

Sports Weekend



Could Postecoglou be the Spurs saviour?

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RUGBY WORLD CUP 2023
MATCH 2: TONIGHT 8PM
IRELAND v TONGA



Gerry Thornley, John O'Sullivan, Johnny Watterson & Matt Williams

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Interview Kellie Harrington



“

I've just been in a bit of a dark place. I'm just sad. I'm sorry for the tweet I put up. I'm sorry for the hurt that I caused. I am sad. I've been sad because of it. It happened. People say things without thinking about the consequences of it. And that was what happened.”

PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON

Kellie Harrington wants to pick her words carefully. She wants to do everything carefully. At one point, she stops herself after the f and the u of a swear word that's about to slip out and goes, “No, I can't say that.” You remind her that people everywhere curse all the time and that it's really no biggie. She shakes her head.

“I'm so careful now about what comes out of my mouth,” she says. “That never used to be the person that I was. I'm always cautious now of what I say. Even there, I was cursing and then I was going, ‘Jesus, I better not curse’ and then I was going, ‘Jesus, I better not say Jesus.’ That's what's in my head now a lot of the time.”

We're in St Mary's Boxing Club in Tallaght on a grey Wednesday morning. Her coach Noel Burke is sitting on the apron of the ring as we chat. He interjects just once, when Harrington briefly tears up and apologises for crying.

“It's hugely emotional,” Burke says to her. “That's why you're crying. You're a human being. You were affected big time because that's not who you are. If it was who you were, you wouldn't care. And you

could spout a load of crap about it.”

It. It, in this context, covers a multitude. It covers a retweet she posted last October citing a notorious right-wing pundit on GB News talking about the death of a 12-year-old girl in France at the hands of an Algerian immigrant. It covers Harrington saying in her retweet that “Our own leaders need to take a listen to this”, from which it could reasonably be inferred that she was linking immigration to crime in Ireland.

It covers a disastrous interview with Off The Ball in March of this year, during which she was repeatedly asked about the tweet and refused to expand on what she meant by it. Most of all, it covers an impression of her that she doesn't want out in the world, one she has struggled with for long stretches of this year.

“I've just been in a bit of a dark place with it,” she says. “I'm just sad. I'm sorry for the tweet I put up. I'm sorry for the hurt that I caused. I am sad. I've been sad because of it. It happened. People say things without thinking about the consequences of it. And that was what happened.”

On Monday, October 17th, 2022, Harrington was in Montenegro, competing in the European Championships. She



Malachy Clerkin

The Olympic champion got embroiled in a controversy about immigration and is eager to clarify her views and apologise for the damage done

had won her opening bout the previous Friday and followed it up with another win on the Saturday. But her quarter-final wasn't until Wednesday and now she was bored. Normally, she wouldn't have been anywhere near social media during a tournament but a four-day gap between fights left her with time to fill.

“I was scrolling on my phone. I actually don't even know how that tweet ended up on my Twitter because I don't follow it – someone who I follow must follow that. And I didn't even look at what it said, I just

looked at the video. It was about 12-year-old girl who had been led to her death, raped, murdered and chopped up and put into a suitcase. And that just filled me with anger and sadness.

“To be very honest with you, I never thought of the hurt that I could cause to anybody by retweeting it. I never thought of what I said in the retweet either. I just said it and I put it up on Twitter.”

The post she retweeted was a video of Dutch right-wing pundit Eva Vlaardinger-

broek going on GB News and using the murder of French schoolgirl Lola Daviet to spout unsubstantiated claims about immigrant crime in France. Vlaardinger-broek said, without evidence, that she thought this was the 12th murder of a child by immigrants in France in 2022. “Another young European girl sacrificed on the altar of mass migration,” was how she termed it.

Private messages

Within minutes of posting, Harrington received private messages from people she knew and respected, who told her that by boosting the likes of GB News, she was aligning herself with some pretty dubious people. “They weren't being aggressive to me, they were just trying to educate me a little bit,” Harrington says.

“I had basically painted a group of people with the same paintbrush that people like me, from my community, from my area have been and are still being painted with for many years. So I know what that's like. And that's exactly what I had done with my retweet. I didn't realise that at the time.

“So I deleted the tweet. I took it down and I apologised personally in the messages to people who I had hurt. They under-

stood and they said, ‘Look, we're all learning. We're all human, you know? There's good and bad in everyone.’

“And that was that. It was deleted and I moved on. There was nothing said about it, that was it. I didn't hear a thing about it afterwards. Because anybody who knows me knows what I am and what I do. I didn't know the journalist in the tweet. I didn't know her. I didn't know what GMB [GB News] is. It was just on my Twitter.”

