



**Fixture Planning in
Co. Meath GAA
in 2009**

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Introduction

Fixture planning has a huge impact on everyone in the GAA no matter what level or capacity they are involved at. Fixtures underpin every aspect of GAA life which is vast and interconnected, making the organising and planning of competitions and individual games within those competitions very complex, with national fixtures impacting on local fixtures, senior fixtures that impact on junior fixtures, adult fixtures that impact on underage fixtures and football fixtures that impact on Hurling fixtures and vice versa for all these.

The following report is based on the findings of a survey conducted in November and December 2009 on fixture planning in the GAA. The survey involved an online questionnaire that was completed by people who were contacted by email. 180 people from Meath fully responded to the survey (116 players) from 53 of the 59 Meath clubs. The primary aim of the survey was to get a snapshot of perceptions and attitudes to fixture planning in the GAA. The survey was specifically aimed at Meath GAA people and players in particular in order to provide an avenue for club players to express how this important issue impacts on them.

This is not a scientific based research study and as such cannot claim to be representative of the target population (GAA people in Meath). The findings however have been drawn from a sufficiently broad range of people from 90% of clubs in Meath to be indicative of people's attitudes and to allow, at least tentative, conclusions from these findings.

This report and its findings in no way attempt to question the character or integrity of any official involved in fixture planning in Co. Meath. Its sole purpose is to highlight the concerns and views of players, mentors and officials of Gaelic games in Co Meath. Quotes taken, and reproduced in the report, are those of individuals surveyed and are not necessarily those of the author.

Executive Summary

84% of GAA players in Meath are either dissatisfied (32%) or very dissatisfied (52%) with fixture planning in the County. This dissatisfaction is based on two main problems; the spread of games over the year and the short notice received by players for matches. This is characterised by long breaks in the fixture schedule during the summer followed by a condensed fixture schedule where very little notice period is given.

Although the majority of players played 15-20 matches throughout the season, these games were spread irregularly over an 11 month season which is not defined. 65% of players had to wait at least 1 month between matches including 28% who had to wait over 2 months between matches. This is then followed by a rush of fixtures where 77% of players have played at least two games in 6 days or less including 52% who have played two games in 4 days or less.

The irregular spread of games is compounded by the fact that the most frequent notice period for matches given to 97% of players is less than two weeks including 50% receiving less than one week's notice. It is accepted that players make sacrifices in their personal lives in order to compete in the GAA, however this sacrifice is exacerbated by the ad hoc nature of fixture planning as illustrated by the 82% of players who said that playing in the GAA impacts on their personal, social and professional lives either often or very often with many citing strained personal relationships as a result of playing.

The consequences of this are that 'fed up' players are drifting away from GAA to other sports where they are given regular fixture schedules. The solution to the problem by almost everyone in the survey was to develop a master fixture schedule which will require engagement at a national level and innovation and strong leadership at local level.

"Games are constantly changed at short notice and players are expected to drop their other plans, which is often work related, to fulfil fixtures and matches they are not prepared for. I think the debacle which is the GAA fixtures are putting players off playing GAA. I much prefer playing GAA to soccer because it runs deeper in our Community, but at least I know every game of soccer I have for the next month."

Summary of Main Findings of Meath Respondents

- 74% are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with fixture planning in Meath (players 84%)
- The vast majority of people are alerted about fixtures by electronic means, with text message being the most popular followed by email and websites
- The majority of players play 15-20 games per year
- 65% of players have had at least 1 month between matches in 2009 (28% over 2 months)
- Over 50% of players have played two games in 4 days or less, with 77% playing at least twice in 6 days or less
- Playing GAA in Meath impacts on 82% of players' personal lives often (51%) or very often (31%) including family, social and professional commitments

