

rural reality

BUILDING A BETTER RURAL FUTURE

Specialist 'ball stop' fencing manufactured on family farm



■ HONED TO PERFECTION: Eamon Scullion, who started a specialist fencing business on the family farm almost 20 years ago, still keeps his 'hand in' helping to manufacture his highly successful designs. FW-1H.

■ FLOATING NET: Dominic Scullion points out the simple yet ingenious solution to flapping and sagging 'ball stop' nets; a 'floating net' designed and patented by Specialist Fencing Contracts, Bellaghy. FW-1R.



■ SPORTING MATERIALS: In the yard of Specialist Fencing Contracts, Ballyscullion, a collection of goal posts, 'ball stop' fencing uprights and nets are stacked awaiting delivery and erection at a sports site. FW-1M.

The Scullion family of Ballyscullion, near the rural village of Bellaghy, has been designing and making specialist sports field fencing on the family farmland for almost 20 years. Ian Harvey took to the roads to discover the success of this enterprising venture.

IF YOU hadn't guessed over the years of reading my stories, then I should tell you that rowing is my sport. I wouldn't profess to know much about cricket, golf, hurling, soccer or gaelic, other than the same dedicated element of competitiveness, not to mention physical and mental adjustments, are common to all popular outdoor sports.

My host Eamon Scullion, however, was much better informed. Gaelic football, he explained as I sat with him at the kitchen table on his family farm having a sociable chat, is a mixture of rugby and soccer.

That much I knew, but what I hadn't really paid much heed to is the high netting which runs along the back of all goals on gaelic pitches. Points can be scored either by aiming the ball into the soccer-style goal, or, through the upright posts above, which resemble rugby posts.

Ball stop nets, as the name suggests, prevent the ball going astray. Designing and making these 'ball stop' nets, is precisely what Eamon has been doing in the former farm buildings for years.

In fact, he has built a very successful business around the demand for these net structures.

It was Saturday morning and I had driven from Toomebridge through the village of Bellaghy, turned into Ballyscullion Lane and found the farm house. It was a dull morning and I had been asked in for a cup of tea by Bridget, his wife, who assured me that it wouldn't be long before Eamon returned from a short business journey. I thoroughly enjoyed talking to Bridget and their daughter Fiona about books and local history in my wait for Eamon and during that time we passed a remark about the townland name Ballyscullion.

Bridget laughed and said: "There are a lot of Scullions who live around here, which they've done for countless of generations no doubt, so it can't have been hard to call a townland after the indigenous people!

"Certainly this 20-acre farm has been in the Scullion family for a long time and Eamon inherited it from his father Joseph."

Minutes later Eamon appeared, shook hands and sat down to join me.

"I trained as a joiner years ago, because I knew there wouldn't be enough room on a small farm with my father, who at that time was working on a mixed farm with horses, taking land around us.

"Dad died in 1970 and the next year I took the opportunity of a job in a power plant near Detroit, USA, on Lake Eyrie, doing shuttering for eight months.

"It was an amazing experience, but I knew I had to return home and get

"Before our patented design nets were just tied to the uprights, now we've brought a level of simple technology into the structure of ball stop nets."

things sorted out on the farm.

"Back home I started to milk in a small way and in 1972 started to work off-farm erecting farm buildings.

"I'd begun to milk cows, but decided instead to turn the farm over to cattle and sheep production, potatoes and oats and for some time that combination seemed to work.

"Twelve years later I changed back into dairy farming and began to milk 24 Friesian cows, installing a pipeline system, but still erecting farm buildings and sheds off-farm.

"I soon found myself working 84 hours a week, with a couple of men, to help with the farm building construction work.

"After some seven years of working at 'on and off' farm work I was approached by the Treasurer of the local Bellaghy GAA club, the late Sean Brown, to erect

new nets and posts for their pitch.

"He knew I was an accomplished contractor and reckoned I could tackle a job like that, even though I had never done anything as specialist as that before.

"After some research I bought the materials and erected the nets and posts.

"He was so pleased with the final result that he suggested I take the work up as a full-time job.

"Another local GAA club, Cargin from Toomebridge, who'd played a match in Bellaghy, asked who erected the nets and posts and then approached me to do the same for them.

"It wasn't long before the word got out and I found myself inundated with enquiries and I started to advertise as well.

"The next year, Hilltown GAA Club asked me to erect a ball stop net and the whole diversified business started to develop from there on.

"Ten years ago our son Dominic joined me after training at the tech and he's been with me ever since

"So instead of just doing one aspect of the business, we took on the whole job, which involved ball stop nets and uprights, goal posts and nets, and fencing for the perimeter of pitches.

"It was a big leap forward and at the time there were no other specialists around doing that sort of job.

"When we reached a certain level, LEDU, the small business body charged with helping development in those days, gave us a grant which meant we had to provide enough employment for up to four people.

"In 2004 we erected protective fences



■ BUSY WORKSHOP: Sparks fly as work continues on a selection of 'ball stop' net posts, manufactured at the Scullion's rural enterprise, near Bellaghy. FW-1D.



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■ **TWIN WIRE:** A patented solution involving the use of high tensioned double wires with a 'floating net' in-between to secure 'ball stops', was designed by Eamon Scullion of Specialist Fencing Contracts, Ballyscullion, Bellaghy. FW-1S.

■ **SAFETY FIRST:** At Eglinton Cricket Club, the car park is protected from stray cricket balls, with Specialist Fencing Contract's 12 metre high and 80 metre long netting and upright system. FW-2B.



■ **BALL STOP NET:** Specialist Fencing Contracts manufacture a range of uniquely designed 'ball stop' nets, from 12 to 14 metres high and whatever length is required, including, goal posts and pitch fencing. FW-1U.