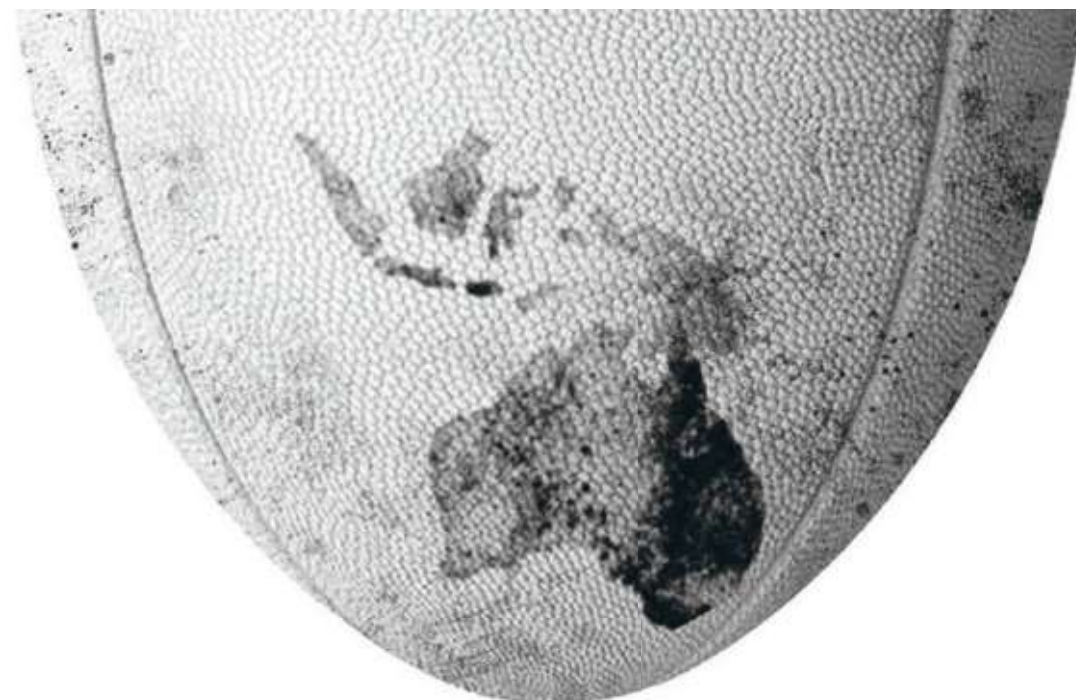
That was Monday night. By the weekend, she had won the tournament outright, finally emulating Katie Taylor's full house of European, World and Olympic gold medals. Her autobiography, co-written with Roddy Doyle, came out the following week and though she did various bits of publicity for it, the issue of the GB News tweet never came up.

It wasn't until five months later that the reckoning arrived. Harrington was at a sponsor's press event, part of which was an interview with Shane Hannon of Off The Ball. When Hannon brought up the tweet, her response was to go on the offensive, accusing the presenter of coming with an agenda and hanging her out to dry. The video went viral and

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WILL IT ALL GO SOUTH?

Southern hemisphere teams have won the Rugby World Cup 8 out of 9 times. But North are at home.



Look Up

Malachy Clerkin



So what if Evan Ferguson is fit to play for Brighton? Isn't that what we want?

How will you feel if Evan Ferguson plays against Manchester United this weekend? There's a question, now. What if he rattles in a couple of goals into the bargain? What if it's 10.30 on Saturday night and Gary Lineker is grinning into the camera making dorky jokes about Evan Almighty and Fergie Time and all that kind of cheeseball sass? Are you going to be okay with that?

The question is neither as odd nor as ridiculous as it sounds. When the official Brighton & Hove Albion Twitter account

posted pictures on Thursday of the boy prince back in training, they possibly didn't expect quite the river of vitriol that would flow through in the replies. Even by Twitter's standards, it turned out to be a rough afternoon for the lads.

"Fresh from his first #PL hat-trick!" ran the caption, (accompanied by a star emoji and another kind of smirky one that your correspondent stared at for a good 20 minutes to try to discern its meaning before mourning the passing of what was left of his youth).

Responses ranged from passive-aggressive eyebrow-raised emojis to slightly more pointed shouts of "Oh, he's okay then?", all the way to various charmers interjecting to inform Ferguson that he is a "Bohs c**t". "Load of bollox" got a run-out. "Injured my hole" was popular.

This, to put it mildly, isn't the sort of discourse they'd be used to down in the Seagulls' social media department these days. Brighton are the darlings of English football right now. At the rate they're going, they'll be adding daisy chains and a unicorn to the club crest before Christmas. All their players are about 15 years old, their every goal is a dream sequence and no matter who leaves, nothing seems to halt their progress.