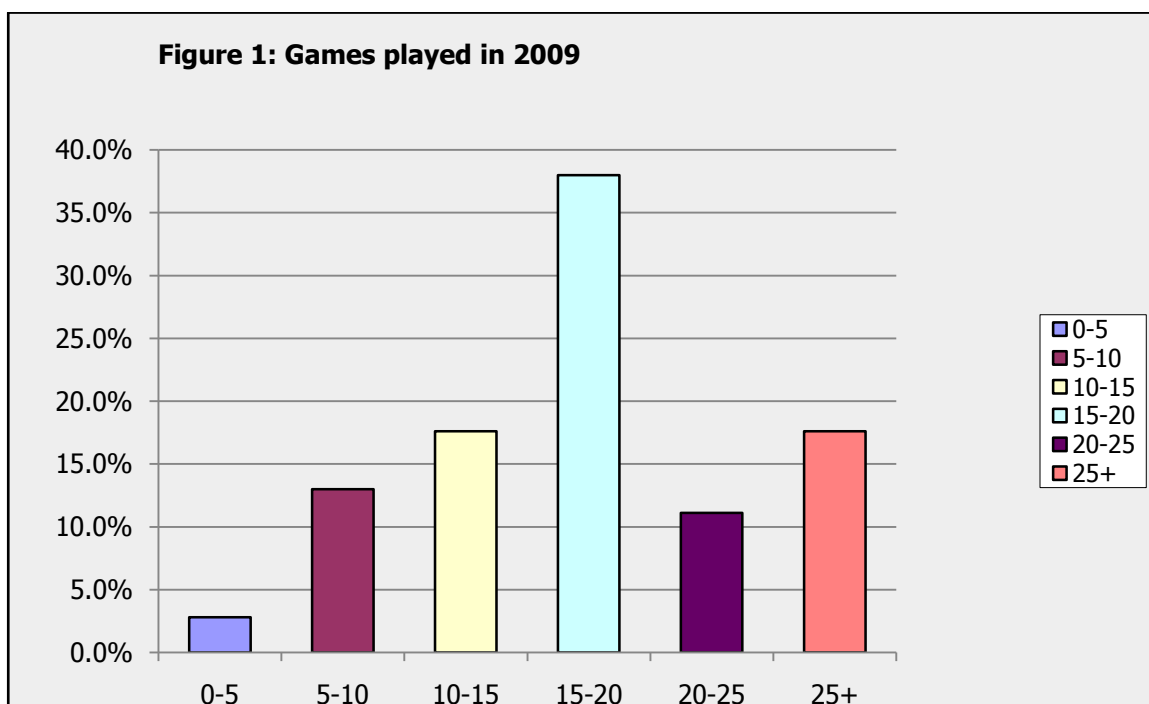
Player Profile

For the purposes of the analysis, only the 126 players (10 retired players) who fully completed the questionnaire are included. The average age of players in the survey is 25.6. Table 2 gives a spread of the levels that the players within survey play at in both football and hurling. 17% of the players are dual players.

	Senior	Intermediate	Junior	U-21	Minor	Other
Football	30.4%	25.5%	38.2%	2.0%	2.0%	2.0%
Hurling	48.1%	14.8%	22.2%	7.4%	3.7%	3.7%

Number of Matches Played in 2009

In terms of how many games players play throughout the year, 15-20 games was given as the most frequent number of games (see Figure 1 below). This is in line with most clubs' core season schedule in Meath with 11 league games, 3-4 championship group games and Cup games such as the Feis Cup. Dual players were obviously more likely to be in the 25+ games category. This means that the majority of players play 15-20 games over a season that is now 11 months long. This works out on average of a game every 2-3 weeks for the majority of players in the survey 'if' the games were spread evenly throughout the year.



Time between Matches

Players were asked to give the shortest and longest times between matches, which helps to give an idea of the spread of matches throughout the year. Table 3 gives a breakdown of their answers. 6 days was given as the most frequent answer for the shortest time between matches while 1-2 months was given as the most frequent answer for the longest time between matches. When looked at more closely, over 50% of players said that they played two matches in 4 days or less. As amateur players, this has implications for recovery and increases the risk of injury. At the other end, 65% of players said they had to wait at least 1 month between games including 28% waiting more than 2 months. This is consistent with what players said in the open ended question where they cited long breaks without matches during the summer followed by a ‘rash’ of fixtures as a major negative issue.

“There was maybe one or two championship matches between May and September, the time a player would like to be playing games, then there is a rush after this to play games and these could be any night of the week. While in the summer it has to be at the weekend. League stage of the championship should be over by September.”

Table 3: Shortest and Longest times between matches									
Shortest Time									
	1 Day	2 Days	3 Days	4 Days	5 Days	6 Days	7 Day	1-2 weeks	More than 2 weeks
Time Between Games	10%	15%	17%	10%	7%	18%	16%	6%	1%
Longest Time									
	1-7 Days	1-2 weeks	2-3 Weeks	3-4 Weeks	1-2 Months	more than 2 months			
Time Between Games	2%	1%	9%	24%	36%	28%			

“5 games in 16 days following a 5 week gap??? Ridiculous!!”

