

# Tony Brennan (1916-1965) (Clonoulty-Rossmore & Tipperary)

By Seamus J. King

There are a number of poems and ballads written about the glorious period of Tipperary hurling, 1949-1951, and Tony Brennan features prominently in them. He is 'a full back brave and strong' in *Champions of '49*. His defence of the Tipperary goalmouth and Tony Reddin is highlighted in *Tipperary's Hurling Men 1950*: 'Before you on the ramparts stands Brennan cool and still/Oh! Anthony, You're grand, you're brave – in peril we trust your skill.' And *Tipperary Fifty-One* calls for 'A cheer for Tony Brennan our peerless sound full back/Who kept the forwards all subdued and stemmed each fierce attack.'

Jimmy Finn, one of three survivors of these years – the other two being Mickey 'The Rattler' Byrne and Johnny Everard – recalls Tony as a father figure to John Doyle and himself in those years. He was protective of them, supportive of their efforts and a great leader who marshalled the defence. He was very protective of Tony Reddin and a great mentor of his in the early years. Jimmy uses the word 'genius' to describe his skill and his reading of the game. He was a great man to use a flick or a tip of the ball to get it out of the danger zone. Jimmy also recalls that Tony played during those great years under the severe handicap of an injured back and in many cases it was only his grit and determination enabled him to finish particularly tough games.

Whereas the high points of Tony Brennan's hurling achievement were his All-Ireland senior hurling successes, he also had an impressive earlier record. Born in Clonoulty in January 1916, his father, James, was an RIC man from Boyle, Co. Roscommon and his mother, Kate Byrne of Coolanga, Clonoulty, sister of Phil Byrne of Tubberadora fame.

From both parents he inherited his athletic skills. His father, who is listed in the 1911 census as 49 years old, single and stationed in the RIC barracks in Clonoulty, was one of six brothers to join the RIC and, according to a photographic feature on them in the *RIC Gazette* of November 1911 were 'all fine specimens of Irish Manhood, and have proved themselves to be exceptionally good policemen in many times of serious trouble.' Peter, who served in Kerry and Clare, was 'a well-known athlete' and William, who was stationed in Belfast was 'a prominent athlete in his day.'

On the other side of the family was the famous Phil Byrne, who was an outstanding defender on the 1895 Suir View team, which was defeated by Tubberadora in the county final. He was picked by Tubberadora for the All-Ireland championship and went on to win three championships with them and a further one with Horse-and-Jockey.



**Thurles CBS Dr. Harty Cup Champions 1933**

Front Row (L to R): - Phil Purcell, T. Prior, Philip O'Dwyer, J. Moloney.  
 Second Row (L to R): -J. Noonan, Paddy Bowe, Pady Gorman, Tommy O'Keefe,  
 Con Maher, Tommy Lanigan.  
 Third Row (L to R): - M. Spittle, T. Leahy, M. Mockler, Anthony Brennan,  
 J. Dwyer, Michael Condon.  
 Back Row (L to R): -J. Hackett, D. Hayes, T. Healy.

## School Success

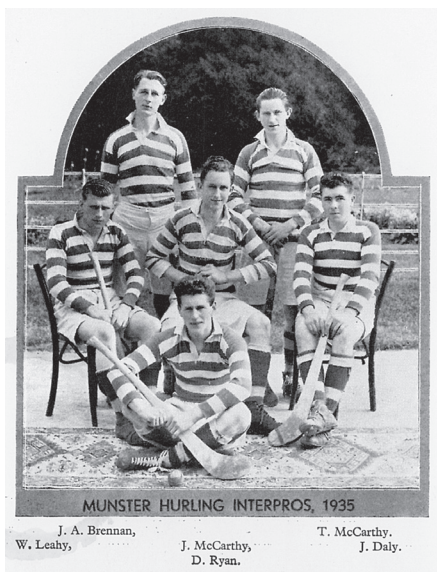
Tony first revealed his hurling skill as a secondary school student at Thurles CBS when he won a Dean Ryan Cup medal in 1930, beating Rockwell in the final on April 13. He played full back on the team that won the first Harty Cup for the school in 1933, beating North Monastery by 3-3 to 1-3 on April 27. In the match report it is stated that 'Brennan of Clonoulty as 'full' displayed his usual efficiency, coolness and resource.' Other notables on the team were Philly O'Dwyer of Boherlahan, Phil Purcell of Moycarkey and Tom Prior of Borrisileigh.

Tony spent his final year of secondary school, 1934-35, at Rockwell College and proved himself the outstanding athlete in the school the same year. He also played Harty Cup with the college and lost the final to North Monastery by 4-8 to 3-2 at Mitchelstown on May 8. He is mentioned in a poem about the final:

Tho' we landed Bill Leahy and Brennan  
 Dinny Ryan, Joe Nolan and Moss,  
 Tho' we sported our blue and white ribbon  
 All our bright hopes were darkened in loss.

Six of the Rockwell side were picked on the Munster Colleges team for the inter-provincials and Tony was one of them. It was his third year to

make the provincial side. It was only natural that a player of Tony's hurling ability would be picked on the county side and he was selected on the minor teams that won All-Ireland championships in 1933 and 1934. Tipperary had a great crop of young players at this time and the strength of the team may be seen in the score they put up against their opponents in winning the 1932 championship 25 goals and 26 points against 11 goals 2 points conceded. Tony was corner-back on the 1933 side that took two games to beat Waterford and were lucky to get through Cork. It was plain sailing against Kilkenny in the All-Ireland semi-final and they defeated Galway by double scores in the final, which was played at Portumna.



