

Henry Shefflin retirement

'Soon we knew this fella was not for wilting'

More than his skill and advice, it was his courage that earned absolute authority

PM O'SULLIVAN

Late last Wednesday week, Andy's Bar, Main Street of Ballyhale. The club's sixth All-Ireland title, won the day before, is being celebrated. Wisps of roguery tighten and a bit of karaoke breaks out by the fire, as one of the hurlers plays a Clash track on his phone. Some of the finest offer their take on *Should I Stay or Should I Go?*

Henry Shefflin tilts with the moment, a beaming sphinx, one of the lads, a rogue among his own fine rogues.

Now the question is answered in sober terms. He has gone into our fascination.

Behind the scenes, though, what you saw was what you got. There were no airs and graces, save in his strokeplay. Ballyhale is a levelling place, which he embraces with good humour, a connoisseur of gossip and mischief.

Yes, a perfect fuse of talent and temperament. Yes, the whole package. But there was much work, before that union, on both sides of the divide.

There were doubters

Mouthy as a young hurler, Henry got sent off for dissent in 1997's minor A south final. He was too fond of tipping the ball over a marker's head and the like. He chased embellishment and there were doubters.

Still, his first display arrived in that minor A county final. He led victory over wild favourites James Stephens. A straw

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lifted into the wind. The previous August, Shefflin had battled criticism after the Kilkenny minors went down to Clare. So we knew, in his own place, this fella was not for wilting.

The arc of his career became the relentless deletion of anything superfluous. Desire made him better and better and he simply ended up with that bit extra.

Waterford's Eoin Kelly, as fine a stickman in certain regards, got lost in the labyrinth of his temperament. Tipperary's Eoin Kelly, with at least as good a first touch, could never quite impose himself as decisively in the last 10 minutes.

Joy and satisfaction

Club genuinely meant much. Interviewed for *My Great Sporting Memories*, Shefflin selected 2006's senior title for "the joy and satisfaction it brought to the team, the panel, the selectors and management, and to the whole community".

That evening, the Ballyhale squad headed to Langton's for a meal. Never were there happier people on Maudlin Street. Strolling down, Henry said with emphasis: "You have no idea what a weight that is off my mind..." Doubters in the parish had not gone away.

He was perhaps thinking of a post-pub get-together the night Ballyhale Shamrocks won under-21 A in November 2005.

That success salvaged burning disappointment over defeat to James Stephens, a

few weeks earlier, in the senior final. Henry had not fared well and was on a big down against himself for squandering – he was precise – 2-5.

Over whiskey and biscuits, he spoke about a recent charity trip to Africa, about the many conversations with Brian Whelehan.

Would he ever do with Ballyhale what Whelehan had done with Birr? That moment in late 2005, before the first cruciate injury in 2007, probably counted as the toughest low, since it involved his own crowd.

He rebounded there, as later from the raft of injuries. Now, a year on, Shefflin is heading to Langton's, unburdened and elated on Maudlin Street. Rathnure are up a week later, Leinster semi-final. Dangerous scenario.

Fully appreciating Shefflin's gifts meant seeing it from the sideline. And now TJ Reid gathers possession and rips the centre of Rathnure's defence. Shefflin, hurtling down the left in parallel, choreographs with shouts: "No! No! No! No!"

Then, optimum moment: "Now!"

Henry takes TJ's handpass and lamps home beyond Dermot Flynn, effectively ending the contest.

Has any other player communicated with colleagues on the field so effectively, without lessening a whit his own contribution? Doubled genius was afoot, cutting a unique groove.

It looked as if someone was simultaneously conducting an orchestra and playing chess. Up close, Shefflin's poise was eerie. Time slowed.

Stabbing the bull

The mind forever sped, Henry would say himself that he is not the world's ablest taker of penalties. Yet he marshalled his best one for the best possible moment, sticking the ball over Brendan Cummins' left shoulder in September 2009 as surely as any darts great stabbing the bull for a 170 checkout. More than skill, more than advice, it was his courage that earned absolute authority in the dressing-room.

