

Feature Ronan Conway



The former hurler taking risks and shining light inside the prison walls



Denis Walsh

Ex-Cork player overcame his own issues and now helps others, including prisoners, through his life's work as a performance coach

In a room in Castlereagh Prison, Ronan Conway stands in front of 12 inmates and introduces himself. His intention for the next two days is that everyone in the group will reveal thoughts and feelings they had not planned to share, but the talking must start with him. The prisoners sit in a jagged semicircle and he begins.

He tells them about hurling for Cork, and the injuries that derailed his career, and the feelings of “emptiness” that made him question his path in life. About working with teenagers for eight years in Soar, the foundation that Tony Griffin started, and finding his voice to speak in rooms like this and make connections with strangers.

Then starting out on his own, working with teams; the Dublin footballers under Jim Gavin and Dessie Farrell, the Galway footballers, the Cork hurlers, Irish rugby teams, club teams. Groups that felt close, without knowing about other depths of togetherness.

“In every group there is an incredible amount of knowledge and wisdom,” he tells the inmates.

They don't feel like a group yet. Most of them have never met before. Their cells are on different landings. The gap between the youngest and the oldest must be 40 years. Four of them are in prison for the first time. Joe has been incarcerated for the ninth time. Frank has served 14 years of a life sentence. Most of them have children. Some of them have broken-down relationships with the mother of their kids. John's kids don't talk to him.

In the first part of the morning session most of them are watchful and not ready to express their feelings. Conway prods their wariness, gently. Ian wants to talk about pain.

“You suppress it down,” he says, “trying to block it out. You push it down. You're burying it. Then it pops up when you don't want it to, and it explodes . . . All you seem to do in here is look back, at shit I've done. Thinking is not good. It has to be soul-searching. I'm looking to find myself. Don't really know who I am any more. I know who I wanted to be. It just didn't turn out that way.”

On a screen at the top of the room, Conway flashes up an image of an iceberg. With the group, he says, he wants to take their conversation below the waterline. For now, all of them are huddled at the tip of the iceberg.

“There was a lot of tracking going on from them going, like, ‘Is this the place for me and is it safe to be here?’ Psychologically safe to be here?” Conway says later.

“Over time, you create that safety with them. By the end, hopefully, they don't want to leave the room. The purpose of this is to build a healthier relationship with themselves and others. If they have a minor shift in how they see themselves or how they relate to other people, or their hope for the future, it's like, that's huge.” Before lunch, the room starts to thaw.

“We all have hardships,” says Frank. “We're all the same. We've all suffered. There's nothing wrong with it, but nobody wants to be vulnerable in here.”

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Conway remembers a short conversation with his dad, at a time in his life when he was drifting and lost in plain sight. His degree and his masters from UCC had led him to a good job in the tech industry. His promise as a young hurler had attracted the attention of the Cork seniors. All of it had a face value that should have amounted to more than it did.

“I was living at home and I was [out] until all hours playing poker with friends and sleeping until noon. My dad was like, ‘What are you going to do with yourself?’ I was like, ‘I don't know. All I know is that I'd like to work in a room with people making some form of impact’. He said, ‘What's that?’ And I was like, ‘I don't know’.”

Conway's hurling career peaked in his early 20s. His club Bishopstown were flying, he was playing for UCC in the Fitzgibbon Cup and Cork came calling. In that dressing room was a galaxy of stars.

“I knew I was a good hurler but I had this limiting belief about, like, ‘Do I really belong in this squad?’ I'm looking around at Seán Óg [O'hAilpín] and [Brian] Corcoran and all the lads, and I'm going, ‘Yeah, it's great to be here, but do I belong?’ I probably would have lacked self-belief, and I internalised that.”

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– Castlereagh Prison inmate ‘Ian’

“I tore my abductor muscle twice and the injuries were one thing [in his decision to quit] but I felt like there was something missing when I was playing. I felt bad about that. That probably drove my team-mates mad [in the club].”

“Sometimes I feel a bit of guilt about how it finished up, but, looking back, I had to do it. You know, I'm doing what I love [playing hurling] but I also had an itch to do other things. In reality, I didn't know myself at all. Didn't know who I was beyond the hurler. It was getting to me. It was getting to me in terms of that feeling of a bit of emptiness inside.”

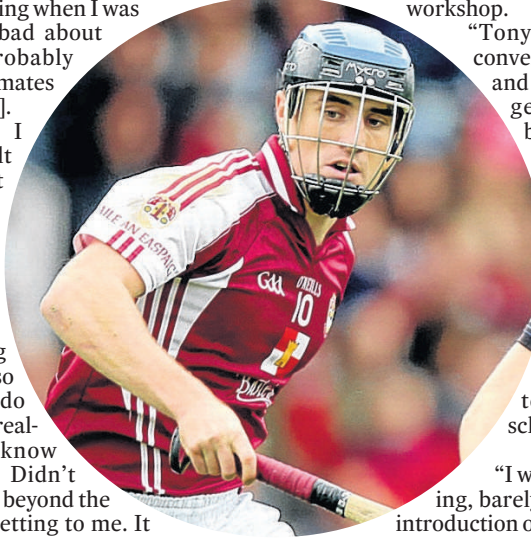
Conway went to Australia and when he returned he started a psychology degree in

Dublin, by night. On that course a new acquaintance introduced him to Tony Griffin; he invited Conway to a workshop.