There is a large degree of frustration with the 'unofficial' summer break, especially as GAA being a summer sport, this should be the peak season for all players. It is widely acknowledged that this is due to the fortunes of the County teams which to a degree, cannot be foreseen. The run of Meath football team to the All Ireland semi final via the back door in 2009 and the Hurling teams progression to the Nicky Rackard Cup final meant that club fixtures (championship in particular) were put on hold for large parts of the summer. There is varying degrees of feeling among players in the survey regarding this, from acknowledgment that this should be so in order to give the county team the best chance, to disregard for the county team and frustration that all club fixtures are held up for this reason. The predominant feeling though is moderate where it is felt that the County teams should be given the optimum chance to progress but still have planned fixtures during the summer for club players, like league and Cup games. It was also highlighted that a number of students who went to America during summer on J1 visas who were ineligible for their club for 90 days did not miss any of their club's championship games illustrating the long break without competitive games during the summer.

"There have been large periods of time particularly during the summer months where there are no club fixtures at all. This makes it almost impossible to keep players involved on a regular basis. This is at the height of the inter county season so obviously championship games cannot be fixed but surely there should be league games fixed for this period to give players competitive games at least every two weeks. Ideally however they could be played every week if possible. I think that the Feis Cup should be run off as the start of season competition in the county offering clubs competitive games and if clubs are knocked out then they can arrange challenge games to prepare for the start of the league. This means that league games can be played off during the summer months. "Realistically the last club game played in the county should be the Senior County final."

Although there is some understanding with club games involving inter County players being held up, players in the survey can see no reason as to why lower graded games are held up, particularly B leagues and Junior championship grades.

"We only played 1 or 2 junior D championship matches during the 3 summer months. This is a total disgrace as there were numerous weeks that games could of and should of been played. Why not send fixture lists out at beginning of year so there could be a more even spread of games. Also why was junior D championship delayed when county seniors were going well."

"...with regard to b league fixtures there are 9 games plus the final with our 1st game taking place on the 1st march 09, currently we have fulfilled 6 fixtures and received 2 w/o over a period of 36wks so far! Leaving 1 group game plus a final yet to be played. Surely this could be avoided with proper organisation and appropriate fixture setting."

The irregular nature of the fixtures means that the season 'drags on' and players lose interest which devalues the competitions that they are playing in. A large number of players made reference to the fact that they are still playing in November and December after the season began in February following preseason training in January. This also means that players have little off season to recover adding to an increased risk of injury, burnout and early retirement.

"It has dragged out the year making it 11 months long. We waited 10 weeks for a final and it is hard to keep the interest going along with paying a coach and physio. Neither teams had county players so it should have been played off in August. Also county games should not mean club games come to a halt, we need to play more games midweek under lights."

A further risk of injuries for players is the condensed nature of a number of fixtures following a large break during the summer. This is especially true for dual players where they see little coordination between the hurling and football fixtures with a perceived bias towards football fixtures by the hurling players in particular. Hurling players find the length of the season with large gaps in the summer particularly frustrating because the condition of the pitches in winter is not conducive to Hurling.

"Our club did not play Intermediate championship for over 13 weeks (between 2nd round and 3rd round). We then had to play senior hurling championship on a Sunday, Intermediate championship on a Tuesday and then Intermediate championship again on the Saturday. This is 3 really important games all stuffed into 6 days after going months without a game."

This problem was also highlighted by a number of coaches such as the following;

"Why are there league fixtures in December yet a huge gap in the summer when pitches are dry. Too big a gap between round two and round 3 in this year's championship too. Leagues should be finished in the last week in October at the latest and ran off during the summer when Meath are playing"

Notice Period for Matches

Another important issue for players is the notice period they receive for games. As we have seen, players are frustrated with how the season played out in terms of the spread of games. In terms of the notice period given for matches played throughout the year, players were asked what the most frequent notice time they were given for competitive matches. 50% of players are given less than one week's notice most of the time with 47% indicating that between 1-2 weeks is the most frequent notice they are given. Even though throughout the year there might be times where more than two weeks notice is given for games, astonishingly, 97% of players regularly receive less than 2 weeks' notice for matches. This has a massive impact on players' lives, especially those with family and professional commitments outside of football and hurling. Table 4 illustrates the breakdown of the most frequent notice period players receive.

