

America At Large

Dave Hannigan



Sports Pope/Dope – the New York mix of Dunphy, Clarkson and Partridge

Two years ago, then New York Mets second baseman Daniel Murphy took three days' paternity leave when his wife Tori gave birth. The decision to miss games in order to be with his new baby Noah prompted Mike Francesca, the most popular sports talk show host in the city, to denounce the player and to question any man's need to

take time off work in these circumstances. "One day, I understand," he said. "Go see the baby be born, and come back. You're a major league baseball player, you can hire a nurse. Your wife doesn't need your help, those first couple days, you know that. What are you gonna do? Sit there and look at your wife in the hospital bed for three days?"

For nearly three decades, for 5½ hours each weekday afternoon, Francesca has pontificated like this on WFAN, America's first sports talk radio station. For this type of unreconstructed shtick, he earns \$4 million a year and is loved and hated in equal measure. The Sports Pope to some. The Sports Dope to others. Whichever side of the divide you fall on, his recent announcement that he will retire in 2017 marks the beginning of the end for a peculiarly New York institution.

On any given day, he will evince Eamon Dunphy's talent for the polemic and Jeremy Clarkson's brand of boorishness, delivering brazen and often wrongheaded predictions in a Long Island (pronounced "Lawing Guyland") accent with an insouciance that has made him the most listened-to talk show among males between 24 and 55. For all the brashness and bloviating, he knows what his audience wants in the impressive way that Gay Byrne was once on the same wavelength as the Irish housewife.

Exaggerated opinions
That he commits every possible crime against supposed good radio has never affected his popularity. Excessively long periods of dead air are an irritating feature of his shows and he once fell asleep at the mike while discussing his beloved New York Yankees. In interviews, his questions to athletes

and coaches are ridiculously elongated statements of his own exaggerated opinions rather than genuine inquiries designed to elicit answers.

Utterly dismissive of callers, the supposed lifeblood of the programme, he never, ever admits he's wrong, and even worse, often pretends to know more than he does – just the other day making ludicrous claims that \$1,000 seats at Yankee Stadium were being sold for three bucks in the online ticket markets.

None of this seems to matter a jot to his legion of devoted followers, who spend hours on hold each day in the hope of getting to talk to their hero. The more fundamentalist among them gather once year at Francescacon, an entire convention held in his honour, a very modern recognition of the special nature of his relationship with his more rabid listeners. These are the ones that keep him top of the ratings, something he also never tires of reminding competitors about.

Now and again, Francesca, for all his overweening arrogance, dripping condescension and juvenile namedropping, will open a show with an extended rant about the topic *du jour* and there will be brilliance in the raving. The unmistakable sound of an irate man tapping right into his audience's main vein, capturing the frustrations and anger of every tormented fan. But he's probably at his best when discussing games and players from days

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gone by. The death of any icon with New York ties can spawn a sepia-tinted afternoon of warm nostalgia as he and his constituents trail through the highlight reels in their heads.

When he strays outside his comfort zone the results are usually unintentionally hilarious enough to go viral. His attempts to figure out the chronology of the *Star Wars* films became a YouTube sensation. Similarly, the day he interrupted his sports chat to cover the election of Pope Francis, like it was the Yankees announcing the signing of a new short stop, was a Patridgesque masterpiece.

As time has gone on, however, the 62-year-old does sound increasingly like a cranky and rather pompous old man, bristling at the intrusive growth of some-

thing like soccer (sawca!), always stubbornly contending that the older players were better and the long-ago games more true. In this vein, he rails at length and with some justification about the tendency of modern stars to excessively celebrate simple plays. His tirade against the New York Giants' Odell Beckham Junior on that score back in December was a classic of the genre.

Sycophantic

Yet, he cannot seem to summon the same calibre of outrage for weightier sports topics. Even going back to the days when he shared a studio with a co-host named Chris "Mad Dog" Russo (their relationship is to be the subject of a forthcoming ESPN documentary), his opinions about steroids have always been pitched somewhere between ill-informed and wilfully myopic.

One especially sycophantic interview with the Yankees' Alex Rodriguez, during which he allowed every single lie go unchallenged, will go down in the broadcast annals as a note perfect rendering of America's laissez-faire attitude towards performance-enhancing substances. A disaster that might have derailed another career, it simply became part of Francesca lore because his listeners care less about exposing cheats and more about when the Yanks might next win a title.

A man in tune with his audience. As ever.

Gaelic Games News

Kildare's Cribbin ruled out for up to a month

EAMON DONOGHUE

Kildare are set to be without the influential Paul Cribbin for up to a month, with injury ruling him out of at least three of their remaining five Allianz League games as they look to plot their way out of Division Three.