In the past two years they've seen Moises Caicedo, Alexis Mac Allister, Robert Sánchez, Leandro Trossard, Marc Cucurella, Yves Bissouma, Ben White, Dan Burn and manager Graham Potter all walk out the door and haven't missed a beat. Roberto De Zerbi has the intense but kindly bearing of an older brother keeping his siblings in line after a car crash has claimed their parents. Everybody watches in admiration as Brighton carry themselves through a ruthless world.

Everybody, that is, unless you're an Irish fan scorned. Bad enough that he couldn't play for Ireland against France and the Netherlands after scoring the first hat-trick in the Premier League by a teenager in 25 years. But to be possibly fit and raring to go in time for Brighton's first match back? Ah here.

De Zerbi said in his Friday press conference that they'd be making a late call on him, which at the very least means he's in contention for the bench. If it all works out the way Brighton are hoping, the Bettystown Haaland will spend the afternoon feasting on United's carthorse defence. In which case, whoever runs the Brighton Twitter account should probably post once and then leave it a few days before checking back in.

Picking and pecking

We're not seriously going to do this, are we? Obviously it would be folly to go extrapolating too much from a few dozen doses on Twitter but it feels worth asking the question all the same. We're surely not going to start picking and pecking at him this early on, sousing the first good news story in Irish men's football for ages?

Ferguson is a month short of his 19th birthday. If he has basically an average amount of luck on his side, he'll play for Ireland for the next 10-to-15 years. That's anything up to seven or eight qualifying campaigns for major tournaments with him as a goal machine. We could, with a fair wind, have him still banging them in as far away as the 2038 World Cup. Euro 2040, anyone?

Okay, okay. Settle down, Mal. The lad just passed his driving test, so maybe hold off on ordering up the statue outside Lansdowne Road just yet. But the point stands – the arc of history is long and it bends towards Ferguson scoring goals for Ireland. Now is precisely the time to be

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treating him with the gentlest of kid gloves.

This was particularly driven home on Thursday because at more or less the same time as Ferguson was getting back on the training pitch in Brighton, the FAI were hosting their long-delayed press conference in Abbotstown. The Vera Pauw and Stephen Kenny stuff was what grabbed the most headlines but a decent portion of it was also taken up with the nuts and bolts grassroots stuff that will ultimately prove far more important.

Fair to say the picture painted by Jonathan Hill and Marc Canham wasn't, by and large, encouraging. They're starting from a

bad place, given all the years of waste and neglect by their predecessors. They need more from the government, they need better links with schools, they need everyone pulling behind their development plans instead of jealously guarding their own small patch. And even then, even if all that happens across the next decade, there's still no guarantee that it will help the fortunes of the national team.

For now, we are who we are. We have what we have. It was, yes, hard to be at the match against the Netherlands and watch on as Adam Idah twice go on the ball in the box with his back to goal in the first half before all-too-generously laying it off. Idah gamely wired into a running battle with Virgil van Dijk for the evening but in those two moments it was impossible not to wonder what Ferguson would have done with such premium possession.

But even so, that doesn't stop it being the right call for the Ireland medical staff to send him back to his club for the international window. And nor should it mean he has to sit out Brighton's next game if he and his club decide he's fit and able for it. An Irish teenager tagging out against United at Old Trafford is a cause for joy and hope and optimism.

You've fairly lost your sense of what's good for Irish football if you imagine otherwise.

➔ **Change of fortunes for Irish in Brighton as striking prodigy Ferguson wins local hearts:** Mark Paul, main edition, page 9

Interview Kellie Harrington

'I've just been in a bit of a dark place. I'm just sad. I'm sorry for the hurt that I caused'

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though she later released a statement to try and take the heat out of it, the damage was done.

"In fairness to the lads in Off The Ball, that's their job," she says now. "That's what they have to do. They're journalists. They have to do what they have to do. On that day, I just wasn't expecting it. I was just shocked. And I reacted quite badly. At the time I didn't think I reacted badly. I just thought, 'I'm just not going to answer it.' But once I looked back at it, I do think I reacted badly."

"I don't blame him for asking the question. I was annoyed at myself that I didn't answer it. I was totally shocked that it was coming back up again. I'm not known for politics or for anything other than sport. So I didn't think that question was going to come back. I know I had put it out there. But I had deleted it. And I thought, 'Right, that's gone.' But it wasn't. It came back to bite me."