Table 4 : Most Frequent Notice Time Given to Players		Response Percent
less than one week		50.0%
1-2 weeks		47.3%
2-3 weeks		1.8%
3-4 weeks		0.0%
1-2 months		0.0%
More than 2 months		0.9%

“Nothing can be planned with the current fixture situation. On most occasions clubs are given a fixture on a Monday night which is then passed on to players the next day with a fixture in place for that Sunday. How can the club championship in Cork (All Ireland Finalists) be finished weeks if not months before the Meath championship?? Defies logic”

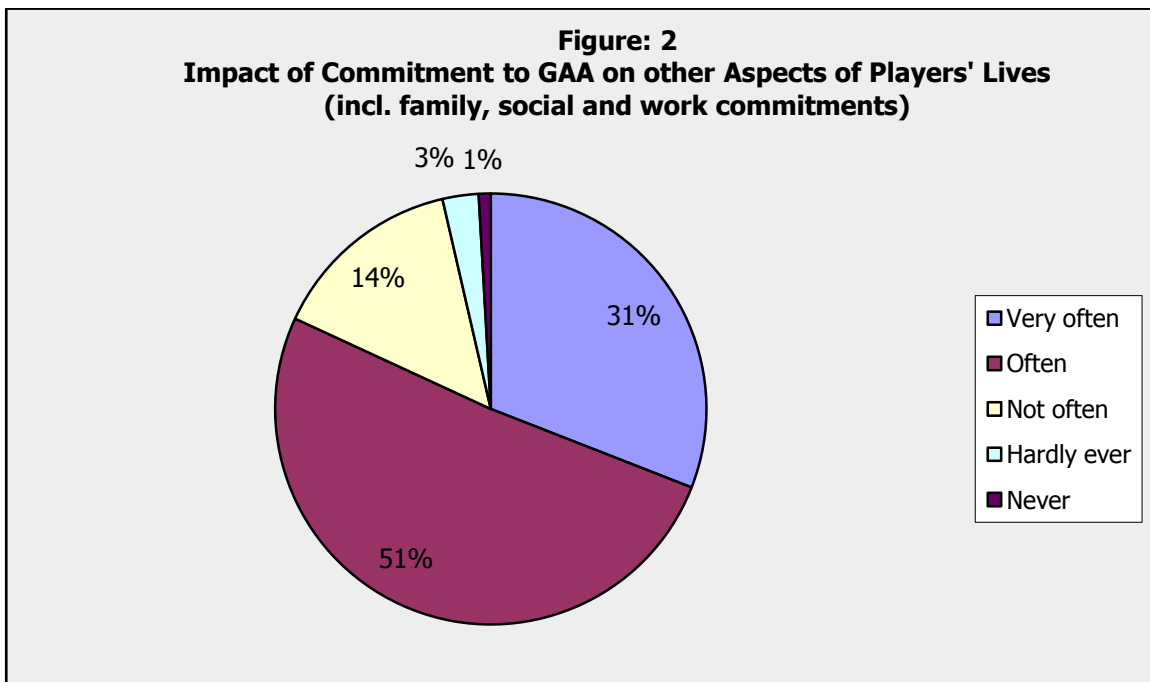
The lack of notice period for games coupled with irregular fixtures of long gaps followed by a glut of matches in a short period amplifies the frustration felt by players.

“Due to short notice, approx 3 days, I missed a Junior C quarter final”

Impact of GAA on Players’ Personal Lives

With regard to the impact of playing in the GAA, it is clear that players make significant sacrifices in their personal lives, demonstrating the passion they have for playing the game. When asked how often playing affects their personal lives, 51% replied often and 31% replied very often (see Figure 2). Obviously this impact can be amplified by short notice periods for matches and changes at short notice. This again came through very strongly in the open ended questions where players expressed their frustration and anger at the increasing impact of playing has on their personal lives.

“You cannot plan any weekends away throughout the year, as you don’t know when games are going to be played. Even at this late stage we still don’t know when our league final will be played. All club games should be completely finished by the end of October, every year. If it means starting championship and league a month earlier and also playing Feis cup from February until summer, then I think it would be better than looking for challenge matches at the start of the year. It also allows players to plan for holidays and proper rest time at the end of the year.”



These results are not surprising considering what we have seen in regard to the way fixtures are spread out and the short notice period given. As almost all players receive less than two weeks notice for most of their matches, if a player wishes to play in all their club's matches, they cannot plan anything in their personal lives more than two weeks ahead, or more commonly, less than one week ahead. What came across very strongly is the impact this then has on players' personal and professional relationships.

