

Comparing GAA players with professionals is ultimately pointless



Seán Moran On Gaelic Games

Just because other sports are different doesn't necessarily make them better – or worse

I didn't take the firestorm of abuse that erupted in response to Stephen Hunt's perfectly unexceptional original column to demonstrate yet again that the GAA can be a touchy community.

The former soccer international merely pointed out that it's not as easy as it is for amateurs, who can be active in their own communities, for professional sportspeople to be role models. He also suggested not unreasonably that the adjustment to professional lifestyle mightn't be as straightforward as it looks from the outside.

I can remember former All-Ireland-winning Clare hurling fitness coach Mike McNamara saying that the one area in which amateur GAA sportspeople couldn't compete with professionals was that of rest, a vital component in driving the highest levels of fitness.

It's hard to read into Hunt's remarks any intentional disrespect for footballers and hurlers – he points out that he comes from a Gaelic games background and has always publicly acknowledged and spoken positively of that provenance. The complained-of remarks came

in the introduction to his piece in the *Sunday Independent* at the end of last month. In passing he referenced – perhaps never having read Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby – comments by Joe Brolly, which made the initial point about role models.

Anyway, the wrath of Twitter descended on Hunt, whose exchanges with Brolly have since escalated.

That thin-skinned sense of self may have been more pronounced in the past but it still exists within Gaelic games. Largely it takes two forms: a world-class ability to bristle and an irritating desire for external validation. Hunt's column provoked the former and for the latter we need look no further than the mid-summer obsession with what Sky viewers thought of the championship.

Overseas broadcasts
Even Joey Barton must have been surprised to have his views on hurling taken more seriously than his views on soccer ever were.

There's a distinction between hoping that overseas broadcasts of big championship matches get decent audiences and spread interest in the games and hanging on every

utterance that emanates from the Twitter machine.

How often do we hear soccer professionals and their prima donna antics being unfavourably compared with the honest amateurs of Gaelic games? Brolly said he didn't imagine Hunt, who in his time has survived age-grade Waterford hurling finals, would have lasted five minutes in the Ulster club football decider.

Which was reminiscent of the old yarn about Christy Ring watching some virtuoso golf shot being played by a top pro and observing: "Why wouldn't he and no-one within 10 yards of him."

Another Derry perspective on the professional-amateur sports interface came from someone who played on the front line. Seán Martin Lockhart, one of Ireland's best International Rules players, recalled how he once told his marker: "You're a mercenary. You just play for money. I play for pride."

Ultimately though one of the big strengths of the GAA is that it doesn't depend on international success to prosper whereas its most obvious competitors, rugby and soccer, command most attention

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The GAA is the greatest sporting presence in the country between participation, its place in the community, attendances and television audiences

when they are either winning things or qualifying for major events – which by its nature can't happen all the time.

Comparing Gaelic athletes with professionals is fine as a parlour game but ultimately pointless. They're just different arenas.

This afternoon the winner of this year's Philips Sports Manager of the

Year will be announced. This is an interesting microcosm of the GAA's competition with other sports for public recognition.

On the one hand, Gaelic games managers have won the award more often than candidates from any other sport; on the other hand if there's any suggestion of international achievement, the GAA candidates never appear to have a chance.

Obvious champions

This year for instance the two All-Ireland-winning managers Kilkenny's Brian Cody and Eamonn Fitzmaurice from Kerry both had very strong credentials after championships where each of them had to mend and make do with panels that weren't obvious champions.

Fitzmaurice had to cope without his team's most celebrated player, Colm Cooper, whereas Cody had to make substantial changes along the way, including between the drawn All-Ireland and its replay.

For the first time in ages – possibly ever – neither of the All-Ireland-winning managers even won the September monthly award. That went to another man with a strong

GAA background, Paul McGinley for managing Europe's team to the Ryder Cup.

It would however be valid to argue that Cody and Fitzmaurice had less to work with – allowing for their counties' intimidating traditions – than McGinley, albeit whose managerial acumen merited praise on both sides of the Atlantic, facing a by all accounts disorganised team of Americans.

Ironically the favourite for this year's award is Ireland rugby coach Joe Schmidt who has in the past been on the receiving end of international priority when neither of his outstanding European Cup-winning seasons with Leinster were recognised, losing out to respectively Ireland's qualification for Euro 12 and Katie Taylor's Olympic gold.

Such things are subjective, though. The GAA is the greatest sporting presence in the country between participation, its place in the community, attendances and television audiences. Just because other sports are different doesn't necessarily make them better – or worse.

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Gaelic Games Leinster SFC final

St Vincent's fighting fit as they close in on double



Ian O'Riordan

Champions include mixed martial arts in their training regime to freshen things up

Rhode (Offaly) v St Vincent's (Dublin)
Páirc Tailteann, Sunday, 2pm
TG4

No one said it would be easy, so when St Vincent's thought about ways of extending their unbeaten club run which now stretches back to September 2012 – an incredible 27 months – freshness was always going to be paramount.

