

In 1960, Shannon RFC won the Munster senior cup for the first time, fittingly, in Limerick's Thomond Park, after the first final against UCC had been drawn a week earlier in Cork. In Shannon's second row that day was one Jim O'Donovan, who "never let up," according to the match report in the Limerick Leader. A few days after that epic victory, on May 4th, 1960, there arrived an addition to the O'Donovan household in the Island Road, in the famous "Parish," the family's only son, as it happened.

Twenty six years on, and a few weeks short of his birthday, Shannon's number eight Niall O'Donovan took over where his father Jim left off. Top scorer in Munster with a staggering twenty three tries to his credit this season, he's a key figure in a Shannon team which has been unbeaten in twenty five matches so far — thirty, in fact, if you include an autumn tour to Canada. A club side of impressive might, which already has won the Limerick Charity Cup and the Munster senior league and which then faced the last two hurdles in pursuit of the centenary Munster senior cup.

Niall O'Donovan and his Cork-born wife Cathy at present live within a stone's throw of Thomond Park, where for the first time in history, four Limerick clubs battled it out for a place in the final. Soon, they are going to move, when they find a suitable new home — "preferably an old house, somewhere in the country, but not too far outside Limerick," says Cathy.

But Niall admits — and admits very willingly, be it said — that he is the product of his environment. "I grew up in a rugby-mad family, in a rugby-mad area," he says. That term applies to pretty well all of Limerick; all the same, Shannon, one of the city's two oldest clubs, has a special place in the lore of the game. For in "The Parish," rugby is the game of the people, and Shannon's impact has been immense: unusual indeed the club where the anthem "There Is An Isle" hasn't been sung at one time or another.

That family rugby background was nurtured further when O'Donovan went to school, having started his rugby career with Shannon at the age of eight. Limerick CBS in Sexton Street is not readily linked with rugby, except for sporadic occasions in the thirties, when the Munster schools senior cup was won.

But when Niall O'Donovan was there, among the teaching staff was international prop forward Gerry McLoughlin ("Locky" and not "Ginger" to Limerick rugby folk), himself, of course, a Shannon rugby

History Repeats Itself!

By Karl Johnston

product. McLoughlin's coaching contribution was significant: with Brian Spillane, O'Donovan in his final year was a member of the Limerick CBS team which lost to PBC Cork in the Munster schools senior cup semi-final.

"There are several senior players around who learned their rugby at CBS," says O'Donovan. "Apart from Brian, there were players like Francis Brosnahan and Pat Cross from Young Munster." Given the large number of pupils at the school, it seems a pity that McLoughlin gave up teaching and that CBS gave up rugby.

On that schools semi-final team, O'Donovan was in the second row, with Spillane at number eight. But for the past six years, ever since taking over from Shannon's long-serving Eddie Price, O'Donovan is now a number eight. And so, in the senior cup semi-final against Bohemians, he and Spillane — one of Ireland's shining successes last season — were in direct opposition.

When he left school, Niall O'Donovan returned to Shannon, playing for the club at Under 18 and Under 20 levels. He came into the senior side in 1980, playing mostly as a flanker, but switched with more or less immediate success to the number eight position when Price retired. Yet, in seven senior seasons, he has got no representative recognition, except for a game with Munster B against Anglo-Scots B last autumn. Try scoring, it seems, cuts no great amount of ice with the Munster selectors.

O'Donovan is the province's top try-scorer, with Shannon scrumhalf Oliver "Sonny" Kiely the runner up. Which may be taken to speak volumes about Shannon's style of play; relentless forward power, a superb back row and an astute scrumhalf — classic nine-man rugby, in other words. A bit like Pontypool, whose coach Ray Prosser once was asked what match he had most enjoyed in his life. "The last match we won," was his instant reply.

But that assessment is less than fair to this Shannon side. They play

to their strength, certainly, but their backs are a long way from being mere stoppers, and against Constitution in the Munster senior league final, they scored as stylish a try as you could wish. "And of course, a lot of sides get caught out that way," says O'Donovan. "They take it for granted that we'll keep it tight and use the back row and Sonny all the time."

It was after that five-match undefeated Canadian tour, he says, that Shannon decided to widen their tactical game. And then, when the domestic season began, victories started coming.....and coming.....and coming. And then, unbeaten, they were at the penultimate stage of the senior cup, at their most vulnerable, like the movie gun-fighter who's the target for every history-minded hick-town kid.

It was a strain alright, says O'Donovan. The team longed for the end of the season, and a break from rugby, and he and Cathy have booked a June holiday in the Canaries. But first had to come that supreme effort which would give Shannon their fifth Munster senior cup — and the centenary cup, at that — and Niall O'Donovan a second senior cup medal. And those are glittering prizes which were likely to be enough to spur the team on unprecedented success.

About that lack of representative recognition, O'Donovan is philosophical. "Maybe my size is against me," he says. "I'm 6' 2" and 15 st. 7 lbs. That's all right, but maybe I could do with a longer reach! But I'm bigger than my father. He's 5' 10" and every time he stands beside Mick Moylett he says — "I don't know how I ever managed to win a line-out ball!"

Niall has played in the Munster trial for the past four seasons, opposing players like Tony O'Leary and Brian Spillane. But to date, his finest hours have been with Shannon, playing and living and maturing in an environment in which, as he rightly says, "people live for rugby." Like them, so does he: he plays no other games and the summers are spent keeping fit and weight training.

Twenty-six years ago, O'Donovan pere was a member of that history-making Shannon XV in which, wrote the Limerick Leader, "every man knew what was required of him, and they gave of their all with a spirit that just had to find its reward."

That was a headline for the present team. And a key figure in their endeavours was Niall O'Donovan, the lad who was born just after that famous victory in which his father shared.