"Impossible to arrange anything outside of football for one week to the next for fear of the county board 'throwing' a fixture in at the last minute especially when involved with my clubs 1st and 2nd team. Family also suffers as you can't arrange anything concrete when you are committed to not missing games. I don't think that the county board realise that players have outside interests and i don't just mean socially as in going for pints. Players also have wives, kids to look after and spend time with. For example on it could be a bank holiday and you could be fixed to play a game on the Monday which means you generally can do nothing for the long weekend but sit around waiting for Monday... I also have had to cancel going to weddings, family functions etc because of the timing, late notice of matches, etc. By times it's a farce."

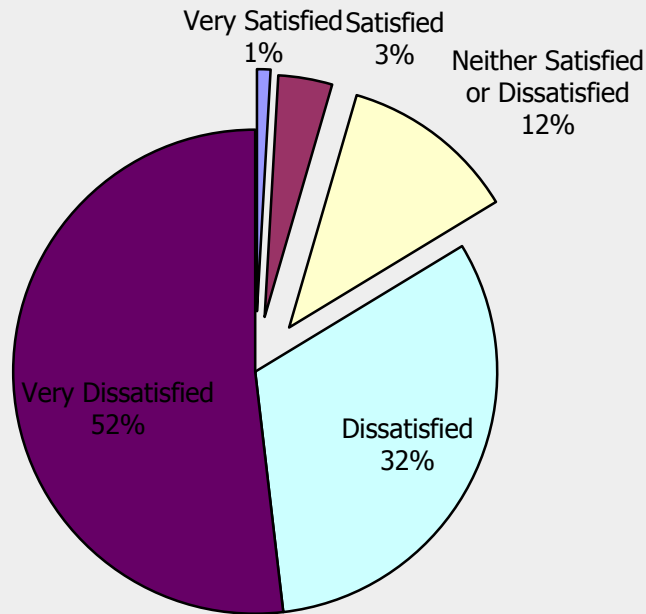
A player's wife who completed the questionnaire also expressed how fixture planning has affected her ;

"For years we have been unable to plan a holiday due to the commitment of my husband to his club, planning the fixtures well well well in advance would help us to have a life during the championship season."

Satisfaction with Fixture Planning in Meath

Players were also asked whether they were satisfied with fixture planning in the County and given what we have seen regarding players perceptions of the season, the notice period for games and the effect it has on their personal lives, it is not surprising to find that the majority of players are dissatisfied with fixture planning. The extent of this dissatisfaction is illustrated in figure 3 with more than four out of every five players dissatisfied, with more than one in two players very dissatisfied. This tells a story in itself. Players are more dissatisfied than the rest of the population within the survey where dissatisfaction drops to 74% when all other people are included, yet almost 3 out of every four people are still dissatisfied with only 9% expressing satisfaction compared to only 4% of players.

**Figure 3:
Players' Satisfaction with Fixture Planning**



"Games are constantly changed at short notice and players are expected to drop their other plans, which is often work related, to fulfil fixtures and matches they are not prepared for. I think the debacle which is the GAA fixtures are putting players off playing GAA. I much prefer playing GAA to soccer because it runs deeper in our community, but at least I know every game of soccer I have for the next month."

It is hard to infer what the consequences of this dissatisfaction are for the GAA in Meath as this dissatisfaction may be benign and players will simply continue to play on regardless of how fixtures are planned. In looking at the open ended questions however, it would appear that the current situation is unsustainable as a lack of fixture planning manifests itself negatively in many ways and doesn't just affect players as articulated by some of the administrators and coaches. Players perceive fixture planning in Meath to impact negatively on clubs finances, team morale, injury, loss of players due to early retirement or taking up a different sport and resentment towards officials and administrators.

The team morale has suffered badly, not knowing when our next game is going to be. Personally, I am considering quitting playing due to the fixture problems.

"If county board continue to disregard club players, players will turn to other sports."

With regard to the last two comments regarding the impact of losing players to other sports or retirement, it is difficult to say without tracking these players to see whether fixture planning played any part in their decision. The feeling among some of the players in the survey is that a lot of players, especially at lower grades switch to soccer and rugby because of fixture planning.

"Too many gaps midyear especially July / August where often [there are] no games. County Board don't understand that people's lives are more pressurised than in previous times and give more respect to club player. Set out designated free weekends. That is why so many guys that would be at junior - to junior c level go playing soccer because they know they have regular fixtures."