The 23-year-old underwent surgery last week on a cartilage problem in his knee that has been hampering the former AFL player since his involvement for Ireland in the International Rules series last November.

Manager Cian O'Neill expects the Johnstownbridge man to be out of action for between three and four weeks, with him expected to begin light training over the weekend.

Cribbin excelled last season in a midfield role under



Paul Cribbin will be ruled out of action for Kildare for a month

former manager Jason Ryan. The former Collingwood player though has lined out in his more natural half forward role in the county's two league wins over Westmeath and Offaly.

Another former AFL player Daniel Flynn, enforcer Daryl Flynn, the fit again Tommy Moolick and Athy's Kevin Feely are all competing for the midfield berths.

Feely is a former professional soccer player (with Charlton, Carlisle, Wimbledon and Newport) and was deployed as a full back for DCU during the Sigerson competition but O'Neill says he will not be considered in that role for Kildare.

"Kevin will be challenging for a position further out the field. We have our own defenders to play in defence and we are confident in them," said O'Neill.

Meanwhile Armagh's injury woes have been added to as midfielder Ethan Rafferty hamstring strain ensures he will sit out the weekend's game against Fermanagh, and possibly the Cavan encounter a week later.



Donegal in unfamiliar territory as league leaders in February

Two wins from two as traditionally slow Division One starters find winning rhythm

Toye and Gallagher in reckoning as manager shuffles deck for Mayo visit

Malachy Clerkin

This is all very unlike the Donegal we've become used to at this time of year: top of the league after two wins from two games, with a points difference of +27.

For the last time they won their first two games of the year in Division One, you have to go back as far as 2008. They have never been a February team.

Rory Gallagher wouldn't be rushing to call them one this year either, but the numbers are hard to quarrel with.

Cork left Ballybofey with a thrashing, before Donegal went to Newry and hammered Down for their first away win in the top division in seven years. A stat like that doesn't mean

a lot in the abstract, but it's a long time sitting on quiet buses home all the same, so it was well worth putting an end to it.

On arrol
"We were very much conscious of it because of the amount of times it was said in the media," says Gallagher.

"But sure the way we looked at it, we drew with Mayo in our last away game last year. We were one game unbeaten – considering what went before it, we were on a roll!"

"And now we're two games unbeaten so we'll have to look about keeping that going. But no, any success we've had in the league over the past few years was very reliant on our home form, so it's definitely some-

thing we have to address. We got Down at a good time – they're just starting out under a new manager. But there's no doubt we'll have stiffer tests away from home . . .

"We typically haven't done that well early in the year. Like last year we had a decent start against Cork, but then lost a couple in a row. And we've done nothing really new this year."

"We definitely wouldn't have had very much work done going into the break. We're lucky enough to have a lot of young players who are in good shape naturally and they've seen us through the first two games."

"But this next three weeks is always the period that puts a bit of shape on the league."

Cursed
In other years, Donegal have been cursed with having a fractured panel at this time of year, with up to half the squad in college or working in Dublin. The older profile nowadays means it's less of an issue, with only a handful of players not based in Donegal. Then the recent trip to Tenerife for four days' train-

ing can't hurt either. Gallagher brought 33 to La Caleta the day after the Down game and says they found it productive.

Enjoyed ourselves
"We had a great time. We enjoyed ourselves and we enjoyed each other's company. We got a great bit of work done, which was the main thing. We trained a couple of times both days and we played an awful lot of football. We have a late start in the championship on June 12th so there's no need to overly panic about our fitness levels. We have plenty of time to do that."

"It was great to be able to train like a professional team and to have good down time together, to be able to talk about our tactical work and individual player needs, as well as some video analysis."

For Mayo's visit on Sunday, Christy Toye and Neil Gallagher are in the reckoning. Karl Lacey is being held for another few weeks to allow Gallagher look at some fresher faces. Colm McFadden will likely see game time either against Kerry or Roscommon. For now, some

Rory Gallagher: "It was great to be able to train like a professional team and to have good down time [in training trip to Tenerife]." PHOTOGRAPH: LORCAN DOHERTY/PRESSEVE/INPHO

of the squad players are getting to make their pitch and a fair few are leaving an impression.

"These lads are young . . . but they've been around the panel for a few years. Peter Boyle, Eamon Doherty, Hugh McFadden – all these boys have been around the fringes for three or four years. Eoin McHugh is in his second year; he's been with the under-21s.

Newblood
"We wanted to get new blood and we feel there's a few more coming. Ciarán Thompson has been with us; Darach O'Connor will be back from his cruciate hopefully before the end of the league. There's a young lad Rory Carr coming back from a shoulder; another Micheál Carroll, who was with the minors for the last two years. So there's a few coming through there."

