

Look Up

Malachy Clerkin



This much we know: Ireland shouldn't play against Israel

We know it's unreasonable to expect the Ireland women's basketball team to boycott their match against Israel next week. We know that doing so would cost Basketball Ireland thousands of euro in fines and anything up to a five-year ban from international competition. We know they didn't choose to be in this position, and that there's no simple way out of it. We know they're in an impossible situation. But we also know that over 9,000 children have died in Gaza since October. We know it's unreasonable to expect Robbie Keane to resign from his job at Maccabi Tel Aviv. We know that it's very easy to tell other people what to do when it comes to taking a stand. We know that even though Keane is a wealthy man with a secure future, everyone has the right to make their own way in the game however they see fit. But we also know that Gaza is on the brink of famine and that people are taking to eating grass to stave off the hunger. We know it's unreasonable to declare

that Israel should be banned from this summer's Olympics in Paris. We know that telling an Israeli gymnast or judoka or sprinter that all their training has been for nothing would be unjust in the extreme. We know that laying the crimes of a vengeful government on the shoulders of a workaday sportsperson is cruel. But we also know that women are using strips of tents as tampons in Gaza. **High-stakes game** We know that telling sportspeople they shouldn't be playing against Israel is a low-stakes game for us and a high-stakes game for them. We know that the players give up so much more by refusing to play than we do by giving them grief. We know that whether or not a sporting event goes ahead, we will get on with our lives and detain ourselves with the things that are important to us. We know the sport is the important thing to the sportsperson. But we also know that 85 per cent of people in Gaza have been displaced by the war.

We know that sporting boycotts are of limited use anyway. We know that Binyamin Netanyahu isn't going to call the IDF home because this match didn't go ahead or that athlete couldn't compete. We know that whatever anyone in sport does in this realm is dot on a dot on a dot, the smallest gesture imaginable. We know that most likely absolutely nothing will change. But we also know that 21 of Gaza's 36 hospitals are now beyond use and the remaining 15 are only partially functional. We know that sport is all too easy a target. We know that it is seen as disposable and not worth a second thought. We know that if you wanted to go to the cinema tonight in any Israeli city you could check out Mean Girls and Poor Things and Trolls and all the same movies you'd see everywhere else, yet nobody is talking about boycotting Hollywood or about the movie industry legitimising the war. We know that sport is always first against the wall in these circumstances. But we also know that around 17,000

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kids have been separated from their families in Gaza over the winter. We know that there will be no leadership here from the major sporting bodies. We know that Fifa is running a mile and that the IOC does not want to get involved. We know that anything that is likely to scare the horses in America – home of the 2026 World Cup and the 2028 Olympics, remember – is just not the sort of thing the likes of Gianni Infantino or Thomas Bach have any notion of wading into. We know that asking individual sportspeople or teams to step up when the people in actual power are in hiding is deeply unfair. But we also know that at least half of all buildings in Gaza have been damaged or destroyed by the IDF in the past four months. **Societal breakdown** We know that sportspeople don't generally follow the granular ins and outs of the long, desperate history of the Israel-Palestine conflict. We know that they shouldn't be expected to. We know that they have

enough to be getting on with trying to excel at the thing they're best at, trying to do justice to the people who have coached them and helped them along the way. We know that this wasn't covered in any training session. But we also know that more than 700,000 people living in shelters in Gaza are suffering from contagious illnesses, including diarrhoea, jaundice and skin diseases. Above all else, we know what we don't know. We don't know what it's like to be cut off from the world; to live under a blockade; to have our homes and schools and hospitals pummelled night and day; to have society break down completely, to know catastrophe as a way of life, to be abandoned and left destitute while the planet gets on with playing its games amongst itself. We don't know what any of that feels like. We have that luxury. We can afford to be more generous with it. We should not be playing basketball against Israel right now.

