

Tipping Point

Malachy Clerkin



Hard not to cheer as Cooper and Nolan hit comeback trail

In Liberty Hall last Wednesday evening we watched a one-man band lose a fight with himself onstage. Damon Gough, the Manchester singer-songwriter better known as Badly Drawn Boy, was having one of those nights where he looked like he'd rather be anywhere else doing anything else.

He'd certainly have leapt at the chance to share it with anyone else but us, an expectant audience of middle-agers loaned out for the night by babysitters across the city.

His guitars either weren't tuned to his liking or, despite all efforts, couldn't be. The sound coming back at him from his monitors was driving him demented. At one stage, after his third or fourth grouch at his engineer that the sound was brutal, someone offered up from the crowd that actually it sounded fine down here. Gough barked back that he didn't give a f*ck how it sounded out in the arena – it was doing his head in onstage.

And yet the man has the tunes. A couple of brilliant albums back around the turn of the millennium buys you a lot of credit with the people who were touched by them through the years. And no matter how bad his mood or how cranky he was getting with his instruments, the crowd hung in there with him, willing him to get

through it.

By the end of it all you wouldn't quite say he strolled off the stage triumphant but he did manage to dig a show out of it. We walked out into the night wishing him the best.

Music has that resonance for people. The past makes the present more forgivable that it ordinarily would be, and more hopeful than it has any right to be. If you'd never heard of Badly Drawn Boy in your life and had just been dragged along to the gig last Wednesday, you wouldn't have lasted past the fourth song. But everyone there wanted it to come right and knew somehow that it could. Not that it would, just that it could.

Place money Sport has that resonance too. On Saturday afternoon at Naas, Bryan Cooper came with an immaculately-judged ride on a Paul Nolan-trained horse called Discorama in a beginners' chase.

It wasn't the biggest race on the card, and it's not going to make the season for either Cooper or Nolan. But there were some decent horses left floundering for the place money behind them, including a Gigginstown pair swallowed up and spat out by Cooper on the run from the last to the line.

Cooper and Nolan have different stories to tell about their place in the world of jumps racing these days. But they share a certain similarity too. They were both thought of as up-and-comers to watch once upon a time – Cooper more recently than Nolan, obviously. They've both heard the clank of the bucket off the bottom of the well in recent times too.

Back in the mid-2000s, Nolan had a star in the yard in the shape of Accordion Etoile, who came fourth in a Champion Hurdle in 2005. In 25 runs for Nolan he won a shade over €325,000 in prize-money. Put together all the prize-money won by all of Nolan's horses in the two seasons before this one and the total doesn't beat that by very much at all. In the 2017/18 season he had 13 winners in total. In 2016/17, he had five.

Famous treble

Cooper's fall has been arguably even steeper. Nolan would likely never have overtaken Willie Mullins no matter how well things had gone. But Cooper was presumed to be in line to surpass Ruby Walsh some day.

He was just 20 when he rode a famous treble at Cheltenham in 2013, and looked to have the world by the lugs when he won the Gold Cup on Don Cossack three years

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later. But then he lost his job as Gigginstown's retained rider in the summer of 2017 and had to start again.

When he was riding for Gigginstown, Cooper got a name for not riding for small trainers. Whether it was fair or not that he earned such a reputation, he has conceded that it was there and it was a real thing. With the patronage of the biggest owners in the game gone by the wayside, he has had to go out and hustle.

Along the way he and Nolan have struck up an alliance that neither of them would have imagined possible until very recently.

A bit of light

It has sparked something for them both. Nothing mind-blowing, nothing to take the stars from the sky, but something to offer a bit of light in a game that can so easily stay dark when it gets dark. Discorama was Cooper's 13th time in the winners' enclosure this term, which, considering he only managed it 18 times last season, is evidence of a career that is starting to gather a bit of pace again.

It was Nolan's 11th winner of the season – again suggesting that by the time we get to PuncHESTOWN next May, he'll have easily outstripped the small totals of recent years. Cooper has ridden six of

those winners, by the by.

"I was hoping to get a horse that could compete at level weights again, and hopefully he'll come on from it," Nolan said on Saturday. And when it gets right down to it, away from the Mullins yard and the Elliott yard and a tiny handful of others, that's all anyone in a small stable can cross their fingers for. A horse that's good enough to go in a graded race without it being a waste of everyone's time. Throw in a jockey who knows what to do with one at that level and suddenly the needle hits the groove again.

Cooper won't be champion jockey and Nolan won't be mapped in the trainers' championship. And Badly Drawn Boy won't be troubling the charts the way he once did either. But they're all still at it, still grinding away at the thing they're best at in the hope that whatever strange force once made the planets align for them can do so again.

In sport and in music you don't get to fight back in private. You have to go out and play with everyone watching and everyone judging, and you have to get through the gig as best you can, regardless of the result.

Watching on from off-stage, it's hard not to cheer for people with that sort of fight in them.

