

Philly McMahon interview

'I couldn't face losing this All-Ireland final with my Da in the crowd'



Malachy Clerkin

The Dublin defender on how the team were tighter than ever and why last Sunday's win felt like a precious gift

Philly McMahon is ordering lunch. The waiter is standing there with a little two-by-four pocket notebook and when Philly picks out a salad from the menu, he dutifully jots it down.

"Can I have bacon with that?" Philly asks, and the chap says no problem. "And flaked almonds..." Sure. "And red onions..." Absolutely. "And blue cheese dressing..." Yep. "And..."

It's not often you see a waiter having to flip to a second page for a simple salad.

"Season's over," McMahon smiles. "This is me treating myself. I don't drink alcohol so this makes up for what the lads have been drinking since Sunday."

It's Thursday afternoon and by now the fizz has settled on the celebrations. McMahon enjoyed them well enough but you can tell he isn't exactly straining at the leash for more. Partly out of sheer exhaustion, partly out of being used to it, partly out of having bigger things to attend to just now.

Don't misunderstand him. This isn't yawning indifference, seen-it-all ennui from a five-time All-Ireland winner. He's not in the least bit blasé about what the Dubs did against Mayo last Sunday. The total opposite, in fact. For a very particular reason, it was the biggest game of his life.

When we meet, he has just come from Beaumont Hospital. When we're done, he's heading back. A little over two months ago, his father Phil was diagnosed with cancer of the stomach. The prognosis is terminal. They're trying chemo but his platelets were down this morning so his body wasn't in a position to take it. So today is a bad day.

Just now, the McMahaons are in that brutal canyon of doubt and anxiety that every cancer family wanders through. The highs are too high and lows are too low.

Phil McMahon is a young man, still in his early 60s. And he's bearing it well – when the consultant gave him the initial verdict, the already bald Belfast native asked if this meant he was going to lose his hair. But he really could have done with this being caught earlier than it was.

He was in Croke Park on Sunday and saw his son win that fifth All-Ireland. When it was over, Philly went looking for him. He finally spotted him a few rows back in the Hogan Stand, stuck in the middle of a few rows of Mayo supporters.

Tonweight

Some of them weren't best pleased when Philly started wading through them to get to him and in the heat and emotion of it all, one guy started showing the corner-back.

"Look, me Da is sick and I just want to go to him," McMahon said. Conversation over. Apologies and handshakes all around.

Between one thing and another, the last few months have been a ton weight to carry. Never was he happier to go along with the much-lampooned Dubs mantra of just sticking to the process. His father's bomb dropped mid-championship and there was nothing he could do about it only stand up straight and try to keep walking on.

"Do you know what? I thought it would have been a huge motivation, initially. But really and truly in those early days, it was stress, just pure stress. As it went, it became more of a motivation.

"I couldn't face losing the last All-Ireland he'd ever see me play in. No way. So really,



Philly McMahon, on the shoulders of John Small, hoists the Sam Maguire aloft at Hill 16 after last Sunday's win over Mayo. Photograph: Dara Mac Dónaill /

what that makes it, it's the best gift I've ever got off the rest of the players. The management team, the staff, the kitmen, everyone. You can't win an All-Ireland on your own. To be able to go to me Da and say, 'Here, that's for you. I'll never forget that.'

"All the lads knew. They were a huge help over the last couple of months. Fellas like Eoghan O'Gara went visiting him and stuff like that. So like, just to be shown that these lads really care about you as a team-mate and as a friend meant a lot. It was huge."

Dublin were a tight bunch this year. Numerically, the panel was more or less the same size as it always was but in real terms, McMahon reckons it felt bigger than ever. More fringe players with genuine chances of getting a game. More instability for the older guys. Niall Scully started the year in the O'Byrne Cup and finished it in the final. Cormac Costello couldn't make the 26 for the All-Ireland semi-final but was there at the end three weeks later.

With that amount of flux going on, McMahon reckons they had a nigh-on perfect league. As a knock-on effect of coming back later than everyone else, they weren't playing overly well in games. But they weren't getting beaten either.

They hunted down Kerry, Tyrone and

Monaghan late on in games where they were second-best a lot of the way. The rest of us watched on from the sidelines and declared they were fighting tooth and nail to keep their unbeaten record. McMahon's view is they got something far more tangible out of it.

Drawn games

"In those drawn games, they were games where we were coming back from positions where we should have lost. We ground it back to not lose and that showed character. So any celebration was that it was a game we should have lost and didn't. The learning was, 'I came through a battle with you. That game was gone and look how we all fought for it together.' That's what creates camaraderie. We fought together – and for a draw, like. That's nearly as good as a win.

