



Report of the Task Force on Player Burnout

October 2007

The membership of the Task Force was as follows:

Dr. Pádraig O'Neill (Dr. Pat O'Neill)

Cathaoirleach, Consultant in Sports and Exercise Medicine, Dean of the Faculty of Sports and Exercise Medicine, RCPI, RCSI; former senior inter-county player and manager.

Padraig O Dálaigh (Pat Daly)

Director of Games, Cumann Luthchleas Gael.

Seán O Duibheannaigh (Jack Devaney)

Cathaoirleach, Comhairle Ardoideachais, CLG.

Padraig O Dufaigh, (Paraic Duffy),

Player Welfare Manager, CLG.

Daithi Mac Gearailt, (David Fitzgerald),

Inter-county hurler and third-level coach/team manager.

Micheál O Moráin, (Mickey Moran),

Former inter-county player and manager, and third-level coach/team manager.

Prof Niall O Maighneach, (Professor Niall Moyna),

Head of School of Health and Human Performance, Dublin City University.

Seamus Mac Ualtair, (Seamus Qualter),

Inter-county hurling manager.

Colm O' Ruairc (Colm O'Rourke),

Principal, St. Patrick's Classical School, Navan; coach and manager, and former inter-county player.

Micheál Mac Ránaill (Michael Reynolds)

Deputy Chief Executive, Comhairle Laighean and Leinster Schools Officer, 1991-2007.

Seán O Toibín (John Tobin)

Games Manager, Comhairle Connacht; former second-level teacher and inter-county player and manager

Dr Eoghan de Siun (Dr. Eugene Young)

Director of Coaching and Games Development, Comhairle Uladh; former inter-county player.

Buíochoas

I wish to thank the members of the Task Force on Player Burnout for their expertise and diligence with the work undertaken by the Task Force over a series of meetings. In particular, I am grateful to Professor Niall Moyna, Head of School of Health and Human Performance at Dublin City University and Mr. Paraic Duffy, Player Welfare Manager, Gaelic Athletic Association for reviewing the scientific data and assisting with the writing of the report of the Task Force on Player Burnout

We wish to thank the various experts who made excellent and informative presentations, and all others who made submissions and recommendations to the Task Force.

I wish to commend the proposals and recommendations of the Task Force to the Association.

Pádraig O Neill,
Cathaoirleach,
Task Force on Player Burnout
Deireadh Fomhair 2007

Introduction

Player 'burnout' is defined as reduced or total withdrawal from participation in Gaelic games as a result of the psychological, physiological and physical demands associated with excessive training and/or number of games. There is accumulating anecdotal and empirical evidence to suggest that 'burnout' in talented young GAA players is a serious issue that needs to be urgently addressed by the Association.

The development of player 'burnout' in Gaelic games is multi-factorial. The most common cause in talented adolescent and young adult players is excessive and inappropriate schedules of training and games. Many young players, at both club and inter-county level, are participating in excessive training sessions and matches, usually with numerous teams, in multiple competitions. Overuse injuries, and to a lesser extent acute traumatic injuries, are also more likely during the period of peak skeletal growth prevalent in this age group. The mindset and attitudes of coaches, trainers, managers and parents in pressurising young and particularly talented players to participate in extraordinary numbers of training sessions and games is also contributing to the problem.

Preventing 'burnout' and associated overuse injuries is of paramount importance in protecting young players. This will require limiting training and playing activity among young players and incorporating an official closed season into the official GAA calendar.

There is also a need to educate players, coaches and parents regarding the early recognition of impending 'burnout' symptoms and signs, and the prevention and management of injuries. It is envisaged that the changes recommended in the report will:

- Significantly reduce the number of players suffering from 'burnout'
- Reduce the pressure on Leaving Certificate students
- Reduce travel, inconvenience, cost and fatigue
- Reduce medical and treatment cost/expenses
- Improve physical and psychological well-being
- Pre-empt future litigation due to chronic-injury disability

The recommendations and their rationale as outlined in detail in the report of the Task Force relate to inter-county level only and for a two-year trial period. The major proposal is the amalgamation of the inter-county minor and under-21 grades into a single grade of under-19 grade. The proposals will be circulated to all county boards (and clubs) for discussion, and will be debated at a Special Congress in January 2008

A Sport Science Perspective on the issue of Player Burnout

The provision of time for the adequate physiological and psychological recovery of players is central to the design of an appropriate training and competitive GAA programme. However, many young players rarely have an adequate period of recovery because they

- play on several teams
- train several times a week and sometimes more than once per day
- play a number of competitive games every week, and sometimes two each day
- undertake different types of training with a number of teams that are in different phases of their competitive season.

