

Sports Tuesday

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Ireland can seize control of destiny

Women's Rugby World Cup
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Jim McGuinness



Mayo's hard-running collective proving difficult to stop

We waited all summer for this game and it didn't disappoint. After a low-key All-Ireland championship spread over five months, the season spins around two fascinating games in the space of 24 hours.

Dublin-Tyrone promises fireworks but Sunday's game has brought the Kerry-Mayo rivalry to new heights and speculation around the replay will be intense. Mayo are in the unique situation now where they have the potential to outfox Kerry.

On Sunday, both teams mirrored one another in going for straight up man-to-man match-ups and pushing up really aggressively and boldly on the opposition kick-out. They were adamant that they would force the ball long. For me that was interesting. Once you set your team up to go man-to-man like that, you are basically saying: we are better than these guys. Pound for pound and man for man, we are better.

So that is a very interesting insight into the Mayo psychology right now. It's clear they feel that confidence. Kerry, obviously, feel that; recent and no so recent history instructs them that they can beat Mayo. They respect this Mayo team for sure but I feel their attitude is: 'yeah, they will be dangerous and they will ask questions of us but ultimately we will beat them because we are that bit better'.

And in a way, both teams were right here in their mindset. The game ended in a draw. It was a tough, thorny contest. There's no love lost between them and there's no harm in that. You could see Paul Geaney and Aidan O'Shea going at it after the final whistle. The teams respect one another. But just about.

Obviously, the big talking point was the switch of O'Shea to fullback.

In fairness to Mayo and Stephen Rochford, they made a bold tactical move. It's no secret that the number three jersey has been troublesome for Mayo for a few seasons.

They've tried a few different players there and sometimes got caught out either through match-ups or because they didn't have the cover. Maybe they were in denial, pretending there was no problem. But they decided to address it before it was too late. This was an example of lateral thinking; of being willing to think outside the box and try something different. It takes guts to do that and particularly in an All-Ireland semi-final. And I think it worked to an extent.

Aidan didn't look like a full back and was a bit loose at times. But it did show down that aerial threat through which Kieran Donaghy has tormented Mayo for over a decade.

People were complaining that it denied Mayo of O'Shea's service as a rampaging forward. I would question why Mayo can't use Aidan in both roles. I remember seeing him take a ball just before half-time and he hand-passed the ball on and stopped. I was wondering why he couldn't just launch up the field like Neil McGee or Ryan McMenamin. He has the engine to run the field like that. So why not use him as both stopper and creator?

Backfoot

For us in Donegal, one of the biggest things in trying to win the All-Ireland was putting the opposition forwards on the back foot. As soon as the ball breaks and your defenders have it, you are in control of the game. That is where the trust in yourself and your team-mates comes in. If Mayo can take a leap of faith and feel it is a tactic worth pursuing, why can't Aidan then spring up the pitch and contribute to the attacks?



■ Andy Moran gets his kick away despite the attentions of Killian Young. The Mayo man's movement and game intelligence on Sunday was exemplary.

PHOTOGRAPH: RYAN BYRNE/INPHO

He is nominally a centre- or full forward. Think of the impact it would have on the Mayo crowd to see O'Shea charging through the attack every so often. And now Kieran Donaghy has a decision. Does he follow? Does he tear about the pitch after his marker?

So I would applaud the Mayo management for the decision but not giving him licence to attack was an opportunity missed. We saw Chris Barrett and Donal Vaughan – both doing defensive marking jobs – venture forward and kick for points. So other Mayo defenders were doing it. Surely allowing O'Shea the same licence makes sense? And it just serves a notice of intent to Kerry. Put your man on the back foot! Go all the way.

But that individual battle sucked so much attention from what was a fascinating tactical game in which all the action was concentrated in the middle third of the field.

This is where the replay will be won and lost. With both teams pushing up on restarts, space was created around both

full back lines and the real fight and battle took place in the middle third. How a team uses the ball in that sector becomes vital.

The fundamentals – not taking the ball into contact, recycling it out of trouble fast, having runners off the shoulder, constantly switching the play and playing with high intensity composure rather than trying to charge through and not giving the opposition the opportunity to tackle you – become paramount. The team that is cleverer and keeps it out of contact in that area and gets down the blindsides with switches in play will have joy in the replay.

