

Jim McGuinness



We can give the Leitrim a fighting chance of glory

There has been a lot of talk this summer about 'the gap' between the few elite Gaelic football counties and the rest. The way Dublin dismantled Tyrone led to several calls to divide the city into two distinct entities. I feel that would be completely wrong. The entire tradition of Gaelic Games is based on an emotional attachment to place as much as to the team. It doesn't make sense to effectively punish Dublin for doing what was demanded of them for years. They are simply getting the best out of the resources available to them. And they are here to stay.

What are the implications of this? Imagine what the Gaelic football landscape will be like in a decade's time. My best guess is that it won't change much. Dublin will be the standard bearers and the other strong counties will respond. Kerry will keep pace with them. Tyrone have been there since 2003. Mayo have been consistent. Cork will get their act together. But it is a bit of a private members' club.

So where does that leave the other counties? That's where the conversation needs to turn now.

I remember heading down to Leitrim with the Donegal lads for a few training weekends. Years before I was asked to come in and do some coaching with Clune, a small rural club. We won the intermediate championship and it was hugely enjoyable. You didn't need to spend long there to understand that this was a proper football county.

When I was there with Donegal, the few pubs we were in carried photographs of their local championship-winning teams and, of course, of the 1994 Connacht championship-winning side. You'd meet people and they were engaged, curious about what Donegal were up to and passionate about the sport.

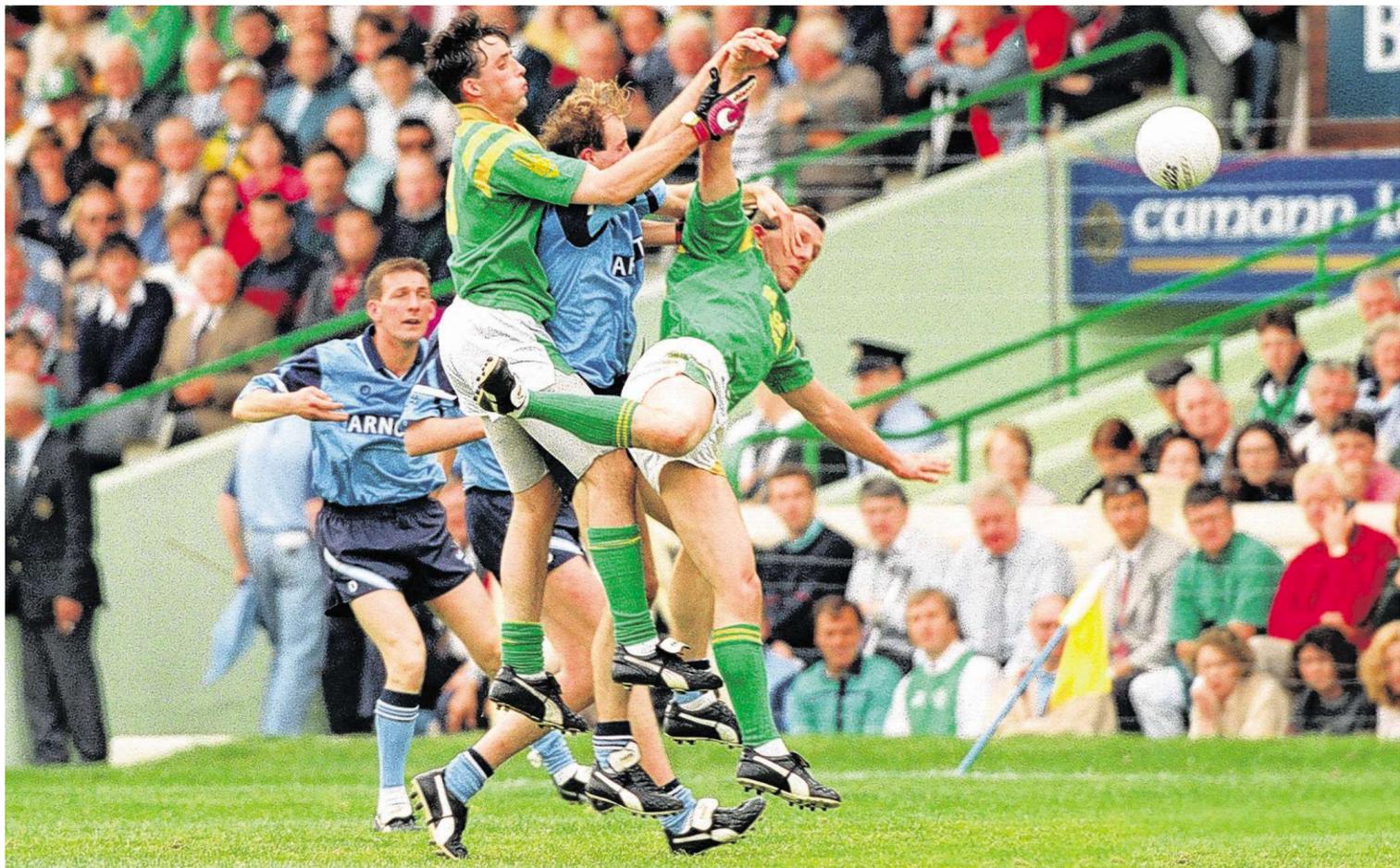
Intervention
But Leitrim has 25,000 people while Dublin has 1.4 million. Their entire sponsorship budget is probably worth as much as a single sponsored car. On Sunday week, the chances are that an eight-year-old in Drumshanbo and an eight-year-old in Drumcondra will watch the All-Ireland football final on television. Both may be thrilled and inspired by what they see. Both may wonder what it is like to play for their county in Croke Park. So why should the GAA give one child a better chance of achieving this than the other?