These problems are further compounded by the fact that the current GAA competition calendar does not allow for a closed season, which is essential for optimising recovery. Too many training sessions and the frequency of games, coupled with inadequate recovery time, may result in overuse injury, overtraining and burnout.

Evidence for Burnout among Gaelic Football Players

Over the past three years Lynette Hughes has undertaken research into the issue of player burnout (part-funded by Comhairle Uladh and Pairc an Chrocaigh), as part of her study for a PhD degree in the University of Ulster (Jordanstown). Her findings are hugely relevant to the work of the Task Force.

Participation in study

- 534 inter-county Gaelic football players between the ages of 16 and 24 years took part in the study. All 32 counties were represented
- Players were divided into three categories for the purpose of the study: 16-18 years (minor level), 19-21 years (U-21 and college level), and 22-24 years (young senior inter-county players)

Findings of study

- Almost one-third of the players played for at least five teams within one competitive season. Of these players, a further 26% played for seven or more teams in one competitive season. Players in the minor age-group played for the highest number of teams
- Approximately one in every ten players (9.7% of the entire sample) surveyed was in the final stage of burnout and, therefore, was deriving little satisfaction from their participation in Gaelic games. The largest proportion of players in this final stage of burnout was in the 22-24 year-old group

- Approximately 30% of all players surveyed suffered from elevated physical and emotional exhaustion. This is equivalent to one in every three players. The breakdown by age-group was: 16-18 years (24%), 19-21 years (31%), and 22-24 years (34%)
- One in ten young players in the 16-18 year-old group is beginning to question their participation in Gaelic games
- 42% of all players reported feeling isolated from their clubs and detected resentment from club members as a result of their county participation
- 47% cited the lack of an official closed season or the lack of a cap on training and playing as a major issue. They felt that the implementation of an official closed season would contribute greatly to their well-being;
- Approximately one in four players surveyed felt they had little time for other activities due to their participation in Gaelic games. 10% find it difficult to balance work and playing commitments, while 28% expressed difficulty in finding adequate time for friends or family;
- 13% reported an inability to have a social life as a result of playing the game, whilst 13% reported having difficulties with partners in relationships as a result of playing demands;
- 36% reported receiving no communication or feedback from managers and experiencing conflict with managers, particularly regarding playing for other teams;
- 13% felt pressurised to play when incompletely recovered from injury, and 11% reported being pressurised to play on a continual basis whilst 9% felt pressured to play for too many teams or to play up in age group with a further 3% reported feeling pressured to play during examinations.

Medical Problems Associated with Current Training and Competition Structure

Since 2002 the Sports Institute of Northern Ireland (SINI), under the direction of Head Physiotherapist Dr Phil Glasgow, has evaluated and tracked elite sportsmen from a number of sports including Gaelic football, Rugby, Hockey, Athletics, Rowing and Cycling. Approximately twenty elite 18-20 year-old Gaelic football players have undergone a functional assessment each year and were subsequently monitored to assess the history, nature and severity of injuries, injury incidence, injury management, rehabilitation compliance and injury-recurrence rates. Among the findings to emerge from these evaluations and assessments were:

- A greater overall injury rate in Gaelic football compared to elite players/athletes from other sports. (It should be noted that chronic overuse injuries are one of the more easily documented barometers of over-training and player burnout.)
- A higher injury-recurrence rate in Gaelic football than in other sports;

- A higher incidence of groin, ankle and knee injuries and a higher incidence of injuries requiring surgery each year in Gaelic football than in other sports;
- Approximately a quarter of Gaelic football players in SINI require surgery and a further 20% require a break from participation of more than six weeks due to injury each year;
- A lower compliance with treatment and rehabilitation programmes than in other sports.

