

The role played by Tom Woulfe in the campaign (1959–1971) to remove the Ban on Foreign Games (Rule 27) from the rulebook of the GAA.

My essay proposes to examine the role played by Woulfe in the campaign (1959–1971) to remove the GAA's ban on foreign games (Rule 27). In place in various forms almost since the foundation of the GAA the rule prohibited GAA members playing or attending so-called "foreign games" including soccer, rugby and hockey, even banning members from attending functions (e.g. dances) organized by British security forces or foreign games clubs.

Tom Woulfe, (b1915, Ballybunnion, Co Kerry) was a founding member of Civil Service Football Club, Dublin (1935). His place in GAA history was recognised in a supplement in the "Sunday Tribune" on 4th January 2009 marking the 125th anniversary of the GAA profiling 125 people who had played a significant role in the development of the GAA: "He gained his place in history by leading the campaign for the removal of the Ban."

During an interview I conducted with Woulfe he linked the origins of the Ban to the influence of the Fenians in the early days of the GAA and to their disliking of all things English. He said it was no surprise that in the early days of the GAA any link with English culture would be actively discouraged. MacLua (p.30) referred to the Ban as part of the "basic rules in the developing nationalist philosophy of the Gaelic Athletic Association.

I asked Woulfe about his reasons for campaigning against the Ban. He said "it was a bloody nuisance and a headache, it was a festering sore." In his own article on the Ban (p.72) he referred to Monsignor Hamilton (1895–1969), a leading GAA administrator from Co Clare who once pronounced that neither Kevin Barry nor Eamon DeValera were "complete Irishmen because they had played rugby." In contrast Woulfe described how, as a volunteer in the Irish Army during World War II (the "Emergency") he met men who happened to play soccer or rugby and began to realise the traditional GAA view, that those

who played “foreign games” were not true Irishmen, was completely without foundation.

Woulfe identified 1959 as significant - the 75th anniversary of the GAA and the opening of the new Hogan Stand in Croke Park – he recalled the sense of pride he felt in the GAA and its ability to create such a wonderful stadium. He felt it should become a national stadium open to all sports. In order for that to happen he realised the first step would have to be the removal of the Ban.

On 7th December 1959, Woulfe succeeded in passing a motion for a Commission of Enquiry into the Ban at the Dublin Convention of the GAA. Woulfe said “the immediate aim was to push the subject into the mainstream of debate”. According to the rules of the GAA, “Ban” issues could only be raised at National Congress at three-year intervals - the Dublin motion didn’t reach Congress until 1962 but the process had started and soon began to attract interest in the press. Woulfe compiled an extensive memorandum on the history and social effects of the Ban and it was published in full in “The Irish Times’ on 28th November 1961. He said the article generated a lot of debate amongst rank and file members of the GAA which he identified as a significant first change in the mindset of many of these people. However, at the 1962 Congress the motion was defeated 140 votes to 80.

Leading up to the 1965 Congress Woulfe maintained a campaign of letters and articles in the press which he asserted led to a further shift in grassroots opinion. MacLua acknowledged the significance of this when he wrote (p89) that it “provided Mr. Woulfe with a steady means of disseminating his views and he availed himself extensively of this facility.” However, once again conservatism within the GAA triumphed when the motion was defeated 230 votes to 52. MacLua noted (p.93) the comments of Seamus Ó Riain (GAA president, 1967-1970) who claimed traditional values were more important than ever as they “provided ballast in an era of aimlessness and disillusionment.” MacLua concluded that the Ban “survived with consummate ease.” (p.93)