Tony was a dominant figure in the team that was successful again in 1934. What is unusual is the low scoring in the games, 1-3 to 1-2 against Cork, the same against Clare, 3-6 to 0-5 against Waterford in the Munster final. It was easy against Galway in the All-Ireland semi-final but victory was by the minimum, 4-3 to 3-5 against Laois, in the final.

## The Galway Years

Two years after completing his secondary education at Rockwell College, Tony joined the Irish speaking battalion at Renmore Barracks, Galway. The year was 1937 and his hurling prowess was soon recognised. His team, An Cath Gaedhealach, won the Galway junior championship in 1938. In the same year he was picked on the Galway junior team that won the Connaught final, before losing to Waterford in the All-Ireland semi-final. In the same year he was drafted into the Galway senior panel. The following year he played National League for Galway and was on the championship side that lost to Kilkenny at Roscrea in the All-Ireland semi-final. In 1940 he played Railway Cup with Connaught in which they lost to Leinster. He was first sub on the team beaten by Limerick in the All-Ireland semi-final at Ennis.

In 1941 he crossed paths with Tony Reddin, who was drafted into the Galway senior side, which was beaten by Dublin in the All-Ireland semi-final at Roscrea. Tony Brennan played centreback on the team. The county selectors changed goalkeepers in 1942, dropping Reddin and

drafting in Seanie Duggan. Tony Brennan played at full-back on the side beaten by Cork in the All-Ireland semi-final. In 1943 Tony was on the Galway side that lost to Antrim in the championship match and in the Railway Cup to Munster. Tony's last game with Galway was against Cork in the 1944 All-Ireland semi-final. Cork won the the minimum of margins, 1-10 to 3-3, at Ennis. While in the Army Tony won two Army championships.

## **Return to Tipperary**

According to his Army service record Anthony Brennan served under the service number 74731. He was in the regular Army between 26/10/1937 – 13/11/1945 and in the Army Reserve between 14/11/1945 – 13/11/1953. He undertook a Potential Non-Commissioned Officers course 10/1938 – 02/1939 and was promoted Corporal 31/08/1939. His service was with the 1st Battalion/Chad Chath.

Having left the Army in 1945, Tony got a job as a ganger with Bord na Mona in Co. Kildare. He must have come into the sights of the Tipperary selectors during the first half of the year because, while he didn't feature in the Four County League he did in other tournament games, and was named at centre-forward in the first round of the championship. Later he moved into full and was there for the All-Ireland final. This move found favour with Winter Green, writing in the Tipperary Star: 'Brennan at full forward is now in the position that best justifies him. He is a thinker and a man who does not care who makes the scores so long as they are made.'



*Corporal Tony Brennan*

Tony played full-forward for the county in 1946 and 1947 without success, with Limerick getting the better of them in both years. He didn't play in the league or championship in 1948 but was to be very much involved in the great three-in-a-row success 1949-51.

Following a trial early in 1949 Tony was installed in the full back position and made it his own. He played a major part in putting Tipperary on the road for the All-Ireland title. In the drawn game at Limerick against Cork, time was almost up with the Leesiders a goal ahead, when something prompted him to go outfield. He immediately chanced on a loose ball from a clash between Christy Ring and Tommy Doyle, which he drove with all his might. Sonny Maher stopped it and crossed it to Jimmy Kennedy, who planted it in the Cork net with the last stroke of the game. And, we all know that Tipperary won the replay after extra time!

Two further All-Irelands followed in 1950 and 1951. Tony's contribution

to these successes was major. He was the leader who marshalled the forces in Hell's Kitchen. His command of the area before the goalmouth, his protection of Tony Reddin and the leadership of his play ensured that Tipperary were unbeatable during these years.

Following the victory over Wexford in 1951, in which Tony collected his fourth senior All-Ireland, Archbishop Kinane, who received the victorious side on their arrival home at Thurles, is reported to have referred to the full back as 'Iron Curtain' Brennan 'Never, perhaps, has the Iron Curtain been subjected to such a strain as last Sunday; it had to withstand a projectile of tempered steel (Nicky Rackard), 15 stone in weight, and it is a tribute to the strength and resilience of the curtain that it was pierced only once or twice during the match.'

Tony played two more championships with Tipperary, 1952 and 1953 without success and retired after the latter championship.

### **Other Achievements**

As well as his four senior All-Irelands, 1945, 1949, 1950 and 1951, Tony won three National League titles in 1949, 1950 and 1952, two Oireachtas medals in 1945 and 1949, and a Railway Cup medal in 1951. Tony went to New York with the Tipperary team in 1950 and 1952 for the away finals of the National League. He was picked on the Tipperary Team of the Millennium in 2000.

Tony Brennan also contributed to the success of his club, Clonoulty-Rossmore. He made his debut at the early age of sixteen years in 1932, when Clonoulty won their third West senior hurling title, beating Donohill/Cappawhite in the final. He won a second championship in 1933 though he didn't play in the final as he was on duty with the county minor team in the All-Ireland semi-final the same day. He won a third divisional title in 1951 but had to endure a crushing defeat by Holycross-Ballycahill in the county final.

Tony married Eileen O'Dwyer in 1946 and the couple had four children, Jim, Mary, Eleanor and Anthony. He died on November 4, 1965 following a shooting accident and his funeral was one of the largest ever seen in Clonoulty village.



*Anthony and Eileen Brennan  
Wedding photo Oct 1946*