

The Last Line

Jackie Tyrrell



Cody taught us to block out the noise of All-Ireland final build-up

I always found this week of an All-Ireland run-in strange. You're floating. You're in limbo. You have qualified for the biggest game of the year and now it's the biggest game of your life. You have your head half-tilted back, looking backwards, admiring what you've done. It's normal, we all do it. But there's that voice in the back of your head all the time, telling you to snap out of it. You know you should have your head fixed firmly forward.

Don't look back too long or it will be too late. You can only win this All-Ireland. And only you can win it. Every other team has fallen away except you and the opposition. Every minute you spend thinking about the great semi-final you just won is a minute you're not thinking of how to beat the only other team left. It's wasted energy. Dangerous, lethal territory.

But it's so understandable. Especially when it's your first final. Imagine the Waterford players this week.

Other than Brick Walsh and Kevin Moran, none of them ever won an All-Ireland semi-final before last Sunday. In 2016 and 2015, the semi-final was the point at which their summer ended. This week last year, this week two years ago, they were drowning their sorrows. Those are hard weeks in any player's year, full of regrets and despair.

So you wouldn't be human if you got to this point and weren't tempted to look back and enjoy your achievement a little bit. Even for the Galway lads who have been to finals before, this is still the best thing you've done in your career so far.

That's where the experience of guys like Joe Canning and David Burke and these lads will play a big role. They need to be passing down lessons. Now, not next week.

The message has to be very simple, very direct. That game is gone. It's not worth anything other than the matchday programme you've thrown in a box under the stairs or bed. When you take that programme out in years to come, what will that game mean to you?

Was it a great win that drove us on to win that unreal All-Ireland? Or was it a game we won in a year we didn't finish the job off? Deep down, everyone in the panel knows that's how they should be thinking but it's no harm driving it home. Leave nothing to chance.

Advantage

I always liked to be on the team that won the first semi-final. It's only a slight advantage but it is an advantage. You get an extra week to get the semi-final out of your system. An extra week to recover the body and refocus the mind. Beyond yourself, it gives all the backroom staff and officials an extra week to sort out logistics. Nothing is rushed. You get to take your time and do it right.

The flipside of that is you can be a bit too unhurried. Things can drift. The weeks go by in a flash and all of a sudden, the final is there, whether you're ready or not. That's why this week is so strange – the final is still far enough away to not feel totally real yet but too close to ignore even if you wanted to. You have to get the balance right.

This is where the management takes charge. I'll never forget the training session in Nowlan Park on the Tuesday night of this week in 2007. It was two nights after Limerick had beaten Waterford in the second semi-final and we were out having our puck-around before lining out for a 15-on-15 game.

We had been doing this for about 10



minutes or so, just going through our usual drills, when Brian Cody blew his whistle and called us in.

"Right lads, head back into the dressing room there," he said.

Oh-oh. Straight away, we knew he wasn't happy. He had never done that before. Come to think of it, I never remember him doing it again. We went inside and he closed the door behind us. Just him, us and the selectors. No physios, no county board officials. Nobody watching in from the stands seeing him reading us the riot act. Only us.

And he laid it out, very simply. He didn't like what he saw out there. Our body language was all wrong. We were still in limbo, even though it was nine days since our semi-final. Limerick had upset Waterford in the second semi-final and it was as if we just assumed we were going to beat them handy in the final.

Straight away, that snapped us out of it. It reshaped our focus. It might only have been 48 hours since Limerick had won their semi-final but as soon as we left that dressing room, we were zoned in on what we had to do. Okay lads, limbo is over. No bad habits, no cruising through these weeks.

That was one of Brian's great strengths. As soon as he got a sniff of complacency seeping into the team, he was on it like a dog with a bone. We hadn't even started playing a match yet, we were just pucking around. But even in that, he sensed something was off. Bang. Blow the whistle. Get these lads in and stop the drift before it starts.

When you're getting ready for an All-Ireland final, there's no easing yourself into it. This is something you want

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more than everything else in the world – either start acting like it or you'll be bypassed by someone who is. Be relentless, from here until the final whistle. Foot to the floor. Focus forward.

