

# Hurley had seen it all... team from Ireland won

## Ultimate tribute is paid to sibling Seán in Jerez day of days

**A**RACETRACK in Jerez in southern Spain is a far cry from an RTE studio. Jacqui Hurley has spent her career watching various Irish sporting moments unfold from Montrose.

Analysing and chewing over all sorts of highs and lows as a host or presenter, both on radio and television. All-Ireland finals. Six Nations. Olympics. World championships.

A witness, in a way, to Ireland's sporting history.

But she never expected to experience one of the Irish sports stories of 2025 first hand. To be trackside at the famed Jerez circuit in a city that is part of the southern province of Cadiz two Sundays ago to watch Team 109 – a motorcycle team set up in honour of her late brother Seán – be crowned world champions.

With a story, a season, a race and a last lap that the scriptwriters of *Drive to Survive* could only dream of penning.

In a year when Eddie Jordan died, here was an Irish team racing under an Irish flag carving out their own bit of history – on two wheels.

Born out of the tragedy of a young rider Seán Hurley being cut off in his prime at just 25, here was the first Irish team to win a world championship. With a rookie sensation at the wheel – 17-year-old Beñat Fernández – the story of the San Sebastian rider ended up making the main evening news in Spain.

Only winning the World SuperSport 300 Championship with a manoeuvre on the last bend to jump from fourth to first and win by 19/100ths of a second – 'the manoeuvre on the final corner of the final race is one of the most outrageous sporting moments I've ever witnessed,' says Hurley. Hugging the tarmac on the turn – almost horizontal and travelling even at that point at up to 80kmh – it's breathtaking. But the

By **Philip Lanigan**



story goes far deeper than topping the podium.

There's a very good reason Hurley travelled out to Spain, along with her parents Dave and Mairéad and with sister Catriona sending her support. Why there are tears all round at the finish.

Because this really is Seán Hurley's story. The race team set up to honour his memory after [Jacqui's brother] tragically lost his life in a road accident in November 2011.

109 was his old race number. Team 109 would be part of his legacy.

Just one item on a personal bucket list of life ambitions that he drew up two nights before he died, and that would live on through friends and family.

On a stormy night in November 2011, Seán Hurley never came home from work. A plasterer by trade, he was also a hugely talented motorbike racer. Had been crowned Irish Supersport Champion in 2010 at Mondello Park.

A couple of nights earlier, he sat down with his mother Mairéad and talked about his own plans for the future. At 25, he voiced his thoughts and dreams. What he wanted to accomplish in life.

Small things – and big. Like run a marathon. Get super fit. Open a shop. Be a millionaire. Run a pub. Be a world superbike winner.

His mother took the time to write it all down. Two nights later, he had a call to go out and do a 'foxer' or another job. Had plans to meet his girlfriend Sinéad after. Decided to brave the thunder and lightning. He never came home. 'Seán's Bucket List' is



**AMAZING FINISH:** Beñat Fernández celebrates after winning in style

framed and hangs in the Hurley family home in Ballinshassig.

As a way of turning grief into something positive, family and friends set out to try and complete the list in Seán's honour.

Jacqui's wedding was one example. The decision to run a marathon as part of the celebrations. The t-shirts dedicated to Seán that became a go-to uniform.

'Even with the marathon, like we got married six months after Seán died. Lots of people had said to us, "Would you not put the wedding off for a few months?" But my mom had said to me at the time, "We've had so many sad days – we need a happy day."

'And then I thought, "Well maybe we could make this even more special by getting everybody to run a mile. We'll get 26 people."

'But then, as we sent it out in the wedding invitations, we had just ticked a thing that said, "Do you want to stay on for Day Two? And

then do you want to stay on for Day Three? We're running a marathon."

'And then everyone came back and was like, "yep, would love that". So it just kind of escalated.

'I remember we were running a 'Who Wants To Be A Thousandaire' night. And I went to Ryan Tubridy and I said, "Look, is there any chance you'd come to Cork? Could you do this for me or whatever? We'll pay you or whatever." And he was like, "Absolutely. But I won't take a bob."

'He brought his whole team down. They did a show from Cork. I had the likes of Ronan O'Gara, Rob Heffernan. A whole load of people came and did a night just because people wanted to help.

'So it is kind of incredible, things like that... the help that we got from other people who just wanted to make simple things extraordinary.' Then there was Team 109.

