

Allianz League Kerry



# Walsh well placed to pick up where he left off before AFL adventure



Ian O'Riordan

Forward's return gives All-Ireland champions Kerry a welcome boost

So he's back for real and for good. The first impression of Tommy Walsh after his five years playing professional football in Australia is not just his golden glow, or that Michelangelo indeed could have carved out his features.

What the professional experience has also heightened is his demeanour, as Walsh attentively engages on the range of questions about his time away and what he expects on his return to Kerry. He exudes an air of confidence not normally associated with some of his amateur counterparts.

He turns 27 next month, although Walsh doesn't appear to have aged more than a day since leaving Kerry at the end of 2009, not long after he helped them win the All-Ireland, and the year after he was named Young Footballer of the Year. Not that he's taking anything for granted: if his five years in the AFL taught him one thing it's that career paths don't always go to plan.

**New challenge**  
He's already found himself an accountancy job in Cork city, starting next month, and admits it will be a new challenge trying to balance work and football, having previously only had to worry about playing. What is certain is that Walsh can't wait to play for Kerry again – possibly as early as Sunday's Allianz League opener against Mayo.

"I've come back with no regrets whatsoever about the way things went over there," says Walsh, speaking at a Lucozade Sport event. "As much as I would have liked to play more games, I'm back to play a sport here that I love, and actually really enjoy the lifestyle here, so I certainly couldn't see myself ever going back."

"It was when I came home, for Christmas 2013, that I first really thought about coming back, that it was probably going to be my last year in Australia. I just went along with things during the year really to see how things went, but by July or August I had made up my mind."

Truth is, his time in the AFL – the first two years with the St Kilda club in Melbourne, the next three with the Sydney Swans – was at least partly ravaged by injury, particularly when he tore his hamstring off the bone in June 2013. In the end, Walsh only made five AFL appearances in all.

"There's nothing I can do



There was talk of some offers from other clubs, but by then I'd already made up my mind I was coming back

about that. I had been lucky up to then in my career, and even since, with injuries. You see other guys and they do their knees and shoulders and that kind of type of stuff. That's sport, it happens.

"But it was always a year-by-year basis, for me, out there. The first year in Sydney we got to the Grand Final, which wasn't far off. Then I did my leg, and I was determined to come back from that, and that led into the third year. There was talk of some offers from other clubs, but they weren't concrete, and by then I'd already made up my mind I was coming back. After that it was just about getting my leg right."

Walsh has already proved his fitness, lining out with his club Kerins O'Rahillys last weekend (against Austin Stacks) and he's already done several training sessions with Kerry. He has little fear of the readjustment to Gaelic football, and although he started out as a specialist forward, he'll be happy to play wherever Kerry manager Eamonn Fitzmaurice can find room for him.

"That's entirely up to Eamonn and the lads, to see where I fit, or when I fit in, if that hap-

pens. I still have a lot of work to do in terms of touch and just getting my head back into the game, but I feel ready to play.

"It's just about getting my touch back and my kicking as well, and hopefully that will come once the games start. "Nothing replicates a game. You can do all the training you want but once you are in that competitive game, be it league or championship, that intensity is different to any training."

**Fitter**

"And I suppose I feel a bit fitter than I was when I left, so whether that means I can play midfield or centre forward and move around the field a bit, again that's completely up to Eamonn. Wherever that is, I'll just be doing my best to contribute to the team, try help them perform as best we can."

There is even the suggestion he might fill the full back role his father and seven-time All-Ireland winner Sean Walsh played in 1970s, having switched from midfield. Either way, while Walsh reckons his fitness levels have improved thanks to the AFL, he also sees improvements here.

"The fitness would be higher

Tommy Walsh spent five years in the AFL but his career was badly disrupted by injury and he made only five appearances in total. PHOTOGRAPH: MORGAN TREACY/INPHO

in the AFL, only because the game is pretty much twice as long, or four half-hour quarters. That took a lot of adjustment when I went over first, trimming down and get more miles into the legs, really. But Gaelic football has come on a lot in terms of sports science and professionalism in the last five years as well so I'm sure there won't be too big of a difference once the fitness side of things really ramp up here.

"The other big difference is rest, in terms of time, because as a professional, once you finish training, you're not getting ready for work. It's about getting ready for the next session. Here, it's also about preparing for work, study, or whatever. And getting the balance right. But if you can manage that, there's no reason why a guy can't do it as well as a professional could over in Australia, or anywhere else."

Donegal

# Reliable Toye focused on the road ahead

Donegal forward believes Gallagher can continue positive legacy of McGuinness

IAN O'RIORDAN

Despite the shattering experience of losing the All-Ireland final last September – followed by the loss of manager Jim McGuinness – there is a sense that Donegal are picking up their new football season not far from where they left off their last.

The feared spate of retirements never came, and although Rory Kavanagh has brought the curtain down on his long career, all those of similar vintage are prepared to carry on. Christy Toye turns 32 in March, and is entering his 14th season with Donegal, yet nothing about the 2014 experience lessened his desire to go on.

