

Championship 2017

Jim McGuinness



Bitter truth is Mayo have only themselves to blame

Everyone in Croke Park and watching around the world knew that Mayo were poised to win the All-Ireland on Sunday. They had created their perfect storm and the Sam Maguire was there to be claimed. I am talking both generally about their performance but specifically about that moment when they were two points up after 63 minutes. They had Dublin dragged into their cave right then.

I could feel it as I was watching it in Beijing. You could tell by the atmosphere in the stadium and the faces in the crowd. There was a kind of realisation – a dawning – that they were witnessing history in the making. I got the same feeling. I had the goose bumps for them. I believed it was going to happen. Dublin were just hanging around for a long time in the game.

But 15 minutes later, Stephen Cluxton was lifting the cup and Mayo were devastated: runners-up again. They had lost by point – again – and there were no words. I couldn't believe it and still can't. It was after midnight when the match ended here. I switched off the light and I had this heavy feeling that their moment to claim what had come to feel like a destined win had somehow slipped out of their grasp. And much as we all admire this Mayo group, the bitter truth is that they have only themselves to blame.

How did they lose this? It was clear from the get-go that the performance level and intensity which was there since the Roscommon quarter-final replay would not be a problem. They had the purpose, the intent, the drive and they had Dublin on the back foot despite the boon of Con O'Callaghan's sensational goal.

We spoke about how critical it was for Mayo to shut down the middle channel and here, in the second minute, was a rookie waltzing down the centre. If you looked at the screen, the Dublin forwards were hugging the sideline to create that gap. It was a bad, bad goal to give away. But Mayo just shrugged and responded with three terrific points and I felt that after that it was their mentality that was imposing the flow of the game: this sense of today is our day. We are going to make it happen.

That was evident in the speed with which they closed down the Dublin kick-out and then, when Stephen Cluxton was forced long, Dublin got a battering in the middle of the field. I will always remember the ferocity with which Jason Doherty went for one breaking ball. Their focus was absolute. They played heads-up smart football and held Dublin to two points from play in the half.

Stretched

If there was one criticism, it was that they tried to play Andy Moran and Doherty inside too much rather than just keep running at Dublin. They got as much out of themselves as possible but they also missed an incredible amount of handy scores. I felt they had Dublin stretched and could also have really troubled them by running with the support runner there to flick a handy score over the bar.

When they were 0-7 to 1-2 up after 25 minutes, I felt that they were dragging Dublin into a place where they didn't want to be. Mayo looked in better physical shape than Dublin, too. They were keeping the ball really well and had a high intensity composition in terms of how they were handling and moving it. When you are playing against another team, there comes a moment when you look in their eyes and you know they are on song. And you also sense that they are just physically edging you. And I felt that Mayo brought that there and then.

You could see that Dublin were collectively taken back a little by what they were encountering. A feeling of: whoah, this is different. Mayo coughed up two needless frees which hauled Dublin back into it on the scoreboard. But in the real open contest, they were winning battles all over the field.

It meant that Jim Gavin couldn't hold his bench back as long as normal. The Jack McCaffrey injury was a disruption and



■ Donal Vaughan barges into John Small following Small's foul on Colm Boyle. "The game hinged on the John Small yellow card and then, in the blink of an eye, the reaction by Donal Vaughan. It felt for me that in football terms, there was a shifting of the tectonic plates in those few seconds." PHOTOGRAPH: EODIN NOONAN/SPORTSFILE VIA GETTY IMAGES

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I hope I am wrong and I am not saying that they will never win the All-Ireland. But that was a moment when there was an understanding that this huge quest was ON in a way that it hadn't been on since, well, 1951

forced an early change. But they needed Diarmuid Connolly and Kevin McManamon at half time. Both did well – I felt that Connolly was sluggish but still had that moment of brilliance with his 57th minute right footed point and the experience to draw the defining free in the 75th minute.

Still, Dublin had most of their cards played by the 45th minute and were facing into an absolute slug-out with a Mayo team which was not going to relent. They were in a war.

So the game hinged on the John Small yellow card and then, in the blink of an eye, the reaction by Donal Vaughan. It felt for me that in football terms, there was a shifting of the tectonic plates in those few seconds.

The dynamic of the game had changed hugely for a split second when Small fouled Colm Boyle. Now, Mayo have a free to level the game and a numerical advantage if Joe McQuillan, the referee, books

Small for a second time – as surely he must. Now, it's 15 v 14 and Mayo can use that extra man as a sweeper against a Dublin team which has already played its hand. Dublin had lost all the initiative in that second and then, through Vaughan's reaction, they not just regained it but the outcome left them in a better place.