Kerry play this sort of game very well. They have David Moran – what a fantastic footballer. That dummy solo for Kerry's second goal was sublime and it wrong-footed Brendan Harrison, one of the tightest defenders in the game. David ran the show on Sunday with his general distribution. Then you have guys like Peter Crowley and Paul Murphy who can punch holes and get the ball to their talent-division up front. We know Kerry can do this well.

The big transformation has come from Mayo; they ran straight lines here. They just ran straight lines. They have a host of guys who can do that – powerful, hard-running athletes. And they ask a new set of questions now. When you run the ball aggressively, it is an entirely different proposition for full backs. They don't know what is happening. They don't quite know how to position themselves on their full forward. It is hard to deal with.

Rewind on the Mayo project to early

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summer, or last year, and you knew what they would do. You would have guys running on their own, carrying the ball and getting isolated and trying to recycle it under pressure. Now, they are coming through in waves with guys coming off the shoulder and that creates a new chaos.

Quality ball

The opposition had to deal with those runners. And when the runners are stopped and the ball was flipped back out, Mayo were able to find their men with measured kick passes much easier than normal.

The quality of ball going into Andy

Moran, Cillian O'Connor and Jason Doherty was often very, very good. These things are connected and these are the nuances of coaching that are often completely overlooked.

The trick here is to have two game plans running simultaneously: an aggressive running game and also the capacity to play with your head up and pick a pass inside. So now they are finding the men inside much easier with the quality of ball – one bounce and on the diagonal. The fact they are running the ball with such aggression and belief correlates with the quality of the ball then being kicked in. One feeds the other.

When Kerry push up on their kick-out, Mayo don't have the same strategy as Kerry to find a solution. Winning your kick-out is about knowing where the ball is going, who is attacking it and who is waiting for the break. And it is about practicing that.

Once Mayo's options are shut down on kick outs, they seem to just kick it 50-50 and it becomes an absolute battle. Kerry have been brilliant at applying that pressure on teams and are really certain about what they want to do on their kick-out. They commit to the fetch and they commit to the break and if it doesn't work out, well, they have the weak side wing back and the full back covering the centre.

Kerry knew who they were going long to all afternoon. Mayo, it seemed to me, don't have that dynamic. That is Kerry's

advantage. And I think Mayo have an advantage over Kerry in the physical stakes. That straight-line running is an acknowledgement of that. They are making a statement; come stop us if you can.

Mayo were wasteful too. It should have been 1-3 to 0-0 when Keith Higgins needlessly fouled Paul Geaney. That was Kerry's ticket into the game. That handy free. This is about discipline. When you have Kerry squeezed, you have to keep on squeezing.

There are imperfections on both sides. Kerry's weaknesses are the same; they will struggle not to concede goals. I'm not sure they are good enough to ball on a sweeper. But they are reluctant to do that. I feel they are balancing the platform David Moran gives them with the quality they have up front against any defensive vulnerabilities.

And they feel: we don't have to be incredible at the back. Maybe there is a bit of cat and mouse too because if Kerry play sweeper, then maybe Mayo play sweeper, it becomes less of a shoot-out and that doesn't suit Kerry either.

Game intelligence

But for all the perceived weaknesses in Kerry's full back line, Andy Moran was just excellent. There was some great corner forward play. One point in particular; a Cillian O'Connor ball on the diagonal to Jason Doherty and Andy positioned himself so that the ball just fell into his hands and he clipped it over from the edge of the D. It was his anticipation of what was going to happen that was such a joy to watch. His movement and game intelligence was exemplary. But I think he had that space because of what happened further out the field.

So it is all to play for.

There won't be that much change from Kerry. There was a lot of opinion pointing out that Kerry need to do something about their full back line. But do what? How do you address it other than bring in new players? Or go defensive? To do that is a kind of concession. I think Eamonn Fitzmaurice believes: this could be tight but ultimately we are going to prevail.

For Mayo, the interesting thing is that their straight line running can alleviate the pressure of not having a so-called marquee forward.

You don't need that kind of a player when you have a group of players coming in waves and creating productive chaos all over the place. If that continues to happen, then the argument may come into play and Kerry may be indeed forced to play a sweeper.

The winning and losing of the game will be in the middle third of the pitch. Whatever team plays with intensity and composure will win the game. The team that can avoid that initial phase of contact, recycle it, get runners off the shoulder, switches the play; then everything opens up and the scoring situation moves from one which is difficult to one which can be quite handy.