In a presentation to the Task Force, Mr Gerry McEntee, Consultant Surgeon and former Meath inter-county footballer, pointed out that in the past ten years the number of referrals to medical sports specialists, referrals for surgical opinion and the number of operations for chronic groin injuries has increased dramatically. Referrals are almost exclusively male, typically in the 15-21 age-group, and most commonly involve Gaelic footballers.

Main Recommendations

All of the proposals below relate to inter-county level only

Proposal: That Minor and U.21 championships at inter-county level be replaced by an U.19 championship. This will be introduced as a two-year experiment initially, in 2009 and 2010, and will be reviewed at the end of that period.

Reasons for this proposal

- **(a) Reasons for replacing U.21 and Minor championships with U.19 championship**
 1. It will reduce the multiple-team involvements of elite players. U.21 players are involved in too many teams: i.e. club and county U.21 and, sometimes, minor; senior club and senior inter-county or third-level competition. In the case of dual players this problem is greatly accentuated.
 2. The U.21 football championship clashes with both the National Football league and third-level competitions in which 46 colleges participate, while the U.21 hurling championship clashes with the senior hurling championships at both inter-county and club level. This leads to over-training and burnout.
 3. A reduction in the number of competitions for elite U.21 players will have the effect of relieving the pressure in terms of training and playing and will reduce the risk of overuse injuries.
 4. It will also lessen the pressures on club and college fixtures occasioned by clashing fixtures. At present, (i) the U.21 football championship clashes with the third-level championships; (ii) the U.21 hurling championship clashes with club and inter-county senior championships; (iii) the early stages of inter-county Minor competitions clash with the closing game in the second-level competitions, causing tension between college and inter-county coaches. An U.19 competition will not clash with either second- or third-level competitions.
 5. Most minor championship players are sitting their Leaving Certificate or equivalent examinations in the Six Counties. The training demands of county minor panels put unfair pressure on players at a time when they are preparing for examinations that will have a major impact on their future. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the time

commitments demanded to prepare for the Minor championship can adversely affect examination results and impose huge pressure on our best young players. These examinations are the most important that our players will ever take. Our primary responsibility should be to their welfare.

6. There are too many pressures on our elite players in their U.18 year. Most of them take part in the senior schools' competitions for the last time, sit the final second-level examinations that will determine their future, train to play in the inter-county minor championship and leave home for the first time.
7. Certain factors associated with participation on a county minor team, at a time of school leaving examinations, are recognised as precipitating physiological and psychological burnout:
 - intensive frequent training
 - apprehension about selection and competition
 - sudden increases in amount and frequency of training
 - constant training and playing
8. The progression from U.16 and U.17 development squads, through U.18 club and U.19 inter-county to senior level, is a logical player progression. Counties will select U.19 inter-county squads based on performance at club U.18 level.
9. Elite players are being withdrawn from their clubs too early. Players at U.18 county minor level are often precluded from club training and from some games. An extra year with clubs will benefit the players and their clubs, and restore a better balance between club and inter-county competition.
10. Elite players in the 20-21 age-groups will spend more time with their club teams. Reducing two inter-county grades to one gives clubs greater access to their players and will significantly reduce the expenditure on inter-county teams.
11. Raising the age-threshold at county level to U.19 will provide greater bone and joint maturity and thereby reduce the risk of musculoskeletal injuries.

One issue which the Task Force considered carefully was the impact of an U.19 championship on club fixtures. Given the relatively short time span in which the U.19 Provincial championships will be played and because few inter-club championship games are played during the Senior championship season, the Task Force took the view that the negative impact of changing the age limit to U.19 will be minimal. It will be more than compensated for by the fact that two inter-county competitions are being combined to one.

Proposal: No U.17 player will be eligible to play at U.19 level.

Reasons for this proposal

- The elite U.17 player will be able to participate in development squads
- He will be able to commit himself fully to school and club teams
- He will be given the opportunity to develop physiologically, psychologically and socially
- He will be given more time to concentrate on academic studies
- The aspiration of making the county minor team will be available for longer. This is a huge motivation for young elite players.

Proposal: No U.19 player will be eligible to play in senior inter-county competition.

Reason for this proposal

- It will prevent players being introduced to senior inter-county teams before they are ready. At present, some of our young elite players are playing senior inter-county and U.21 while still aged under nineteen.
- It will avoid overlap between U.19 and senior competitions (unlike U.21 and senior).
- It will allow U.19 games to be played in the same week, or on the same dates, as senior games.
- U.19 games can serve as curtain-raisers to Provincial championship finals, Qualifier games and games in the All-Ireland series

Proposal: The U.19 championship will be played from late June to September.