That electrifying coldness in heat of battle re-emerged as the exact opposite choice in 2012, when he pointed a penalty to put Kilkenny up the bare minimum against Galway in the drawn All-Ireland final. At home, musing on Shefflin's bounty, they talk about a native sitting beside another native as their man prepared to strike.

"If he goals it," said one, "they'll have to win!"

"He'll point it," said the other. "It's the percentage bet."

"Go away," he replied. "You have to go for a goal from a penalty, like in '09."

Shefflin clipped over. The one swung back round, his face an exclamation mark. "Didn't I tell you that man is like a computer?"

The singer changes but hurling's song, the registers of excellence, remains the same. Henry Shefflin hit all needful notes. Forget the unique haul of medals.

As a player, nothing was left undone, no question left dangling. The player was even greater than the winner.

Henry did it.

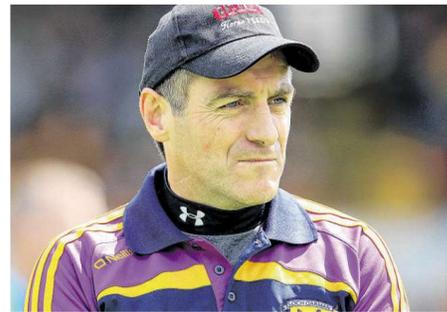
PM O'Sullivan was part of the senior set-up for Ballyhale Shamrocks in 2006-07 and from 2012 to 2015

Clare hurling and player welfare



Wexford hurler Lee Chin

“We're a very tight-knit panel in Wexford and I know if it went on here there would definitely be a bit of support from the panel, but I suppose the show must go on.” Lee Chin



Wexford hurling manager Liam Dunne

“I don't make rules, rules are made to be broken, the temptation is there. We set standards, not rules. If one of your main guys breaks the rules in a pub then what do you do?” Liam Dunne



Former Clare hurler and Soar ambassador Tony Griffin

“The volume of requests, whether to Soar or me personally, would indicate that there is a serious lack of understanding of how to consciously develop emotional resilience.” Tony Griffin



Mayo footballer Andy Moran

“If a group need to sign that then they are not in a good place to succeed anyway. We've always had leaders in our dressing-room.” Andy Moran



Westmeath footballer John Heslin

“I don't know the full story of what happened in Clare but it won't bode well for the county moving forward... If it happened in the workplace it wouldn't go down well.” John Heslin



Limerick hurler Donal O'Grady

“Straight away signing a code of discipline says to me there's a lack of trust in the squad. There is an honesty in most camps and stuff would be just flagged by a fellow player.” Donal O'Grady

'There are consequences for what you do. But nobody owns you'

Intercounty players bristle at the idea of disciplinary codes and severe punishment

Davy O'Halloran has yet to be contacted by any member of the Clare County Board

EAMON DONOGHUE

A Clare hurler who claimed he was humiliated and isolated by the treatment he received from his manager has yet to be contacted by any segment of the GAA or Clare County Board. It is believed he only received a phone call from the GAA after a full week of being in the media spotlight.

Both Clare GAA and the GPA have released statements suggesting they have investigated the player's claims, both now deeming the matter closed for debate.

The lack of support, particularly from the relevant organisations, or from any of the player's former team-mates or coaches, at least on the record, has led to several players and mental wellbeing organisations questioning the support systems available to players or equally the awareness and delivery of the programmes which are in place.

Three years ago, Wexford hurler Lee Chin spoke out about the racial abuse he received while playing a senior club football match.

He says that while the GPA is a "great resource, they will help if you go to them", there was also a lack of initial support for

him after that incident.

"I can't remember going to the GPA as I had the support of my family and friends and all of my team-mates so it was different... but no they didn't contact me either. When I look back at some of the interviews I had done back then, like with the *Late Late Show*, I probably would have liked to have been a bit more aware of what was to come.

Phone calls

"I was getting so many phone calls I didn't know how to handle it and it got tougher repeating the same thing over and over. I would've liked a bit of support."

All-Ireland medallist O'Halloran claimed that he and another Clare senior hurler were humiliated by "double-standard" disciplinary punishments dished out to them for being caught on a night out two days before a league game. They claim they were injured and not drinking.

