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Leinster SFC

Lowndes raised on Meath but perfectly at home in Dublin blue

Ian O'Riordan

Forward has a Meath background but never doubted his Dublin identity

■ **Eric Lowndes is challenged by Kevin Murphy of Wicklow during the recent Leinster SFC quarter-final between the sides.** PHOTOGRAPH: TOMMY DICKSON/INPHO

Raised on songs and stories and the heroes of Meath football, Eric Lowndes has occasionally got a hard time for being a Dubliner. Both his parents are from Meath, his grandfather Paddy Maguire was famous in Meath sporting circles, and at school in St Peter's Dunboyne some of his classmates were playing minor football for Meath while he played for Dublin.

Not that Lowndes has ever doubted his identity. Except perhaps when it came to deciding between football and hurling. Or, indeed, last summer, when it seemed most of Croke Park mistook him for Diarmuid Connolly.

He is now a familiar face on the Dublin team, one of manager Jim Gavin's first-choice corner backs in their opening wins over Wicklow and Longford, and also set to start in Sunday's Leinster final against Laois. At age 24, Lowndes also brings considerable experience to the position and such a steady trajectory of improvement to suggest his best days are only beginning.

In his earliest days, however, it was all about Meath.

"All my immediate family are from Meath," he says, "and there's some from Westmeath, it's quite a small family. My Dad's parents were both only children so there aren't many Lowndes that I'm aware of.

"And Meath were really successful when I was young. I was born in 1994. Meath won an All-Ireland in 1996, in 1999, and beaten by Galway in 2001. So I was kind of raised on stories of Meath heroes from the past, even the generation before that, the 1987 and 1988 team and all that kind of stuff. Uncles and cousins and the whole lot would have been mad into it."

> **It's not that you've arrived once you have it. It's about holding on to it as well**

His own football career began with the St Peregrines club in Clonsilla in north Dublin, and while Lowndes also played football with St Peter's Dunboyne, Dublin was always going to be home.

No matter what, it seems, his parents might have preferred.

"Well, they don't support the Dubs anyway," he says. "My brother Stuart is playing club football in Meath, and played O'Byrne Cup with them in 2017, 2016, and is still playing football with Dunboyne at the minute. But I never played club football in Meath or anything. I went to school in Meath, played Meath schools and colleges football, but, no, [that] was never a prospect, or I was never thinking about playing for a club team in Meath or playing county football in Meath or anything."

Hurling

When breaking on to the minor teams with Dublin, Lowndes played both football and hurling – equally talented at both. In 2012, he played in both the football and minor All-Ireland finals, winning the former, losing the latter in a replay [he also has Leinster football/hurling doubles from 2011/2012]. Fate then took him down the road of football, especially after winning an All-Ireland under-21 title in 2014.

"It [hurling] might have been an option initially. I was involved with the under-21 hurlers, my first year on the senior football squad, but I picked up an injury in early 2013, and didn't end up playing any hurling at all. But still hurling away with the club when I get a chance, or on a break, or at the end of the year playing club hurling championship and stuff, so still enjoy it."

He has been on the fringes of the Dublin senior panel since 2013, his first year out of minor, and made his first senior appearance in 2015, still only 21, as a replacement for Jonny Cooper in the Leinster quarter-final win over Longford.

Last year Lowndes started the Leinster quarter-final, semi-final and final, then the quarter-final win over Monaghan, before coming on in the semi-final win over Tyrone – the day he was mistaken for Diarmuid Connolly.

Wearing the number 12 jersey, Lowndes came in for Paul Mannion, the roar of approval clearly suggesting the crowd thought he was Connolly; Connolly, wearing number 22, later came in for Con O'Callaghan, the roar louder still.

"I actually wasn't really aware of it," says Lowndes. "I ran on to the pitch and thought there was a fight broken out behind me or something. I didn't know what was going on, to be honest. I suppose I was just in the moment, a couple of minutes left in an All-Ireland semi-final, and I know it's kind of cliché to say I blocked it out, but I genuinely didn't pay much attention to it."

Driven

Some time later, back at Scoil Bride in Blanchardstown village where he teaches, Lowndes was gently reminded of the moment when fellow teachers presented him with a mug with a picture of Connolly, which then morphs into an image of Lowndes. None of this takes from his seriousness as a footballer: that other cliché that competition for places is what drives this Dublin team has got him this far because once Lowndes got that Dublin jersey he has worked extra hard to keep it.

