

Tipping Point

Brian O'Connor



GAA players have the power to change things for the better

Since the winner is inevitable a portentous tone is difficult when it comes to the escalating battle between player power and official control within the GAA.

It really shouldn't be a battle at all. The recent ructions in Galway hurling and Mayo football are merely the latest instances of county board administrations struggling to reconcile being in control with players actually having the power.

It is a power rooted in two fundamentals – no one has ever paid through a turnstile to watch a county board suit run around, and amateur players get to choose what they do. You would imagine this to be self-evident but major reverberations come from acknowledging it in terms of the GAA's self-image.

Nevertheless the reality behind the image is that it requires real neck from county board Gaels to presume to tell elite senior players keeping the organisation's financial clock ticking over what to do.

It is beyond parody. Only in Ireland could 'sagas' be constructed out of amateur sportspeople presuming to have a say in who coaches them. Anywhere else,

anyone presuming otherwise would have been told to go bite the big one long ago.

Admittedly you do have to be a bit of a weirdo to play inter-county; flogging your guts out for matches five months away, living like Cistercian monks for nothing but the dubious thrill of comparing flagellation scars and feeding off-the-record quotes about the torture of existence in strait-jacketed purgatory.

Amateur sport

But for Christ's sake, people, chase up those spine donors. These tales of player woe are getting real old. You have the power. If amateur sport isn't about those playing it then what else is it about?

Well officially it's about community of course, the GAA's foundation stone. It's about who and what you represent with the stars being one-of-us, living lives recognisable to the rest of us during the week before performing miracles at the weekend. Except at elite level this has been passé for years. Players now lead lives so Calvinist as to be unrecognisable to anyone else. The reality of intercounty participation has moved on. Yet the

hierarchy remains much the same; suits picking the tracksuits picking the team.

Such control was a given, Gaels grimly climbing the greasy political pole not only had to be in charge, but be seen to be in charge. And part of the deal was choosing who to put in charge of county teams.

What those same Gaels struggle to come to terms with however is if you haven't got an 'or else' over players then you haven't got much, something admittedly which only seems to have dawned on players in the last decade.

The lack of an 'or else' is self-explanatory, or should be, if you're not filled to the gills with management jargon such as that being currently peddled by Alex Ferguson. He proudly asserts his entire career was based on control, only easing his grip on players in order to more easily fling them overboard.

This is the reality of most professional organisations, those at the top self-consciously setting the tone, often far too preoccupied with making sure that tone is obeyed rather than examining if it is any good or not.

If the modern top-level GAA is charac-

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terised by anything it is the application of this stuff to the coaching and management of teams. The cult of the coach has become endemic, reaching even to the lowest junior levels after years of percolating down from the top.

The result at the top end of Gaelic football in particular appears to be a stifling atmosphere of discipline and sacrifice we are regularly informed puts professional sports to shame, and which

coincidentally puts sideline merchants centre-stage. The impact of much of their supposed tactical innovation has been to turn many games into yawn-fests with the primary objective being to avoid defeat rather than seek victory.

Dangerous presumption

That punters aren't yet voting with their feet about this says much about the power of tradition but it's a dangerous presumption to believe the quality of entertainment on the pitch won't eventually impact on numbers off it. What's really amazing though is that more players haven't long since voted.

The 'or else' in professional sport is simple: don't play ball and it hits you in the pocket. The 'or else' if you're an amateur is you don't get picked, hardly the end of the world for any player, and hardly a move casually made by any GAA manager since it invites microscopic public and media examination.

It's obvious once players decide on who they want to work with that the outcome is inevitable. This has been proved repeatedly ever since Cork's hurlers called their

county board's bluff. So the reality of the power-play is already known, just not widely acknowledged.

You can see why the GAA administration mightn't want to. It means acknowledging players ultimately represent themselves rather than any traditional script about community which means a lot of pious handwringing. More concretely it also means relinquishing some control.

But is it too much to hope that the greater future exertion of player power will result in players helping themselves, maybe even the rest of us too?

That instead of bleating about training rules flouted, enjoyment forfeited for faddish tactics, and talented youngsters run into the ground by control-freak coaches, they might actually do something about it; maybe even try to fix an overall picture which, we're assured, has turned voluntary sport into an indentured penance for those playing and endurance tests for those of us watching?

Games are ultimately for and about those playing them, the same players surely ultimately possessed of the power to change things for the better.

Mixed Martial Arts Featherweight title fight

McGregor's success a vindication of his devotion to a particular worldview



Ken Early
Las Vegas

Belief system that governs athlete's life engenders an iron-clad confidence

Maybe it's stretching things to describe Conor McGregor's 13-second knockout of Jose Aldo as a miracle. Let's just say that if he'd been doing this stuff in old Israel 2,000 years ago, there's a decent chance that McGregorism would today be a major world religion.