The walls came tumbling down. She found herself paralysed. This was a situation of her own making, in which she had inadvertently become a lightning rod for an immigration debate that she had neither desire to get caught up in nor the expertise to see off.

Weaponised

She became weaponised by all sides of a question that has no neat and tidy answer. Some of her supporters felt let down by what they saw as a betrayal of the openness and diversity she had always stood up for. On the flipside, some of the worst people on the internet hailed her as a hero and gave her plenty of you-tell-'em-Kellie backing.

But tell-'em what, exactly? She put out that statement to get through the day but in the weeks that followed, she came under pressure to come out and be honest about what she felt about immigration. To answer questions and let everyone know where she stood.

All of which sounds reasonable enough, in theory. In practice, it terrified her. It would terrify most people. Could you do it? Somebody sets a tape recorder under your nose and starts interrogating your thoughts and theories about immigration – would you trust yourself to tiptoe through the minefield unscathed? Plenty of people talk about starting honest conversations, safe in the knowledge they won't ever be asked to come to conclusions.

But in the end, she knows she brought this on herself. And that this is the consequence.

"I can talk all day about boxing. It's what I'm used to. I'm used to training. I'm used to boxing. I'm used to nutrition. I'm used to stepping into the ring and when the bell goes, going out. And if I throw two digs and take three back, I'm used to being able to step back, breathe, think about what's after happening and to go again."

"But in that moment, in October, when I saw that tweet, I didn't step back, breathe and think. I just reacted. That's what it was. Every action has a reaction and my reaction was to repost that. And then that reaction got another reaction and I deleted it. I was genuinely sorry for the upset and hurt that I caused to people. And I'm still sorry."

She knows who she is. She doesn't have solutions for how governments should deal with refugees or asylum seekers or migrants of any kind. She couldn't begin to tell you where to start if you're formulating a policy or trying to find a fix for something that feels broken in every country in western Europe. But she knows how she sees the world and who she is in it.

"I believe that Ireland is for everybody. It should be a place to feel safe and to feel welcome. And that's regardless of your skin colour, your religion, your gender, your sexuality, or anything like that. Ireland is known as being so welcoming. You should be able to feel safe here. And I'm all for that."

"We travel away boxing all the time and that is what comes across to the rest of the world everywhere we go and I want us to have that forever. I'm very, very proud of



where I come from. I want our country to be known forever as the country and the people that are very, very welcoming. A country that will help anybody who needs help. That's what I believe.

"I try to help everyone. My help for people doesn't stop at what race they are, or what gender they're from, or anything like that. If someone needs help then they're getting help. If they're a good person, they're getting it. It all depends on whether you're a good person or you're not. That's where I come from. It's nothing to do with what race you are or where you're from or anything like that."

"I do stuff in my community, to help everybody in my community. And we have a very diverse community, all different nationalities. It's not just to help a certain nationality, it's to help everybody. At Christmas, we have 350 families through the doors, all different nationalities, genders, all different creeds. That's who I am."

"And I don't want to be going around saying, 'Look at me, look at all the things I do.' That's not it. I believe that if I have any sort of pull in terms of getting the city council to do something for an event or of getting a bit of money to go towards doing a fun day, then that's what I should be doing. That's where my energy and time should be going into. I'm not all into politics and all that. I leave that to the politicians to deal with because I just have no clue."

In the midst of it all, she got back to what she's best at. She and Noel got back

in the ring and got on with qualifying for Paris next year. Not that it was straightforward. She's 33 now and she finds making weight at 60kg much more of a trial than when she was in her 20s.

That aspect of it came to a head in the Czech Republic in May when she fought in a tournament that required her to make weight every day for four days straight. By the end of it, she was considering walking away altogether. Or at least throwing the words out into the world to see how they sounded.

'Absolutely banjaxed'

"I won a close fight in the final, a split decision versus Sweden. But I felt absolutely banjaxed after it. Afterwards, I actually thought that was it, I'm done now. I actually got pains in my legs and arms because of dehydration – it felt like growing pains. Growing pains at 33!"

"I was getting cramps in my legs for a few days after it. And I thought it was the end of my boxing career. I genuinely thought that for a few days. I just couldn't face having to do that, to make that weight it is what it's doing to my body to have to make it."

"But the thing was, it was only because there were no rest days at that tournament. Usually, you'd make weight, have your fight and then get a day to rehydrate before the next one. But because I was fighting four days straight, I never got to rehydrate fully and it meant I wasn't thinking clearly either."