That's the reality for Leitrim right now. What can they and counties like them do to change their circumstances? Dublin North and Dublin South is not the answer to Leitrim flourishing. There needs to be both an internal and external intervention.

The first thing you need to do is to give the people and the players hope. You need to give them the belief that there is the potential to achieve something. This idea of: "We are developing. We are getting better. We are moving forward." That happens too seldom. In order to do that, I believe Leitrim and the vast majority of counties need guidance that can only come from a programme delivered by the GAA at national level designed to ensure uniform quality of coaching and support.

It was very interesting to listen to the conversations around the World Athletics Championship, where the correlation between funding and medals is made all the time. How does that work?

When I was in college in Liverpool around 2004, the whole talk was about London 2012. Jobs, strength and conditioning, psychologists' funding, resources, development, athletes—these were the buzz words. Huge money was going into



the Great Britain team in the expectation that the expertise would raise the standard across a variety of sports. And that is what happened. Investment yielded results.

The GAA, it seems to me, is run on two distinct tiers. There is the national GAA organisation. Then there are 33 affiliated but essentially independent republics called county boards. In order for the majority of the chasing counties—the other 25 or 26 counties—to improve, there has to be honesty of effort at county board level and a desire to get behind the vision for their county sides.

Culture
There needs to be an acceptance that there is a required level of preparation implemented across the country. That involves schools projects, sports science, strength and conditioning and expert coaching in all the counties. If that sounds like a professional structure imposed on an amateur ethos, well, let's stop kidding ourselves. That is happening anyway. Let's be honest about it.

It is only the weak counties or, to be more accurate, the underfunded counties that don't get that standard of training. There is a right way to develop the best young players in any county. Dublin know this. The teenager in Leitrim needs and deserves the same strength and conditioning and dietary advice and coaching as the kid in Dublin or Kerry. They need to be shown how to improve their skills by

coaches who have the background and knowledge.

There are people who play golf all their lives and never really improve. Why is that? Because they aren't being developed and because they keep doing the same things wrong. That liability is there all the time when the expertise is not applied. So if you want a kid to be the best he or she can be, then give them the best support to achieve that.