"It's actually nearly better in a way because when you win a game by five or six points, you don't get that feeling. You don't get that buzz. You don't look at the guy next to you and go, 'I worked for you today, I battled for my team-mate when it really mattered.'

"When you hammer a team, you don't get any of that. You don't develop, you don't grow as a player. Whereas those

draws, for me personally anyway, meant that we became a bit tighter and grew a little bit more as players.

"And we learned from them, definitely. It shows we did – we're All-Ireland champions now. We were a bit behind the other teams in the league but what it told us was that we weren't that far behind. That showed us that we were able to finish games even if we weren't starting them at a certain level of consistency. So if you took the whole league campaign and put it into a match, it would have been the final last Sunday. Inconsistent, stronger at the end, got the job done."

They nearly got it done in the league final, of course. Or at least, nearly escaped not getting it done at the death. But Dean Rock's free hit the post and Kerry were league champions.

"Losing that made us think a bit deeper about what we were doing," McMahon says. "It brought a bit of hurt to us. Not so much losing the five-in-a-row or that it was Kerry that beat us, nothing like that. It was more that our own standards for each other weren't good enough and that hurt."

"It was one of those games where, even if Dean had kicked that last score and we had somehow ground out a win, we probably wouldn't have got much out of it. It's not

about going out and winning by a point playing badly – we want to win the way we want to win. Not the way we don't want to win, performance-wise, if that makes any sense.

"Whereas we beat Mayo on Sunday and it was a dogged fight and we came through it. You enjoy that sort of performance and that sort of win. Don't get me wrong – the Kerry game in the league final was dogged too but it didn't have the same impact. We didn't play well. Especially after how the game had gone in Tralee. They had brought their physicality to that game and the league final was a second chance for both teams to have another good clip at each other. And we just didn't stand up to them."

Holiday

Jim Gavin sent them away for six weeks afterwards, a spruce-up for their minds as much as anything else. McMahon did something he hasn't been able to do since before he made his intercounty debut in 2008 – he went on a summer holiday with his girlfriend. They went to Rome for a week, ate pizza, pasta and ice-cream to beat the band. Loved it.

If the Dubs had a signature performance in the summer, maybe it was the one against Tyrone. Anyone who thought

it was going to be a serious game was quickly disabused of the notion. From the outside looking in, Dublin appeared supremely well-drilled. McMahon agrees, but only up to a point.

"You can't be chained to a system. That's the good thing about our management, they like us to express ourselves. What happened to us against Donegal [in 2014] happened because we weren't smart and we weren't adaptable that day. If you have an overreliance on the management to spot things that are going on on the pitch, that's not good. We needed to spot them and fix them ourselves.

"We've definitely learned how to beat the blanket defence. In terms of, after Donegal, against all the teams that played the blanket defence, we've probably won more games than we've lost. Teams have to be adaptable."

At one point in the first half against Tyrone, McMahon called a halt to a Dublin break-out attack by holding the ball in midfield even though it meant Tyrone players were able to get back into their position. It seemed slightly odd at the time, as though they wanted Tyrone to get into a certain formation before taking them on. McMahon explains now though that he had his

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own players in mind at the time, not the opposition's.

"You have to be a smart footballer. You have to be able to look at what's in front of you and say, 'Hold on a second here'. It wasn't so much allowing them to get back in position, it was more to allow us to get into our own positions. Because that day, our forwards were awesome. Our forwards were the winning of that game, how hard they tackled and how much work they did. So it's not easy for them to defend like they did and then to get up the pitch and be expected to score.

"It wasn't a tactic, it wasn't something we spoke about doing, it wasn't something the management said to us. It was just, 'Right lads, hold on a second, this game is frantic, going end to end, let's just relax for a minute and have a bit of restraint on what we're doing so everyone can fill up again.' Because essentially that's what Tyrone's game is – they get back and then they go. That's very fatiguing, that's very tough to do."

All winter talk now, of course.

For McMahon, the season is done and there are bigger fences to jump as he goes. He has a book coming out in a few weeks, although anyone chasing an insight into the inner workings of the Dublin dressing room will be disappointed. There is, he says, barely any football in it at all.

"I have no ambition to do anything in a book about sport. There's little mentions here and there in the book about me and sport the choices I made in taking up sport but there's nothing about Dublin in it."

"I wanted to do a book for people who are addicts, families of people who are addicts, even kids going back to repeat their Leaving Cert – it's for a huge amount of people who are struggling in different ways. It's called *The Choice* and it's about the choices I took in life and the choices my brother John took in life. Basically, I can't keep talking to the media about this story. It's all there in a book now for anyone who wants to know about it."

