

Tipping Point

Brian O'Connor



Picking on location over merit is simply unsustainable

Irish rugby has its own little morality play going on. Rather than good and evil it's a tussle between sentiment and money, although for many it seems to be the same thing. And sure enough the outcome is utterly predictable. In professional sport the money always wins.

That the bad guy gets the girl sticks in a lot of rugby crawls. But ultimately they'll wind up having to swallow it as best they can. You've got to be able to afford your sentiment and the game can't pay enough to keep all its top players here.

The End. Instead what's interesting about the contract negotiation hand-wringing which surrounds Peter O'Mahony in particular – but a forming queue of other Irish international players too – is its appeal to something more worthy.

Everyone knows the major card the IRFU has to play is the honour of playing for Ireland. So if a player decides to go overseas they forfeit the chance of playing for their country. Unless you're Johnny Sexton of course.

Sexton's the exception that encouraged everyone else to believe themselves exceptional too. It's a move which has left

the IRFU's stand on not picking players for the national team unless they're based here open to charges of expediency.

Nevertheless the IRFU does have a lot of good on its side. By stressing the primacy of the national team on the back of a provincial structure that has helped catapult the game's popularity, the stance on playing here in order to play for here actually appeals to sport's better side.

Crediting the IRFU with altruism is a push. But there is a conscience to the official stance that contains an overall perspective for the good of the game. So they play the hand they have as well as they can.

There are reassurances on player welfare and an acknowledgement that burnout on the back of playing too many matches elsewhere is a real issue. There's the pull of home, of playing in front of your own and most of all representing the national team.

These factors play to the sentiment at the root of all sport, the things that pull us to it in the first place. They appeal to the heart, to a connection with the local, the honour of representing something bigger than the individual. It's worthy stuff, a plea

to our better selves.

For once, officials mindful of the potential unravelling impact on the provinces, and the game's overall profile here if a stream of top players going abroad turns into a flood, are essentially good guys fighting a good fight.

Financial bottom-line

The only problem is that it's futile. And it's fascinating how long it's taking Irish rugby to properly face up to that. The sport of choice for much of the business class is finding it hard to acknowledge the financial bottom-line: when it comes to professional players, it's the tobacco that counts.

In fact the real intriguing element to all this soul-searching is that anyone can reasonably argue it being any other way.

Professional sportspeople have a responsibility to themselves to do the best they can for themselves. That doesn't mean ruthlessly devouring first-borns. But it does mean acknowledging sport is first and foremost your job.

Every player knows they are just one bad injury from career oblivion. There's no glory in patriotism when everyone has

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moved on to the next great hero and you're left limping into obscurity. It's easy to be sentimental on someone else's back.

That some of the rugby base can still affect to turn its nose up at such professional reality reeks of nostalgia for more old-school 'ragby' and the self-regarding

baggage tied up in it.

Rugby isn't better than that anymore. A player willing to turn down double the money in order to keep playing for their national side is either happily impervious to financial worry or a mug.

And countering that with romance is either naive or a cynical attempt at steering an agenda.

The structure built up here over two decades has allowed the game flourish. Stark market forces haven't been allowed completely reign and there have been considerable benefits to sidestepping the market sometimes, like the arrangements that keep Sexton and Jamie Heaslip at Leinster.

Commercial reality

But those in charge can't presume to continue incubating the game here from commercial and sporting reality. Picking the Ireland team on location rather than merit is simply unsustainable.

Plucking redolent old-school 'ragby' strings about identity is fine for fans. But rare is the professional that can afford to indulge in them. It's interesting to hear O'Mahony consistently refer to Munster

as a club, which is what it is, a commercial operation with goodwill factored into profit and loss.

Expecting him or anyone else to turn down a significantly better offer from France or England for the sake of any shade of shirt is not a runner. The sooner the IRFU acknowledge that, the better, even if it does seem all a little bit too football for some.

Digging the heels in on playing for Ireland will ultimately cost Irish rugby. And throwing the hands up and accepting the inevitable will probably cost too, perhaps no more so than in relation to the provincial set-up.

Fears of the clubs here ultimately turning into feeders for Europe's richest operations are hardly groundless. But preventing players from playing for Ireland because they try to make the most of a short career at elite level won't work.

No one blinked during the Simon Zebo contract negotiations and the result is a top class Irish player not playing international rugby. That's a situation that benefits no one, except, ironically, Racing 92. It's the sort of twist in the tale we can do without.

Golf Tour News

Irish pair pipped to Shootout title

Stricker and O'Hair edge out McDowell and Lowry after final round of 64

Consolation for the runners-up as they receive cheques of \$257,500 each

PHILIP REID

Shane Lowry and Graeme McDowell were thwarted in their quest to claim a pre-Christmas end-of-season jackpot when edged out by Steve Stricker and Sean O'Hair in the QBE Shootout in Naples, Florida, a two-man team competition that finished with a best ball format in the final round.

