

Strokestown and Roscommon senior footballer David Neary talks to OISÍN CUSACK about the challenges for teachers and students posed by online learning, how he's hoping to see more game time with the Rossies this season and that it's finally time for Strokestown to deliver on their potential...

It's a typical Monday morning in Clonturk Community College and the calendar on the wall reads March 2020. David Neary has just finished his classroom roll call. More than 25 students are confirmed as present with each student's tone and facial expression different to that of the next. The students wait in anticipation as "Mr Neary" announces to the class "let's begin."

Fast forward 12 months to the present day and the situation is very different. The same classroom in Clonturk is now completely empty. David's new one is situated inside the confinements of a 19-inch desktop computer.

Eager students have been replaced by virtual ones. The announcement confirming their attendance is dependent on the speed of their broadband at home.

David, 25, has been teaching in Clonturk Community College for two years, the majority of which has been online owing to the world we find ourselves in.

"I have probably spent more time teaching online than I have teaching physically in the school at this stage, so it has been strange," he admitted.

While some schools have returned to "in-class teaching" for Leaving Certs, David's school oddly won't have any Sixth Years until next year.

"We've only gone up as far as Fifth Year because it's a new school so we're waiting for them to get back and I'm looking forward to it," he enthused.

David teaches Junior Cert maths and science alongside Leaving Cert maths and chemistry. There are traditionally more difficult subjects in schools, and one appreciates the challenges tackling these subjects virtually.

"Science is a bit tricky because there are a lot of different areas you can veer off into. There are a lot of different questions that can be asked," he acknowledged.

However, the issues for the most part with online teaching seem to lie with students' internet and access issues.

"We would have students with poor Wi-Fi and they wouldn't have access to a device all day. They might have brothers and sisters, so they might have to share with them. That's the hardest thing really, trying to get everyone engaged because not everyone has the same access," he explained.

Doing anything online can be difficult and teaching is unsurprisingly no different. Like every other teacher in Ireland, David is too still trying to get to grips with the challenges posed by online learning.

“It can be hard. I mean there are times where you’re asking questions and there are no answers coming back from the students, so you just end up answering it yourself. It’s difficult for teachers but it’s not easy for students either.

“In that context, there are times when you worry about students fully grasping what you’re trying to explain. When it’s through a screen, students will say they understand but they might not, and that’s the difficulty,” he felt.

While the Fifth Years in David’s school returned on March 15th, the remainder of the students are due back after Easter, something he is very much looking forward to it.

“The online teaching is okay, and I’ve been able to make do with it, but you can’t replace that in-class experience and face-to-face teaching. You can give students a bit more help and basically get a feel of the room and I am very much looking forward to getting back to that,” he said.

While teaching is one aspect of David’s life that has been affected by Covid-19, another is Gaelic football. He has currently four Roscommon senior appearances racked up, with his last appearance coming in Roscommon’s victory against Cavan last November, a win that cemented Roscommon’s promotion to Division One.

That day, David and a depleted Roscommon team travelled up to Cavan and defeated the subsequent All-Ireland semi-finalists in their own back yard. This year the situation is rather different with Roscommon, like every other county team in the country, unable to meet up following the government’s decision to exclude the GAA from the elite sport bracket.

“We have been in contact but obviously we haven’t met up. We have a Zoom call on a Sunday evening to check in and go through a few bits as a group, but we haven’t done anything as a group with the restrictions that are in place at the moment,” he confirmed.

While David was happy to start against Cavan last year, his hope this season is to see more game time.

“It’s my third year on the panel this year and I would have felt I made strides forward last year, so hopefully I can build on that a bit more,” he said.

On paper at least, his aim of breaking into the Roscommon rearguard does seem challenging. Roscommon’s defence was arguably their biggest strength last year, conceding just two goals across the entire league campaign with no county in the country conceding less. Despite this, Neary remains unfazed by the challenge.

“At the moment, the lads in the defence might have that bit more experience on me but hopefully I can keep improving, break in and play a bit more this year.”

While still unable to meet up and train as a group, David says that all of the players have been given training plans to follow.

“Our strength and conditioning coach Gary Flannery is really good, he has adapted the workouts so that we can do all the work at home. He’s always available for a call, so you can ring him up and ask him a question on anything.”

While every GAA player around the country is probably sick at the sight of home workouts, David outlines that his brothers have helped him to keep them going.

“I’m lucky I have two brothers in Brian and Colm, so I can train away with them. Colm is actually still hoping to play in the All-Ireland U-17 semi final, so it has been a big help and motivator having them to train with,” he revealed.

While David has tasted success with the county, his own club Strokestown have not been as fortunate, with one having to go all the way back to 2002 to discover the club’s last county title. In fact, it took a hard-fought victory over Fuerty in the relegation play-off last year to maintain the club’s senior status.

“Last year, we never really got going, we got off to a bad start against Elphin and we were up against it after that with St. Brigid’s and Clann na nGael in our group too,” he accepted.

While last year’s shortcomings still linger, the teak tough defender is hoping to put them to one side later this season.

“You can only really take each game as it comes but we’d have to be eyeing getting out of the group — that has to be the absolute minimum target,” he felt.

While it is still unclear when the club championship will take place, David believes that the first game will be ultimately pivotal.

“That first championship game, whenever it is, we have to be ready for it. It’s really as simple as that, that’s the game and we have to win it,” he opined.

Many people in Roscommon still view Strokestown as the dormant volcano whose underage talent and potential have threatened to erupt for many years. While the “Black and Amber” did reach back-to-back senior semi-finals in 2018 and 2019, Neary feels that there’s more in the team.

“We would have had a lot of talk around Strokestown the last few years about having potential coming through, but we’ve never really delivered on that. Why that is, I don’t really know but we have to figure it out quickly because we aren’t getting any younger, so it’s down to the players at this stage.

“We have to start delivering on the promise of our underage success. I don’t want to be part of a nearly team or a team that never lived up to its potential,” he admitted.

Away from the football scene, lockdown has allowed David to discover cooking as a pastime.

“Cooking has taken a big step up the ladder. I think nearly everyone in the country has baked banana bread at this stage. You have more time to cook and spend time at it, so that’s one thing I’ll try to keep at when we are back to normal.”

As far as looking forward into the future goes, David is very much focused on the here and now.

“At the moment I am just taking each day as it comes really — I mean it’s all you can do. Look at the year we’ve just had, there have been twists and turns that have been absolutely impossible to predict, so let’s just see what happens,” he concluded.