Nobody scripts that kind of outcome. Imagine the withering exchanges at the writers' meeting if somebody suggested it. "So... your idea is that he predicts he'll win by knockout in the first round, after the champ swings a wild right hand, and then he proceeds to knock him out in precisely those circumstances after 13 seconds? Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realise we were making the ninth fu**ing Harry Potter movie."

American sports journalism has its "no cheering in the press box" conventions designed to reinforce the message that acting like a fan is in poor taste. But when McGregor walked into the press conference several journalists scrambled forward with their phones to take pictures.

The champion stood at the podium and surveyed the room with a statesmanlike air – the Crumlin Obama, though the other Obama would have worn a more boring suit.

Fight prediction

A journalist quoted McGregor's eerie fight prediction with reverential awe, as though reading aloud for the first time from the log of a crashed alien spacecraft. How had he done it?

"If you can see it here," McGregor said, pointing to his head, "and you have the courage enough to speak it, it will happen. So I see these shots, I see these sequences, and I don't shy away from them."

"A lot of times people believe in certain things but they keep it to themselves. They don't put it out there. If you truly believe in it, if you become vocal with it, you are creating that law of attraction and it will become reality. I knew he would overextend, and I knew I would catch him, so. Mystic Mac strikes again."

This was probably the most explicit public allusion McGregor has made to the belief system that governs his life. His victory will send another wave of people to YouTube to



Conor McGregor celebrates after a first-round knockout victory over Jose Aldo at MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas, Nevada.
PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

watch *The Secret*, the 2006 self-help documentary that shaped McGregor's worldview.

In a nutshell, *The Secret* is that Paula Abdul couldn't have been more wrong. Like attracts like. "Everything that's coming into your life you're attracting into your life," one talking head explains. "And it's attracted to you by virtue of the images you're holding in your mind."

The documentary sets out a vision of the universe as a kind of Argos catalogue that can be accessed through the power of your mind. If you visualise happiness, fortune, fame – the universe will send them your way.

If your thoughts are dominated by the things that worry and frighten you, the universe will give those things to you too. The physical mechanism by which this actually happens is never spelled out beyond vague references to frequen-

cies and magnetism.

A sceptical assessment would conclude that the law of attraction is a classic unfalsifiable belief system that exploits cognitive quirks like frequency illusion, confirmation bias and selective perception to buttress its fantastic claims.

Maybe it's just a coincidence that the law of attraction implies some rather conservative conclusions about the real world, such as: wealthy people are wealthy because they're sending out the right mind waves to the universe.

No accident

"Wise people have always known this," another talking head says. "Go right back to the ancient Babylonians, they've always known this... Why do you think that one per cent of the population earns around 96 per cent of all the money that's being earned? Do you think that's an accident? It's no accident. It's designed that way. They understand something. They understand the secret."

Paging Thomas Piketty... Another conclusion that follows from the Law is that things like poverty and disease

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are your own fault for thinking about the wrong stuff. One woman tells us that she recovered from breast cancer by watching funny movies and thinking positive. McGregor has assiduously applied the theory, "visualising" and speaking about success and refusing to countenance the sort of negativity others mistakenly call "realism".

You could see this at work in a recent interview he did with Gareth A Davies of BT Sport. "What happens if you do lose to Jose Aldo?" Davies asked. "That... is not... in the equation. That does not process in my brain for one second," McGregor said. "Can you not allow yourself

as a fighter, then, to go into that?"

"I could try! But it wouldn't happen. I wouldn't even happen. I couldn't even try and feel that if I tried my best. It's not gonna happen."

"Is it like a safe in your brain that's locked?" "I dunno, I'm not a neurologist! I'm not a neurologist. I just cannot see it. Cannot feel it. So."

By now McGregor was looking away to indicate he was not interested in pursuing this line of questioning any further. Even talking about not thinking about failure risks allowing it to creep in under the door.

McGregor's championing of the Law is unlikely to change now that the universe has made it so obvious that it really does love him.

He'd hardly be the first athlete to build his competitive mentality around some questionable beliefs. Two of the Brazilian fighters at UFC 194 had celebrated their victories with Brazil flags that had "JESUS" inscribed across the blue center circle. The Law of Attraction is McGregor's 100 per cent Jesus headband. Maybe visualisation fulfils the same

practical function for him as prayer does for the conventional devotee: to clear and calm the mind, to help you figure out what it is you actually want out of life. A pragmatic take might be that if this stuff works for him, then what's the problem?

Then you think about all the McGregor fans out there, with their McGregor beards and off-the-peg McGregor attitude, who'll soon be watching *The Secret* and trying to apply the law of attraction in their own lives, and you just hope it works out for them.

To say that the universe helped to draw Jose Aldo's jaw onto McGregor's left fist would be to underrate his own role in what he has achieved.