It is difficult to say how big an issue this is but when looking through results on the Meath GAA website there are 31 recorded walkovers where fixtures were not fulfilled, most of these occurred after the soccer and rugby seasons began in mid August and also after long gaps throughout the summer due to Meath's run in the All-Ireland Championship. This does not include matches that were not played because they had no bearing on the outcome of the competition. Most of them were also games from lower grades. Only 10 retired players fully completed the questionnaire as a retired player (some coaches indicated that they had also recently retired). Of the 10 retired players who responded fully, 5 said they retired because of injuries, 4 because of age and 1 went to play Rugby instead. One articulated stronger feelings about his retirement;

"Injuries and complete lack of respect shown to players from county board officials - this lack of respect manifests itself by the county board assuming that players can put their life (family and professional) on hold in anticipation of a midweek phone call of a fixture just announced for an important game to take place that weekend."

This perceived lack of respect of officials for players' welfare and the lack of transparency in how fixtures are decided seems to breed animosity and suspicion among some players towards officials, despite the acknowledged effort and commitment of those officials.

"Officials are great to put in the time they do but they seem to have zero respect for players. Completely impossible to plan a holiday or weekend away! It is now November and most competitions still haven't been run off..."

“For one particular championship game this year, a game that proved decisive in us not reaching the quarter finals. We were missing five first team players as they were at a stag weekend. When planning the trip, the players were assured that there would be no competitive action on that weekend. Despite this, the game was fixed, we were narrowly beaten and our year ended early because of it. A fixture list being sent out at the beginning of the year with a clear dates and times of games would be the solution.”

This anger and frustration is mediated somewhat by the acknowledgment of the complexity of the planning fixtures in not alone accommodating a number of levels and grades but also integrating football and hurling into the GAA calendar year around an inter County schedule.

“Huge amount of fixtures, in both codes, county teams fixtures impinge on club fixtures but this is taken as a given, all counties have to deal with this. I don't see how the county board could do it better.”

The anger of players generally predominates throughout the survey. However one player who is also an administrator gives a more rounded opinion of how he sees it from both sides of the fence.

“As a player and administrator I see problems caused by players, clubs and administrators. Players and clubs expect to be able to cancel scheduled matches for stag nights, 21st Birthdays etc. without any regards for the knock on effects on all other fixtures. Administrators do not provide (and stick to) an advance schedule of fixtures. Steps which need to be taken include an advance schedule of fixtures (min. 2 months in advance, for all levels) and clubs and players need to buy into this and stop looking to undermine it by changing fixtures for things like stag nights, etc”

The reactive nature of fixture planning in the County where fixtures are decided from week to week seems to foster a horse-trading culture where clubs and players with no long term view of fixtures seek free weekends in advance. This sometimes conflicts with the fixture schedule as the weekend comes closer and it is clear that it is then not possible to grant a free weekend for a club. It may also have a knock on effect of conflicting with another club who do not wish to facilitate this. This further contributes to the animosity towards officials felt by players.

“Our club was in a situation where we gave 6 weeks’ notice of being unavailable to play championship on a weekend, but the county fixtures board still put us down to play. It put a lot of pressure on players who had things booked and paid for. (Were the county board going to refund the cost?)”

Improving Fixture Planning

In terms of addressing this very serious issue for players, one thing was almost ubiquitous across the board from all people in the survey and that is a master fixture list. This is the most obvious thing and probably didn't need a survey to come to this conclusion as it is almost universally acknowledged that this is what is needed.

"A master fixture schedule HAS to be made up and abided by NO EXCEPTIONS. County players who are not in line to starting with the county have to be released for club duty. Some county players don't play a competitive match for months. The County Leagues are still not finalised, its December. Feis Cup still not finished again we are in December. Club players go weeks without playing a game in the summer months."

There are a wide number of variables that contribute to the complexity of trying to both devise and implement a master fixture schedule. To accept this complexity as a reason not to strive towards achieving it seems unsustainable in terms of retaining players in the GAA based on the evidence so far. Playing in the GAA significantly impacts on the majority of players' personal lives where over four out of every five players are dissatisfied with the current fixture planning situation.

The major difficulty seems to be in the inability of county fixtures committees to sufficiently plan around the inter County schedule. There are now an increased number of pathways in the All-Ireland where teams can progress, as well as going the traditional provincial route, teams can now be involved in the qualifier system at any one of four rounds which dramatically increases the amount of possible weekends where a county team may be involved. The development of a concrete master fixture schedule would therefore seem unattainable without engagement on this issue at a national level.

