, was granted **Life Membership of the DJFNC** in 2017.

Nick would marvel at the strides that his Great-grandson **Zac Stelling** has made in junior football ranks. Zac is the current **DJFNC Under:15 Best & Fairest player** which 'backed up' his win in the Under: **14 Best and & Fairest trophy in 2016**. Zac is an emerging talent at Dromana and he has represented the **MPJFL** on several occasions; and he is always a willing and trusted helper around the club.

Even though Zac never had the good fortune to meet his Great-Grandfather he feels a strong bond with Nick via family albums, memoirs, anecdotes and stories about the 'old days.' These are the invisible connections that build families, communities and, in turn, clubs like Dromana FC.

Jordon Nicholls, a grandson of Nick, also loves football; and following several years at junior level (on Sundays) and a **boundary umpire** on Saturdays, Jordan opted to become an umpire. Jordon has worked hard on his fitness and knowledge of the rules and has developed into a competent and respected umpire in local football.

As can be seen from the above pen sketch of Nick McGrath, Dromana Football Club has been an integral part of the lives of his family. It all began when Nick offered to 'give the club a helping hand'. From 'little things, big things grow' and it seems as though Nick's family will continue to be part of the life of DFNC for many years to come.

Finally, as written at the beginning of this article, 'history is full of surprises'; and the story of the **Nick McGrath** is one worth telling and recording for future generations to appreciate.

THANK YOU

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Research and reference information.

- DFNC history archives and family interview.
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