



In Good Shape

Damian Dowds talks to officers of the Directorate of Defence Forces Training in an attempt to shed some light on its sporting arm—the Defence Forces Athletic Association.

Sport has enjoyed a long and happy marriage with the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces Athletic Association (DFAA) was formed in 1923 and has overseen sport activities within the organisation ever since. These days, director Colonel Barney Donagh and section head Commandant Kevin McStay lead a full-time directorate based in Park House on Dublin's North Circular Road. Col Donagh has had a long involvement with sport, having been involved in Gaelic football, squash and cross-country running. Comdt McStay is a former Mayo Gaelic footballer and won an All Ireland under 21 medal in 1983 and an All Star award two years later. A soccer player of some repute, he won two caps at Irish Universities level in 1986.

Roles

The DFAA is an arm of the Defence Forces Directorate of Training and its mission statement charges it with organising, administering and controlling sport, games and recreation within the Defence Forces. This means it oversees the various sports functions of the organisation, such as participating in and organising international events, managing representative teams and DF competitions, and setting out and implementing the Lifetime Improvement and Fitness Evaluation (LIFE) tests.

"All the activities undertaken by the DFAA complement everything we try to do in the Defence Forces in terms of physical fitness development, character development and leadership development," says Col Donagh. "It also affords a great opportunity

for officers, NCOs and men to meet one another in a less regimented environment that allows them to be somewhat more open with one another." Comdt McStay agrees and emphasises the importance of the DFAA's activities and sport in general within the organisation. "The operational capability of the Defence Forces is directly related to the level of fitness of personnel which in turn has a direct correlation with your involvement in sport. We must ensure that the required levels of fitness are provided for to ensure DF operational effectiveness is not compromised."

The LIFE tests are one of the most visible aspects of work carried out under the auspices of the DFAA. These annual tests, which involve press ups, sits ups, a 3.2km run and a loaded 10km walk, must



Colonel Barney Donagh.

be undertaken by all personnel and have been heavily emphasised since the 1990s. A successful result is needed for soldiers to be eligible for overseas missions and higher grades must be attained to avail of certain courses. "However, it is not just about trying to pass the test, we're trying to inculcate a lifestyle," says Comdt McStay. "We don't want people putting on a push for the two months before the test and half killing themselves. There should be a routine training programme, steady progress from January to December where personnel look after their fitness, watch what they eat, avoid tobacco and use alcohol at a moderate level." The success of these tests, which are carried out by Brigade Physical Education Officers (BPEOs) in conjunction with the brigade's Physical Training Instructors (PTIs) is demonstrated in the significant increase in the general fitness levels of Defence Forces' personnel. It is a measure of the importance and seriousness the Defence Forces attaches to physical fitness that the BPEOs and PTIs are all graduates in sports science and related disciplines.

Other Sports and Activities

Within the DFAA there are 18 sports committees, ranging from GAA, rugby, soccer, and athletics to boxing, orienteering, volleyball and golf. A further five activities (mountaineering, kayaking/canoeing, parachuting, diving and sailing) come under the umbrella of the Defence Forces Council for Adventure Training (DFCAT). Under the guidance of the DFAA, the chairmen of the various committees plan and organise their sport each year. It is a system that has served the DFAA very well in recent years. It should also be noted that those who hold committee posts fill them in a voluntary capacity. "We try to ensure that the event management around our fixtures is to the highest possible level," says Comdt McStay. "We use the best venues, pitches, and officials to ensure each sport is well-presented and reflects the prestige of our competitions." Comdt McStay is keen to acknowledge the support of commanding officers in aiding the promotion of Defence Forces sport. "We now have a sports policy in place since 2003 and this has gained

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strong support from the formations. Their positive outlook ensures personnel are released for tasks and participation,” he says, “Without this, events and competitions simply could not take place”

International Activities

The Conseil International du Sport Militaire (CISM) is the international body for sports activities for armed forces worldwide. The Defence Forces became a member of CISM in 1948 and the body currently has 126 member nations. Defence Forces personnel and teams compete in sports as diverse as athletics, parachuting and rugby annually under the CISM umbrella. The World Military Games, the military equivalent of the Olympic Games, are held every four years, most recently in Catania, Italy in 2003 where Defence Forces boxers and soccer officials performed admirably.