Distractions

The big job is avoiding the noise. Suits, ticket orders, sports gear, boots, media days, player profiles for the programme. Distractions and noise. This is the week to get all that done. Get done and get rid.

Especially tickets. Do not get caught up in the circus that exists with them. This is the week I always got the orders in and the money collected. After that, I was able to bang out a simple text or give a simple answer to any request – "Sorry bud, I have the tickets got already and given out". I've seen lads carrying around the guts of €3,000 in their bag the week of an

All-Ireland final or messing around chasing fellas for the money.

No way. Not for me. A fortnight out, I was done with tickets. No point even asking me – the answer would get shorter with every passing day.

No distractions. Everywhere you go people will all talk about the match. Work, gym, shopping, in town, outside Mass, you name it. I got into a routine of just doing enough those few weeks and limiting my life's exposure to the outside world.

I only went out when I had to. I did one big shop or got someone else to do it. My girlfriend or family did the coffee run for me. And when I did head outside I pretended to be on my phone most of the time. Why? So I didn't have to listen to idle talk about the match. Potential teams, injuries, opposing team players, this lad said this and that pundit said that. I couldn't care less.

It was a habit I got into. I shrank my world for the duration of three weeks – work, training, the gym. Outside of that, very little. Coffee stops, walks in the park, all gone for these three weeks. And this is the week to get that habit regimented. Get used to it, embrace it, normalise it, don't resent it. Love it, even.

Like everything else, that comes with experience. I look back at the build-up to my first All-Ireland final now and I can't believe how naive I was. I didn't take steps to block out the noise. I fell into the trap of thinking still as a fan rather than as a player. I saw the buzz going on and I wanted a part of it.

The day before the 2006 All-Ireland final, I went down the town in Kilkenny to take in the atmosphere. Part of it was just blind curiosity, part of it was nearly

wanting to be stopped by people. I was enjoying being seen out and about 24 hours before the final, enjoying the buzz, enjoying the fact that people knew who I was.

Nerves

The Kilkenny Supporters Club had set up a stall on the back of a trailer selling flags and colours and I, like an idiot, was standing there chatting away to anyone who came over. God, I cringe when I think about it now.

In my defence, it was pure nerves. I was awake at the crack of dawn that Saturday morning and I was lying there thinking, "How in the name of God am I going to fill the hours from now until 3.30 tomorrow? How am I going to punch in the day?" And it was early enough when I went down the town. But still. Ludicrous carry-on.

There are two ways of learning. Either you do it wrong the first time or somebody else does it wrong and they tell you about it. That night, before my first All-Ireland final, I left my phone on the locker beside my bed. Never thought to put it on silent or even just turn it off altogether. So with every text that came in wishing me good luck, the phone pinged and vibrated. Kept me awake half the night. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

And here's the thing – I had experience all around me. I had All-Ireland winners, All Stars, Hurlers of the Year, no end of lads who knew the score, who had all been through their first All-Ireland final before. And I still made basic, thoughtless mistakes. That's what an All-Ireland final can do to you.

So this week, it's important for manage-

All-Ireland final day: "You can only win this All-Ireland. And only you can win it. Every other team has fallen away except you and the opposition. Every minute you spend thinking about the great semi-final you just won is a minute you're not thinking of how to beat the only other team left. It's wasted energy. Dangerous, lethal territory."

PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

ment on both sides to have made sure that there's no sense of drift. Get out of limbo, start zoning in. If you're a player, don't build it up too much, don't become consumed by it. If you're consumed with anything, get consumed with making it just another game.

If you hang out with your team-mates outside of training normally, keep doing that. But don't feel like you have to do recovery sessions and gym sessions together now to build that unity for an All-Ireland or go ringing each other every other day. You don't have to live in each other's pockets to know you're ready. Relax, trust the process, it's got you here so far.

The trick is to treat it as just another game, even though it's not like any other game. That takes a bit of work and the work starts now. It makes this week just as important as the week of the game.

The GAA yesterday confirmed that Tipperary's Fergal Horgan will referee next month's All-Ireland final between Galway and Waterford. It will be the first time the Knockavilla-Donaskeigh Kick-hams clubman has taken charge of an All-Ireland final.