The gap won't close on its own. So who is going to instigate the change? There has to be an intervention at centralised GAA level to ensure that the standards rise at a national level. And maybe the response to this is that every county already has dedicated football coaches. That's fine and I am sure they are doing terrific work. But there is no balance across all counties. I would suggest that this is not a high performance structure or culture.

Tyrone, for example, is a different kettle of fish. They have their own independent coaching culture. They have just won the inaugural U-17 All-Ireland title. That's no surprise. They are a good example of a county that has not gone away because they have raised internal standards.

It was under Pat Gilroy's watch that Dublin began to run the senior team as a business. How do other counties replicate that? The obvious answer is: "We can't. We don't have the numbers or the resources."

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I feel that there almost has to be an acceptance at central level that the county boards do have not the capacity and in many cases the will to change this sense of resignation. I feel this is a big part of the problem. It is staring us in the face.

Results
In many cases, county board officers are trying their best. There are good people working hard and struggling just to keep the show running at club and under age level. I understand that. They don't have the time to launch themselves into it. What Dublin did over the past seven or eight years simply proves that this type of process—heavily funded and orchestrated coaching—works and yields results. That should be viewed as a positive. That should encourage the GAA to start investing in the other counties so that the vast majority don't feel as if they are there to make up the numbers.

My sense is that a lot of universities are at a higher standard of support processes than a lot of senior county set-ups. They have the facilities, the players are on campus, they have the sports science expertise, they have coaches at hand. They are getting the best of everything. But the colleges' competition is not one which attracts mass interest and passion.

That's the All-Ireland. It goes back to hope and emotional attachment. We can't have a situation where the majority of the counties just feel that being competitive is almost an impossible task and a lost cause.

■ Brian Stynes of Dublin jumps with Mickey Quinn of Leitrim during the 1994 All-Ireland football semi-final, which the Connacht champions lost after a wonderful run of wins over Roscommon, Galway and Mayo brought them to Croke Park. PHOTOGRAPH: LORRAINE O'SULLIVAN/INPHO

To me, that makes no sense. I, for one, don't believe that any cause is lost. Dublin are the barometer. Go chase them. It is not an easy proposition and would take a huge injection of energy and belief allied to a clear vision and the help of the GAA.

The Dublin machine is moving very smoothly at the minute. But that's because there are people in the city working hard to ensure that's the case. It is all streamlined. They are winning the battle every day on the ground. Gaining ground won't happen overnight. But it doesn't have to. If there is a will to change the prevailing circumstances and a desire to improve rather than to simply exist, then the playing field can become more even.

And in 10 years' time, Dublin will still have the advantage of population over counties like Leitrim. But if it can at least be said that those notional eight-year-olds have had the same chance to learn and excel at the game, then they will respond to that and I believe the results in many counties could be revolutionary and exciting.

All-Ireland SHC final Waterford reaction

'Up For The Match' brush parody a jibe too far for McGrath



Eamon Donoghue

Waterford manager also takes issue with some of the pre-match punditry

Derek McGrath hopes Waterford's progress this season will help hurling pundits move on from their sweeper obsession and accept that the game has been constantly evolving for a long time now.

Following his team's three-point All-Ireland semi-final defeat to Galway on Sunday, McGrath has taken issue with some of the pre-match debate.

One scene in particular on Saturday night's *Up For The Match* programme on RTÉ 1 tel-

evision has proved one jibe too many. "We were in Johnstown House on Saturday and I had made a decision earlier in the day that I'm not going to watch it," McGrath explained yesterday.

"Then as the day went on we were having so much craic up there we said we would."

"We just said, 'lads, if you want to watch *Up For The Match* go ahead. If you're the type of personality who doesn't, just go and do your own thing. If you're the type of personality who brings a story from it to another fella, be careful of that'. You're trying to avoid those conversations on the night before an All-Ireland final."

"But yeah, it was disappointing to see the ball being passed from brush to brush on national television."

"People might say I'm being over the top in criticising it but we're better than that, I think, in Waterford. We're better than passing a sliotar from brush to brush. I don't think it was right but that's just a personal opinion."