Racing

O'Leary's slimmed-down stable still a major player in Irish racing



Brian O'Connor
Racing Correspondent

That the Ryanair mogul hasn't followed through on his get-out plan is racing's good fortune

In 2019, Michael O'Leary announced his racing team would be phased out within five years. The Ryanair boss was unequivocal. His young family meant he didn't have time to go racing. The plan allowed horses finish their careers and trainers a chance to replace them. But there would be no new purchases. The five years are up, and the man famed for his straight shooting hasn't gone away, you know. Admittedly, there aren't as many runners in the famous maroon Gigginstown Stud silks as there used to be. Those numbers peaked in the 2017-18 season with 160 winners from almost 1,000 runners in Ireland and Britain. They included the first of Tiger Roll's Grand National victories. Even JP McManus was powerless to prevent his great rival topping the owners table in Ireland. In the next season, O'Leary had a best-ever haul of 159 winners in Ireland, was crowned champion owner for a seventh time, secured a second National with Tiger Roll and – just to keep everyone on their toes, it seemed – threw the sport such an unexpected curveball that some fretted it might never be the same again. “As my children are growing into teenagers I am spending more and more of my time at their activities and I have less and less time for National Hunt racing, a situation that will continue over the foreseeable future,” he said. “I hope that by running down our string over an extended four- or five-year period, it will give trainers ample time to replace our horses without disruption.”

Uncertain outlook Gigginstown's annual investment in young stock had been estimated at €15 million. Every year it acquired more than 50 of the best prospects from sales rings, point-to-point fields and from France. Breeders, producers and sales companies feeding off that outlay were left to ponder an uncertain commercial outlook. Admittedly, racing stories about ridiculously rich owners getting bored and opting out aren't rare. True to his word, O'Leary has been an infrequent presence on racecourses since then. Cheltenham's appeal remains intact but a single day at Leopardstown last Christmas was a rare domestic appearance by the renowned businessman. Nevertheless, if personal sightings are unusual, Gigginstown itself remains among the most prominent ownerships in the game. Proof of that – as well as, it seems, the old game's continuing appeal – is obvious right from the start of this weekend's Dublin Racing Festival. O'Leary's Predator's Gold is favourite



Michael O'Leary celebrates after his horse Delta Work won the Glenfarclas Chase at Cheltenham last March. Photograph: Tom Maher/Inpho

ite for the opening Nathaniel Lacy Novices Hurdle. So is Storm Heart in the following McCann Fitzgerald Spring Juvenile Hurdle. Both are Grade One contests. Later on the card, Conflated will try to repeat his 2022 success in the Paddy Power Irish Gold Cup. There is abundant evidence of O'Leary's readiness to continue splashing out on potential top-class talent that take his fancy. A hefty £450,000 (almost €500,000) was paid out for the double-bumper winner Jalon D'oudairies. The exciting mare, Brighterdaysahead, favourite for Cheltenham's Mares novice hurdle cost a cool €310,000. The €250,000 French purchase Gold Dancer makes his Irish debut in tomorrow's Grade One novice hurdle alongside King Of Kingsfield. The latter is trained by Gordon Elliott, who prepared Tiger Roll as well as O'Leary's 2016 Cheltenham Gold Cup hero Don Cossack. When Elliott got embroiled in controversy over a notorious digital image, O'Leary rallied behind him and invested in store horses to give to Elliott once he'd served a six-month licence suspension in 2021. Gold Dancer's appearance is evidence

dence of how flexible O'Leary can be. Having famously removed 60 horses from Willie Mullins in 2016 due to a dispute over training fees, the pair reunited six years later. Both Predators Gold and Storm Heart are more evidence of that détente. They are among 35 Gigginstown winners in Ireland this campaign, two more than during all of last season, and part of a healthy 23 per cent strike rate from 153 runners. If it's nowhere near the big numbers of half a dozen

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years ago, O'Leary remains one of the sport's power brokers with perhaps up to 65 horses in training overall. Despite not going racing much, he apparently also retains his avid day-to-day interest in racing affairs. “I would say he remains hugely engaged, although you don't see him on the racecourse as frequently as you did a decade ago,” said one industry insider who preferred to remain anonymous. “There probably isn't an ideal number they're aiming at, but I guess they would have 60 to 65 in training right now. I would say they're trying to buy quality stock, whenever and wherever it appears. The Gold Cup is the holy grail. But, like it always was, the aim is to get their hands on Cheltenham horses,” they added. Over two decades, O'Leary's brother, Eddie, a veteran bloodstock professional, has been central to Gigginstown's success in acquiring stars such as the 2006 Gold Cup hero War Of Attrition. Reluctant to comment on what might constitute any future “sweet spot” in terms of numbers, he merely replied: “We're only interested in hav-

