

Kilkenny in uncharted waters but still All-Ireland favourites – with or without Henry

Seán Moran
On Gaelic Games

Do not read too much into the Cats' worst performance in the league under Brian Cody

Another All-Ireland heads for Kilkenny. It's not Ballyhale's fault but their three most recent finals have been relatively bloodless affairs and in fact the club hurling showpiece has in recent years been a disappointing climax to the championship.

Kilkenny teams, though, frequently dance to their own music on these occasions and as a consequence opponents can look flat-footed.

In a significant postscript, Henry Shefflin said he'd be making his mind up on his inter-county future within the next week. He's kept his cards close to his chest but if he decides to go back it will be to a Kilkenny side in unusual circumstances.

Sometimes you don't fully notice things until they're not there. The fact that the county will contest this year's relegation final in Division One A marks the poorest league season for the county since Brian Cody took over in 1998.

What that highlights is a record of extraordinary consistency over 16 years. On eight occasions – half the available silverware – the county has won the spring trophy.

We take it for granted now that triumphing in the league is a 'good thing' because of the connection

between that success and winning All-Irelands but the picture was a lot more cloudy in the years before Cody arrived.

Look at what happened to the nine league winners prior to 1999: none added even a provincial title, let alone an All-Ireland – allowing that in two cases that wasn't possible, as Galway in 2000 had no provincial title to win and Limerick in 1997 won the league in October as part of a quickly-abandoned experimental calendar.

Tanking
In fact, six of the nine winning managers were gone by the end of the year and two others a year later without having built on their achievement in the previous season.

It's valid to point out that the arrival of the calendar-year season in 1997 has also done a lot to forge a link between the two national competitions but the connection has been largely Kilkenny's creation. During the years in question, only Tipperary in 2001 also achieved a league-championship double.

Kilkenny have done it six times – 2002, '03, '06, '09, '12 and '14 – and added another two All-Irelands in years when they reached the league

final but lost – to Waterford in 2007 and Dublin four years later. Over such a long period of time, it's a vivid picture of domination.

It has also developed the profile of the competition, as hurling's dominant team never takes the spring off to record an acoustic album.

That was clear on Sunday after an understrength team took a tanking from Tipp in Thurles.

Cody's immediate reaction was to check if there was still even a remote chance that they'd make the quarter-finals.

"Are we absolutely out of it now? If we aren't, we want to win it," he said. Archive research reveals only one statement of relative indifference towards league elimination, expressed in what is – to the modern ear – peculiar live-and-let-live language, and that was in his first year, while still learning on the job.

"I wouldn't say I'm fierce disappointed," he said after a semi-final defeat by Galway. "It was a disappointing way to lose the old game just at the end. But ah, I'm reasonably happy. We've had a good league run, a good old campaign. I'm happy enough."

There have been just four years since 1998 that the county hasn't

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Kilkenny's domination has also developed the profile of the competition. Hurling's dominant team never takes the spring off to record an acoustic album

featured in the knock-out stages of the league. In 2000, they were third in Division One B, one place from the semi-finals.

Four years later, an unusual end-of-season structure saw the counties at the top of Divisions One A and One B split out to contest the league trophy and those at the bottom left to fight relegation.

Needing to beat Dublin by 12 points to make the cut, Kilkenny

could manage a margin of just nine. But with a final free Henry Shefflin crashed the ball off the crossbar and Tommy Walsh just failed to net the rebound.

"We won the match but we lost the war," Cody said afterwards.

In 2010, the county came fourth in Division One with the top two contesting the final. In other words, there have been no write-offs.

On a cautionary note, Kilkenny failed to win the All-Ireland in two of the above three years but it's moot whether that's coincidence or causation because the figures are much the same for seasons when the league was won and no All-Ireland followed – 2005 and 2013.

Typically, there are also mixed signals for the years in which Kilkenny clubs have won the All-Ireland. In two of them, 2005 and 2010, the Liam MacCarthy Cup went elsewhere later in the year. In 2007, the county beat Limerick in the final.