“Tony facilitated a conversation with me and 25 other strangers. I was just blown away. I left that night going, ‘Whatever happened there, I want to do that.’” Conway's first gig with Saor was to talk to 120 teenagers in a school in Tallaght.

“I was scared, shaking, barely able to get my introduction out of my mouth. You can tell people are looking at you. ‘You don't know what you're doing’.”

“But, you know, Tony injected me with a belief. He took me under his wing.”



■ Ronan Conway working with prisoners at Castlereagh Prison and, inset above, in the colours of Bishopstown during the 2012 Cork senior hurling championship. PHOTOGRAPHS: ALAN BETSON/ THE IRISH TIMES; JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

Kevin McManamon, the former Dublin footballer, joined Soar three or four years after Conway and they struck up a friendship. Other doors opened. When McManamon started doing some work with the Dublin Under-20s he asked Conway to lead some workshops. When the Ireland Under-20s rugby team needed some help in a Grand Slam season, they went together.

Then, out of the blue, McManamon called one day to say that Jim Gavin wanted to talk to him. Dublin had just won their fourth All-Ireland in a row. What more could they need?

“All elite teams try to keep evolving, they try to add layers to what they're doing. One of the players said to me, ‘We're looking for new stimulus’. I remember the first session [with the Dublin squad], you had all these players looking up at you and I knew all their faces. It was surreal and daunting at the start, but not after that.”

“A big part of the work I do is for a team to connect to something bigger than themselves. To have a higher purpose guiding them. The main thing to understand is that we all have the same needs. We're hard-wired with the need to belong and feel connected and feel safe and when you fulfil those needs for a group, regardless of the level they're playing at, that's where the growth will come.”

“That's where the first session with Dublin was important. If they got a sniff that this was going to improve their performance on the pitch by 1 per cent, or even a ½ per cent, they were going to buy-in.”

For everybody who operates in this space, the work has an abstract, subjective quality. Unlike gym scores or aerobic tests, there are no empirical measurements. But one session led to another. The feedback was strong. The players were convinced and engaged.

On Conway's website, one of the testimonials is from Jack McCaffrey. Part of it reads: “He took a group that was already successful and opened up room for improvement and growth that we probably didn't realise was there. By connecting with each of us on an individual level his input was invaluable in unlocking our potential.”

Conway noticed that Philly McMahon was taking copious notes during his sessions. He had been working with prisoners in Mountjoy and after a few months he asked Conway if he would join him. At the first session, while he was introducing himself, one of the inmates stopped him dead in his tracks.

“This guy goes, ‘You don't f***ing care’. I said, ‘Go on’. And he said, ‘Why would anyone care?’ I was thinking, ‘This is an interesting place to start’ because you have to show them that you care, and maybe they're used to people in their lives not caring. So, I said, you know, ‘I'm actually scared of saying the wrong thing here’. And he said, ‘You can say whatever the f*** you want’.”

“I'm still friends with him. He's in an open prison now. We went on a 16-week journey together [with the programme] and it was unbelievable.”

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After lunch in Castlereagh Prison, Conway asked the group to talk about experiences that had influenced their lives. In turn, they talk about broken homes, drugs, addiction. Conway quotes a line from Gabor Mate, a Canadian doctor and author.

“It's not, ‘Why the addiction?’” he said. “It's, ‘Why the pain?’”

The afternoon session is more dynamic. The inmates spend more time on their feet, facing each other. For some segments he pairs them off and they must speak to each other for two minutes on a topic he has nominated. Something personal, such as what gives them hope? All the while barriers are crumbling. By the end of the second workshop on day two, he asked them all to write a letter to themselves and read it to the group. Nobody balked.

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“Sport is about risks,” Conway says.

“On the field, if you feel free to take risks, that's where the magic happens. It's the same in workshops. It's all about taking interpersonal risks with each other and showing vulnerabilities. In a team environment, when there's 40 lads in a room and one of them steps outside the comfort zone, the room is filled with trust almost immediately, and respect. It doesn't mean tapping into your deepest, darkest fears, it's just lowering the waterline a little bit.”

“The room, the group, can hold it then. When one person speaks, or five people speak, the room almost supports that vulnerability. It never ceases to surprise me how teams are hungry for conversations like that. They don't happen very often.”

At the end of the second workshop Conway asked the inmates to write down a piece of advice to themselves. He goes around the group to hear their thoughts, and the same sentiments are repeated: stay positive; keep going; believe that I can change.

Then he reaches Danny, a man in his 50s, well-spoken, educated, his first time in prison. “To share goodness and love,” he said, “and throw away the badness and shame.”

The energy in the room had come from all of them. The light had come from Conway.

The names of the prisoners in this article have been changed