The fog cleared though and she kept

■ **Kellie Harrington after winning gold in the lightweight (60kg) competition at the European Games.** PHOTOGRAPH: TOM MAHER/INPHO

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I believe that Ireland is for everybody. It should be a place to feel safe and to feel welcome. And that's regardless of your skin colour, your religion, your gender, your sexuality, or anything

plugging, qualifying for the Paris Olympics a month later in Poland. The gold medal fight at 60kg is on August 6th, 2024 – all going to plan, that will be the day she retires from international boxing. She can't wait.

"If it had been four years to the next Olympics, I don't know if I would have kept going," she says. "But three years felt okay. I'm looking forward to retirement. Really looking forward to it, with Mandy and the dogs and seeing what life brings. Looking forward to moving back into town, looking forward to life after boxing. I've been boxing for 20 years. That's a lot, you know?"

It is. And for most of it, she was nobody. Outside of amateur boxing's tiny circle, nobody cared what she did or what she said for the longest time. Success changed all that – you don't get to become world and Olympic champion without gathering people along the way. Her biggest fear is that she has lost those people. That one stupid retweet and one terrible interview have cost her the goodwill she spent all those years building up.

"That is important to me," she says. "That people know that I'm not that person. That's what ate me up for months, the fact that someone might think that I'm all of those things that people were saying on Twitter about me. I just know that I would hate to think that anyone would think any different of me."

"I would rather people not know me for being an Olympic champion but to know me for being a good, kind person."

Briefs

Soccer

Everton announce full takeover by US private equity firm

Farhad Moshiri has signed an agreement to complete the \$2.888-billion takeover of Everton by a US private equity firm 777 Partners. Takeover talks between the British-Iranian billionaire and the Miami-based company had advanced after the collapse of a proposed equity deal with another American investment firm, MSP Sports Capital, which has loaned £100m towards the construction of Everton's new stadium at Bramley-Moore Dock.

The two parties have now signed an agreement for a full takeover, which Moshiri

claims will secure the funding to complete the \$2.888-billion stadium on Liverpool's waterfront, although the deal remains subject to approval from the Premier League, the English Football Association and the Financial Conduct Authority.

777 Partners has been embroiled in numerous controversies since being founded by Josh Wander and Steven Pasko in 2015, including allegations of fraud, which the company denies. Wander also pleaded no contest to a drugs charge in 2003. – Guardian

Cycling Vuelta a España

Groves misses out on third Vuelta stage win due to crash

Sprint favourite Kaden Groves lost the chance of taking a third stage win in the Vuelta a España yesterday after he was caught up in a crash inside the final three kilometres.

The Australian's Alpecin-Deceuninck team-mate Tobias Bayer glanced behind to ensure Groves was in position in advance of the sprint, then inadvertently clipped the wheel of the rider in front of him and crashed. Several other riders also came off, including Groves, although he avoided injury.

The stage to Íscar was won by Alberto Dainese ahead of



■ Kaden Groves: avoided injury when multiple riders crashed

Filippo Ganna. Race leader Sepp Kuss avoided the crash and maintained his 17-second lead over team-mate Jonas Vingegaard.

Today's stage is the last mountain leg of this year's race which ends tomorrow. SHANE STOKES

Tennis

Tearful Murray reveals added significance of Davis Cup win

An emotional Andy Murray broke down in tears at the end of an epic Davis Cup win over Swiss debutant Leandro Riedi after revealing he was missing his grandmother's funeral to play in the tie.

Murray needed all his nous to grind out a 6-7 (7) 6-4 6-4 victory in three hours and 10 minutes at Manchester's AO Arena, giving Great Britain a 1-0 lead over Switzerland.

At the end of what had been a light-hearted on-court interview, the Scot choked up, revealing the added significance of his win.

"Today is a tough day for



■ Britain's Andy Murray after beating Leandro Riedi

me, it's my gran's funeral today," he said. "I'm sorry to my family that I'm not able to be there but gran, this one's for you."

Murray then returned to his bench where he sat sobbing into his towel.

Cricket One Day International series

Malan hits century as England secure win over New Zealand

Dawid Malan's series-clinching century against New Zealand pushed him into pole position to open in England's World Cup defence next month, as question marks continued to linger over Jason Roy.

Roy was once again missing due to back spasms, meaning he has been sidelined for all four games against the Black Caps.

Malan made a superb 127 from 114 balls at his old home ground of Lord's, steering England to a score of 311 for

nine that the tourists never came close to matching.

They succumbed for 211, going down by exactly 100 on the night and 3-1 overall, as Moeen Ali spun his way to figures of 40 for 50.

It is only a matter of days since Malan was being floated as a potential fall-guy should Harry Brook find himself parachuted into the squad for the tournament in India, but he has picked his moment expertly, following knocks of 54 and 96 with his fifth ODI ton.