It could be argued that Ballyhale's previous All-Irelands had significance in terms of wear-and-tear in that they were followed by cruciate injuries to Henry Shefflin, which proved critical in 2010 but not so much in 2007 when the damage occurred at a stage when the actual

final was already well in hand. Again coincidence and causation can't be differentiated.

Whatever about the lessons of spring, Kilkenny remain favourites for the All-Ireland. As the team changes with time, they simply adapt to current circumstances.

Up until 2012 none of Kilkenny's All-Irelands had been won from the qualifiers. Even relegation finals, which the county will now definitely contest, aren't without their reassurances.

Mantra
Two years ago Clare beat Cork to secure Division One status and five months later won the All-Ireland.

One man who certainly wasn't reading much into the weekend's result was Tipperary manager Eamon O'Shea.

"That's no more and no less, we got a win today, which is very good but as I keep saying, the same mantra, win or lose it's a game in March. Take it for what it is."

"We won the game; sometimes we lose games. That has no bearing on what's going to come in any month following this. Just be cautious."

Very cautious.
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Cycling News

Armstrong urged to halt Tour route ride

UCI president says plans are 'very disrespectful to the Tour de France'

OWEN GIBSON

The head of world cycling's governing body has called on Lance Armstrong to abandon "very disrespectful" plans to ride part of the Tour de France route for charity a day before the official race.

Armstrong has been persuaded by Geoff Thomas, the former Crystal Palace player who is aiming to raise £1 million for Cure Leukaemia by cycling the entire Tour de France route before the official peloton, to join him for a couple of days.

But the UCI president, Brian Cookson, said the idea of Armstrong, banned for life



Lance Armstrong: persuaded by Geoff Thomas to join him for couple of days

and stripped of his seven Tour de France victories for serious doping violations, taking part in the charity ride was hugely disrespectful to the rest of the sport. "I'm sure Geoff Thomas means well but frankly I think that's completely inappropriate. I think it's very disrespectful to the Tour de France," said Cookson.

"I think it's disrespectful to the current riders in the peloton, I think it's disrespectful to the UCI and current anti-doping activities. I think Lance Armstrong would be well advised not to take part."

Cookson admitted he had no authority to stop Armstrong from taking part in the charity ride. "Lance Armstrong can ride his bike around France as often as he likes, it's got nothing to do with me or the UCI," said Cookson.

Thomas told *Cycling Weekly* he could understand the furor over the plans but that critics were missing the bigger picture. "I think there's a bigger story here; to raise awareness and as much money as we can for this fantastic charity," said Thomas, who battled blood cancer himself 12 years ago. "It's my job to work out how to do that as best as we can. This has stirred up a lot of people's feelings, yes, but it's all from a good side from my perspective."

Well-intentioned
Cookson said he was sure the former footballer's idea was well-intentioned but called on him and Armstrong to reconsider. "The charity justification was used quite a lot throughout Lance Armstrong's career and that got us into a mess that is well documented now. There are other ways people can do good works and raise money," said Cookson.

Cookson said he was willing to act as an intermediary to bring Armstrong and Usada together if required but he could see little reason for getting involved. Cookson, who said he had never met or spoken to the Texan, said it was down to Usada if it wanted to reconsider the life ban handed down after a 2012 investigation found Armstrong at the centre of "the most professionalised and successful doping programme that sport has ever seen". "Usada are in control of whether Lance Armstrong gets any reduction in his lifetime ban, not the UCI, that's how it should be," he said.

Armstrong presented a BBC award to Thomas in 2005 after the former England midfielder first followed the Tour de France route with a charity ride.
Guardian Service

Diaspora GAA USA



New generation embracing games in the USA

Old pay-for-play culture giving way to soaring American participation levels

EAMON DONOGHUE

Against the backdrop of the GAA World Games in Abu Dhabi earlier this month the increasing international appeal of our national games has never been more prevalent, yet America remains the home of the GAA diaspora.