Rugby Ireland v New Zealand

Kiwis not wild about defectors



Gregor Paul

New Zealand warmth is dissipating as Ireland's recruitment policy makes them a serious threat

New Zealanders have never quite known what to make of their own who end up playing against the All Blacks. Kiwis playing against the All Blacks is a story that spans most of the professional age and yet it one that still doesn't deliver a universal response.

Tony Marsh, after a couple of years on the edge of Super Rugby, was deemed a pioneering hero when he ended up playing for France at the 2003 World Cup.

New Zealand-born and bred Quade Cooper, on the other hand, became the most hated man in the country when he emigrated to Australia in his teens and ended up playing for the Wallabies.

The emotional response, it seems, will be determined on a case-by-case basis, but essentially influenced by how close the player in question came to being an All Black and to which country he is committing.

That's why former Hurricanes team-mates Blade Thomson and Brad Shields will be playing Test rugby this month with entirely different feelings generated about that in New Zealand.

Thomson was always seen as an honest, hard-working versatile tight-loose forward who was more than unlucky with injuries. He never really came close to All Blacks' selection despite the respect he earned and the fact he is playing for Scotland means most Kiwis wish him all the best.

He's playing for the land of his grandfather with New Zealand's blessing, partly because there is a strong affinity with the Scots whose footprint in the South Island is deep.

Inescapable truth

There is also the inescapable truth that New Zealanders don't particularly fear Scotland or see them as a genuine world force.

Shields hasn't felt any of that warmth because he played for the New Zealand Under-20 team alongside the likes of Brodie Retallick, Sam Cane and Beauden Barrett and chased the All Blacks jersey hard and then ended up having to turn it down.

He was called up to captain the mid-week All Blacks team against a French XV this time last year and probably would have won a cap against Wales as Kieran Read had to pull out injured.

But when the call came he had to say no because he was intending to sign with Wasps and commit to England.

Bad luck or bad timing, it doesn't matter, as he said no to New Zealand and yes to England – a team that the All Blacks not only take hugely seriously, they still don't particularly like.

The pathway an individual follows to an adopted country is also important.

Those who have heritage – a genuine, meaningful and proven connection with the jersey they commit to tend to win a more empathetic, accepting reaction compared with those who take a club contract somewhere and three years later are play-

Celtic Kiwis
In the frame for Ireland

Tom McCartney: Outstanding for Connacht and rewarded with a new three-year contract in 2016 and while not getting the same game time this season still provides experience and quality. He became eligible to play for Ireland in 2017.

Bundee Aki: With 11 caps to his name he has proved to be a brilliant acquisition for Ireland with a series of excellent performances, the latest of which came against Argentina.

James Lowe (right): He

qualifies for Ireland the summer after the Rugby World Cup in Japan and given his impact so far in his Leinster career to date, Irish supporters will be salivating.



Rodney Ah You: He made his Ireland debut off the bench against South Africa in 2014 and won a further two caps, both as a replacement. Not regular for Ulster over the past two seasons.

Tyler Bleyendaal: The former New Zealand Under-20 international has been ridiculously unfortunate with injuries, specifically neck issues. He qualified in January of this year.

Jamison Gibson Park: He will qualify to represent Ireland next summer just ahead of the four Rugby World Cup warm-up matches.

Michael Bent: Tighthead prop won the last of his four caps in a 2015 World Cup warm-up match when coming off the bench against Scotland, having won his first before he played for Leinster in the 2012-2013 season.

Sean Reidy: He won the second of two caps against Japan in the summer of 2017.

ing Test football on the basis they have met the required residency requirement to be eligible.

And it is of course this latter route that took Bundee Aki to Ireland's midfield and Jared Payne before him.

Aki's move to Connacht carried a cold, clinical, calculating element to it that probably ended up with Kiwis wondering more about the motives and thinking of the Irish Rugby Union than it did about the player.

In some ways he was simply offered something that was too good to turn down and no one could judge him for that.

He was starting to be more influential with the Chiefs: starting to show a wide enough range of skills to be considered a player of interest. But there were so many others so far ahead of him that the prospect of being reasonably high on Ireland's pecking order, as opposed to somewhere in the middle of an extensive pack in New Zealand, seemed like a good reason to throw his lot in with the former.

Scouring the world

But while the player may be immune from the New Zealand public's wrath, he is still the symbol of a strategy that isn't respected or supported by New Zealanders. New Zealand spend millions developing players and Ireland using that programme as their own is not something anyone enjoys seeing.

The concept of scouring the world as part of the national side's succession planning is also one that is little loved in New Zealand, where the All Blacks have shown a remarkable capacity in the last two years to dig into their own talent pool and build the next generation of Test stars.

Ireland are making Test rugby feel like club rugby with this 'go where you have to' recruitment strategy. Ireland are within the rules doing what they are doing, but outside the spirit of international rugby.