■ **SPARKS FLY:** Grinding in operation at Specialist Fencing Contracts, Ballyscullion, Bellaghy, a rural business run by the Scullion family. FW-1B.



■ **GOAL POSTS:** The business of making goal posts for GAA clubs and schools is just one aspect of fencing being undertaken by, Specialist Fencing Contracts, Ballyscullion, Bellaghy. FW-1L.

■ **NEW NETTING:** New netting system: Drumlane GAA Club, County Cavan, has commissioned the Scullion family's Specialist Fencing Contracts to manufacture and erect their highly successful 'ball stop' net design. FW-2C.



for Ballymoney Rugby Club and for Coleraine RFC, which is also a Cricket Club ground.

"Sports contractors soon began to ask us for specialist fencing and netting and through Cecil Haffey Contractors we made and erected ball stops and fencing for Rathmore Grammar, in Belfast.

"That was one of the first moves into the schools' work arena and since then the business has diversified again into portable junior-level goal posts, for both soccer and gaelic football/hurling."

"We then developed work through Prunty Contracts, Newtownbutler, and started to advertise in the Ulster Gaelic Magazine, which we did for 12 years and which covers Donegal.

"We buy materials from Donegal Netting, Coastal Cages in Ardara and KT Nets.

"We also buy raw material from BMK Steel and make up all the goal posts, uprights and perimeter fencing and gates ourselves.

"The business now extends into the Ards peninsula and we also work through Fox Contracts of Omagh and

Clive Richardson of Portadown.

"We came up with our own special design of what we call a 'floating' ball stop net, which was patented and which Dominic will show you a little later on when he takes you to a GAA pitch on the outskirts of Bellaghy.

"I'm beginning to take more of a back-seat now and Dominic is really running the business.

"The land is all set but I'm planning to go back into cattle again, more as a hobby than anything else - farming is still in the blood!

"We had been employing up to seven men until fairly recently and now we are down to five and although business in general is tighter, as it is for all aspects of society, we are still keeping busy.

"It's our intention to develop the business even further and to that end we've been talking to Glynnis Mills of DARD with a view to the possibility of obtaining Rural Development funding."

With that, Eamon took me across the road to a fenced yard and a large shed, which housed a digger and a forklift truck and all the equipment to run a specialist fencing business.

Inside, sparks were literally flying as an employee worked a grinder on a new ball stop upright.

"There were several lengths of boxed steel upright posts, laid out on trestles, with various attachments and outside, piles of finished metal goal posts, sacks of netting and dozens of sections of perimeter fencing.

Having met Dominic I said my goodbyes to Eamon and headed off to the nearby gaelic football grounds, in convoy with Dominic, to see for myself what the Scullion's 'Specialist Fencing Contracts' business was capable of producing.

"This is what we mean by a 'floating' ball stop net," said Dominic, pointing to the inside of a 12-metre high upright.

"In the past, a ball stop net for gaelic sports was simply a large net strung up between two uprights with no real means of preventing sagging.

"We have designed and patented a means of containing the net, which is hooked onto a high-tension upright wire running through rings on the galvanised steel upright post.

"Two wires run parallel to each other between the uprights, at intervals all

the way up on either side of the net, and these wires can be adjusted for tension, so there is never any give or slack when the ball hits the 'ball stop' at any point on the net.

"Before our patented design nets were just tied to the uprights, now we've brought a level of simple technology into the structure of ball stop nets.

"It's not just the ball stop nets, but we've refined the business of perimeter fencing as you can see and of course our systems are adaptable as dad has explained, which means we have a wider market for our fencing.

"We already have business in both the North and the South, but it's our hope that we can break into the market in Britain and we've already had interest from one university in Scotland, so business is there to be found."

I wished Dominic the best of luck, said goodbye and left Bellaghy with a much clearer picture of the business of gaelic sports ball stop nets!

For more information contact:
Mob: 07802 660982, or 07968 825519
www.specialistfencingcontracts.com

Did you know?

■ **THIS week I have** reached chapter XIV of John Stevenson's 1920 published book 'Two Centuries of Life in Down 1600-1800,' a truly detailed section of the book but nevertheless fascinating in its revelation of the financial chasm between the wealthy and the poor of the 18th century. Stevenson begins with a list of housekeeping accounts.

"Mrs Clothworthy Upton, later Lady Templon, on the creation of her husband, Baron, in 1776, sister-in-law of Arthur Upton of Castle Upton, South Antrim, was Woman of the Bedchamber to Queen Charlotte, from 1772 till 1778. Her household accounts, most accurately kept and apparently in her own handwriting, exhibit income as well as expenditure. The salary attached to her position was £285 per annum, payable quarterly, and from each payment the Treasurer, Mr Stone, appears to have deducted, for himself, one shilling in the pound. The perquisites of a Woman of the Bedchamber realised quite considerable sums. In her notes for the years 1772-3 Mrs Upton shows a receipt on account of sales of the Queen's cast-off garments. 'Rec'd for a Gold & Silver stuff Gown & Petticoat with Trimming left on ... £36.15.0d

Mrs Upton's servants in London were paid at a much higher rate than at home in Antrim, in a wages note dated 1772 (note all footmen were called 'James'):

"James (John) Small his year's wages... £3.0.0d"

Useful contacts

- Rural Development Council
028 8676 6980
- Rural Community Network
028 8676 6670
- Rural Support Line
0845 606 7607
- DARD Grants and Subsidies Division
028 7131 9900
- Post Office Customer Helpline
08457 223344
- Health Action Zone
028 8772 9017
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