

Blues Sisters

By Helen Hanley

Dublin GAA players Sarah McCaffrey and Nicole Owens on football and friendships.

How times have changed. When Nicole Owens started playing football in senior infants, she was the only girl on a team full of boys. Her local GAA club, St Sylvester's in Malahide, like most clubs at the time didn't have the numbers to sustain an all-girls underage team.

Fast-forward to 2018. "It's completely different now," says the All Ireland-winning Dublin footballer. "When I train with the club on Saturday morning, we walk by the nursery and it's all girls – it's brilliant. It's so far removed from what it was."

The higher profile that ladies Gaelic football currently enjoys is thanks in part to Nicole and her Dublin teammates and their *Blues Sisters* documentary. It followed the team as it built towards the climax of the 2017 season, which culminated in them winning the Brendan Martin Cup after years of trying.

The documentary, originally aired late last year, had a powerful trickle-down effect.

"We knew it was going to be at a level where it would have an impact," says Nicole, "it was something we all wanted to do in order to elevate the profile of the game." They soon realised they'd achieved their objective.

"So many kids, and mums of kids, said they watched it. One woman said her daughter watched it four times."

What the programme also highlighted are the friendships and emotional support that comes from football, says Nicole. One of her own long-standing football friends is teammate and fellow Trinity graduate Sarah McCaffrey.

Both girls started playing football at a young age and both joined the Dublin development squad at U11. They opted for similar degree courses of study in Trinity (Nicole studied Spanish and Sociology; Sarah studied French and Psychology), and both have parents who are doctors.

They also both played GAA while in college. "We won the Giles Cup in fourth year," says Nicole. "The team that year was brilliant



Photo: Ivan Rakkmann

– we had Davy Burke over us, who was the assistant manager with Dublin at the time. He had us in the gym at seven in the morning doing conditioning.

"I hated it at the time but myself and Sarah would have gotten close because of it. Once the session was over we'd go for breakfast before class."

Sarah says the thing she remembers most from her Trinity GAA-playing days is the craic and she's still friends with many of her former teammates – even when she encounters them on the pitch. "It's always good fun going up against players from your college team in club or county matches."

Both Sarah and Nicole had Trinity as their first choice. In Nicole's case both her parents are graduates – her dad studied TSM; her mum studied medicine – while the psychology course here really appealed to Sarah. She doesn't remember those first few weeks in Trinity. "It was a bit of a blur. We were preparing for an All-Ireland final at the time so I felt a bit cheated of the authentic freshers' experience!"

Nicole admits that playing football, at that level, wasn't really conducive to the "college experience". She constantly had to excuse herself because of training and matches while, it seemed, everyone else was out enjoying themselves. In second year, the 10 months she spent in Granada as part of Erasmus ended up being a real catharsis.

"Erasmus let me cut loose for a year. I'd been playing football for



Sarah McCaffrey
and Nicole Owens

Dublin since the age of 11. When I went into first year in college I was craving a bit of freedom as I was trying to have the best of both worlds. I think I just needed a break from football at that stage as I'd become quite disillusioned."

That time away proved vital. Nicole was surprised by how much she missed football. By the time she landed back in Dublin she had refocused and was ready to commit herself to inter-county football again.

Sarah is similarly strongly embedded in the Dublin set-up. In addition to playing for the Jackies since U11, both her dad Noel and older brother Jack are past and present Dublin footballers. Some of her earliest memories are of playing Cumann na mBunscoil finals in Croke Park, which she absolutely loved.

"My older brother Jack and I played on the same team one year. We actually got hammered in that match!"

For Nicole, the downside to being the only girl on her St Sylvester's team were the taunts from other teams, saying "that team has a girl". It didn't bother her too much, because she was comfortable in her own ability, but it did bother one of her teammates.

"I distinctly remember one of my teammates getting sent off because he'd punched someone who had said something to me!"

The documentary, the sponsorships, the media attention and record attendances at games, are in stark contrast to how things were when both girls were starting out in football. Back then there

wouldn't have been much coverage of ladies' football and you wouldn't have seen many female GAA players, recalls Nicole. It never occurred to her that she'd be playing in Croke Park one day.

As the daughter of an All Star, things were slightly different for Sarah. "It was always a dream to play in Croke Park and I think as a child you tend to believe you can do anything. I suppose the older I got the more I understood that it would not be easy to get there. That's why I'm so thrilled that we finally did manage to get there, and be successful, after a few heartbreaks."

The Dublin ladies, of course, lifted the Brendan Martin Cup last September, for only the second time (2010 was the first). They had lost the previous three finals to Cork. Sarah admits it was hard to bounce back after those. "To experience several All Ireland defeats by the smallest possible of margins – it's hard to pick yourself up after that."

But then the resilience – one of the great things that football teaches you – kicks in. "Football teaches you that you can't have things the way you want them all the time," says Nicole, "and you have to adjust to that. We're probably the perfect example – following those defeats we kept trying, we learned, we adapted the way we play and it worked."

Last year's All Ireland victory meant they finally shook the monkey off their back. "It took a while to sink in and realise that we were All Ireland champions because we'd fallen at the final hurdle so many times." It also made for a more rewarding post season. "It was the first off season where we weren't carrying all these regrets."

The result is that the team's motivation is stronger than ever. "We don't want to be seen as a one-trick pony – we want to create the kind of legacy that Cork have [10 All Irelands in 11 years]," says Nicole.

While there are a number of similarities between the two Trinity graduates, there is one area where they differ. "The first time I ran out on the pitch in Croke Park was for the 2015 final when I came on as a sub – to this day I hate coming on as a sub!" says Nicole.

However, coming on as a sub in last year's All Ireland final worked out fine for Sarah, who promptly scored two goals to help seal Dublin's victory. "The management put a huge emphasis on the squad and not just the starting 15. It's something you often hear but they really drove it home. We knew that our style of play was physically demanding and that we'd rely on fresh players coming off the bench to bring energy."

Whatever happens in this year's championship campaign, Sarah will be watching from a distance – the far side of the world, to be exact. She decided to take time out to travel and work in New Zealand, where she has plans to link up with another former Trinity GAA teammate, Marie Murphy.

As for Nicole, she'll be hoping for another trip to Croker on Sunday 16 September 2018, although the bus trip to the ground on the day, police escort and all, is very different from the bus trips she remembers as a student.

"Some of the great memories I have of college football are the really long bus journeys to Sligo IT or somewhere – you went down, you played your match, you got cans, you got back on the bus. A bit different to the Dublin set-up!"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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