"It's not that you've arrived once you have it. It's about holding on to it as well. Really driving standards to the next level as well, in terms in preparation before training and games, and making sure you're putting yourself into a position to do yourself justice, and to hold onto it, drive it on to the next level so that you don't always have someone chasing you. But always staying one step ahead, I suppose, is the main thing.

"And physically I've grown up a lot. And I suppose just continuous practice and skills of the game as well, I've really, really gone after them in the last few years, and it's starting to show now."

Second Opinion

Ciarán Murphy

Cluxton's position is not for keeps

The question of whether Stephen Cluxton should play on Sunday next is about as fevered as debate is going to get ahead of the Leinster senior football final. The rib injury he sustained in the win over Longford was initially set to keep him out for a month, but manager Jim Gavin refused to rule his captain out while speaking to the media this week.

If Dublin win as expected (and that phrase seems hardly fit for the level of expectation that that will be the result come 5.30pm on Sunday), then they will play four times in five weeks between the 14/15th July and the 11/12 August to get to an All-Ireland final.

Giving Cluxton another three weeks to get over his injury to play a full role in that part of the season, the meat and drink of the year as far as Dublin are concerned, would appear to make a whole heap of sense.

But there is another reason, beyond protecting their most important player. There doesn't appear to be any question that he can change our expectations of how long an intercounty career can last, and in fact no one would be particularly surprised if he played on for another two or three seasons, even into his 40th year. But the fact remains that he turns 37 this December.

There will come a time when he is no longer the Dublin goalkeeper. And if a player has revolutionised the game to the extent that Cluxton has revolutionised Gaelic football, it's fair to ask how you would go about attempting to succeed him.

Strange

The role of sub goalkeeper, under Cluxton particularly but even generally, is a strange one. More often than not, an acceptance that you must not challenge the incumbent is the key to a harmonious relationship between you, the man in position, and team management. All of the things you expect and want from your outfield subs, to constantly pressure and coax more from the starting XV, is not necessarily what you want from your sub keeper.

It's hard to remember a Gaelic football team (or a soccer team, for that matter) with real competition for the number one jersey which has actually benefited from that competition. What is required in most teams is a sub-keeper with an understanding of his position in the world, much like former Liverpool goalkeeper Pepe Reina's status in the current Spain World Cup squad, which is basically that of "vibes man" – like Bez from the Happy Mondays, but with even less actual responsibility within the group.

The inference around Dublin club football has always been that Cluxton has never really wanted competition for places – or at least, competition for his place. It seems bizarre Cluxton would have played all eight league games for Dublin in 2017 for instance, and yet he did.

There is an alternative view of course, one that explains why Cluxton might be right to guard his position on the team as jealously as he appears to do. Succession plans are all well and good, but they are a slave to results.

For years we watched enviously as Brian Cody was able to keep young, supremely gifted players in reserve while they waited for their chance. Richie Hogan and TJ Reid are the two most-used examples, but it wasn't as if they were kept on the bench as part of a specific plan for their own careers – it was just how it was done.

Winning teams have that luxury. Now you see a situation where Cody threw young player after young player into the team during the league this year, and it's gone okay for him so far. But you could hardly say it was part of a broader plan – he was reacting to the realities of the situation. Maybe Gavin sees Stephen Cluxton as Dublin's best goalkeeper, and he's going to reap the whirlwind of his extravagant talent for as long as he can, succession plans bedamned.

> **What is required in most teams is a sub-keeper with an understanding of his position in the world, much like Bez from the Happy Mondays**

Cluxton's replacement in the Longford game, Evan Comerford, did at least play two league games this year, against Galway and Monaghan, and even if Galway put him under serious pressure when kicking into the inevitable gale blowing in Salthill that day, he did very well with the Dublin Under-21s last year. And he's a left-footed kicker too, which is helpful in mirroring Cluxton's preferred kick-out angles.

So he's been blooded a little more thoroughly than has been previously been the case, but this seems to be a gilt-edged opportunity for him to get real championship experience under his belt in a game that seems like it matters, even if the result should be beyond doubt even taking into account any malfunction that might occur. Comerford is a fine goalkeeper and could well be the answer. Finding that out before Cluxton retires would be a worthwhile exercise.

