

# World of GAA

## achievement

capital, where he worked on the buildings and played for the Guinness team, Denis gave up on ever being called into the factory and headed for London instead.

Arriving on Ash Wednesday 1953 Denis immediately found himself to be a man in demand. No sooner had he left Dublin that the letter arrived at his home informing him of his call up to the Guinness brewery, whilst at the same time, a lesser known organisation called the Green Roosters in Wimbledon were also seeking his services. The quaintly or some might say bizarrely named football team, which was wisely re-named Clann na Gael soon after, were to be Denis' choice and he played for them in the Junior League Final of 1953 in Mitcham.

As was the case so often back then, players tended to move from club to club quite frequently, depending on where they were living or who they were working for. The official procedures that so dominate all aspects of life nowadays were less prominent back then and transfers were often by mutual agreement rather than county board consent.

After a year with the south London club, Denis moved to St Fat's, who at the time had another former Dunlavin player, the recently deceased Kit Carroll, in their ranks and the two Wicklow men helped the club to a Tipperary Cup triumph that same year, a competition that ranked second only to the Senior Championship.

One year with St Pats was enough for the young McCarthy and by the start of the 1955 season Denis was to be found lining out for the very successful St Mary's team, a side with which he won a Senior Championship in his first year when they defeated St Vincent's and then lost the following year's final to Garryowen by a single point.

By this stage, Denis was being widely recognised as one of the most talented players in London and in 1956 he played for the county in an All-Ireland Junior Final against Monaghan in Carrickmacross, which London lost by four-points, (at the time London didn't compete in the Senior competition).

All the while that he was playing in London word of his progress and success was filtering back to his home club in Wicklow and in 1958 the local parish priest asked him to return to the Dunlavin colours as the club attempted to land the Wicklow Senior Football Championship. With the parish priests of the time being men of some considerable persuasion, Denis answered that particular religious calling and in his second year back helped Dunlavin to land the Senior crown.

Job done, back he came to London and joined the newly formed Cashen Rovers team, that was being run by the late great Martin Diggins, but the love affair was short-lived, as the club folded shortly after Denis' arrival.

Both McCarthy and Diggins, together with a number of other Cashen players, joined the Parnells and in 1960 Denis captained them to the Intermediate Championship.

On the back of his recent triumphs Denis, momentarily at least, took his eye off the ball and turned his attention to the fairer of the species. He married Offaly girl Rose Egan that year and moved to Hayes where, four children, several grandchildren and two more football clubs later, he is still living and breathing football.

Denis stayed with Parnells until 1965 when he then moved to the Hayes based St Brendan's to play out the later stages of his football career. When he finally stopped lacing up his own boots, he began to turn his attention to the laces on the boots of his sons, Denis and John, who were to become an integral part of gaelic foot-

ball in the Hayes area in years to come.

By the mid-1970's Denis, along with Mel Tighe, had produced a very talented crop of young London born gaelic footballers. Players such as Kevin Gilmartin, Denis Diggins, Mark Mellett, Tommy Quigley, Paul Traynor and young Denis McCarthy were featuring regularly on the St Brendan's team throughout the year, but appeared to be missing out when the bigger games came around.

This fact was beginning to cause some difficulty within the St Brendan's and in 1975, Denis, together with a number of the other fathers involved, decided to form a club of their own to give these young players the chance to progress into men's football. They named the team St Clarets (after the order of priests who serve the local community) and soon the club were beginning to establish itself as a more than capable intermediate and under-age club.

In 1981 Denis led the team to their first major final, where they were beaten by an emerging Tir Chonaill Gaels team in the Intermediate showpiece.

Success though was to arrive at the end of the decade, when firstly the club landed the Sean Shields Cup by beating Denis' first London club Clann na Gael in 1987 and then finally in 1989, Denis, with the help of current manager John Kelly, guided the club into the senior ranks for the first time ever, when they beat St Anthony's in the Intermediate Championship final, with a team that contained nine London born players. That success was perfect testimony to the work that Denis had put into the underage set up in London throughout the previous two decades.

Away from the St Clarets, Denis also became very involved with the London Minor Board and was its Treasurer for twenty-one years, a tenure that included the organising of the London Minor Board's trip to New York in 1987 (Denis' fellow Irish World Lifetime Achievement Award winner Pronsisas Redican was Chairman of the Minor Board at the time). On top of this, Denis had managed a London U-21 team that played in the famous Wembley

been a crowd in excess of two thousand people, a statistic that patrons at Ruislip these days would find hard to believe. Football in London at the time was of a very high standard, so when Denis talks about great footballers, you can be sure that he doesn't use the words lightly.

When pressed to name who he feels would have been the very best player he had played alongside or against in London he would rate Armagh man Sean Quinn as the top man with his great friend Kit Carroll also figuring highly. Having said that though Denis did have the honour of marking the great Sean Purcell when the Galway man came to London in 1954 with the Tuam Stars for a challenge match and I suppose a player of that status might well just shade it on the calibre stakes.

In more recent times Denis would point to the likes of Gerry O'Connell, a member of the great Kingdom teams in the 1970's, whilst among the home grown talent that he has seen and helped nurture, Sean O'Reilly from the St Agnes' in the early 1970's and Kevin Gilmartin of St Clarets from the 80's would both warrant a mention.

As for Denis himself, how good was he? Well I know from my own experience with the man that there would be no point asking him to rate himself as he is as famous for his modesty as he was for his footballing talents. My own memories of Denis as a footballer are limited to seeing him run for ball after ball at St Clarets training sessions, picking it up, toe-tapping twice and then delivering the perfect drop-kicked pass to whoever was calling for the ball. Even in his early sixties, Denis still had the most exquisite of touches. However, despite how impressive that particular aspect of his game was, it would be unrealistic to judge his overall ability of that particular piece of skill.

Thankfully though, there is a little story that might just help to quantify his ability. Whilst visiting the home of a former team-mate of mine, Ciaran Byrne in Hackettstown, Co Carlow, I got talking to his father, Nick and the conversation quite naturally came around to football in London. Nick, who didn't know Denis personally, asked had I ever heard of a man called Denis McCarthy in London?

"I have" was my immediate reply and I began to tell of my own association with him.

"Denis McCarthy", Nick went on to say, "was the best player ever to play for Dunlavin," and considering it was over forty years since he had last appeared for the club, then that was high praise indeed.

**"Denis McCarthy was the best player ever to play for Dunlavin"**

Games in 1975 and had great success with the St Clarets U-14's at the Feile Competition in 1984.

Aside from all the effort that he has put into gaelic football in London, Denis has always remained a prominent figure within affairs in his local Botwell parish, be it driving the church mini-bus on Sunday to pick up the older members of the parish or being involved with the Botwell Social Club.

Now, very much a behind the scenes person with the Hayes team, Denis is a regular spectator at the St Clarets games and still has a very comprehensive knowledge of what is going on within the county and at home.

As is always the case when trying to compare different eras in any sport, it is almost impossible to establish who the very best were. One thing that needs to be remembered when looking at the achievements of the likes of Denis and his contemporaries, is the fact that many of the teams that they were playing on in London at the time had an entire fifteen made up of county players and that at New Eltham on any given Sunday, there might well have