What's also changed since Aki left New Zealand is that Ireland have become a phenomenally good team. They have also, of

■ **Bundee Aki** has become a key player for Ireland since his debut in 2017. PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

course, beaten the All Blacks and with that victory in Chicago, changed everything.

Kiwis love the Celts but some of that warmth in a rugby sense was built on the certainty that Ireland were never actually going to be so impertinent as to beat the All Blacks. So in shedding the loveable loser tag, Ireland have forced New Zealanders to reconsider how they feel about their players defecting there.

Whatever the mood building up to this Saturday's match in Dublin, it may change if a Joe Schmidt-coached Ireland are inspired to victory by a storming performance by Aki.

What won't help is that if another former Chiefs player, James Lowe, also ends up in the Irish national team once he has served his three-year residency. Under a different coaching panel Lowe, who is impressing everyone at Leinster, could easily have been an All Black.

His ability was never in doubt but when the All Blacks can't find room in their squad for World Cup winners Julian Savea and Nehe Milner-Skudder, players as good as Lowe can see that their time may never come.

New Zealand already feel under siege from predatory French clubs and the increasing allure of short-term deals in Japan that are pulling their best players in all sorts of directions.

Seeing some of their former prospective All Blacks turn out against them in the Test arena only serves as a reminder of their vulnerability. They can brush it off if the All Blacks continue to win. An Ireland side that loses to the All Blacks can be considered an Irish team.

An Irish team that wins suddenly starts to look like an Irish-fusion team, with the Kiwi element within it no longer viewed as happy-go-lucky opportunists, but men who have stabbed their homeland in the back.

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■ Gregor Paul is the *New Zealand Herald* on Sunday's rugby correspondent

Food Month

Food for thought as GAA teams move with times

Pressed for time, top teams can avail of freshly delivered ready-to-eat meals

EAMON DONOGHUE

Time is of the essence in the life of a GAA player. Trying to balance collective and individual training sessions, with a full-time job, university course, never mind a personal life. Eating well can often be compromised.

A GPA/GAA survey carried out last month found players that can spend up to 31 hours per week on their senior inter-county commitments, with almost half of those surveyed not getting the eight to 10 hours sleep recommended for athletes. One thing county teams can, and are, controlling is how their players recover at meal times.

Kildare native David Carey founded Fitness Food HQ in 2016, and his company pride themselves on preparing fresh, completely natural ready-to-eat meals and delivering them nationwide daily.

The key question they ask of consumers is – how much do you value your time? Enough to pay roughly €35 weekly for one meal a day? Or a lot more depending on the number of meals. This year's All-Ireland hurling champions seemed to see the value.

"I think the main selling point for us is by the time people spend 10 or 11 hours a week – thinking of what they're going to get, prepping for it, shopping for it, cooking it, cleaning up after themselves... we'd say to them, what do you value your time as?" says Carey, whose company operates from a custom-built 14,000sq ft production kitchen, manufacturing facility and distribution centre in Co Kildare.

Time is limited

"GAA players are full-time athletes but they have full-time jobs as well. So they are in a situation whereby they are trying to eat and train like a professional athlete, but still work a day job where they may be 9am to 5pm. So their time is limited and that seems to be the market that is advancing the most at the moment."

"We have catered for the Limerick hurlers this year [who won the All-Ireland], and the Kildare senior hurlers and footballers, and there are a lot of counties who we've been in contact with their S&C coaches. So we hope to be working with a lot more teams going forward.

"Some teams we would pro-

vide food for after training. Other teams we would provide a set amount of meals to the players over the week. It's designed that we work hand-in-hand with the nutritionist and S&C coach and the backroom teams, to design meals to fit within the guidelines of what the player should consume within the day."

Having your meals prepared specifically to your nutritional needs, cooked and delivered to you sounds almost too good to be true – surely something's got to give?

Completely natural

Cooked supermarket meals and other ready-made options have long been associated with different preservation methods to extend shelf life. Then anything you don't cook in your own kitchen these days can be stuffed full of artificial colourings and flavourings.

"Everything we do is cooked fresh and completely natural. So no preservatives, no artificial flavours, no artificial colours, nothing that would be deemed in any way artificial. We don't use any preservation methods that would extend shelf life, we don't use any form of gas which would extend shelf life – it's all fresh."

"The definition of fresh could be 2-4 days, on average the food would have a three-day shelf life, and you can freeze anything you don't consume in that period of time. And customers can receive their meals in one delivery per week, or split it into two deliveries.

"People can specify with us, exactly to the gram, what they want. It could be somebody looking to bulk up, or for fat loss, somebody could sign up to us for 12 or 16 weeks and they could be working with a personal trainer and they've been told you need a certain amount of calories a day."

Results
"You need X-amount of proteins, carbs and fats, and they'll come to us with a meal plan or a solution and they'll say I need this cooked. I need to consume four meals a day, seven days a week and I need to use your service. So we can give you exactly what you need and exactly what you want and this will essentially all be happening on that day."

"We give athletes that guarantee that if you're training you're going to get the results."