Reason for this proposal

- Most players will be free of second and third level examination pressures.
- It will help clubs by encouraging elite players to stay at home during the summer and develop their skills with their club and county.

Proposal: In preparation for the U.19 championship, no inter-county U.19 challenge games or collective training will be allowed between November 1 and March 31.

Reason for this proposal

- From November to March, schools' and third-level competitions will have priority.
- It will reduce the multiple-team training that leads to overtraining and burnout.
- It will allow players to develop an individually-tailored conditioning programme during the early months of the year.
- It will give the students who go to college a chance to adjust to college life during their first 6-7 months and to prepare for their examinations.

Proposal: Extra time should be played at the knockout stage of all post-primary competitions.

Reasons for this proposal

It will:

- reduce fixture confusion and conflict between schools and clubs.
- reduce the number of games, thus lowering physical stress due to replays.
- ease pressure on the many dual players who participate at schools' level.
- avoid further disruption of academic work and will reduce the expenses incurred by schools.

Proposal: All senior post-primary school finals must be completed by the second weekend in April.

Reason for this proposal

- The competitions currently run too close to examinations.
- A later finish interferes with study due to training, playing, travelling, etc..
- Finals increase the psychological stress on students in the run-up to examinations.
- A later finish interferes with the start of Minor competitions in counties, with club leagues, championships, etc., and causes conflict between club teams and schools.

Proposal: Players eligible for Vocational Schools Junior Football and Hurling will not be eligible for Vocational Schools Senior Inter County Football and Hurling.

Reasons for this proposal

- A good dual player who is eligible for the junior grade could find himself playing for his school at junior and senior levels in both football and hurling

and also being selected for the county schools' teams in both codes. Such multiple involvements put undue pressure on the player, impede his academic progress and contribute to fixtures chaos.

Proposal: No player will be allowed to play in both the Freshers competitions and in the Sigerson and Fitzgibbon Cups and other third-level championships (and equivalent league competitions).

Reasons for this proposal

- It will reduce the problem of multiple-team participation by young elite players. Many of our elite players are in colleges that play in the Sigerson and Fitzgibbon Cups and in other major third-level competitions.
- It will give more players the opportunity to participate in third-level competitions.

Proposal: The months of November and December will be closed months for all inter-county games and collective training for inter-county panels.

Reasons for this proposal

- The provision of a mandatory closed season will provide players with appropriate time to rest and recuperate from the physical and emotional demands of the previous season.
- It will also provide players with the opportunity to get away from the training and competitive environment of Gaelic games and to manage any injuries sustained during the season. This may involve an appropriate pre-habilitation or rehabilitation programme, or some form of surgical intervention (where appropriate) on injuries that were not overly dysfunctional during the season, such as minor cartilage tears of the knee, ankle arthroscopy, hernia repairs or Gilmore groin repairs, tears in the shoulder and minor wrist surgery.

Most major field sports now have a mandatory closed season of about eight weeks. The first five weeks are strictly free of organised training, and are followed by three weeks of 'volunteer' training, conducted at the discretion of individual players in consultation with the club/team coaches.

Proposals relating to Development Squads

- ***U.16 and U.17 development squads will meet a maximum of eight times between April 1 and September 30, with an additional four days allocated for competition***
- ***All U.16 and U.17 competitions must be in the form of blitzes, and focused on development where all players have the opportunity to play. Counties can play more than one team so that all squad members get playing time.***
- ***Players can only be a member of development squads in their own age-group.***
- ***All coaches working with development squads must have at least a Level 1 coaching qualification.***
- ***It will be the responsibility of Provincial Games Development Committees to ensure that these conditions are met. National Games Development funding will be withdrawn from counties who breach the above conditions..***

Reasons for making these proposals on Development squads

The original thinking behind the concept of development squads was to establish an Academy – incorporating Schools of Excellence (U.14/U.15) and Development Squads (U.16/17) in Hurling and Gaelic football – by way of identifying and providing for the transfer of talented players within the overall Pathway to Elite Performance (PEP). The intention was that each participant would be provided with eight quality coaching sessions – all practice/training inputs would involve the use of the ball – and that these would be scheduled by Bord na nOg and the Games Development Committee within each county to complement, as distinct from competing with, the existing games programme. It was agreed that four game days – incorporating pre-existing tournaments and/or new blitzes – should dovetail with the eight sessions and existing games’ programmes within the county, and that overlap with second-level schools would be minimised.