The success of this ongoing and now readdressed project in America is not one which should be judged in terms of playing standards though, or the senior intercounty performances of the New York Gaelic football team, but rather by sheer participation figures.

Dara Ó Cinnéide got his first taste of the GAA in the USA in

the 1996 New York championship but his intrigue really kicked in when the late Páidí Ó Sé first told him about this "different breed" of GAA people.

In 1997 Kerry took on Cavan in the National League played in the Polo Grounds in New York to commemorate the 50-year anniversary of the All-Ireland final played in the same venue.

Different breed

"There's a comment that Páidí made years ago in '97 before that Kerry-Cavan trip," says the former All-Ireland winning Kerry captain. He said "look lead they're a different breed, there's a different breed of sport out here, a different breed of player out here, and a different breed of doing things out here". You were left intrigued after he said that."

That curiosity was added to after two separate spells playing in the New York championship, winning the title in 1999,

numerous non-playing trips and by having a brother who has given so much to his GAA club first in Boston and then in Chicago over a 12 year period.

Over the past two summers he's been able to finally get to the root of this different breed; what drives them and what the future holds for them. Starting this Wednesday TG4's new series *GAA USA* begins with Ó Cinnéide travelling across the US to GAA clubs in Boston, Chicago, New York, Milwaukee, and San Diego to give a new perspective on the Irish emigrant experience in America.

In episode one Ó Cinnéide investigates the earliest reporting of Gaelic Games in America looking back from 1840 to 1918, he finds that even in the late 19th century there was evidence of the 'pay for play' culture which is so synonymous with GAA in the country.

Ó Cinnéide though believes that this is a culture which is making way for a more forward

thinking and participation-based approach.

"I wouldn't want to diminish the actions of the people in the past who were doing what they thought was best for their clubs in maintaining the game..."

"But what are you telling the

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boys who train there all year, 'wait until we bring over the big boys?' So that's the realisation, that that isn't the way to go..."

"It was done with the best intentions but there was kind of a dirty element to it and it wasn't good for the development of the game. There was also a cer-

tain amount of bravado and bragging rights involved. But they were misguided."

Today though the three-time All-Ireland winner says the continental youth games, now in their tenth year of existence, are the "biggest GAA event in the world, with the most GAA participants in one place on an annual basis", reflect the new focus based upon soaring American participation levels.

"The big message from me is that these games that we're so keen to internationalise at the moment, they aren't ours anymore. We need to embrace that. "We have our All-Ireland championships, and county championships, but don't frown upon what's happening in other countries because the standard isn't where we'd expect."

"Milwaukee is a great example, they just love the game of hurling with the stick and the dynamism and physicality of it all, but they hardly know who

Christy Ring leading the Cork team out against New York at the Polo Grounds in 1954 and, inset, action from the same game. PHOTOGRAPHS: GREY VILLET/THE LIFE IMAGES/GETTY

Henry Shefflin is. It's the game they love rather than the entity, they're oblivious to that and they just like to go to the park and play their internal leagues and that in itself is to just be admired. Grandparents wanting to impose an Irishness upon their kids and grandkids who are then impressing upon their Puerto Rican and Latino friends that these are brilliant games."

A story of a people and their national games thousands of miles from home, a story of isolation, of nationalist gun-running disguised within Kerry GAA tours, a sport of splits, infighting, bribes, and back-handers. It begins on TG4 on Wednesday from 9.30pm.

Sport briefs

Rugby Six Nations Championship

Wales forced to face Italy with third-choice loosehead prop

Wales go to Rome on Saturday in search of a third title in three years with their third-choice loosehead prop in the front row against opponents they acknowledge are at their strongest up front.