Lowry, making his debut in the competition, and McDowell, a veteran of six appearances, were the only non-American team in the 54-holes tournament hosted by Greg Norman. Although their closing round 66 for a total of 24-under-par 192 – two behind the winners – left them short of the title, there was the compensation of sharing a cheque for \$515,000 (\$257,500 each, €218,800) for the Irish duo.

Having shared the 36-hole lead, and moving ahead with an opening hole birdie, it proved to be a frustrating homework run for the Lowry-McDowell partnership.

Time and time again, birdie putts refused to drop with McDowell failing to hole birdie chances on the 13th and 14th before finally getting some reward for his efforts with a six-footer on the 15th.

"It's got to be right edge," whispered McDowell to Lowry, who concurred with the assessment. McDowell sank the putt,



Lightning strikes the course at Randpark, causing play to be suspended during the final round of the Joburg Open yesterday. PHOTOGRAPH: CHRISTIAAN KOTZE/EPA

to get one back of Stricker and O'Hair at that stage.

But that was as good as it got in their bid to reel the American duo back in, with the defining moment coming on the par five 17th where Lowry's approach finished up against the face of a bunker and McDowell's approach found the same trap.

In contrast, O'Hair hit a superb six-iron approach from 187 yards to six feet. He holed the eagle putt, which gave them

a three-shot cushion playing the last where McDowell's closing birdie closed the margin to two. Stricker and O'Hair's closing round 64 for 190 ensured they claimed the winners' cheque of \$820,000.

Gelled well

"We really gelled well together, we felt comfortable with one another. With his length the first day (scramble), getting some clubs into the greens, some short irons for me, we just fed off that first day quite a bit," said Stricker.

As it turned out, both players contributed with Stricker claiming birdies on the seventh, ninth and 14th and O'Hair securing birdies on the eighth

Joburg Open Sharma must wait

Shubhankar Sharma will have to wait until today to try to seal his first European Tour win after storms in South Africa sent the Joburg Open into a fifth day.

The Indian will take a four-shot lead into the extra day, with his final act yesterday hitting a solid tee-shot on to the par three eighth green before

(from 18 feet), 11th (from six feet) and that superb eagle on the 17th to edge out the Irishmen. It was a first professional win in six years for O'Hair, dating back to his 2011 Canadian Open title.

play was suspended at one o'clock local time.

He had already made birdies on the second and sixth at that point to get to 22 under and lead the way from charging South African Erik van Rooyen.

"I'm going to treat it like another day," Sharma said. "I'm going to do the same things I've been doing."

Lowry – who finished runner-up in the DP World Tour Championship, the finale to the European Tour season last month – and McDowell finished alone in second place, with Pat Perez and Brian Harman two

shots further adrift in third.

For Lowry, it was a decent finish to the season ahead of a move to the Naples area in early-January as he concentrates on the PGA Tour for the first half of next year.

Exemption

"My exemption (on the PGA Tour) is up next year, so I've really got to go and keep my card now and try and do as well as I can. The last two years I've been travelling back and forth and I've played 15 events both years maybe, maybe 16 one year. I find most guys out here play 25, 30 events, and to try to compete against those guys in 15 events, I don't think it's doable."

Briefs

Cricket

Stirling's century secures series win for Ireland over Afghanistan

Paul Stirling's 10th international century helped Ireland finish the year on a high as they beat Afghanistan by five wickets in Sharjah to complete a 2-1 series win.

Having lost the opening game after being bowled out for 100, Ireland have turned their form around, with the bowling and fielding again restricting Afghanistan in Sunday's decider.

Having elected to bat first, Afghanistan were bowled out for just 177, with left-arm spinner George Dockrell taking four wickets for 28 after opening the bowling alongside Tim Murtagh.

The Leinster clubman included the dangerous Rahmat Shah in his haul, Boyd Rankin taking a catch at long-off to see off the

batsman for 44.

Shah's dismissal left Afghanistan on 102 for four and they never recovered with Barry McCarthy again taking lower-order wickets to finish with figures of three for 32 to add to his five-wicket haul in the second game.

Ireland lost skipper William Porterfield after he had made just four but a 62-run stand between Stirling and his former Middlesex colleague Andrew Balbirnie got Ireland to 91 before Balbirnie went for 35.

Stirling, who hit 11 fours and four sixes in his 97-ball knock, also added 51 with Gary Wilson, who made 11, but fell with the finishing line in sight when he was trapped leg-before for 101 with Ireland just eight runs shy.

Boxing

Conlan makes it five out of five at Madison Square Garden

Michael Conlan made it five wins from five in the professional ranks as he beat Luis Fernando Molina on points in New York on Sunday morning.

Fighting on the undercard of Vasily Lomachenko's world super-featherweight title win against Guillermo Rigondeaux, Conlan was taken the distance for the first time in his pro career.

But the 26-year-old won cosily on the cards, receiving a unanimous 60-54 points decision from all three judges.

It was Conlan's first professional fight over six rounds, and he was pleased



Michael Conlan: won on all three cards

to get all of them.