Mind boggling

Fourteen v fourteen was always going to suit Dublin better than Mayo. It meant that Mayo couldn't push up zonally on Cluxton's kick-out. So in the blink of an eye the worst possible circumstance for Dublin – one man down against a ravenous team in great shape – is changed. It was incredible. It was mind boggling. Plus, they lost a real physical presence, a stopper and a smart ball player in Vaughan. There are five or six different angles in that one moment. On a human level, I feel hugely sorry for Vaughan. As a coach, that kind of indiscipline drives me berserk.

But Mayo lose Vaughan, fall into a 1-10 to 0-11 hole after 51 minutes and then respond by going two up in a period defined by Lee Keegan's goal. With everything that is driving them internally, that response was going to be there. But you have to wonder: what would the response have been with 15 men on the field? Anyhow: here Mayo are: six minutes from home – home being the 70th minute. This was their time to take a deep breath and set about taking their All-Ireland.

Yet nothing changed for Mayo. It could have been a quarter-final or a semi-final. We keep going! We keep rampaging! It didn't work. Because they didn't Manage The Game. When you are seven minutes away from injury time in an All-Ireland final, you break that time down into 30

second sequences. The time came there and then to protect. Their only task after Cillian O'Connor's free was to get to the 64th minute without conceding. And then the 65th.

I heard Pat Spillane saying afterwards that Mayo don't know how to win. That is not true. They know how to win. They have won more games than Kerry in the last five years. They know how to win games of football and how to manage games. But they didn't do it here.

Ring of truth

Instead, they maintained this kind of purist honesty: they persisted in playing the game in all-out warrior mode. And they had done enough of that. There is a ring of truth in what Spillane said in that Dublin know how to get over the line, even when they are not 100 per cent functioning. That's partly because they expect Mayo to stick to their guns which means: we will always get a chance, lads.

Mayo needed to force Dublin to think their way through that two-point deficit. And yes, Dublin might have landed a point. But you have to remember the intensity of Chris Barrett and Harrison and these guys: they were in the form of their lives. Andy Moran was never going to have a better day than this. Let him see it out.

Why not play on the break for seven minutes? Fall back, defend from the 50 and exploit the fact that onus is on Dublin to come and get the scores. Then look to hit them on the break. Slow down the kick-out. Foul deep out the field. It doesn't have to be cynicism. If you win a free, just leave the ball down and let someone else come to take it. Twenty seconds here, 10 seconds there.

Look at what Dublin did when the game

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Even after the Vaughan incident, they still dragged Dublin into the cave and then they didn't club them. They said: 'you're not a bad lad, off you go' ... They let them escape to victory. And in fairness, Dublin went. They took the prize

was at 1-16 apiece. Diarmuid Connolly wins the free and immediately starts smiling and telling everyone to calm down. How much time was killed between his winning that free and Rock striking it? They were in no rush. One minute and 25 seconds passed between Connolly winning the free and Rock putting it over the bar.

Then, when Mayo go to restart, four Dublin forwards are head-locking their men. Cormac Costello gets booked. Ciarán Kilkenny leaves the field on a black card, in no real hurry. A full 57 seconds pass and now the game is gone beyond the six minutes of allotted injury time. In other words, Dublin have succeeded in eating over two full minutes off the clock through one free. And as Kilkenny leaves, he is shouting: Drop! Drop. In other words; fall back, put the pressure on Mayo. I am not condoning what Dublin did in

that instance. But there are also legal ways to manage and slow and basically kill a game. If Mayo could have protected that two-point lead until injury time, everything changes. Injury minutes are not like normal minutes. The pressure on the team that needs the score is multiplying by the second. It is not a game of football then. It is a game of will. Mayo kept playing a game of football. People crack and make mistakes and drop a solo because everything comes to bear in those moments. When you are two up with seven minutes to go, it becomes a different task.

Just stop. Spoil

Mayo's task was to stop playing the game and start managing it. Everything that you have learned in your life about football: put that into action there and then to buy you and your team-mates time to stop the opposition. Just stop. Spoil.

Everything from when you are eight years of age comes to bear where you control them and not the other way around. Even after the Vaughan incident, they still dragged Dublin into the cave and then they didn't club them. They said: 'you're not a bad lad, off you go'.

This doesn't translate to the old stick of Mayo being "too nice". We are not talking about vindictiveness. We are talking about nous – all the stuff you have collected. Just slow them, make them go lateral. The damning fact is that the points which Paul Mannion and James McCarthy scored to recover that two-point deficit were practically the easiest shots that Mayo gave Dublin in the entire final.

They let them escape to victory. And in fairness, Dublin went. They took the prize. Winning three All-Ireland titles is an amazing achievement. This could easily go to five in a row for Jim Gavin's team. At the end of it, they found a way to win a game that they looked like losing. And they held their heads when everyone else was losing theirs. Right now, it's hard to make a convincing argument about who might replace them on the podium next summer.

Mayo, of course, are the team that has pushed Dublin hardest. And I just feel like they left their moment out there. And I felt hollow for them and I was thinking: that's it. It's over. They are back at square one. They have to get back to the All-Ireland final, number one. And then they have to get that performance level. And they have to drag Dublin back into that space – that cave – into which they dragged them on Sunday.