Gethin Jenkins suffered a hamstring strain nine minutes into Saturday's victory over Ireland but remained on the field until half-time. With his experienced back-up in the position, Paul James, out until next month with a hand injury, the uncapped Rob Evans was on the bench.

Evans starts against Italy while on the tighthead, Aaron Jarvis replaces Samson Lee, who lasted 14

minutes against Ireland before suffering a suspected ruptured achilles tendon that may keep him out of action for six months.

Otherwise Wales keep the side that started against Ireland and France with Jamie Roberts, Dan Biggar and Rhys Webb recovering from knocks they sustained.

WALESL (Italy): L Halpin (Toulon); G North (Northampton Saints); J Davies (Clermont Auvergne); J Roberts (Racing Metro); L Williams (Scarlets); D Biggar (Ospreys); R Webb (Ospreys); R Evans (Scarlets); S Ball (Ospreys); A Jarvis (Ospreys); L Charteris (Racing Metro); A Wyn Jones (Ospreys); D Lydiate (Ospreys); S Warburton (Cardiff Blues, capt); T Faletau (Newport). **Replacements:** K Owens (Scarlets); R Gill (Saracens); S Andrews (Cardiff Blues); J Ball (Scarlets); J Tait (Ospreys); G Davies (Scarlets); R Priestland (Scarlets); S Williams (Scarlets).

Formula One

Hockenheim boss rules out German race

There will be no German Grand Prix this year, Hockenheim circuit boss Georg Seiler said yesterday in a decision that ended months of uncertainty over the country's Formula One race.

The absence of Germany, home of world champions Mercedes, for the first time since 1960 leaves the calendar with 19 races.

"We have no hope any more of having a Formula One race here [this year]," Seiler told *Bild* newspaper. "We did everything in the last few years to keep the fans happy."

Hockenheim has made heavy losses due to poor attendances.

Cricket

Phil Simmons expected to take over as West Indies coach

Phil Simmons is expected to sign a contract to take over as West Indies coach in the coming days, bringing an end to a successful eight-year term with Ireland.

The 51-year-old from Trinidad informed the Ireland squad that he has been offered the job in the dressing-room at the Adelaide Oval following the defeat to Pakistan on Sunday that ended Ireland's World Cup participation.

Ireland beat the West Indies in their opening game, but lost out on a place in the quarter-finals to them on the basis of net run rate.

Simmons had previously stated that the only coaching position he would leave



Phil Simmons: successful eight-year term with Ireland

Ireland for was his former international side.

Stuart Williams has been interim coach to the West Indies since Otis Gibson stepped down last August, with the West Indies Cricket Board keen to finalise a new coach ahead of the upcoming Test series against England.

EMMET RIORRAN

Cycling Olympics

Mixed gender events being trialled

Mixed-gender cycling events could form part of the 2020 Tokyo Games, Brian Cookson, president of the sport's governing body, said yesterday.

With IOC president Thomas Bach pushing sports federations to improve gender equality, Cookson said trials would begin behind closed doors in Switzerland on Friday.

He said several national federations had been invited to send young riders to the trials, with the madison and team sprint disciplines being looked at as well as a possible road team time trial.

American football

San Francisco 49er to retire over concussion concerns

San Francisco 49ers player Chris Borland, a leading rookie last season, is retiring from the NFL over health concerns related to repeated head trauma. "From speaking with Chris, it was evident that he had put a great deal of thought into this decision. He was a consummate professional from day one," 49ers general manager Trent Baalke said in a statement.

The 49ers did not specify why Borland, 24, chose to leave. ESPN reported he was retiring over health concerns related to head trauma, an issue that has rattled the league and prompted a massive lawsuit against the NFL. Borland, a linebacker, was a star in his only season



Chris Borland: a star in his only season with 49ers

with the team, registering a team-high 128 tackles and earning several rookie-of-the-week and month honors. "I just want to live a long, healthy life, and I don't want to have any neurological diseases or die younger than I would otherwise," Borland told ESPN's *Outside the Lines* program