During the RTÉ preview

show presented by Des Cahill and Gráinne Seoige, a selection of scenes were based around locals using a sweeping brush, with a group of underage players in Ferrybank GAA club filmed training with the brush-

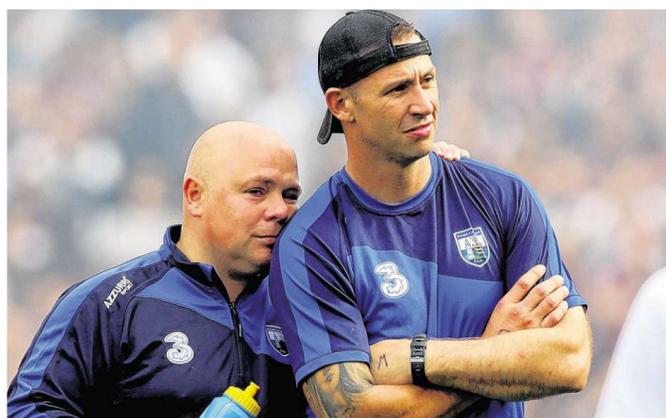
"We're going to sweep Galway, back to the west," they cheered, during the short segment.

Waterford's much-maligned defensive system, whereby Tadhg de Búrca drops back as a sweeper in front of the Déise full-back line, has been one of the major talking points throughout the summer.

"It's been a common trend of debate all along. It's just about how you look at it. Jimmy McGuinness always says, it's how you look at the game. There's something in that."

Language
"I keep saying it, it's more deliberate with Tadhg (de Búrca's role) but I still have the 1992 and 1993 final in my mind with Pat O'Neill sitting back there for Kilkenny."

"I still have Keady in the 1990 final. God be merciful to him,



■ Waterford manager Derek McGrath with selector Dan Shanahan in the aftermath of Sunday's final loss: "We died with our boots on." PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

on Tomás Mulcahy in the first half especially. I have Brian Hogan, I have... this year when Walter Walsh wasn't followed down the field by Declan Hannon, I've Declan Hannon sitting at the edge of one D and Cillian

Buckley sitting at the edge of the other D. All the narratives that are there as opposed to the sweeper system.

"Even the language of commentators when they are talking, it's the Waterford sweeper,

but when it's the language of someone else it's the extra midfielder, it's the man helping back.

"That's only kind of irksome rather than something that's in my mind for a long time."

"We'd like to think we're the ones making the most informed decisions because we're working on it. We believed in what we were doing and the lads believed in it as well."

"My mother had taped Donal Óg [Cusack] the day of the Cork game and he'd been very complimentary of the team and what they'd done."

"I watched him on *The Sunday Game* when he was on it and I felt he was very incisive in terms of showing what's happened. He's missed there."

With a night's sleep under his belt, McGrath—who has a year left on his term as manager—says he has still yet to consider his own future, but the goodwill his team received on Sunday night has helped ease the abject disappointment.

"There was a sense we died with our boots on, so that was the feeling."

"We didn't go to bed happy, obviously we were massively disappointed, but we felt we were really well supported. The disappointment was helped by the amount of good will last night."

All-Ireland SFC

McQuillan to referee final

The GAA has confirmed the appointment of Cavan's Joe McQuillan as Sunday week's All-Ireland football final referee.

The Kill Shamrocks clubman previously refereed the 2013 final between this year's finalists Mayo and Dublin, and the 2011 decider which Dublin also won, beating Kerry.

McQuillan also refereed the All-Ireland U-21 final in 2006, the All-Ireland club final in 2008, three Leinster finals, one Munster final and two Ulster finals.

In this year's Football Championship, he has refereed the quarter-final between Roscommon and Mayo, the Ulster final between Tyrone and Down, the Leinster semi-final between Meath and Kildare, and the Connacht semi-final between Galway and Mayo.

"It is great honour, with two big teams in it, so I'm just delighted," he said. "I knew I was on the shortlist, but until you get the phone call you are still never sure who is going to do it."