In its document, "The GAA Strategic Vision and Action Plan 2009-2015", the GAA set out fixture planning as a key strategic objective with the aim of providing all players with an appropriate programme and schedule of games. **"We will provide a structured games programme at inter-County level so that club fixtures can take place within the agreed calendar."**

"In 2016 we will be able to say:

'All units at all levels provide a coordinated programme of meaningful games for players, appropriate to their needs and abilities. All games are regulated so that players experience fair play and can take part in well-planned and scheduled games as part of a balanced lifestyle. We have in place a locally effective and efficient, nationally co-ordinated, fixtures planning system.'"

How fixtures process will work around the country

Timelines	Club	County	Provincial
2009	Fixtures reporting Fixtures reporting process in place. Satisfaction Assess satisfaction levels on fixtures with players, coaches and mentors.	Fixtures planning County fixtures planning committees appointed. Education Fixtures planning education and training programme in place. Future planning Each County has a fixtures plan in place for 2010.	Fixtures planning Provincial fixtures planning committees appointed. Education Fixtures planning education programme in place. Future planning Each Province has a fixtures plan in place for 2010.
2011	Fixtures reporting Fixtures reporting process in place Feedback Cross section of personnel surveyed to determine the satisfaction with programmes. Satisfaction ratings reviewed and targets set for improvement.	Annual review Annual reporting, review and planning process in place in all Counties. Compliance Counties to achieve at least 80% compliance with fixtures plan. Referees' plan National referees' plan integrated with County plans.	Annual review Annual reporting, review and planning process in place. Referees' plan National referees' plan integrated in the Provincial Plan.
2015	Club role Clubs continue to contribute to fixtures planning process.	Assessment Adherence to fixtures plan included in merit-based funding model.	

Source: GAA Strategic Vision and Action Plan 2009-2015

It is not clear whether the performance indicators for 2009 have been achieved and whether this timeline is on schedule. Although the strategy document does not deal in specifics of how this will look or how it will deal with the current situation where the inter-County programme is obstructive of counties providing master schedules, it is still a medium term solution to something which requires immediate attention by the County Board.

A number of players who recognise the difficulty in making a comprehensive full year master schedule still stress the need for a provisional fixture list(s) which have been suggested in a number of forms including;

- Having a full list of fixtures up to Meath's first games in the championship
- Playing Cup games such as the Feis Cup as the first games of the season instead of leagues in February leaving more meaningful league games to be played during the summer
- Giving fixtures a minimum of two months in advance
- Have two provisional fixture lists based on Meath getting to the All Ireland / Christy Ring Finals through the provincial and qualifier routes.
- Give a full fixture list for lower grade games including Junior B, C, D and all B League games and all Junior Hurling fixtures.
- Enforcing the 13 day rule for inter County players including allowing more squad players to play more often for their clubs.
- More midweek games freeing up more weekends including bank holidays where games could be played on Friday and Saturday nights.
- Communicate fixtures decisions expediently and regularly through text and email

By implementing any or all of these suggestions would greatly improve the players' quality of life by allowing them to plan personal and professional activities more regularly. It will also help clubs and coaches as well as players, prepare in a more meaningful and professional manner for important games which would help increase the standard of hurling and football in the County. This transparency would also require clubs to request less free weekends as they will be known in advance which would possibly reduce the potential for conflict between clubs and between clubs and the County Board.

Other Findings

Club Officials and Coaches

Although the survey targeted players and the findings have predominantly focused on this, there were also a number of issues highlighted by other people in the survey including club administrators and coaches. The feelings of these people were not as strong about fixture planning as highlighted earlier in the quantitative questions. The issues highlighted were similar to those as players such as the cost of fixture changes to the club such as loss of gate receipts and the inability to prepare players properly for games or keep them interested when gaps appear in the fixture schedule.