Free-scoring Kerry profit from new attacking mix of young and old

Eamon Donoghue
GAA Statistics

Domination in Munster has been based on an average score of 1-19 a game

From 2010 when Cork last won the All-Ireland football title, Kerry have claimed seven of the eight available Munster titles. Crucial to their domination in the province has been their attack, with an average score of 1-19 per game in their last five championship matches against Cork.

Racking up a frightening total of 0-32 in their Munster semi-final win over Clare, following up on a league average of 0-16 per game (in a disappointing league campaign they still finished up as second top scorers in Division One), Kerry's forward line has been the key to their success in Munster over the past decade. Yet it's still fallen short of Dublin's – with the All-Ireland champions scoring 10-124 last summer, an average of 0-4 per game more than their old rivals.

A breakdown of Kerry's scorers over that period however reveal some surprising figures, and perhaps some keys to them halting Dublin's dominance. Looking solely at scorers from play, Kerry's top scorer in championship football since 2010 is James O'Donoghue.

The former footballer of the year has scored 5-68. The 28-year-old corner forward has done so in 27 appearances, 24 of those being starts. Ninth top scorer in that period is Barry John Keane. Another Kingdom attacker aged 28, Keane came off the bench to score 0-3 against Clare last time out. They were his 31st, 32nd and 33rd scores from play for the green and gold in the championship. Keane has made 34 appearances in scoring 2-31 since his debut, which was back in 2010. He has come off the bench in 30 of those matches.

Second on the list is Paul Geaney, a year younger than O'Donoghue and Keane, he has scored 7-58 from play in just 24 appearances. Although 20 of them have been from the start. Kerry have a number of top quality inside scoring forwards, but a look at Dublin's strength in depth shows why more are needed.

Bigger impact

The trio played together in the All-Ireland minor semi-final defeat to Mayo in 2008 but while Keane has featured for Kerry more often, the other two have clearly started far more matches and had a bigger impact as the team's two primary attackers. Interestingly Geaney's score per start average is 0-4, slightly edging O'Donoghue but three points adrift of Keane. Geaney and O'Donoghue have been more prolific in their starts, albeit they've had a lot more them.

Against Cork in this weekend's Munster final, and certainly as the summer progresses, the Kerry bench could now become one of their key weapons. The introduction of the likes of Sean O'Shea, Michael Burns and of course David Clifford have meant that a number of Eamonn Fitzmaurice's more experienced attackers are now more often than not likely to start on the bench. Kieran "Star" Donaghy has 8-23 in his 35 championship appearances since 2010. Stephen O'Brien tops that with 4-28 in his 14 starts and six substitute appearances. O'Brien, who started against Clare, is fourth top scorer over that eight year period.

Kerry's bench scored between them 1-14 in their five games last summer. All-Ireland champions Dublin played one game more, and their replacements amassed 3-22 in one game more.

So Kerry's increased competition up top could crucially increase that total. Nevertheless the role of super-sub for the Kingdom remains in the possession of Barry John Keane.

The Tralee native's 29 substitute appearances is 13 more than the next highest, that being speedster Darran O'Sullivan. Although O'Sullivan has also started 20 games. Keane has scored 0-7 in his last five championship substitute appearances, coming on inside the second half on each occasion.

So while Keane continues to make his mark from the bench, probably far more often than he'd like to be, Kerry's new attacking mix of young and old should add firepower to support him and provide those extra inches.

Leinster Under 21HC Semi-finals

Strong second-half sees Wexford progress

Wexford	3-15
Dublin	3-12

Wexford delivered a superb second-half performance when getting the better of Dublin by 3-15 to 3-12 in their Leinster Under-21 Hurling Championship semi-final at Parnell Park last night.

With a strong wind at their backs, the visitors started on the front foot and opened their account through a fine score from Joe O'Connor.

The hosts enjoyed a 1-8 to 0-8 interval lead with Colin Currie finding the net in the 14th minute. However, a cracking Joe O'Connor goal within twenty seconds of the restart handed the initiative to the visitors and a goal from substitute Mikie Dwyer in the 44th minute maintained their momentum.

Currie bagged his second goal in the 55th minute but Dwyer settled the issue in injury time as Dublin subsequently scored a consolation goal through Eoghan Dunne.