In addition, most CISM sports organise an annual championship. In September 2002, Ireland hosted the 46th World Military Boxing Championships that drew more than 300 boxers from 60 countries. Held at the Defence Forces Physical Education School at the Curragh, it was the first World CISM event hosted by Ireland. The standard was extremely high and the Ukrainian team even featured an Olympic gold medallist. "It was a huge event for us and a serious amount of work went into hosting it," recalled Comdt McStay. "I had just arrived into DFAA so it was a baptism of fire". Comdt James Hunt is president of CISM's technical committee in boxing and has played a significant role in world military boxing affairs. Also, Lt Col Tony Gilleran is a member of the CISM golf committee and emboldened by the successful staging of the boxing championships the Defence Forces

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will hold the CISM golf championships in the run up to the Ryder Cup in 2006. The championships are currently in the planning stages, but Comdt McStay is confident that they will be a success. "We have a lot of expertise and knowledge when it comes to putting these type of events together," he points out. "We've also observed how other countries have managed their events and picked up the best ideas from them. I'm confident that we'll run it to our usual high standards".

2005 will be a busy year for the DFAA in the international sphere. In addition to CISM world championships in events such as equestrianism, boxing, golf and soccer, DFAA representative teams will undertake a number of tours. Col Donagh is a strong supporter of such events. "We're conscious that identified talent within the Defence Forces must be rewarded and we avail of CISM events and tours to reward excellence," he says. In June and July the representative rugby team will travel to South Africa to pit themselves against the might of local military teams. In October, the Defence Forces Gaelic football team will travel Down Under to participate in the representative series against Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Banks. For the first time, that series is being staged overseas and will be held in the run up to Ireland's high profile International Rules tests with Australia.

While these tours and the 2006 golf championships are high profile events which are exercising the organisational capabilities of the DFAA, the directorate has not lost sight of the bread and butter issues which affect personnel. The association's funding comes from the Department of Defence Vote and the welfare contributions made by personnel. Most of the DFAA's



Capt Gerry Flynn on Diamond Explosion during the Kerrygold Speed Stakes at the R.D.S., Dublin.

budget is spent on gym equipment purchase. The association tries to spend this in a focused way and there are many well-equipped gyms and facilities, ranging from the state-of-the-art Defence Forces Physical Education School to those in local posts. "We have so many posts and units that the budget doesn't spread widely enough," explains Comdt McStay. "We try to have brigades focus on completely equipping gyms for specific units rather than spreading it too widely. There's no point in doing it in a piecemeal manner."

The Future

The final word then to Col Donagh who is keen to emphasise the need for individuals and commanding officers to embrace their responsibilities in the field of fitness training and lifestyle choices: "This is a priority for us in training as it underpins everything we do. We will continue to support these endeavours as best we can by developing our facilities and expertise in the training environment". And so the happy marriage between the Defence Forces

and sport continues. Participation of personnel with sports clubs in their local community provides a strong sporting synergy that benefits the clubs and the Defence Forces equally and helps cement the excellent links that exists between the armed forces and civilian organisations. Its personnel have always excelled in sport and the Defence Forces can bask in the reflected glory knowing that the emphasis on physical fitness in the services has helped facilitate that excellence.

This excellence is to be found in all areas-Captains Carey and Flynn fly the equitation flag around the world while almost every county has a prominent Defence Forces footballer or hurler among its ranks. Captain Ray Kane is approaching elite international standard in shooting while Corporal Mick Kelly is making a name for himself in the boxing ring. If the DFAA has its way, this roll of honour will continue to grow.

Damian Dowds is the editor of HighBall Magazine. The official magazine of the GAA. December issue out now.

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