He said: "I'm happy enough and I was happy to get the rounds. I thought I was going to get him out of there, but it wasn't really unfortunate because I want to move up to eight rounds next time."

Gaelic Games All Stars Tour

Cooney can't wait to get back into action with Galway

St Thomas man keen for county to emulate feat of '88 team in gaining back-to-back titles

EAMON DONOGHUE
in Singapore

Conor Cooney is looking forward to getting back into a healthy routine in 2018, as Galway's All-Ireland celebrations begin to wind down in Singapore this week.

Three months after bridging their 29-year wait for Liam MacCarthy, Galway's celebrations have brought them from Boston to south east Asia for this week's PwC All Star tour. Later this month they head off to Can-

can for their All-Ireland winners' holiday, after which they'll be back to collective training and the St Thomas's clubman can't wait.

"It's been fairly hectic since we won," explained Cooney after Saturday's All Star match at the Padang where he scored seven goals (Pauric Mahony bagged 10 as the 2017 All Stars comfortably beat the 2016 selection).

"We went to Boston and a few different places. We're over in Singapore now, it was a long old flight. It takes its toll on the body as well."

"I suppose we're just reading-justing to everything and getting back into the swing of things. It's going to be good to be back in ways because you can do too much celebrating as well and it takes its toll. It's good to go back and get back to all the lads again and get into a

routine and healthy living.

"It was fantastic [winning the All-Ireland]. I remember going back to the club there and seeing the cups side by side and it really hit home. You're looking out at your clubmates and your family and everything and you saw the cups side by side. It was a real moment where things really hit home and you thought, 'Jeez, we're after achieving something here'. It was a fantastic night."

Two different things

The All-Ireland win meant that Cooney could double up on his club All-Ireland medal – but which meant more?

"A few people have asked me that now and I suppose they're hard enough to compare really. They're two different things. The club All-Ireland you're hurling with your brothers, you're hurling with your friends

Club finals Leinster tie next Sunday

The overnight snow in Portlaoise had left O'Moore Park unplayable, and with that forced the postponement of the AIB Leinster club football final between Moorefield, the Kildare champions, and St Loman's from Westmeath.

The Leinster Council has re-fixed the game for the same venue and time (2.0pm) next

you've hurred with since you're a young lad. "The intercounty is crazy, you're hurling with lads again that you've hurred with for years. They're kind of two different things. If you asked me which was better or which was more emotional, I couldn't tell you. I couldn't split them. They were both incredible, two fantastic achievements."

Sunday. Also called-off was Corofin's All-Ireland club quarter-final against London champion Fulham Irish, scheduled for Ruislip, but which also fell victim to inclement weather. The GAA will confirm that re-fixature date this week, most likely putting it off until January.

Even after the success of this year however, and that club triumph in 2013, this year's All Star full forward is keen to maintain his motivation in 2018.

"That's a challenge in itself, trying to stay fresh is a big thing. We've the League there, we're starting in the same place we started last year. We didn't achieve what we set out to do in the league last year which was

get promotion to 1A.

"That's something we'll try to do next year and I suppose staying fresh for the championship will be a big challenge because there's so many matches coming up but I think at the end of the year everyone will be looking at the championship and I suppose that's what you want to be peaking for."

The last team to win back to back hurling titles, other than Kilkenny, was Cork in 2005. While the last time Galway claimed the title in 1988, they had also gone back to back.

"Yeah we grew up on stories of what those teams achieved and I suppose they were idols to us and yeah, it's something you want to emulate, to do a back-to-back. They did it in '88 so absolutely, it's something you'd set out to try and achieve. It's not easy, they're such fine margins."

Rugby

Lansdowne record 10th straight win

Lansdowne's Mike Ruddock knows being top of the Ulster Bank League at Christmas counts for little in a long and demanding season, but his side are currently the envy of Division 1A clubs with an 11-point lead at the summit.

Ruddock's charges overcame a spirited UCD team 46-30 on the Aviva Stadium's back pitch to record their tenth straight win and maintain their unblemished league run. Ireland Sevens international Alan Bennie bagged a hat-trick from scrumhalf with winger Mark O'Keefe's brace moving him onto six for the campaign.

Bottom side Buccaneers were unable to complete a quick-fire double over St. Mary's College as tries from Leinster's Caelan Doris and Terry Kennedy steered the visitors to a 22-6 win in Athlone on Saturday.

Women's Rugby

Late try from Hughes earns Leinster win

It took a late try from Ireland scrumhalf Ailsa Hughes to secure a hard-earned 17-8 victory for Leinster at Donnybrook as fellow first round winners Connacht pushed them all the way.

Leinster got over for the first try in the 17th minute when promising teenage winger Aimee Clarke touched down. Connacht hit back with a penalty from Hillary Griffin and then took the lead when in-form full-back Mairead Coyne crossed the whitewash.

Michelle Claffey's well-taken try restored Leinster's lead before the interval with Hughes's try, converted by Aine Donnelly the only score after the break.

Laura Guest's Munster team reignited their campaign with a thumping 32-5 bonus point success against Ulster at Dooradoyle.