WEXFORD: J Henebery; S Barden, D Byrne, S Reck; **A Maddock (0-1)**, D Reck, I Carthy; C Firman, R White; R O'Connor, O Foley, L Stafford; **S O'Gorman (0-1)**, **J O'Connor (1-4)**, **S Casey (0-8: 0-6f, 0-1 '65')**. **Subs:** G Molloy for Firman (22), **R Higgins (0-1)** for Barden (29), **M Dwyer (2-0)** for Foley (43), E Kelly for Stafford (62).
DUBLIN: D Perry; S Howard, P Smyth, D Ryan; **D Gray (0-1)**, C Burke, **E Conroy (0-1)**; F Whitely, C Ryan; C Dowling, P Crummey, R Hayes; **C O'Sullivan (0-1)**, **D Burke (0-3)**, **C Currie(2-6 , 0-4f)**. **Subs:** C Costello for O'Sullivan (37), L Gannon for Dowling (47), C Hendricken for Howard (52), S Currie for Whitely (54), **E Dunne (1-0)** for Hayes (57).
Referee: David Hughes (Carlow)

Superior finishing decisive for Galway

Galway	3-13
Kilkenny	1-17

Galway's superior finishing from close range was the decisive factor in Tullamore .

Evan Niland, who scored the game's first goal in the 19th minute. With a strong wind to come, KilKenny looked well poised at half time, trailing by just two points - 1-8 to 0-9.

However the game turned immediately after the break when Kevin Cooney pointed and then Brian Concannon set up Seán Bleahane for a second Galway goal.

By the midway point in the half, that lead was out to nine after Cianán Fahy delivered a superb finish from 15 metres out, leading DJ Carey to push his team forward and chase a miracle comeback.

John Donnelly and Richie Leahy picked off some excellent points but the goal they needed never came.

GALWAY: E Murphy; I O'Shea, J Fitzpatrick, S Bannon; F Burke, M Hughes, J Grealish; S Loftus, T Monaghan; **S Blehane (1-0)**, **K Cooney (0-4)**, **C Fahy (1-2)**; J Canning, **B Concannon (0-1)**, **E Niland (1-6, 0-3 frees)**. Subs: C Salmon for Canning (HT), C Caulfield for Grealish (53 mins), P Foley for Bleahane (60 mins), R Murphy for Niland (60+4 mins), A Greaney for Burke (60+5 mins)
KILKENNY: L Dunphy; R Bergin, T Walsh, M Cody; T Kenny, M Keoghan, S Murphy; E Delaney, **R Leahy (0-3)**; **A Mullen (0-2)**, **J Donnelly (1-2)**, **C Prendiville (0-1)**; B Sheehan, **C Hennessy (0-2)**, **J Bergin (0-7, 0-5 frees, 0-1 '65)**. Subs: M Carey for R Bergin (HT), M Kenny for Delaney (49), S Carey for J Bergin (54)
Referee: Alfie Devine (Westmeath)

Munster Under-21HC Semi-final

Cork up their game after half-time break

Cork	0-23
Waterford	1-17

Cork needed a strong second half to earn victory over Waterford at Páirc Uí Chaoimh last night. A ninth-minute goal from John Paul Lucey put Waterford 1-2 to 0-2 in front before further points from Andrew Casey and Neil Montgomery gave them a cushion.

Cork did threaten goals – earlier, Billy Nolan had denied Shane Kingston and then he and corner-back Darragh Lynch combined to repel Michael O'Halloran's effort – but half-time still saw Waterford ahead, 1-8 to 0-8.

Lucey and Darragh Lyons re-established the five-point lead but Cork had upped their game, led by Darragh Fitzgibbon and Billy Hennessy. They finally hit the front through Coleman, with Dalton, Fitzgibbon, Jack O'Connor and sub Conor Cahalane on target as they saw out the game.