ing a couple of nice horses, that's all.” It appears to be a rare instance of O'Leary understatement considering how even a slimmed-down operation can still target a prestige fixture like the Dublin Racing Festival with 14 runners in all. In the past, Gigginstown-owned horses have been successful in all the Grade One races up for grabs bar the Dublin Chase, which only got top-flight status in 2018. That was just as O'Leary was formulating his get-out plan. That he hasn't followed through on it, as originally believed, is ultimately racing's good fortune. “It enabled them to rationalise the set-up substantially. But in fairness, at the end of each year there always was a rationalisation, and they would trim the bottom 20 or 30 per cent,” one racing expert commented. That trim now occurs from a smaller but still substantial base, one that in the immediate future is still equipped to maintain the racing ambitions of a famously competitive figure who once declared, with a typically colourful comparison, his intention to go on and on “like Chairman Mao”.

Briefs

Gaelic Games

Munster to rotate neutral venues for senior hurling finals

Munster GAA have decided in future to rotate neutral venues for the senior provincial hurling finals between Thurles, Cork and Limerick. Finals between Tipperary, Limerick and Cork will continue to be subject to home and away arrangements but those featuring Clare or Waterford will now go to a neutral venue at one of the province's big stadiums on a rotating basis. The decision taken on Thursday follows the controversy last year when Páirc Uí Chaoimh was nominated as the venue for the Munster final between Limerick and Clare, only for Clare to express a preference to play the match away in Limerick's TUS Gaelic Grounds, as it



■ Páirc Uí Chaoimh: last year's Munster hurling final venue

would be easier for their supporters to attend. Should the counties meet again this year, the venue will be FBD Semple Stadium in Thurles and if Clare or Waterford reach next year's final, it would be played at the newly branded SuperValu Páirc Uí Chaoimh with Limerick next on the rotation. **SEÁN MORAN**

Boxing

Fury-Usyk fight postponed after English boxer suffers 'freak cut'

Tyson Fury's showdown against Oleksandr Usyk for all four major world heavyweight titles has been postponed because of a “freak cut” the Briton has sustained above his right eye. Fury was due to defend his WBC belt on February 17th in Saudi Arabia against his Ukrainian rival, the WBA, IBF and WBO champion, in the first undisputed world heavyweight title fight of this century. But with just 15 days to go until one of the most anticipated fights of the year, Fury's promoters Queensberry announced their charge had suffered an injury during a sparring session at his Riyadh training camp.



■ Tyson Fury: injured during sparring session in Riyadh

Fury said in a statement: “I am absolutely devastated after preparing for this fight for so long and being in such superb condition. “I feel bad for everyone involved in this huge event and I will work diligently towards the rescheduled date once the eye has healed. I apologise to everyone affected.”

Soccer Afcon Cup

Lookman strike takes Nigeria into last four

Atalanta winger Ademola Lookman's first-half goal carried Nigeria past Angola yesterday in Abidjan as they reached their 16th Africa Cup of Nations semi-final. Although Zini hit the post for Angola at 1-0, José Peseiro's side were rarely in danger. The decisive moment came on 41 minutes when Angolan defender Eddie Afonso allowed Moses Simon to get ahead of him. With Victor Osimhen drawing three defenders away, Simon cut the ball back for Lookman to bury his third goal of the tournament. Other than Zini's shot against the woodwork, and an early opportunity for Mabululu as he met a Gilberto flick only to be denied by a point-blank save from Stanley Nwabali, Angola offered little as an attacking force as Nigeria calmly saw out time to reach the semi-finals.

Soccer Asian Cup

Son goal caps South Korean comeback

South Korea advanced to the semi-finals of the Asian Cup with a 2-1 comeback win over Australia in extra time in Qatar yesterday after Son Heung-min scored the winner with a sublime free kick. Australia had beaten South Korea by the same scoreline in extra time in the 2015 final to lift their first Asian Cup, but this time it was the east Asian team who prevailed after netting yet another goal in stoppage time to force extra time. Craig Goodwin put Australia ahead before half-time with a superb volley, but Lewis Miller's late foul on Son gave Hwang Hee-chan the opportunity to equalise from the spot. South Korea will play Jordan on Tuesday in the first semi-final after the Middle Eastern side defeated Tajikistan 1-0 earlier yesterday. – Reuters