Kicking and boxing each other inside a cage might not be everyone's idea of freshness, although it was certainly something different for the St Vincent's players. For the management it was also a way of reinforcing the team spirit which has helped the famous Dublin club win back-to-back county football titles for the first time since the 1970s.

So, while Sunday's Leinster club final against Offaly champions Rhode will be won purely on football terms, presumably, St Vincent's have included several sessions of mixed martial arts as part of their preparations – visiting the Straight Blast Gym (SBG), on the Naas Road, over the course of the season.

"We wanted a fresh ap-

proach, just to change things slightly, so we did a bit of mixed martial arts," says Hugh Gill, the St Vincent's vice-captain and long-serving defender.

"SBG is where Conor McGregor started out, although he wasn't around at the time. It was great, very enjoyable. We did a bit of wrestling and a bit of grappling and a bit of circuits. Eoin Brady is particularly good. Shane Carthy is a bit of animal. I think Mossy Quinn fancied himself at it but no, he wasn't very good.

"But it was great to see a different angle, to a different sort of training. The training is just insane. And I would have followed McGregor from early in his career and mentally, how he approaches things is just quite impressive."

Unbeaten run

Not that St Vincent's have been ignoring their football arts: they go into Sunday's final with surely the longest unbeaten run of any team in the country, given their last championship defeat was to Ballymun Kickhams, in the quarter-final of the Dublin championship back in September 2012. Ballymun went on to win the Dublin title that year (losing out in the All-Ireland club final), but St Vincent's swiftly re-emerged to win the 2013 Dublin and Leinster titles, then the All-Ireland, in March of this year.

Now, they're one more win away from back-to-back Leinster titles, and not even the legendary St Vincent's team of the 1970s ever managed that.

"It's been a long old run alright," says Gill, "and the prospect of getting another Leinster under the belt is a huge incentive to keep it going. And there is still a lot of hunger there, in that we do have a big panel.

"But when you're going this



■ St Vincent's Diarmuid Connolly in action against Damien Rushe of Garrycastle during the Leinster semi-final. No doubt Connolly will be closely monitored by Rhode on Sunday. PHOTOGRAPH: INPHO

long without a break you do need to be a bit smarter in your training. There's a fine line between getting fit and over training. So we do adapt our training approach. . . . Even when we had matches during the summer I don't think we were training as much."

If anything St Vincent's look a slicker, more productive team than the 2013 version – helped by the increasingly reliable Di-

armuid Connolly. Not that St Vincent's are overreliant on Connolly, as their Dublin final showdown with St Oliver Plunkett's proved.

Pretty well

"Yeah, Connolly probably had one of his quieter days, and they marshalled him pretty well. The same with Mossy. And other lads came up trumps; the likes of Ruairi Trainor, Gavin Burke, Shane Carthy and Ciarán Dorney. So I think that kind of answered a few people."

Connolly, however, will definitely be singled out for special attention by Rhode, and even Gill admits he's never ceased to be amazed at what his team-mate can do.

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The number of Dublin senior football championship's won by St Vincent's

"He's awesome, and I've been training with him since he was about 10 or 11, and we've always played on the same teams. "This has probably been his best year, as he's only now fulfilling his potential. And he would be a big leader on our team, very vocal. He doesn't do too much of this media stuff but he's definitely someone I look up to. The last year or two, he's been extremely consistent. "He's only a year older than

me (at 26) so he can get only get better. I'm just looking forward to seeing what that is."

Indeed while St Vincent's may be considered a largely young team, for many players Sunday also offers the chance to win a third Leinster title, to go with the 2007 title, the season they also went on to collect the All-Ireland outright.

"Of the 33 or 34 on the panel now, nearly every one of them have an All-Ireland and most of them two All-Irelands. We're also a bit more mature, and the bit of experience always helps."

Dublin manager Jim Gavin, meanwhile, has added some further experience to his backroom team by bringing in former fellow All-Ireland winner

This weekend's GAA fixtures

Sunday
Leinster club SFC final: Rhode (Offaly) v St Vincent's (Dublin), Páirc Tailteann, 2.0.
Galway SHC final: Gart v Portlanna, Kenny Park, 1.30.
All-Ireland club SFC quarter-final: Tir Chonaill Gaels (London) v Corofin (Galway), Ruislip, 1.0

Jason Sherlock to act as forwards coach for 2015.

Sherlock played alongside Gavin when they won the 1995 All-Ireland, and has worked with several Dublin development squads in more recent years.

Gaelic Games News

Becoming manager 'inevitable step' for Curran

EAMON DONOGHUE

Former St Bridgid's and Roscommon goalkeeper, the ever-exuberant Shane 'Cake' Curran, is set to take the "inevitable step" into management in the coming weeks.