They say they were to be made spend three weeks in which they had to tog out separately, train in a corner alone, and were not allowed to travel to games, wear their county gear or talk to fellow players at sessions.

Clare GAA have since released a joint player-management statement declaring all-round approval of the management team's actions.

But the input of the entire squad in this statement stretched only as far as a text message informing the panel the statement would be released on their behalf, and for them to make contact within an hour if any player took exception to its content.

"I think the boys' situation was very harsh," says Chin. "A team is based on trust and honesty. If two boys come forward and say there was no alcohol that should be believed... you need a social life too."

"I wouldn't say bullying, but it was too far, it was out of order. If Davy didn't believe them and there is no trust and honesty there then, for me, they should just be cut from the panel. Not three weeks of that, it is humiliating."

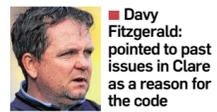
"We're a very tight-knit panel in Wexford and I know if it went on here there would definitely be a bit of support from the panel, but I suppose the show must go on."

Lack of awareness

According to former Clare hurler and current ambassador of the Soar wellbeing organisation Tony Griffin, there is "absolutely" not enough support for players dealing with media bombardment or for those embroiled in the aftermath of personal, yet very public issues. He says the GPA have mental welfare programmes in place but there is a lack of awareness regarding them.

"The key is increasing the awareness of these services."

"We are asked increasingly by intercounty managers to work with their teams. The volume of requests, whether to Soar or me personally, would indicate that there is a serious lack of understanding of how to consciously develop emotional resilience and positive coping strategies in our young players. "Until we do so they will not be equipped with a full arsenal to completely express themselves in a way that respects the enormous demand they will in-



Davy Fitzgerald: pointed to past issues in Clare as a reason for the code

creasingly be asked to meet."

Westmeath footballer John Heslin says he has been regularly contacted by the GPA representative in Westmeath to ensure he is happy with things there, although this does not appear to be a common trend.

"The GPA do excellent work but maybe a situation like this hasn't arisen before and we're all learning. The players do need more backing but maybe it's something that'll be brought forward in the next meeting, we'd hope."

"I don't know the full story of what happened in Clare, but it won't bode well for the county moving forward."

"It was unfair and if it happened in the workplace it wouldn't go down well."

Heslin and Chin both insist there are currently no disciplinary codes of conduct being signed within their panels – and if there were they would be refusing to sign.

"I won't sign as I'll do it anyway," says Heslin. "I will eat right and I will go to training. If not and if you're slacking off someone else will just take your jersey. At the end of the day, we're amateur players and if you want to do something you do it. And there are consequences for what you do. But nobody owns you."

Wexford manager Liam Dunne explains why he does not uphold any such binding code: "I don't make rules, rules are made to be broken, the temptation is there. We set standards, not rules. If one of your main guys breaks the rules in a pub then what do you do? You're really on the back foot."

"If you're not prepared to set standards for yourself and your team-mates or you can't trust the players then you can't expect to be going anywhere."

Ill-discipline

Clare manager Davy Fitzgerald pointed to the county's past ill-discipline issues as reason to set up a code of conduct. Last year's Limerick captain Donal O'Grady has a contrasting view though on how the past should shape a panel's outlook.

"We know what went on in Limerick over the years and that it wasn't good enough. There are no collective drink bans or codes of discipline but an understanding that we needed to change that."

"Between diet plans and gym

sessions and training and matches at the weekend, there isn't much time anyway. You can't be seen going to a chip shop, it's gone that crazy."

"But straight away signing a code of discipline says to me that there's a lack of trust in the squad. There is an honesty in most camps and stuff would be just flagged by a fellow player who would take him aside and have a chat."

Mayo's Connacht winning football captain Andy Moran says there is nothing more than a verbal disciplinary agreement within the Mayo camp.

"If a group need to sign that then they are not in a good place to succeed anyway. We've always had leaders in our dressing-room."

Moran is one of a number of intercounty players contacted by this newspaper who have rejected the notion that a disciplinary code carrying draconian punishments is productive.

Antrim hurler Neil McManus said: "You don't get anywhere by punishing players, I don't think it creates a good atmosphere. To be honest I don't think there are too many managers carrying a big stick. It's more about challenging players than chastising them in front of everyone."