And with that, we're done. Another year over, another battle won, another one up ahead. Whatever else, he'll face it head on.

Championship 2018

So what now for Gaelic football? The Super 8s explained



Eamon Donoghue

Best teams will face off more often next summer under the new format

Mayo heartbroken. Dublin history-makers. What a final, the standard of Gaelic football is better than ever.

Over the concluding eight weekends of this year's All-Ireland football championship we had one brilliant quarter-final – out of five. We had two pulsating semi-finals – out of three. And a

final that showed just how good modern football is – at the very top table. The climax had us all gripped, but before that?

In this year's provincial finals there was an average winning margin of 0-9, the four quarter-finals concluded with an average margin of 0-15, and the semi-finals' concluding average was 0-9.

The All-Ireland championship's beginning will always bring optimism and interest, its ending has been spectacular in recent seasons, the in-between however has been a forgettable run of mismatches and debate about why that should be.

What's next? We'll have more club games to look forward to with eir Sport showing 30 more live games before the New Year, on top of TG4's coverage.

There's the International Rules series and, before we know it, the intercounty pre-season tournaments will be up and running and we go again. It'll keep us go-

ing, but the provincial and All-Ireland championships are what it's all about – and four great games over eight weeks is not enough.

So from 2018 the GAA have looked to address that mid-summer lull by introducing the Super 8s. But what will that entail?

What changes will be made to next year's calendar?

The draft calendar for next year would see the leagues finishing at the same time as they did this year, before the end of April.

The football championship will be run off on a more concentrated basis with more same-day outcomes and the All-Ireland finals concluded by the end of August – unless Croke Park is needed in connection with the potential papal visit next year.

The precise details of the hurling year await the decision of the GAA special congress at the end of September on the proposal to introduce a round-robin format

in the provincial championships.

What is the Super 8s?

The GAA Super 8s will replace the current All-Ireland football quarter-finals. So the last eight teams in the championship will be placed into two groups, each comprised of four teams. So each of these eight counties will have three games apiece against the other teams in their group to reach a semi-final. With the top two teams in each group progressing.

Each team will have a home game, an away game and a game at Croke Park. The first group will contain the Munster champions, Connacht champions, Ulster runner-up (or qualifier team that beats them in Round four), Leinster runner-up (or qualifier team that beats them in round four).

The second group will be made up of the Ulster champions, Leinster champions, Mun-

ster runner-up (or qualifier team that beats them in Round four), Connacht runner-up (or qualifier team that beats them in round four).

So this year the Super 8s

0-15

Average winning margin in this year's All-Ireland senior football championship quarter-finals

would have contained in one group; Kerry, Roscommon, Monaghan and Armagh. The second would've included; Tyrone, Dublin, Mayo and Galway.

When does it come into place? The Super 8s will run from summer 2018, the first of a three-year trial period for the new format. It is planned that

the first round of group fixtures be split into two weekends, each with two matches. With the other two rounds taking place on two weekends of four matches, involving both groups. The matches will take place over the month of July and the start of August. The aim is for the All-Ireland semi-finals (played over one weekend) and final to be wrapped up by the end of August. This will also be aided by the scrapping of replays – except for provincial and All-Ireland finals – although of course if a game is level after extra time a replay will again be necessary.

What will it change?

First and foremost it'll mean that the best teams will face off more often. So that means we'll have more quality games to watch and for those who are currently trailing behind the Dublin, Kerry and Mayo, the extra games should improve them significantly. So in short, the posi-

tives will be more competitive fixtures, in that there'll be more TV revenue, and the month of September should be cleared for club fixtures. Also, there'll be more big games out of Croke Park, although Dublin will still have an advantage with two of their three matches to be played at home in GAA HQ.

Why didn't the players want it then?

On the flip side, for those who have little chance of reaching the last eight, the gap between them and the top teams is almost certainly going to get bigger. How can they close an already yawning gap, by playing even fewer games. Basically the Super 8s means that the best teams will get better. As for the rest?

That's one of the reasons the GPA opposed the motion at Annual Congress. Another (and the recently formed Club Players Association were also in op-

position over this one) is because the three-year trial basis prevents any other structural changes in the calendar during that period – so not only will that intercounty gap grow and grow – but the pressing club fixtures problems will also be exacerbated. With club players signing up for an indefinite, split season, with no defined beginning, middle or end – both associations had hoped for a structural change which would address these concerns.

So...

So next summer the intercounty championships will begin with the usual – albeit diminishing – hopes of counties nationwide. The middle will be run off quicker, with the inevitable mismatches continuing. But this time the conclusion is sure to include a lot more than four top-drawer matches. So hold your breath for July, it's sure to be interesting.