Golf US Tour

Harrington returns to the scene of his triumph

DUBLINER CONFIDENT his game is in good shape as he bids to defend his title

Pádraig Harrington's surprise win in the Honda Classic last year was one of the highlights of the Irish golfing year.

The three-time Major winner held his nerve in a play-off to pip the 21-year-old American Daniel Berger and seal an improbable victory which few foresaw.

Harrington returns to Florida to defend his title this week, and while it seems unlikely he will be able to match last year's heroics, the Dubliner feels an improvement on the greens may see him challenge again.

He said: "I'm very comfortable with my game. The long game doesn't really change much, I've got to say, over the years, but my putting has been struggling a bit and that has come back well. So I'm pleased about that."

"I know it's a cliché in the game, but when you start holing putts and you're holing out better, it does lead to a lot less stress during the round, a lot more confidence in your game, in your long game, when you're holing out putts for pars and birdies."

Flickered sporadically
Harrington has flickered sporadically on the PGA Tour this season but has been left to rue his inconsistency, most recently falling out of contention in the Northern Trust Open following a final round 75 at Riviera.

But he feels there is definite room for optimism, he said: "Yeah, I see an improvement in my putting, which really bleeds through my game. Clearly wasn't there on Sunday. Probably the last two Sundays I've played. But what I've been doing in my game, I see some nice things about it, and you know, I need to carry it through 72 holes, but I'm happy that it's going in the right direction."

He said: "I tend to have a little bit of an issue with having a lead in terms of, I relax a little bit at times and get a bit defensive. I think I've always played

my best golf when it's on the line, I'm under pressure, and I get the feeling, well, there's nothing to lose at this stage."

The 44-year-old will be playing with compatriot Rory McIlroy, who also unravelled on the final day at Riviera, and 2015 British Open winner at Zach Johnson, and feels back-to-back wins in the competition wouldn't necessarily be out of the blue.

Harrington said: "I don't think it would [be out of the blue] in the sense that I've shown better form so far this year, and plus, people are more expecting me to be doing something out of the blue."

Alongside McIlroy and Harrington both Graeme McDowell and Shane Lowry are also



Tiger Woods: his Twitter page showed him playing a shot on the simulator

in action at Palm Beach Gardens. McDowell is playing with Ben Crane and Matt Jones and Lowry with Brian Harman and Russell Henley.

Meanwhile, Tiger Woods has provided an online riposte to tales of his physical demise by posting a video which shows him playing a shot on a golf simulator. The post is a clear indication that the Woods camp are in upbeat mood about whether he will be able to continue his playing career.

Situpright
Rumours this week suggested the 14-time Major winner, who is recovering from a third back surgery, still cannot golf and was in such discomfort that he cannot even sit upright in a car.

But yesterday, Woods's Twitter page showed a video with the headline "Progressing nicely."

On it, the shorts-wearing Woods plays a mid-iron shot into the middle of a fairway on a simulator.

Intrigue surrounds whether he could possibly make a playing return at the Masters, which is now little over a month away.

Gaelic Games Leinster Under-21 FC first round

Strong finish proves enough for Wexford

Wexford	0-14
Longford	2-5

Wexford turned in a splendid closing quarter to earn a deserved three-point victory over a fancied Longford in Enniscorthy last night.

Longford's Larry Moran got their opening goal after 13 minutes when he finished a Liam Sullivan cross to the net. That goal brought them level, 0-3 to 1-0, the Wexford points coming through Niall Hughes and two Donal Shanley frees.

Dessie Reynolds' goal eight minutes before the interval earned his side a 2-1 to 0-5 interval lead. Points from Moran

and Rionn Brady then put Longford 2-4 to 0-8 ahead.

But the home side took over at midfield and outscored their opponents 0-6 to 0-1 in the final quarter with Shanley kicking over three excellent points, in addition to points from Ian Carthy, Brian Power and Sean Ryan.

WEXFORD: B Turner, D Barden, J Rossiter, R Vallejo, S Doyle, N Rossiter, S Donohoe, N Hughes (0-1), G Malone, E Nolan (0-1), C Carthy, B Power (0-1), D Shanley (0-7, frees), E Roche (0-1), S Ryan (0-3). Sub: J Carthy for Kiernan.

LONGFORD: S Fitzpatrick, R Sweeney, A Farrell, E Mackerell, L Hughes, C Farrell, V Hourican, S Kenny, D McGivney (0-2, frees), P Kiernan, L Sullivan, D Reynolds (1-1), L Moran (1-1), N Rabbittie, C Berry. Subs: R Brady (0-1) for Berry, C Brady for Kenny, F Sheridan for Kiernan.

Referee: S Mulhane (Laois).

McGraynor goal sees Wicklow through

Wicklow	5-12
Carlow	3-13

A goal from Wicklow midfielder Seán McGraynor finally killed off a Carlow side which had wiped out second half arrears of nine points at the IT grounds in Carlow last night.

