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HOW very 2005. It's been a while since the Gaelic Players Association wielded the threat of professionalism, and it triggered a Proustian shiver of memory to hear its leader resurrect that old ghost.

But the spectre is a pathetic, translucent thing. This is no poltergeist. There is no monster. There will be no full-time GAA players.

That Tom Parsons resorted to this old playbook was telling, though. Maybe, within the leadership of the GAA, there is an understanding that their campaign for more State funding is as see-through as any cartoon ghost.

The case was set out with a

■ **THE Mayo dream** has been in precipitous decline since the desperate final loss to Tyrone in 2021.

Kevin McStay and his galactico management team have done nothing to correct the slide, but Tyrone could apply fresh pressure with a win in Castlebar today.

The visitors have endured a three-season-long slump since 2021, yet are emerging as the fancy of many for the All-Ireland.

Mayo look years away from competing. Supporters feared a painful season, but perhaps didn't expect the agonies to begin while the snowdrops were still above the ground.

NOT A PENNY MORE

Taxpayer should not be funding more GPA grants while inter-county spending is still raging out of control



SAME OLD PLAYBOOK:
GPA chief Tom Parsons

consultants' report heaving with estimates about the costs of playing the inter-county game, the millions the players help generate, and the implicit conclusion: very few give so much for so little.

No major – or minor – event can take place now without consultants estimating its economic value in fat, round terms, but the value of the GAA as a generator of economic activity, especially on championship weekends in provincial towns, has long been recognised.

So has State support for inter-county players – even if some of us have never been convinced that taxpayers should be the ones pick-

ing up the bill. And those doubts have only hardened as the eye-watering costs associated with the inter-county game continue to rocket.

Until that is addressed, then the sustainability of football and hurling as elite products in their current form weakens every year.

The GAA leadership have been warning for years that these costs cannot be borne, but they climb season after season.

If there is money to be sprayed around in this manner, generated within the GAA, or at least within the hinterland of the association by supporters' clubs and the likes, then let that be redirected to make

up any short-fall that inter-county players are suffering.

In this connection, Tom Ryan, the GAA director general, drew a direct link between the demands made of players and exorbitant preparation costs, and said that making fewer demands of players, thereby reducing costs, was required.

The glacial pace of addressing the cost crisis is frustrating, and surely GPA energy should be directed at that, too. That's without mentioning the money that sluices through the black economy, paying managers and other support staff at club and county level.

The point is there is a fortune

being generated by the GAA, and players' advocates might be better advised trying to encourage a fairer allocation of those resources.

But asking taxpayers to contribute more to a culture that is unsustainable is, at best, complacent.

But then the way the GPA are making their feeble argument is yet more evidence of an organisation drifting further from not just the reality of the GAA's difficulties, but also public attitudes.

Implying that support for amateurism can't be guaranteed was a dubious negotiating position when the starting point is the financial pressures on players.

If stars really are struggling,

where will the money come from to support them full-time?

Tables in their report on punitive costs, showed increases in the price of diesel, brown bread, broccoli and chicken, and merely present the pressures facing homes across the island every day.

And with the Taoiseach confirming in recent days that there will be no cost-of-living supports for households in the next Budget, then meeting those costs will be complicated for many.

This is the backdrop to what, unfortunately, was the latest manifestation of GAA exceptionalism.

It is a consistent weakness in the culture, and it's shot through this report, frankly.

Niall Morgan talked about eating steak three times a day as a young player to help him bulk up. But the State can't be on the hook for every young aspirant's dream, no matter how talented they might be.

And that brings us to 'choice', a word too easily overlooked.

The sacrifices made by GAA players are exhaustively recorded, and their contribution to the national culture is immense.

But they don't have to do it, and those that do are often rewarded with opportunities beyond most.

There are harder cases in Irish life now.

Read the room.

Rugby's eligibility criteria damaging the game

SOME loopholes demand to be closed. The one in World Rugby's regulations allowing players to represent another Test country for whom they were eligible, once they had completed a three-year stand-down period, should have been stitched shut after the Jean Kleyn farrago at the last World Cup.

The sight of the South African native representing his home country, four years after being selected for Ireland – for whom he qualified on residency grounds – was a risible one.

It was seen as a piece of daring by Rassie Erasmus, ensuring that within his ranks he had a player with a good understanding of the Ireland system generally but also specific intel on two prominent Irish forwards in Tadhg Beirne and Peter O'Mahony.

And there has long been a persuasive argument that rugby's eligibility rules around residency may have had an uncomfortably transactional bent, but if other teams were going to exploit them, then ours should, too. Hence Ireland now have

three absolutely vital Test starters as a result in Bundee Aki, James Lowe and Jamison Gibson-Park.

But the rule under which Kleyn could switch between national jerseys like a sports-store mannequin is a crock. It was introduced to help smaller countries but now we hear Joey Carbery musing about perhaps playing for England – with all the attractiveness that would bring to potential Premiership suitors.

End this grubby charade.