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Na Fianna have many heroes

Atlanta coach Johnny O'Sullivan says GAA in Ireland must do more to help Gaelic games in the U.S.



The Na Fianna team of 2007 with the South Eastern Divisional League trophy.

"It is great to be involved with a club at the grassroots level here in America, but it has to be said that the lip-service that the greater body of the GAA pays to overseas development is patronizing at best, and downright pathetic at worst," that is the view from Johnny O'Sullivan, a founding member and current team coach of Na Fianna Ladies GFC, Atlanta.

The Na Fianna doesn't stop there and goes on to lambast HQ for their lack of promotion in general of Gaelic Games in the USA.

"We have had Gaelic Games in America for nearly 100 years now and we are still not even a blip on the radar of the American sporting consciousness," said O'Sullivan.

"It's time the GAA got serious about rewarding the quite literally millions of volunteer/hours that are put into promoting this organization each year here in the States, and start giving us the kind of promotion we need.

"We will soldier on because we love the games and our clubs, but not with any great love for the organization that so casually leaves us to our own devices like unwanted children."

Na Fianna Ladies GFC has had to struggle since its birth in 2003 when Atlanta was seen as a one-club town - Clan na Gael holding the grazing rights.

It was believed that the resources were not there to support two clubs but that resistance has disappeared now and the clubs regularly work together on promoting Gaelic Games.

"Most of our players have come from Kennesaw State University in the North-west suburbs of Atlanta and we had less than a handful," said the Na Fianna coach.

"Needless to say, some of those early games were fairly one-sided, so the girls have shown tremendous resilience to keep coming back and continue to stick with the game."

On the field, 2007 was without doubt the club's most successful season to date as Na Fianna won the Atlanta Peach Cup Sevens Tournament and the South Eastern Divisional (SED) League, as well as being finalists in the SED Championship, and the North American County Board (NACB) Junior B Shield.

While the Atlanta club has had a number of players who played inter-county in Ireland, it prides itself on being a grass-roots club.

"We are a grass-roots organization in every sense of the word. If you were to ask locals about girls that played for Na Fianna, the names that would spring to mind would include several well-know club stalwarts," O'Sullivan told the Irish Echo.

"Founding member and first captain Lil O'Sullivan is an absolutely inspiration who learnt all of her football abroad and has returned home to play for her local club St Colums in West Cork. Na Fianna feel rightly proud of her.

"Founding member and current Chairperson Sharon McAleer, who played Inter-county for Down in the 1990s, has embraced the challenge of establishing a second ladies club in Atlanta and we would be in dire straits

without her.

"Kim Wilkins, captain for the last two years, has pushed the team on with her own brand of Texas grit and having moved home to Austin, she still commutes to Atlanta for games.

"Kim has the distinction of lifting the first piece of silverware that Na Fianna ever won - the Atlanta Peach Cup.

"There are others like Jen Beatto and Linda Giuffre, the only two of our original players that are still playing for us on a regular basis.

"They embody what Na Fianna spirit is all about in their ability to come back season after season in the belief that this year will be our year.

"Another one of our original players is Amanda Busch. Amanda acted as chairperson for two years and brought new levels of organization to our club, as well as filling at wing forward despite no previous field sport experience.

"Our first Mexican player Noemi Benitez was soon followed by two other great Mexicanas, Marbella Allaniz and Yolanda Gomez. Plus there is the twins - Natalia and Ivett Kyriacou, half Cypriot, half Colombian, and all heart."

Indeed Na Fianna has had players from many other countries play for their club, including: Ghana, Jamaica, Finland, Cameroon, England, Indonesia, New Zealand and of course, Ireland, and the United States.

Na Fianna, in conjunction with local

rivals Clan na Gael held the first ever youth clinic in Georgia recently but basically with a handful of people doing most of the work it is hard to find the time and energy to get a youth program off the ground.

"Youth development is unfortunately quite difficult for us in a city like Atlanta, where the presence of people from Ireland is so thin on the ground," said O'Sullivan.

"It's not that the kids have to be of Irish extraction to play the game; on the contrary, children of all ethnicities love the sport.

"It's that to promote the game, you need a certain amount of coaches/administrators to get the program going, and generally speaking that demands Irish people, as they are the only ones who know about Gaelic Games."

"However the club is built on that the premise that we live in a city of 4.5 million people, and we should be able to find 13 people to play the game.

"The women's game in Atlanta has never relied on immigration but we don't have the one marketing tool we need, which is a greater media presence of Gaelic Games, particularly on television.

"More television coverage, not immigration is what we need. The GAA should be giving games to ESPN and other sports channels for free.

"Gaelic Games are not the sporting horizons of children in America. They don't see them on TV, and their parents don't see them, and yet, we volunteers are expected to roll out these youth programs with little or no support. We might as well be trying to sell timeshares for the moon," said O'Sullivan.

With new players bringing fresh energy to the club and Na Fianna are just one win away from making the SED final again this year, the club is hopeful of repeating their feats of 2007 and possibly going one step further.

Club name:
Na Fianna Ladies Gaelic Football Club
Location: Atlanta, Georgia
Chairperson: Sharon McAleer
Secretary: Erin Whigham



Thursday 8/21		
8:00	Junior B	St. Barnabas v Donegal
Saturday 8/23		
6:00	Junior A	Astoria v Kerry (quarter-final)
7:15	Sr. Football	Cork (SPECIAL LEAGUE) v Leitrim

Sunday 8/24		
1:00	Junior A	Roscommon v Armagh or Dublin (quarter-final)
2:30	Sr. Hurling	Offaly v Tipperary (final)
4:00	Ladies	Cavan v Na Fianna (final)
5:30	Sr. Football	Cavan (SPECIAL LEAGUE) v Down

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John Riordan
Chairman