Enduring value

Toye proved his enduring value to Donegal when introduced in that All-Ireland final defeat to Kerry. Even if it wasn't enough to turn the tide, there was no doubting he was still up to the task. As long as that proves the case, then retirement doesn't enter the equation.

"I'm really looking forward to it," said Toye. "If I still feel like I can contribute to the team, I'll continue to play. Once you realise that you can't do that, you'll walk away. Any time you're handed a Donegal shirt it's a proud moment."

"It's a short career as well and a lot of people never get to experience running out in the Donegal colours. I've the opportunity to do that. Obviously when you're a bit older recovery takes a bit longer. And it's not the most glamorous part of the season. But it's work that has to be done."

Whether Toye will feature in the opening league game against Derry on Saturday night remains to be seen, but with Rory Gallagher taking over from McGuinness, any feeling of transition has been kept to a minimum.

"The last few years we set a very high standard in Donegal and we just want to maintain that," added Toye, speaking at the launch of the new athlete mentors with the Sky Sports Living for Sport initiative. "Every year you try to better yourself. We've a tough draw in the championship as well [against Tyrone] so it'll be a

big ask to get to the Ulster final. But we're looking forward to it and we'll be aiming throughout the league to get up to championship pace.

"But the thing about Rory coming in is there's good continuity. There was no messing about in terms of the appointment either. Everyone was back in sync fairly quickly. If it had been left a while, it could've become disjointed."

"Rory is his own man with his own standards. We know him well from working with him for three years under Jim but he's definitely a brilliant manager in his own right. He has a lot of his own ideas. He's very hungry and demands the best in training, so none of that stuff has changed."

The immediate priority will



Christy Toye was not surprised by the departure of Jim McGuinness

be to retain their Division One status, having spent 2014 in Division Two, and Toye also suspects the benefits of the McGuinness era will continue.

Football culture

"Jim took us on when a lot of people thought we were also-rans, which was true. He changed the whole football culture in Donegal. We, as players, hadn't realised the commitment that was necessary until Jim came in. That kind of culture he left behind has filtered down through county underage teams, to all the club teams as well."

"But I would've been surprised had he stayed on. Jim stuck to his word that he'd stay four years – the Olympic cycle, as he called it."

"It was a bit of an anti-climax but we still made a lot of progress last year. A lot of people didn't even think we'd win Ulster, they didn't even think we'd win the first championship game. So to win Ulster and go all the way to the final, you have to reflect and see it as a progressive season. We couldn't have given anything more and we'll do the same this year and see where it takes us."

Mayo

# Duffy's eight-month wait for debut looms after confusion over eligibility

EMAMON DONOGHUE

Mayo's misinterpretation of the eligibility rules for inter-county transfers has left former Connacht rugby player Gavin Duffy in an eight-month state of limbo, unable to represent his county and unaware of exactly why he could not.

Having made his return to Gaelic football back in early May, Duffy was intent on making up for lost time in the green and red. He was under the illusion that his arsenal of attributes, sculpted by 13 years of professional rugby, would leave him with a healthy shot at making a breakthrough of sorts

come championship 2014.

Instead he would spend the summer watching on, unsure for much of it about what exactly was preventing him from being allowed to play as the county board and management held contrasting views over the player's eligibility.

The reason being that Duffy, a native of the Ballina Stephenites club who transferred several years ago to his by then local Salthill Knocknacarra club in Galway, failed to meet the end of February deadline for "a person transferring outside the home county... who wishes to declare for his home county".

Therefore he was ineligible

to play for anybody other than his adopted club and Galway until a declaration could be submitted in January 2015.

Secret weapon

Despite a lack of clarity, or perhaps knowingly, the Mayo camp were quick to tout Duffy's pending inclusion as a secret weapon of sorts, yet in retrospect was the topic exploited as a useful distraction?

Former Mayo footballer and Duffy's old club-mate Liam McHale says this "is another messy situation in the Mayo county board. We're experts at it now. Gavin is a competitive individual and he wouldn't have

been coming down from Galway two or three nights a week for the craic. If he was being dragged along then that's awful unfair to Gavin if he had no chance of playing."

"They must have known though, a Division One county, imagine if he came on in one of the games last year and wasn't registered. It would have been forfeited. After a disappointing end to the league last year he was probably brought in for his experience and to give the thing a boost."

Following the furore which his transfer in codes triggered, Mayo GAA claim that rival counties in the province quickly

looked into the transfer and informed the Connacht council of the problem. This then alerted Mayo to the issue and, after seeking clarification, they informed the management team that Duffy could not play any part in 2014. A spokesman for the county board says the player remained on the panel because of his experience.

A spokesperson for Connacht GAA insists that the county were fully aware of the ruling from early last summer.

The 2014 management team claims that they did know upon Duffy's arrival to the panel that "a box wasn't ticked" in terms of the formalities of his trans-

fer, although they were led to believe that it was something that could easily be pushed through when the time came that Duffy was ready for championship selection.