"I am primarily involved in hurling fixtures and on this I can only comment, presently the hurling championship within the county is fixed around the county hurling team and their fixtures, as a result the club championship games start in early May approx, clubs generally get to play 2 matches and have to endure up to 10 weeks maybe more of a break in the height of the summer months and long evenings. Matches have often resumed in the month of August and continue then on alternate weeks until the final. Players who start training in Jan/Feb do not do this for league or other competitions but only for championship and to do all this for only 2 games and a long break till August is absolutely ridiculous, it is not doing players, the championship or hurling within the county any good whatsoever!! it is my understanding that in other counties for example the club county quarter final date is set from the beginning of the year and fixtures work back from this regardless of county fixtures, do county boards realise that it is from within these clubs that we depend on our future players at county level i.e. the importance of looking after our club players as well as our county players, these huge breaks in championships is not promoting or developing our hurling in our county and it urgently need to be addressed. if the break is insisted upon can the league not be run off consistently during the break to allow competitive games to be played and not be playing league games in NOVEMBER!!"

“As a coach of an adult team the lack of transparency in the fixtures makes it impossible for players (and partners) to plan holidays etc. This has a knock on effect on training and matchday situations. In an extremely competitive environment one must have a full deck to play with which is not possible if one does not know in advance what fixtures are and how you can plan around them. A fixture list at the beginning of the season is a MUST with games being played midweek where they cannot be played on the scheduled weekend.”

Some club officials also described the impacts that would not be such an issue for players but of concern to the people who run the club at an operational level such as preparing pitches and communicating fixtures to the community in order to increase attendances at home games.

“The main issue is that I arrange the pitch for matches and training at the club and there is no way of being clear as to when games will be played. We need a masterschedule for all games in Meath at all levels and they need to be played through the summer so that players are not training for months while having no games scheduled.”

“As PRO of the club, I find it nearly impossible to advertise fixtures around the parish because as soon as I have posters up in local shops pubs etc, the fixture is changed. it's pointless going to the effort of putting up the posters because i find myself going around the next day to change them. It's not so bad at senior levels but for all other levels, especially out junior teams and our div 5 junior team, I can never let people know about the games, and it's these teams that need to get the support. The players get the impression that nobody in the club cares enough to support them when it's actually the county board's fault that supporters do not know when and where games are going to take place!”

Inter County Players

An area of concern was also highlighted in relation to inter County players. There is obvious dissatisfaction among some clubs at the unavailability of inter County players for important league matches. There is even stronger dissatisfaction with the unavailability of squad players on the County team who do not get many inter County games with some of these players going months without a competitive game. This was also highlighted by inter County players themselves. There were 27 inter County player respondents who had played inter county football or hurling in 2009, 60% had played at senior level. They were asked if there were any specific issues that affected them in relation to club activity independent of the club player. The issues that affected inter County players were namely, not being able to play league games, expecting to play club games a day after an inter county game, being away from club training for long periods of time and substitutes going a long time without games as discussed. There are also benefits to the club players in having inter County players around more often.

“I think the team benefits more especially the younger lads when I’m training and playing more games. An Inter county player should bring greater intensity to the whole set up. Also if you are a permanent sub if that’s the correct term, on a county team you miss out on club league games and don’t get to play any football at all”

Conclusions

Players, officials and other GAA personnel were asked their opinions on fixture planning within the County with the overwhelming majority expressing their immense dissatisfaction with the current situation. As we have seen, the 2009 season was very spread out with long breaks in matches followed by a condensed fixture schedule characterised by very short notice which mainly consisted of less than one week for players. The ad hoc nature of fixtures has impacted significantly on players' and officials' personal and professional lives resulting in high levels of dissatisfaction.

This survey was a snapshot of opinion in one period of time and it would require a longer term more scientific study to determine what the consequences of this dissatisfaction will be. However, it is very clear from the findings that in order to address this problem, more effort is required in order to give players and clubs sufficient notice for matches and a meaningful programme of competitive games throughout the season. The starting point may be to define what the GAA season is, as the current competition focused scheduling means that priority is given to the County teams' schedules and then the priority becomes to finish all club competitions before the end of the calendar year. A number of competitions this year only finished in December after beginning in February, making the season 11 months long. This also resulted in a number of cancelled fixtures, especially at lower grades, where teams could not field a team because players went to play other sports or simply lost interest in competing because it dragged on too long between matches. There is a far greater chance of a team giving a walk over in October or November than in June or July. There is no reason why a comprehensive fixture list for all lower grade games in football and hurling cannot be made other than capacity and competency.

Engagement at a national level is a necessity in order to facilitate better fixture planning at a local level. This may be a long term process but there should still be efforts to improve the current situation where the County Board should endeavour to provide provisional fixture lists that are communicated to clubs and players as far in advance as possible. This will require innovation and most all, strong leadership...

I would like to thank everyone who took the time to complete and forward on the survey

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