CORK: G Collins; D Lowney, D Griffin, N O'Leary; E Murphy, **M Coleman (0-1)**, B Hennessy; C O'Leary, **D Fitzgibbon (0-3)**; **R O'Flynn (0-2)**, **D Dalton (0-8, frees)**, M O'Halloran; **L Healy (0-2)**, **S Kingston (0-2)**, **J O'Connor (0-2)**. **Subs: D Connery (0-2)** for O'Halloran (36), **C Cahalane (0-1)** for O'Leary (44), L O'Shea for O'Connor (60).
WATERFORD: B Nolan (0-3, frees); J Curran, M Daykin, D Lynch; **C Prunty (0-1)**, J Henley, G Cullinane; **A Casey (0-2)**, M Mahony; **D Lyons (0-1)**, **JP Lucey (1-2)**, **N Montgomery (0-1)**; E Meaney, **J Prendergast (0-4, frees)**, **P Hogan (0-1)**. **Subs:** I Beecher for Casey (42), **I Daly (0-1)** for Montgomery (54), **C Lyons (0-1)** for Lynch (49), H Ruddle for Meaney (60).
Referee: J McCormack (Tipperary).

Results round-up

Baseball

US MAJOR LEAGUE – Chicago Cubs 3 Los Angeles Dodgers 4(game 1) Chicago Cubs 2 Los Angeles Dodgers 1 (game 2 & 1 extra innings played), Cincinnati Reds 9 Detroit Tigers 5, Cleveland Indians 6 Chicago White Sox 3, Colorado Rockies 10 New York Mets 8, Houston Astros 1 Tampa Bay Rays 2, Kansas City Royals 1 Texas Rangers 4, LA Angels 5 Arizona Diamondbacks 4, Minnesota Twins 6 Boston Red Sox 2, New York Yankees 7 Seattle Mariners 2, Philadelphia Phillies 6 St Louis Cardinals 7, Pittsburgh Pirates 2 Milwaukee Brewers 3, San Diego Padres 2 Oakland Athletics 4 (1 extra inning played), San Francisco Giants 6 Miami Marlins 3, Toronto Blue Jays 4 Atlanta Braves 11, Washington Nationals 9 Baltimore Orioles 7.

Boxing

Men's Elite Chemistry Cup (Halle, Germany)
Last 16 : 64kg – W Kelly (Ireland) beat A Badalian (Ukraine) 5-0.
75kg: M Nevin (Ireland) lost to V Krishan (India) 0-5.
60k: g G Bates (Ireland) beat A Bril (Germany) 4-1.
69kg: Kieran Molloy (Ireland) beat R Meinecke (Germany) 5-0.
56kg: Kurt Walker (Ireland) beat O El Hag (Germany) 4-1
Quarter-final: 52kg: C Quinn (Ireland) beat U Bajwa (Germany) 5-0

Golf

IRELAND WOMEN'S TEAMS – For European Team Championships (in Murhof, Austria, July 10th–14th): Paula Grant (Lisburn), Mairead Martin (Kanturk), Olivia Mehaffey (RCDL), Julie Mc Carthy (Forest Little), Lauren Walsh (Castlewarden), Annabel Wilson (Lurgan). Captain: Danielle McVeigh (RCDL).
For European Team Championships (in Forsgardens, Sweden, July 10th–14th): Sara Byrne (Douglas), Valerie Clancy (Killarney), Beth Coulter (Kirkistown Castle), Aine Donegan (Woodstock), Nicole Joyce Moreno (Royal Portrush), Kate Lanigan (Hermitage). Captain: Helen Jones (Royal Portrush).
For European Young Masters (in Oslo, Norway, July 26th–28th): Aine Donegan (Woodstock), Beth Coulter (Kirkistown Castle).

Tennis

ATP – Queens Club: (London, second round): Frances Tiafoe (USA) bt Leonardo Mayer (Arg) 6-4 2-6 6-4, Jeremy Chardy (Fra) bt Daniil Medvedev (Rus) 7-6 (8-6) 6-3, (5) Sam Querrey (USA) bt Stan Wawrinka (Swi) 7-5 6-7 (3-7) 6-1 mfl1) Marin Cilic (Cro) bt Gilles Muller (Lux) 4-6 6-3 6-3.

WTA: Nature Valley Classic (Birmingham, second round): Magdalena Rybarikova (Svk) bt Kristina Mladenovic (Fra) 3-6 6-2 6-1, Dalila Jakupovic (Slo) bt Naomi Osaka (Jpn) 6-3 ret, (2) Elina Svitolina (Ukr) bt Alize Cornet (Fra) 6-4 6-2, Mihaela Buzarnescu (Rom) bt Petra Martic (Cro) 4-6 6-3 6-2