A few years ago, Mayo seemed to be kicking wonder points to stay in games. Here, they created high-percentage chances through the collective.

So in the space of a fortnight, Mayo have become a very unpredictable force. They look hungry; for tackles, for running, for goals. Hungry. Can they be 20 per cent better running the ball and can they improve on their kick outs?

I feel Mayo's energy would be best served this week working on a very clear plan for the middle third and kick-out options when pressed.

If Mayo can improve in those areas and return in the same mindset I think they can move on to the All-Ireland final.

GAA work away slowly, players walking away quickly over fixtures



Eamonn Donohoe Opinion

Two thirds of club players have considered quitting, CPA survey finds

Disillusioned by a pursuit that takes over a player's life like no amateur sport should. Like no

modern sport should – a staggering 60 per cent of club GAA players have considered “walking away” due to a lack of a definitive fixture calendar.

That's according to the most recent survey conducted by the Club Players Association, as they continue to go about their primary objective of fixing the fixtures.

Impossible ask

Tired of putting their lives on hold for their respective county's team to be knocked out of the championship. Weddings, holidays, work; all on hold. Committing to an indefinite season, with no sure start, middle or end date set. An impossible ask, which for many club players it seems, they may no longer be willing to keep answering.

The organisation, who aim to become “the club person's

voice in the GAA”, put four questions to their members earlier this month. With over 3,200 of their almost 25,000 members responding.

The most alarming of the four answers was the 1,924 (60 per cent) who said yes when

“Committing to an indefinite season, with no sure start, middle or end date set”

asked; “Have you ever considered walking away from the game because of the lack of a definitive fixture calendar at club level?”

Further to that, 95 per cent of those who partook in the survey believe the CPA should escalate its response to demon-

strate to the GAA that the club player is dissatisfied with their response to the unfairness of the system to the plight of the club player.

All of 99 per cent (3,192 members) think that club fixtures should be on the agenda at the forthcoming Special Congress in September. While 92 per cent of the club player/members are not willing to wait until 2020 for change to happen to the current club fixture situation.

In February, Congress passed the new Super 8 structure, which will replace the football quarter-finals from 2018. Replays for games other than provincial and All-Ireland finals have also been scrapped, with the intercounty season to be done and dusted by the end of August.

All of these measures will

Semi-final replay Prices reduced

The GAA has confirmed that stand tickets for Saturday's semi-final replay between Kerry and Mayo (Croke Park, 3pm), have been reduced to €35 from €45 and terrace tickets have been reduced by €5 to €15.

Meath's David Gough has been announced as the referee, the Dublin-based official took charge of last year's semi-final between Dublin and Kerry, and this year's Connacht final.

come into affect next year and run on a three-year experimental basis. The proposals were all staunchly rejected by both the

GPA and the CPA, but the voice of the intercounty and club players of Ireland had a combined single vote (the GPA) between them at Congress.

The issue being, they go nowhere near far enough in addressing the club fixture problems, and their experimental period delays the implementation of substantial change.

Rest and recovery

The CPA has already made the following proposals to deal with the fixture problem: The entire month of April must be a club only month no no inter-county games, challenges or training; The All-Ireland Club Championships must be played in the calendar year; The month of December must be free for all club and county players, for necessary rest and recovery.

The CPA's football fixtures

co-ordinator, and former Nemo Rangers and Cork midfielder, Derek Kavanagh told *The Irish Times*: “This is a message to the GAA. This is a fundamental request, all we are looking for is a fixtures definition for the hundreds of thousands expected to

ready gone. “And there are 18-20 year olds coming in with no respect for it, they are weighing it up and saying this is not the modern way. It's grand for the elite few but we are losing these lads.”

“The problem is the GAA are happy to blame county boards. County boards are blaming Croke Park. We are left to deal in a grey area but somebody needs to take responsibility.”

“The support we've received has been huge. We expected pain, and we aren't going away. But as the GAA are working away slowly, players are walking away quickly.”

Club championships nationwide are being split into two seasons, with players on constant standby, as key dates are often revealed a week or less before a club's do or die fixture. It cannot continue.

“They go nowhere near far enough in addressing the club fixture problems”

just keep going.

“It's already happening, we all have anecdotal evidence from the various dressing rooms. Lads saying F-this, and walking away. So I wasn't surprised, these are the players who considered quitting. It's not even including those al-