All-Ireland SFC Semi-final

Morley takes centre stage for the Kingdom as transition from juniors is complete

Templenoë man made his name with the club and has gone from strength to strength

Kerry v Mayo

Croke Park, Sunday, 3.30pm
Live on RTE 2 and Sky Sports Arena

EAMON DONOGHUE

The Spillane brothers put Templenoë on the map in the 1970s and '80s, but in 2017 it's Tadhg Morley who is flying the flag for the tiny rural Kerry club.

The 23-year-old defender was the first player from Templenoë to start a championship game for the Kerry senior team since brothers Pat, Tom and

Mick, after catching the eye when captaining his club to the All-Ireland junior title in February 2016.

He made his championship debut the following June against Clare in the Munster semi-final. In his seven championship appearances since he's established himself as the Kingdom's first choice centre back, ahead of Sunday's All-Ireland semi-final with Mayo.

"I struggled at first to be honest with you," he says. "The standard between club junior football and intercounty training is vast. I didn't get into any league panel in 2016, but I worked away on my own on those weekends when they had league games. I did my own bit of training and eventually got my chance and took it thanks be to God and I'm still there."

"It was a big culture shock. I remember the first day I came in I might have sat on the

Gooch's seat. Now he didn't say anything, he'd be too nice about it, but you know what I mean. The couple of training sessions after I noticed he was sitting there and I was thinking 'Christ I sat in his seat the first day'.

"But I'd always have that self-belief or whatever. It's just about getting stuck in. When you walk into the dressing room first you're a bit unsure of yourself, but once you get on the training field and you feel things are going well for you, you feel you belong there."

Versatility

Morley was not entirely new to the intercounty set-up however, he had played for the Kerry Under-21s for three years, one of which under his current manager Eamonn Fitzmaurice. His versatility allows him to fit in perfectly to the role of a modern intercounty halfback.

"I've played the games so far



■ Kerry's Tadhg Morley has really cemented his place in the Kerry team this year. PHOTOGRAPH: LORCAN DOHERTY/INPHO

but I don't have the number six jersey yet for next weekend so I wouldn't be counting my lucky stars just yet.

"And when I've number six on my back, it doesn't mean I'm

going to be playing centre-back either. The last day I was on the wing for the majority of the game.

"I suppose the odd time I get a man-marking job but I like to

think I played my own ball too, but some days I would be told to go mark a fella. The Ciarán Kilkenny [he marked the Dublin half forward in the Allianz league and final] thing is kind of blown out of proportion a small bit. I was never told go mark him.

Man-mark

"He was playing centre-forward, I was playing centre-back, it just happened. I was marking him, he was marking me. If Eamonn tells me to go man-mark a fella I'll go man-mark a fella. If he tells me go play ball up the field I'll go play ball up the field. If he tells me to play corner-back, I'll play corner-back. I'll do whatever he wants me to do."

Morley is now one of three players from his club in the Kerry set-up, along with Gavin Crowley and Adrian Spillane. "I played Division Five foot-

ball. I played the whole way up. I won a novice shield, a novice championship, a junior championship and we're in intermediate now [they lost last year's final]. I've come up through the grades and it does give you confidence. That junior run with Templenoë gave me great confidence.

"The senior team was struggling in the club for a long number of years, struggling to win games – we had 15 or 16 players in 2004/2005.

"But they always kept going for the good of the club. They saw we had great underage teams coming up and they kept at it and they kept going and waited for us to come.

"We had very good underage coaches. Tom Spillane was obviously one of them."

So what influence did the three famous brothers have on his development?

"I never had Pat as a coach.

He was involved in the club as chairman when I was growing up. He managed the senior team when I was in minor, the minor and the senior trained together to make up the numbers and he was training that time which was a big influence obviously. But Tom was one of our underage coaches.

"The three lads, Mick, Tom, Pat they were players for Kerry. Pat had the big name but the two lads, Tom and Mick, were very important as well. We had the Golden Years video growing up and it was cool to see Templenoë people playing for Kerry and they put Templenoë on the map.

"When I was in Dublin, people wouldn't know Templenoë, but if you mentioned Spillane they'd know where you're from straight away."

Now they're starting to know Tadhg Morley too, Kerry's centre back.