The Gary Wardlow legacy lives on

By Daragh Small

Lagan College completed a remarkable rise when they claimed the Ulster School Boys Junior Championship at Portadown, just a few months after their programme took shape, in late September 2022.

However, two months later the man behind it all passed away suddenly. Gary Wardlow was 42 when he was taken ill at his beloved pro shop in Spa Golf Club and he died in hospital a couple of days afterwards.

His legacy lived on, and he captured the imagination when Lagan went on to achieve an unprecedented glory in the All-Irelands at Milltown in April.

Andrew Morris, who took over the team in Wardlow’s absence, delivered an emotionally charged speech, as Gary’s oldest son Jaxon helped the Belfast college secure the silverware.

“It means a lot, we didn’t have a golf team until nine months ago,” said Morris.

“Gary got it formed in the school, got the boys a day off school and fortunately we went and won the Ulster section.

“We took over and came on and finished it off, a very proud day.”

Morris’ son Patrick was also part of that team, along with Ethan Irvine, but it wouldn’t have been possible without Gary Wardlow.

The Belfast man competed at the top level of Irish amateur golf before he became a PGA professional.

He represented Ireland in the 1997 and 1998 Boys’ Home Internationals and was part of a famous win on his first appearance at Royal North Devon.

In 2000, Wardlow helped Shandon Park to the European Men’s Club Trophy and was a teammate of ex-European Tour winner Michael Hoey in their Senior Cup side.

Wardlow became the club professional at Spa in 2015 and he struck up a great working relationship with Morris, who was buying and selling as well as custom fitting golf clubs, at Andrew Morris Golf.

“Gary had taken on the pro shop and transformed Spa Golf Club in so many different areas. He was so involved with Spa from the golf course to running teams and the pro shop and competitions,” said Morris.

“Gary would have bought from us, and we would have custom fitted a lot of Gary’s customers. We custom fitted them and sold the clubs to Gary.

“Gary was a proper worker, a proper hard grafter. He worked hard for Spa, did a brilliant job and put them on the map, he worked hard at his business.”

Wardlow had three sons, Jaxon, Luke and Carter, and it was the former who struck up a friendship with Morris’ son Patrick.

“We used to watch Jaxon hitting balls up at the driving range when he would be practising with Gary,” said Morris.

“He was already a class act then. He went to Lagan College and Gary said to me one day that he wanted to create a golf team for Lagan. At Spa Gary could see there were so many golf guys for schools coming to the likes of Spa.

“He asked would Patrick be interested in playing in it which of course I said definitely. Gary got the wheels in motion and set the whole thing up. He worked with Jim McCloskey, the PE teacher in Lagan, and Gary was given free rein to do what was necessary to give Lagan a good opportunity.”

Milltown Golf Club in Dublin hosted the All-Ireland Irish Schools finals on 24 April, and Lagan scored 75 points as they secured a memorable win.

“Susanne, Gary’s wife, had said to me during the funeral at his graveside that she would really appreciate if I would keep it going, take on the golf team so they could survive,” said Morris.

“Would I do that? I said, I would. The same three-man team went to Milltown, two of the three cards counted, and it was Patrick and Jaxon, Gary’s older boy, who had the two best scores.”

Patrick and Jaxon were linking up again, this time for Belvoir Park. when they travelled to Castletroy Golf Club later this summer, during the All-Ireland underage finals.

While Andrew Morris continues his own career on the course, the man who once competed against Shane Lowry in the final of the North of Ireland, returned to Royal Portrush and reeled back the years in 2023.

At 49, he was the clubhouse leader during the opening round on the Valley Links two months ago. And although Portmarnock’s James Fox eventually took the crown, Morris still finished in T23.

“I think I was five back. I started bogey, birdie, birdie which at that stage brought me into contention but it just didn’t happen,” said Morris.

“One of those days where I was just pretty lethargic and didn’t get going. But I am 50 at the end of December, January kicks me off to play seniors.

“I will go to Spain and Portugal at the start of the year for the seniors. My good friend Noel Crawford played in it last year and progressed onto the Irish team and that is definitely a goal now to try to compete at that level.”

Off the course his business continues to go from strength to strength while he looks to add another facet.

Morris left school when he was 17 and was an understudy of Blake Campbell until just before the Millennium when he got the opportunity to manage a franchise of Nevada Bob’s Golf. Twelve years later he was opening his own place at Lagan view Golf Centre.

Recently he started fitting indoor swing rooms.

“If it’s at your home I go and do an assessment of your garage or spare room. I assess if it’s suitable and if it is I go and fabricate everything,” said Morris.

“I am at that with four or five years. I definitely made all the mistakes that people make with trying to do their own golf simulators at home. Fortunately, it’s spreading afar.

“I have one in my house. I have twins who are 16 and Patrick is a pretty keen golfer, and an eight handicapper, and there is plenty of hours spent there.

“It’s crazy how active that part of the business is at the moment. I would probably be looking at ten or 12 jobs a week. I am a registered installer for Trackman. I get quite a few leads from that, people going to buy the best form of technology generally get the room fitted out the best as well.

“So, it sort of goes hand in hand.”

He continues to plan for life outside of the game, while he hopes to keep the Wardlow fire lit in Lagan College.

ENDS