Carlow took a first-minute lead through a goal from Diarmuid Walsh, but a porous home defence conceded three first-half goals as the pace of Wicklow centre forward Patrick O'Connor exploited the Carlow defence.

A first half injury-time goal from a penalty by Gary Allen saw Wicklow lead 3-6 to 1-7 at

half time. Carlow rallied to draw level but a free from Gary Allen, followed by McGraynor's goal provided Wicklow with safe passage through.

WICKLOW: Murphy, C McGorman, E Mara; C Healy, E Murrigh, M Cullen (0-1), D Boothman (0-1), S McGraynor (1-0), J O'Callaghan (0-2), P O'Connor (0-2), C Magee (0-0), G Allen (1-4, 1-0 pen, 0-3 frees), M Lennon (1-1), M O'Connor (0-1). Subs: B McCormack for P O'Connor (44 mins); D Gethings for Healy (66); R Marron for Allen (black card, 63).

CARLOW: White, A Byrne, J Murphy, C Kelly, M Rennie, M Furey, O'Toole, K Chatten, D Wall, D Walsh (1-2, 0-2 frees), C O'Brien (0-2), L O'Sullivan (0-2), D Smithers (0-2), L Dunne (0-2), N Lowry (2-2). Subs: C Byrne for Furey (27 mins); S Webb (0-1) for Wall (black card, 32); C McGrath for O'Toole (46). Referee: D Moore (Laois).

Lowry leads Laois to emphatic victory

Laois	3-15
Louth	1-14

Laois cruised into the last eight with a comfortable win over Louth at an icy Haggards-town.

After an entertaining opening 27 minutes, captain Eoin Lowry put Laois in the box seat with an emphatic finish past Fergal Sheekey. Cian Doyle and Dean Maguire were Louth's danger men and the hosts rallied before the break to close the gap to 1-8 to 0-9.

However, Laois grabbed the first four points of the second half to assume control again and a fortuitous deflect-

ed goal from substitute Michael Keogh put the issue beyond doubt.

Cian Doyle and Keogh exchanged further goals in the closing stages.

LAOIS: A Cooney, L Knowles, A Campion, E Buggie, T Collins, R Dowling, D O'Reilly, B Daly, N Murphy (0-1), D Hickey, E O'Carroll (0-4, 1-5), A Dowling, C Murphy, E Lowry (1-4), S Moore (0-5 frees). Subs: T Shields (0-1) for O'Carroll (33 mins), M Keogh (2-0) for A Dowling (39 mins), C Dunne for Daly (60 mins).

LOUTH: F Sheekey, P Kirk, R Curran, N Sharkey, L Lafferty, P Matthews, K Faulkner; C Early, M Corcoran, D Hamill (0-1), B McLaughlin, R Burns (0-4, 3-0), D Maguire (0-2), D Lafferty (0-1), C Doyle (1-4). Subs: J Clutterbuck (0-1) for Corcoran (33 mins), A O'Brien for McLaughlin (44 mins), H Osborne for Sharkey (49 mins), T McEaney (0-1) for D Lafferty (64 mins), D McCann for Maguire (65 mins). Referee: S McCarthy (Dublin)

Honda Classic The lowdown

Course: PGA National (Champion Course), Palm Beach Gardens, Florida (7,158 yards, par 70).
Course record – 72 holes: Camilo Villegas (2010); **18 holes:** 61 Brian Harman (2012).
Prize money: €5,535 million (€1 million to the winner).
Field: 144
Irish in action: Shane Lowry (12.15pm Irish time), Graeme McDowell (5.35pm), Rory McIlroy, Pádraig Harrington (5.45pm).
Defending champion: Pádraig Harrington arrived in Florida last year without a win on the USPGA Tour in seven years, stretching back to his third and final Major win at the PGA Championship.
He had missed five of eight cuts in the wraparound season, but turned things around in spectacular fashion with a playoff win against American Daniel Berger after the tournament stretched into the Monday.

The Dubliner also won the 2005 Honda Classic, his breakthrough success on the PGA Tour.
Other course winners in field: Rory McIlroy, Mark Wilson, Ernie Els, Camilo Villegas, Rory Sabbatini, Michael Thompson, Russell Henley.
Course guide: The George Fazio-designed course is considered one of the toughest played on the PGA Tour. Jack Nicklaus redesigned the layout in 1990, toughening up the course, especially the back nine holes.
The Bear Trap is a fearsome three-hole stretch from the 15th to 17th that can ruin scorecards or tournament hopes down the stretch on Sunday.
Weather forecast: Afternoon thunderstorms hit the area on Wednesday. Wind is due to be up on the opening day ahead of calmer conditions.
On TV: Sky Sports 4 from 7pm.