In those 13 seconds he displayed an extraordinary timing and precision that reminded you of the impossible Lionel Messi nutmegs that make it seem like Messi sees everything in slow motion.

That McGregor has attained that impossible level of skill is really his own doing. But if he insists on sharing the credit with some dubious law of the universe, who's going to tell him otherwise?

GAA All Stars

Players should ignore trolls, says Horgan

EAMON DONOGHUE
in Texas

Players need to be mentally tough and savvy to survive the social media abuse which, according to Cork hurler Patrick Horgan, has absolutely no place in the GAA.

Horgan has seen first hand the abuse players, team-mates of his, have received from anonymous social media trolls, but he says the players need to be strong enough to turn a blind eye.

"It's really annoying," says the former All Star, "when you see fellas nearly crying leaving training. They can hardly move, like. Then to see that happening after probably one mistake out of a whole match. Everyone makes mistakes. That's when they'll say it, when no one can say anything back to them. I don't think there is a place for it, anyway."

Following Cork's Munster championship exit last June, full back Damien Cahalane, only 22 at the time, spoke out about the abuse he had received on Twitter. Horgan, though, is less concerned by the views of these so-called fans, and thinks others should adopt a similar mindset.

'The same people'

"To be honest, I couldn't care less because it's the same people. If you do something well the next week they will be your best friends."

"The people that say that on social media aren't the people who are out training four, five six nights a week, giving everything they have to do their best

for their county. But I'd say lads are strong enough to just push that aside and move on."

For now, though the microscope is off the players, it's the off-season or the pre-season, rather, where all the unseen work begins. Cork, however, are taking a more relaxed approach this year, under the tenure of new manager Kieran Kingston. "It's a bit of a boost getting somebody new even though the last lads were brilliant. But we're just happy to kick off and see what the story is for the year."

Last year proved a disap-



Patrick Horgan: 'It's really annoying when you see fellas nearly crying'

pointing one for Cork: a Munster semi-final defeat to Waterford was followed up by wins against Wexford and Clare – before a 2-28 to 0-22 defeat to Galway in the last eight.

"We're not bad. You can't just go from beating Clare and playing so well in that game to not playing well at all against Galway."

"That happens a bit too much. We won Munster last year and were looking like the best team in the country but one slip against Tipp and we just couldn't get it back. That's disappointing as well. We just can't have that happening once a year because if you do you're sitting at home for the rest of the year."

Gaelic Games All-Ireland club SFC

Clonmel advance to face Ballyboden

Tir Chonaill	0-9
Clonmel	2-12

Clonmel will face Ballyboden St Enda's in the All-Ireland semi-finals on February 13th after defeating Tir Chonaill Gaels in difficult conditions at Ruislip. The Munster champions played into a strong wind during the opening period but Ian Fahey's goal put them five points ahead.

Clonmel lost Tipperary pair Aldo Matassa and Michael Quinlivan to black cards and a Tir Chonaill purple patch cut the visitors' lead to two points, 1-5 to 0-6, at the interval.

However, any thoughts of a Tir Chonaill comeback were quickly ended when substitute Pádraig Loomam found the top corner just 15 seconds after the restart and Adam Askin was sent off.

Quinlivan was effective as both a target man and when

running from deep. It was a powerful run from him that teed up Fahey for the opening goal, the centre-forward's shot looping over Gaels goalkeeper Declan Traynor and into the net.

Matassa and Quinlivan's afternoons came to a premature end, the latter black-carded for a trip and three unanswered points from Tir Chonaill Gaels cut Clonmel's lead to 1-5 to 0-6 at the break.

CLONMEL COMMERCIALS: J McDonald, F Condon, D Lynch, J Peters, B Barnes (0-1), S Kennedy (0-1), K Fahey, J Kennedy (0-1), A Matassa, L Moore, I Fahey (1-1), J Lonergan (0-3, one free), K Harney, M Quinlivan (0-1), P White (0-3, two frees). Subs: P Loomam (1-0) for Matassa (25 mins, bc), N Kelly (0-1) for Quinlivan (30 mins, bc), E Fitzgerald for Barnes (44 mins), D Madigan for Loomam (50 mins), R Peters for Fahey (56).
TIR CHONAILL GAELS: D Traynor, P Butler, R Breen, B Atarmsey, G Magee, E McConville, M McCoy (0-1), M Gortsche (0-1, 45), L Gavanhan (0-2), A Askin, C Magee (0-1), N Boyle, A McDermott, S Friel (0-2, frees), A Hanton (0-2, one free), S Friel (0-2, frees), A Hanton (0-2, one free), S Friel (0-2, frees), J Collins for Matassa (20 mins), B Ross for G Magee (44 mins), B Duddy for Hanton (47 mins), J McGrath for Breen (67 mins).
Referee: P Neelan (Roscommon)