Just to get to that stage again is going to take a phenomenal effort and I felt like everything – the past disappointments, the heroic resolve of this group, the way they caught fire at the right time, the golden autumn of Andy Moran, players like Chris Barrett and Colm Boyle in the form of their lives – had created this rare atmosphere in Croke Park where everyone knew that the day was theirs, for a brief time.

I hope I am wrong and I am not saying that they will never win the All-Ireland. But that was a moment when there was an understanding that this huge quest was ON in a way that it hadn't been on since, well, 1951. It is a special moment. Mayo are still a very good football team. They will be in the quarter-finals and it's highly probable that they will be in the semi-finals next summer. For me, however, the moment for them to win the All-Ireland final materialised on Sunday and it was waiting to be taken.

Can you get that moment back? For the life of me I don't know.

Rochford to consider his future with Mayo over the next month



Eamon Donoghue

'There'll be no victimisation here of anybody' - Mayo manager defends Vaughan

Stephen Rochford will spend the month of October deciding whether or not he will return for the third year of his term as Mayo senior football manager.

The Crossmolina native was appointed as Mayo boss in December 2015 for a three-year term, and for the second time in

as many years on Sunday he came within a point of claiming Sam Maguire.

Last summer his team lost the final to Dublin by the minimum after a replay, and this time around the same margin was between the teams after 78 minutes.

Talking in the Citywest hotel yesterday morning, the same venue which hosted his team last year, he said he expects Mayo to regroup and come again in 2018.

"It's not any easier," explained the 38-year-old, "it's very difficult losing finals by one point, two points. We didn't have an ambition to come up and be a good second we were quite happy to be a poor first but it wasn't to be.

Some things. It's a long trek to get back here but I have no doubt the lads will look to regroup over the winter and see what that takes them next spring and into the summer."

Long faces
Since 2012 Mayo have played in five All-Ireland finals (one replay), and lost two semi-finals after replays. In that time they've had their summer ended by the eventual champions every year. Over the past two years they have played 19 championship matches.

"There can only be one winner and you know getting into this that there'll be 31 counties coming with long faces and one smiling on the third Monday in September. It's something that we'll look to get over during the winter.

"We were totally invested in winning that game. It wasn't to be. Tight calls, tight margins, a post. I've no doubt when we sit

down at the end of this week or early next week and look back, we'll pick out a number of things that we could have done better. In that I know that we didn't play to our best. And in that way I think that there's still room for improvement in the lads."

One of the key moments in the defeat was the sending off of Donal Vaughan, who reacted to a John Small hit on Colm Boyle. Small picked up his second yellow, but Mayo were denied any numerical advantage as Vaughan received a straight red.

"Just out of the mayhem that is out here, I haven't got to speak to him yet. I definitely will in the next couple of hours. I haven't seen the incident yet but I thought from pitchside that it possibly looked worse than it was. I thought it was just a case of him running in to re-monstrate.

"With Colm on the ground



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he sort of had to jump over him and maybe that made it look worse. It's one of these things, he's been super for us all year and he was having a fine game

yesterday. There'll be no victimisation here of anybody.

"All 35 that's in that squad worked each other to the bone to get us into that position to be able to be competitive and go to that 78th minute.

"Moments within these games don't define these guys. If they did, they'd have been finished four or five years ago. Mentally they are a very strong group, they are a very tight group and we know again that there's more percentage points to improve on and I've no doubt the talent is there."

Despite the Mayo bench failing to provide any major impact, Rochford believes the age demographic of those who came on is very promising.

"We certainly had legs and youth coming off the bench – all those guys coming on for us are hugely athletic, some of our top fitness guys.

of 25, three of them at 22. While Dublin were bringing on All-Ireland winners and experience, we were certainly bringing on All-Ireland winners at minor and under-21 with youth and that's encouraging as well for the years ahead."

Cluxton's knockout
Pre- and post-match Stephen Cluxton's knockout was a major talking point. Mayo won six of his 14 in the first half but none of his 11 in the second half. What did Dublin change?

"They way the game goes it naturally opens up that little bit more. I think they got huge success off the short kick-out in the second-half. Their movement, and then you had a situation where it was five v five at the back after the sending off.

adapted well to us winning that ball in the middle of the field in the first half. But at the same time we worked some good short kickouts ourselves, and I think that's just part of what happens when the game gets wrong out around that 45-50 minute period.

"Dublin are just very good, very economical on the ball, even when you think you have them wrapped up they're able to manoeuvre a chance. So look, the winner always writes the script so fair dues to Dublin."

So will he be back next year to stop the capital's push for four in a row?
"I have to do a bit of thinking now during the month of October and see how it is. I've gone into a new job with work, two young kids, so there's a good bit to consider now at this stage. But we'll do that during October and talk to the county board."