Each county was encouraged to cater for the largest possible number of players – to counter claims of elitism – and it was also agreed that it would be left to each county, depending on the numbers involved and the strength of the game within that county, to decide on whether a divisional, regional or all-county format would suit best.

Counties were asked to recruit former players, to provide them with the appropriate coaching qualification, namely Level 1 or 2, and to encourage club coaches to attend so that they could familiarise themselves with best-practice inputs from a coaching and organisational perspective.

Counties were also encouraged to establish formal links with third-level institutions with regard to the application of science, for example with respect to physiological inputs and testing, psychological profiling and lifestyle training inputs with regard to diet, nutrition, time and study management, etc..

Many of these initiatives have not been realised. In many instances the development squads have become elitist, have engaged in too many sessions, have impinged on club activity and are too competitive. They have contributed to a situation in which too much training and competition is available for relatively few players and not enough games activity is provided for the vast majority of players. Clubs should remain the first priority for players, with skills development being the focus of activity. It is undesirable that clubs lose their players to the county from a very young age and that managers focus on competitive results, often to prove their own worth.

Player development should be what it aspires to be, thus eliminating the need for a competitive element. Players, moreover, at this early stage of their development, should be educated on rest and recovery strategies, and on the negative effects of overtraining. Coaches with development squads should follow a programme designed by the county, one that aims at the progression of a player from the age of fourteen to senior level. By limiting players to their own age-group, one limits the risk of injury occasioned by competing against players who are physiologically stronger, and generally allows the young talented player to be protected. These proposals will restore development squads to the role originally intended for them and, in the process, will help protect young players from the dangers of overuse injuries and overtraining.

Conclusion

In the final analysis there is now compelling evidence – of an empirical nature – which highlights the issue of burnout in an overall player welfare context. The Task Force is satisfied that the proposals for change set out in this report will minimise the problems arising from this and, in the process, ensure that a more scientific and balanced approach is adopted throughout the Association to ensure that players' needs are catered for in the most holistic way possible.

Presentations were made to the Task force by

Dr.Pat O'Neill on 'Overtraining and Overuse injury'

Dr.Phil Glasgow on 'Injury Trends in the GAA: the SINI experience'

Ms.Lynette Hughes on the findings of her PhD research

Mr.Gerry McEntee on 'Incidence of Medical and Surgical Treatment for overuse injuries in Gaelic games'

Professor Niall Moyna on 'Principles of Training'

Mr.Kieran Shannon ('Sunday Tribune' journalist and Sports Psychologist) on 'Burnout- a Psychological Perspective'

Written submissions on Player Burnout were received from the following:

Provinces:

Connacht (John Tobin, Games Manager)

Counties:

Kildare (Kathleen O'Neill, Secretary)

Kilkenny (Paul Kinsella, Vice-Chairman)

Wexford (Mick Kinsella, Secretary)

Donegal (Crona Ni Riagain, Secretary)

Cork (Frank Murphy, Secretary)

Tipperary (Tim Floyd, Secretary)

Laois (Niall Handy, Secretary)

Players:

Paul Gannon (Meath, hurler)

Mark Hogarty (Kildare footballer)

Aaron Kernan (Armagh, footballer)

Fiachra O Muineachain (Dublin, hurler)

Michael Verney (Offaly, hurler)

Stephen Lavin (Limerick, footballer)

Managers:

Mickey Ned O'Sullivan (Limerick, football)

John Maughan (Roscommon, football)

Paul Bealin (Wexford, football)

Team Doctors:

Dr. Tom Foley (Carlow)

Dr Con Murphy (Cork)

Dr Tadgh Crowley (Kilkenny)

Others:

Pat Daly (Director of Games)

Roger Keenan (High Performance Manager for Gaelic Football, Sports Institute of Northern Ireland)

Gaelic Players Association (Dessie Farrell, Chief Executive)