In the interview Woulfe mentioned the assistance of journalists Eamon Mongey of “The Sunday Press”, Paddy Downey of “The Irish Times” and Seán Óg Ó Ceallacháin of “The Irish Press” in keeping the debate alive over the period 1962 – 1971, a factor which is supported by deBurca when he states (p.202) that, in particular, Woulfe and Mongey “succeeded in creating the impression that... there was a widespread agitation outside Dublin to end the Ban” and went on to state the 1968 Congress “marked the beginning of the end of the Ban.” Woulfe explained this was the case because even though another motion for its removal failed (220 votes to 88) an article by Paddy Downey in “The Irish Times” (29th January 1968) had pointed out an analysis of votes at 31 county conventions showed that there were 1,900 votes to retain the rule with 1,450 against. In other words, the grassroots of the GAA were much more evenly divided on the issue than the votes at Congress seemed to suggest. Significantly, at the 1968 Congress a Mayo proposal to set up a committee to make a case for the retention of the Ban was passed. Woulfe viewed this as an opportunity. He wrote in his article (p.75) “The passage of the motion was the light at the end of the tunnel for us on the anti-Ban wavelength. For the opposition – and they quite obviously didn’t scent danger – it represented the headlights of an oncoming train.”

The period 1968-1971 was characterized, according to Woulfe, by a “media blitz” where Mongey, Downey and Ó Ceallacháin availed of every opportunity to carry their message to the public. He mentioned a series of debates and highlighted one which took place in Ballygawley, Co Tyrone where he defeated Alf Murray (from Co. Down and GAA President, 1964 – ’67). Murray was confounded when Woulfe pointed out, strictly according to the wording of the Ban, Murray a teacher by profession and therefore a public servant in the pay of the British Crown, ought to be ineligible for membership of the GAA!

The final piece in the jigsaw fell into place as a result of a decision taken at the 1970 Congress that all clubs should hold a referendum on the removal of the Ban the following winter. Woulfe told me that he wished to “keep his powder dry” until the right moment. On 1st November 1970 he wrote an open letter to all GAA members and sent it to over 50 provincial newspapers

advising them about the referendum. Over the next week practically all of them published it as did "The Sunday Independent", he was also interviewed about the matter on Radio Eireann. In his article he noted (p.76) the result of the referendum was an "unprecedented exercise in grassroots democracy in the GAA... by the time the Congress came around in Belfast on Easter Sunday [11th April, 1971] abolition was a mere formality." DeBurca (p.204) pointed out that the GAA President at the time, Pat Fanning (despite the fact that he had always been a staunch supporter of the Ban) played an important role in the smooth passage of the motion to delete Rule 27 by proposing a new charter for the GAA "reasserting the loyalty of the GAA, despite the ending of the Ban, to national culture, ensuring the use of the Association's property for its own purposes only and clearly defining for the first time membership of the GAA." While Woulfe wrote (p.76) that the Ban "disappeared with the ease and elegance of an institution whose time had come", deBurca added that "much of the theoretical case for the Ban had been eroded by practice; in some places Rule 27 had become almost obsolete." (p205).

Woulfe felt that, in national terms, the removal of the Ban got rid of a source of antagonism between communities, e.g. the Ban had often been used by Unionist and anti-nationalist groups in Northern Ireland to accuse the GAA of being a sectarian organization. He also suggested the removal of the Ban on "foreign games" paved the way for the later removal of the Ban on members of the British armed forces or the RUC (now the PSNI) becoming members of the GAA and, more recently, the opening up of Croke Park itself to the playing of soccer and rugby. The recent funeral of PSNI constable Ronan Kerr¹, a catholic and GAA member murdered by dissident republicans illustrates this change very poignantly:

"That...the president of the GAA and the manager and captain of the Tyrone football team carried the coffin says a great deal about the journey which the Association has been on."²

¹ 6th April 2011

² Eamonn Sweeny, "Sunday Independent" 10h April 2011

Finally, I asked Woulfe what he felt was the significance, both for the country and for the GAA, of the removal of the Ban. He maintained it proved to GAA members that gaelic games had their own attractions and could stand on their own without the 'protection' of the Ban; he suggested the removal of the Ban led to a greater sense of self-confidence amongst GAA supporters, a late 20th century version of the gaelic revival. Abolished forty years ago almost to the day, the "Ban" and Tom Woulfe's role in its demise remains an absorbing chapter in the story of the evolution of the GAA.

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GAA's own archive available on its website, URL:
<http://www.crokepark.ie/gaa-museum/gaa-archive>