The 43-year-old who lined out for his adopted St Bridgid's club as recently as last month, when they were knocked out of the Connacht championship by Mayo's Ballintubber in the semi-finals, is due to make his mind up before Christmas on the litany of club management offers currently on the table.

Intriguing career

An All-Ireland club winner in 2013, and a Connacht senior championship winner with



■ Shane Curran: the former player says move to management is most likely

Roscommon 12 years earlier, Curran claims that throughout his intriguing career he has had exactly 57 different coaches. All of which he intends "to take something from" as he embarks upon his new managerial career. One which will more than likely begin within the club scene in his native county.

Fresh approach

"It's most likely that I will (be going into management in the coming weeks) but I've made no concrete decision as of yet, and I'd do anyone the courtesy of talking. But yes, I probably will be, it's an inevitable step isn't it."

"It's all had to be weighed up, you need a life/work schedule balance before even attempting it," he said. "There is a fresh approach and fresh ideas needed, the game is going in a different direction so I'll see if I can bring in some of my thinking to it."

Sports briefs

Athletics

IAAF alleged to have turned blind eye to suspicious samples

Athletics is at the centre of fresh claims about doping after it was alleged the sport's world governing body, the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF), turned a blind eye to suspicious blood tests involving 150 athletes including a leading Briton.

The German TV broadcaster ARD reported that a long-time member of the IAAF's medical commission, who remained anonymous, had a list of dozens of suspicious blood values which were not followed up.

The cases involved blood samples taken between 2006 and 2008 and were "highly suspicious" according to the unnamed medical commis-

sion member but there was no follow-up involving target testing of the athletes involved, by the IAAF's doping department.

It is claimed by ARD that many of the samples came from Russian athletes, but that three British athletes were also involved along with others from Kenya, Germany, Spain and Morocco.

ARD has also alleged there is systematic doping in Russian athletics and implicated the IAAF in covering up the problem.

The IAAF said "an investigation by the IAAF ethics commission is already ongoing with respect to some of the allegations made in the documentary."

Golf

Mclroy claims Golf Writers Trophy again

World number one Rory McIlroy has won the Golf Writers Trophy for the second time in three years following a stunning season that saw him claim two Major championships and play a leading role in Europe's Ryder Cup victory.

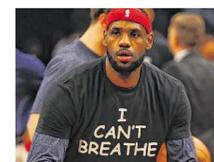
The 25-year-old was the overwhelming choice for the prestigious award following votes cast by members of the Association of Golf Writers. In addition to his victories in the Open Championship and the US PGA Championship, McIlroy also won the WGC-Bridgestone Invitational and the BMW PGA Championship at Wentworth. Martin Kaymer finished runner-up.

Basketball

No fines for James and others over 'I Can't Breathe' shirts

No fines or reprimands will be handed down to LeBron James, Kyrie Irving and others who wore "I Can't Breathe" shirts during warm-ups for a Cleveland Cavaliers-Brooklyn Nets game on Monday night, National Basketball Association sources said on Tuesday.

James, the NBA's biggest star, wore the same type of shirt that Chicago Bulls guard Derrick Rose wore last Saturday in Chicago. NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said he supports players voicing their opinions but would prefer they abide by the rule that players wear clothing made by Adidas, the league's official apparel provider.



■ LeBron James expressed support for Garner's family

The shirts were a gesture of solidarity with the family of Eric Garner, the 29-year-old unarmed black man who died in July, after being restrained in a chokehold by a New York City police officer.

Garner was videotaped saying, "I can't breathe," before losing consciousness.

Cycling

Normandy start for Tour in 2016

The 2016 Tour de France will begin in the Normandy region with the Grand Depart from the iconic Mont Saint-Michel and a third-stage start from Granville, organisers said yesterday.

The world's greatest bike race will start from western France for the first time since 2011, when the riders departed from the Vendée region.

The first stage will take the peloton on a 188km journey from Mont Saint-Michel to Utah Beach.

The complete route will be unveiled in October 2015.

Cricket

Warner dedicates century to fatally injured Hughes

David Warner scored a brilliant 145 and dedicated it to close friend Phil Hughes as Australia returned to Test action for the first time since their former batsman's death.

Hughes (25) died after being hit in a Sheffield Shield match by a bouncer from Sean Abbott – who also returned to cricket on Tuesday with two wickets against Queensland.

The Test against India at the Adelaide Oval was preceded by emotional tributes to Hughes. Both Warner and captain Michael Clarke, along with Steve Smith, honoured their fallen team-mate with significant scores – though Clarke



■ David Warner dedicated 145 score to Phil Hughes

retired hurt after aggravating his troublesome back injury.

Warner seemed to channel his emotions into his batting as he piled on the runs early on – making 35 off the first 17 balls he faced.

Australia finished on 354 for six at stumps, with Steven Smith unbeaten on 72.