League campaign

That stage was reached at the end of the competition last summer, although the feeling within the Mayo camp was that the issue was not quite pushed enough and so the application dripped on right up until this year's FBD league campaign.

Duffy only became a legal Mayo panellist on January 12th. Despite being named to start in an FBD league encounter on

January 11th, the paper work had still not gone through at that point, and so the former Mayo minor player is still waiting to get his opportunity.

Work commitments held the 10-time international capped fullback back from a debut against Roscommon in the FBD semi-final a week later, although he did feature prominently in an A versus B game last weekend and so he could at long last make his intercounty senior bow in Sunday's league opener against Kerry, where an experimental team is expected to line out.

An opportunity which at this stage he has certainly earned.



Gavin Duffy: became a legal Mayo panellist on January 12th. PHOTOGRAPH: INPHO/RYAN BYRNE

# Allianz League Division Two lowdown

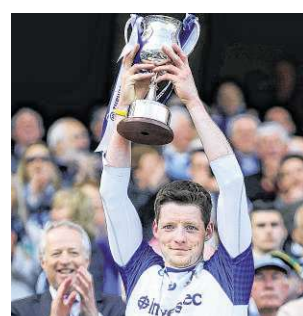
Seán Moran

Formguide 2012-'14

The county from the division to travel farthest in the following championship has been Donegal, who reached last year's All-Ireland final, where they lost to Kerry. Donegal are also the only county from the division to win their provincial title in the last three seasons.

Last season was the most successful in championship for counties in Division Two during the three-year period under review. The division had its highest win rate with 55 per cent. There was also just one championship defeat by a county from a lower division, Laois against Tipperary.

Also notable is the fact half of last year's All-Ireland quarter-finalists were from this division whereas in the previous two seasons under review, just one Division Two county, Kildare in 2012,



Monaghan's captain Conor McManus after beating Donegal in last year's final

reached the last eight of the championship.

The least successful county from the division during this period was Derry, who lost their first championship and qualifier matches in 2012.

The county was however promoted the following year and reached last year's Division One final.

Success rates

The winners of the division during this period have been (final table placing in brackets):  
2012: Kildare .....(2nd)  
2013: Derry .....(1st)  
2014: Monaghan .....(2nd)

During this period Division Three teams have played 102 SFC matches

Winning .....51  
Drawing .....4  
Losing .....47  
Success rate .....50%

Teams from the division have beaten counties from a higher division on nine occasions in the past three seasons. They have lost to counties from a lower division on nine occasions.

Twelve matches have been between counties from the division.

Played .....12  
Beat higher placed county .....6  
Lost to higher placed county .....6

Three-year record

Total number of teams: This season promoted and Roscommon and Cavan will bring to 16 the number of counties to have competed in the division since 2012 - half of the counties in the league.

The division is:

Kildare .....second year out of four  
Westmeath .....third year  
Meath .....third year  
Down .....second year  
Laois .....third year  
Galway .....fourth year  
Cavan .....first year  
Roscommon .....first year

Also since 2012:

Louth .....2012, '13 and '14  
Derry .....2012 and '13  
Armagh .....2013 and '14  
Monaghan .....2012 and '14  
Tyrone .....2012  
Longford .....2013  
Wexford .....2013  
Donegal .....2014

Mayo

# Quitting job to focus on GAA sends out wrong message, says O'Connor

Intercounty players leaving jobs and choosing careers to suit their GAA ambitions is sending out the wrong message to young players, according to Mayo All Star Cillian O'Connor.

The 22-year-old, who attended the launch of Allianz Leagues in Belfast, expressed concern about Darran O'Sullivan's admission he has left his job with Ulster Bank to focus on playing for Kerry.

O'Connor is worried about what the future holds for inter-county players if they are unable to balance their professional and GAA careers. "I would wonder how sustainable it is, when you hear of players selecting careers to suit their football or quitting jobs," he said.

"I don't think it is a good message to be sending to young peo-

ple or potential footballers, to disregard your career to play for your county."

O'Connor (22) is doing a masters in sports exercise and psychology at University of Ulster



Mayo's Cillian O'Connor: doing a masters in sports exercise and psychology

and already he has huge demands on his time – on Sunday he plays for Mayo against Kerry in Killarney in an Allianz League opener, before lining out for Jordanstown in the Sigerson Cup on Wednesday, followed by a league game

against Tyrone at the weekend.

He accepts there will be even greater demands on his time once he enters the workplace. "Most players I know are conscious of the need to get off work early on Fridays to travel across the country for training, or taking a day off to have an operation."

"People are factoring these things in when they're selecting their career paths and it's a dangerous precedent to set for young footballers."

"If they see older fellas quitting the bank or quitting their jobs, they're going to think 'I need to do that, I need to forget about academia, that's what you need to do to play football'."

"It'll be fine for a few years but I don't know how sustainable it is."