

Larry McCarthy

A heroic Muskerry figure.

A Muskerry Golf Club presentation to Larry McCarthy in June 2003 marked not just the 50th anniversary of his senior international debut but it also served as a reminder to present day members of his magnificent contribution to Muskerry's historic Irish Senior Cup and Barton Shield double, also in 1953.

Muskerry's fortunes were always foremost in Larry's thoughts and he was delighted when Liam Higgins gained international status before turning professional in 1971, and that club members Paudie Linehan, Paddy Harrington, Niall Turner and David Daly also donned the green singlet of Ireland in later years.

Larry was capped 20 times for his country but made little of this achievement. He was more concerned with Muskerry's future and expressed delight that the club's prospects looked bright for Muskerry these days as the number of low handicap players had shown a welcome increase. He hoped they would spend a little more time on practice, however.

Larry, who was born in Kenmare in 1920, got an early introduction to the sport as his father, Master Mike, was Hon Secretary of the local club in the 1932 to 1944 period. And, with his brother John and sisters Mona and Eily, the fairways soon had a big McCarthy presence.

Larry was to make an immediate impact as his first participation in a club competition is recorded in the Kenmare competition book when, aged 16 and playing off a handicap of 20, he shot an 83 gross in a singles event and, later in the day, he partnered his brother John to second place in the fourball.

By the Summer of 1939 his handicap was down to ten and he had also joined the staff of the Munster and Leinster Bank and served in Ennistymon, Galway, Lahinch and later in Cork.

While in Galway, Larry won the prestigious Scratch Cup, beating the legendary John Burke of Lahinch in the 1945 final.

On his transfer to Cork, he had no hesitation in joining Muskerry and his golfing career was to reach extraordinary heights, culminating in his international debut against England at Killarney in 1953. England were red hot favourites that day, having no fewer than seven current or former Walker Cup players in their ranks, but Ireland were to confound the critics and scored an astonishing victory.

Astonishing in that the Irish side lost the foursomes 4-1 and a deficit of that magnitude is rarely overcome but, in the afternoon, the English reckoned without that great Irish fighting spirit and, remarkably, the visitors lost eight of the ten singles.

Household names like Joe Carr, Norman Drew, Dr Billy O'Sullivan, who also played with Muskerry, John Glover, Cecil Ewing, George Crosbie, Paddy Leydon and Larry McCarthy played like men inspired to win their matches to leave Ireland overall winners by a 9-6 margin.

Larry's impeccable short game was a big talking point but that came as no surprise to Muskerry members who regularly watched him get up and down in two strokes from 70/80 yards. Early morning practice, without ever being late for work, was a key factor in an ever improving game. This dedication was to see Larry win an Irish Senior Cup medal with Muskerry in 1947 as the club retained the All-Ireland pennant won for the very first time the previous year.

More successes followed at provincial level in the run up to 1953 when Muskerry achieved the magnificent All-Ireland double of Senior Cup and Barton Shield. It is so difficult to win any national title in the one year, but bringing off the double was truly fantastic and Muskerry was the first Munster club to achieve the feat.

Larry was central to those magnificent achievements in what was a glorious decade for Muskerry and starring roles were played too by Mick Power, Billy O'Sullivan, Michael Hegarty, Jack Lawlor, Harry Rice, Frank Casey, Eddie O'Flynn, Michael Cronin, Bertie Dorgan and Fr John Hegarty.

He had also reached the semi-final of the Irish Amateur Open Championship at Royal Dublin only to lose at the 19th to the great Cecil Ewing of Co Sligo.

Playing days at the top level over, Larry was not content to hang up his boots as he went on to serve administrative golf, being non-playing captain of the Irish team for the Home Internationals at Muirfield (1976), Hillside (1977) and Ashburnham (1978).

Significantly, the introduction of panel training coincided with Larry's last year as team captain and, in his report to the Golfing Union of Ireland, he intimated that the performance of the team was a big improvement on previous years. His Muskerry colleague Pat Foley, the GUI President at the time, was a strong advocate of panel training as well and, between them, they won wide support for the concept.

Morale was high, keenness to win was very evident and all team members were very fit. Larry attributed this improvement to the national panel programme and, as we know, team panels and coaching are all the rage today. It can be said that Larry and Pat were ahead of their time and Muskerry takes great pride in such enlightened thinking.

Hopefully, Larry's chequered career will serve as an inspiration to club representatives who will be seeking, not just individual glory, but hoping to add to the tally of eight All-Ireland successes – Senior Cup (3), Barton Shield (1), Junior Cup (2) and Pierce Purcell Shield (2).

George Crosbie, writing in a book I compiled for Muskerry in 1985, had this to say of Larry: "I first met him when he appeared on an always excellent Muskerry Senior Cup team and, of course, I was one of the 'auld enemy' from Little Island. Although we were mortal enemies on the course, we were in fact great pals off and that went for all the Muskerry players, but somehow the fates were to bring Lar and myself very close indeed".

Crosbie went on: "We were selected to play on the Irish team at Killarney in 1953 and I remember my father proudly driving the two of us down and being every bit as keen on how Larry would perform as he was about me. We did not win the championship but we did o.k. and Larry did even better the following year at Portcawl where he gained four and a half points from six.

'I did not play in 1954 but we both celebrated a great victory in 1955 at Birkdale when the Irish team was given little chance as it did not include such names as Jimmy Bruen, Billy O'Sullivan, Mick Power and Brenny Scannell. I recall the late Willie Gill, a gentleman of Irish golf and our Captain, taking Larry and myself aside during the boat journey from Dublin to Liverpool and telling us that we would be playing the last foursomes for all three matches and that we would play in all of the singles as well. It was some vote of confidence as the team contained 12 players with just ten playing.

'We won the series that time by tying with England and beating Scotland and Wales – a feat not repeated until 1983 in Portmarnock. The Welsh match was noted for its finish. After performing well, we still needed three more matches to win the game. Paddy Leyden was two down with about four to go; Larry was also two down with five to go and I was two down with three to go and, believe it or not, we all won. I can tell you we knocked off a few gins and tonics that evening.

'I have often been asked how good was Larry. Put it this way, he was no Jimmy Bruen, or Joe Carr, or Cecil Ewing, or indeed a Billy O'Sullivan but then none of us were. What he was though, was a straight hitter, with a wonderful short game and, above all, he had the heart of a lion, very

difficult to beat and a great member of a team. He was a real friend to all who came in contact with him”.

T. O’B.