"These men are giving up their free time, they're adults and they're able to understand being talked to."

The GPA have declined to respond to numerous queries regarding their role in supporting intercounty players like O'Halloran, or in the monitoring of possibly excessive disciplinary codes.

This weekend's Allianz Hurling League previews

Seán Moran & Malachy Clerkin

SATURDAY

Division 1 quarter-final

Dublin v Limerick, Croke Park, 5.0 – Hard to know who to make favourites here. The Dubs, by dint of their having spent the spring in a higher division? Or TJ Ryan's Limerick, smarting from what is beginning to look like a life sentence in a lower stream?

Ger Cunningham's side found their stride last weekend against Galway, with Danny Sutcliffe and Mark Schutte in sparkling form. Limerick haven't had a full-strength squad to pick from yet but with the return of the Kilmallock players – and with Shane Dowling's suspension served – all they're missing here is Kevin Downes.

The 15 named by Ryan look pretty gnarled and formidable. It could prove to be the difference here. Verdict: Limerick –MC

Division 1B relegation play-off

Laois v Antrim, O'Moore Park, 5.0 – Not a great season for either county with Laois failing to keep their top-four status from last season.

Still they've a good selection of players and manager Séamus Plunkett may have decided to use the league for other purposes given the unlikelihood of winning promotion.

Antrim strengthen the team from last week but will do well to emulate last year's win in this fixture given that they lost to Laois in Ballycastle and must travel for this. Verdict: Laois –SM

SUNDAY

Division 1 quarter-finals

Offaly v Tipperary, O'Connor Park, 3.0 – Offaly's season has marked an improvement on last year and their prospects might have been enhanced had manager Brian Whelan succeeded in getting the fixture switched to Birr.

When they played in last year's championship, Offaly kept pace until the final quarter and then got blown away. Tipperary have had a buoyant campaign following their opening loss to Dublin. Their forward movement and scoring is functioning at a high level for this time of the year.

Offaly will be happy to keep it as keen as it was last July and try to ensure that the roof doesn't fall in as completely as happened then. Verdict: Tipperary –SM

Cork v Wexford, Páirc Uí Rinn, 4.0

– Both teams were on the end of poor results last week but it was questionable as to how deeply the setbacks cut into Jimmy Barry-Murphy and Liam Dunne.

Cork had nothing to play for and whereas Wexford's performance clearly irritated Dunne. They struggled to create goal openings for Conor McDonald and Liam McGovern but Cork won't be setting out a chain-link ultra-defence.

The home side have been forced into a few changes which weaken the team with Stephen McDonnell, Mark Ellis and Alan Cadogan out but at their best they have been high-scoring this season and if they get the sort of territory and opportunity that Waterford managed in Wexford Park, they can be relied on to charge a higher price for it. Verdict: Cork –SM

Waterford v Galway, Walsh Park, 4.0

– This is probably the best prospect for a Division 1B team to reach the semi-finals, as there's a great difficulty remembering when Galway last won in Walsh Park and Waterford were impressive winners of their division.

Galway have strengthened after last week's fitful display against Dublin and much will depend on how driven they are in this. They have the physique to trouble the home side whose manager Derek McGrath pointed out last week that, aside from veterans Kevin Moran and Michael Walsh and Maurice Shanahan, his side lacked heart.

They are playing well, however, with plenty of defensive cover. The attack did well last week and Waterford have the momentum. Verdict: Waterford –SM

Division 1A relegation play-off

Kilkenny v Clare, Nowlan Park, 2.0 – Although last week's defeat didn't make any material difference in the end, it still wasn't great for Clare's morale to get beaten by a shadow Kilkenny side.

It was always going to be the case that this play-off would be different as the All-Ireland club champions Ballyhale would be returning their troops for county service. Then Kilkenny won the toss for home advantage.

Clare haven't been far off the mark in their matches this season despite losing all but one of them and it's likely they'll throw the kitchen sink at this. Nonetheless it's hard – especially after the turmoil of this past week – to see Kilkenny not rising to this. Verdict: Kilkenny –SM

