

Sadness at tragic death of young Hilltown Man – Collie Curran

(Contributed)

The tragic death of young Hilltown man Collie Curran in a motoring accident shocked the community and was a devastating blow to his wife and young family. How the sad news reached the village is poignantly traced in this contributed report:

“And now we go over to the travel desk for the traffic and travel report” – another routine announcement on the early evening radio . . .

“Reports are coming in of an accident on the Newry to Hilltown Road” . . . Ears pricked up, suddenly it was not another routine report. At the same time on another radio station the announcement was more foreboding . . . “At least one person is dead and a number of others seriously injured in a traffic accident on the Newry to Hilltown Road” . . .

Tension and apprehension gripped the village. It was the time of the evening when young people were coming from school, and men and women were returning from work – the question was – who was home – who wasn’t?

There wasn’t long to wait. Like a bolt out of the blue the news struck. “Collie Curran is dead”; “My God . . . Collie Curran” . . .

A village community, no stranger to tragedy, was again plunged into mourning. A young man in his prime, with a young wife and children, coming home from his day’s work was taken from our midst. How much more could we take?

The community was stunned into disbelief, an eerie cloud of salience hung over the village. Throughout Monday evening, small groups congregated about the village, not a word spoken – they came together just to share their shock and grief.

Collie Curran was one of theirs – of the village. He was born in Hilltown, grew up there, married Janine, reared his family, and was part of everything they did. His first love was Gaelic football – he displayed great passion and skill from an early age. He learned his skills early in life, he played ‘hit the post’ with the other boys at the top of Kennedy Drive. They didn’t have goalposts but if you hit the electric pole it was a goal – there wasn’t much margin for error. Likewise, as a toddler in the back garden, with the vegetable garden on the other side of the fence, the young Collie learned his ball control the hard way. That winning smile and the head of curls didn’t always win with an angry gardener.

His exceptional skills brought him to the attention of the Clonduff selectors and as a ten-year-old he donned the yellow jersey for the first time in the U12 team. Honours came thick and fast. His first championship medal was won the U12 team in 1979 and more was to follow the U16 team in 1983 and the Minor team in 1985.

The Down Year Book of that that year, looking back on the County Minor Final between Clonduff and Burren reported . . . “Despite what the final scoreline might suggest 2-9 to 0-7 in favour of Clonduff, this year’s Down Minor Football Final played on a fine August evening at Petit Park, Rostrevor between Clonduff and Burren was in terms of effort, skill, endeavour and discipline, undoubtedly the best of all the County Finals played in Down this year” . . .

Collie partnered Paddy Hannaway at midfield that day and it was probably his finest hour in a Clonduff jersey. He realised his dream when he was called into the Clonduff Senior squad and went on to play for the Count at Minor and U21 level.

Collie had tasted the joys of winning at an early age, success had come early. The medal train had dried up when he joined the Senior team but it said a lot for the character of the young man that his enthusiasm, passion and commitment were not dampened in any way. It would have been easy to sit back on the pocketful of medals already won: his ability

would always have gotten him a place on a Senior team, alternating between the first and second divisions.

But he wanted the young boys coming behind him to enjoy their games as much as he had done and for Collie there was only one way to do that. Get in there, be involved! So it was Collie who became a coach to the U14 team and later the U16 team. A correspondent described his U16 team of two years ago “ . . . as the best tutored club under age side I’d ever seen in skills, in tactics, in competitiveness and in sportsmanship” . . . Whether he was the hand to clap their backs in congratulations, or the arm around the shoulders to console in defeat, he was there!

His humanity and leadership marked him out as the person to bond the emerging talent coming through to the Senior team. It was no surprise then that Colm was appointed Captain of the Club Senior team at the start of the season. As a player, mentor, and administrator, he had packed so much into a very short life. As Fr McNeill said in his homily at the funeral, he seemed to know that his life was to be short, as he lived life at such a pace.

The funeral cortege from his home to St John’s Ballymaghery, was the biggest ever seen in the village. Players from throughout the County joined with the community in their last farewell to Collie. His U16 team led the guard of honour and his team mates acted as pall bearers on the final journey; a journey that paused for a moment as his remains pass the gates of Clonduff Park before going to join so many other young men called by St Peter to his team at a very young age. Go ndéana Trocaire ar anam Collie!