'Like, even this one, it was such a

pipe dream. You're kind of going, is there any chance we could make that happen? We kind of thought we'd set up a fund that might help a few young riders.

'Wouldn't that be great? But then Eugene Laverty had won a world superbike race and he took out a t-shirt dedicated to Seán. And we were like, "Oh wow, this is pretty special."

And then suddenly it was kind of elevated to something more.

When it comes to Team 109, Paul Tobin is the man. Team Principal. The beating heart of the success story on the track. Best friends with Seán from the time they raced the length and breadth of the country.

Think a motorbike version of Eddie Jordan – except instead of the lavish F1 lifestyle of Monte Carlo and models, he runs his own office equipment company. Does all his work for Team 109 for free. For Seán.

**FAMILY TIES:** Jacqui Hurley and (inset) her late brother Seán



# but then a motorcycle world championship



## WILDEST DREAMS:

Benat Fernandez with Team Principal Paul Tobin

'Please don't compare me to Eddie Jordan,' he laughs.

Initially, half the funds raised from the 'Who wants to be a Thousandaire' night went towards an Academy Fund called the '109 Award' – again in honour of Seán's race number. A trophy and a sum of money given out to a talented young rider from the Irish Championship. In 2015, that morphed into Team 109.

'We won the British Championship in 2018,' explains Tobin. 'Were the first Irish team to ever win a British Championship. That was a big deal.'

Went from strength to strength. To the point where they challenged for the world championship last year. Tobin

secured a deal with Kove, the Chinese manufacturer, for 2025. Took a punt on a Spanish teenage rookie who took the championship by storm.

Which all meant the officially branded Retro Traffic Team 109 KOVE led coming into the last two race days, the Saturday and Sunday, two weekends ago.

Was on the verge of winning on the Saturday until Beñat Fernández was literally knocked off the track by another rider, taking him out.

Tobin delivered his own personal pep talk on the eve then of the final Sunday race to decide the champi-

onship after a visit to Ballinhassig graveyard.

'I visited Seán's grave on the Wednesday before I left for Spain. I went out to him. You know, he's got a number plate that we put on his grave from when we won the British championship in 2018. And I picked it up and I said to him, "Would you like to put a World Championship on it? Please, please, please, Seán, help us get there. We'll do our best at the weekend. If you can help us along, we might need some help."

'So I spoke to Beñat and said, "I visited Seán's grave the other day and you know what it says on his gravestone?"

And he said, "no". I said, "It's etched on his gravestone: "You can't win if you're afraid."

And I pointed out to the truck and I said, "See all the guys here? They're all afraid of you, Beñat, because you're the fastest rider in the paddock.

What does that mean tomorrow?"

He said: "if they're afraid, they can't win". I said, "exactly".

Fernández lost his own mother when he was 12. It's why you can see him point to the sky as he crosses the line.

That shared human story is part of Team 109.

'Beñat lost his mum to cancer. Believe it or not, it was his first day in secondary school. He had to do the year again. So he used racing as an escape, he says.

'He then used it later as a motivation. Obviously he wants to make his mum proud, but at the same time, he's a determined kid and he wants to do it for himself. He's quite driven. To be the best he can do at what he does.

'So, you know, he's got a really, really good mentality.

'For a kid of 17 years old, he's got a great head

on his shoulders.

'He likes the fact that we're a family team. And when a rider is happy, they're fast.'

Sunday's race then turned out to be a heartstopper. Fernández leading, then slipping back the field. Trailing fourth going into the last corner before a manoeuvre deserving of winning a world championship.

Here's Tobin: 'The overtake that he made, it was, I had to close my eyes, I was kind of going, "this is a human skittle here!" But it wasn't that, it was that he had such bike

control, and stopped the bike perfectly to get on the gas, to get the run out of the corner.'

And secure a bit of Irish sporting history. By 19/100ths of a second.

'It was just a wheel,' explains Tobin. That's what it was, a front wheel.

'So to go through eight rounds, 16 races, in six countries, and to come down to the final corner of the final race of the championship, was just bananas.

'We were the first Irish team to win a British Championship, and now we're the first Irish team to win a World Championship, so it was incredible.'

And to do it as a small, privateer team. Pitting against the factory teams with much bigger budgets. Sponsors like Mark Dardis of Lift Rite and his brother Barry have become like extended family over this journey, as the budget required to compete is now roughly 200k.

**He likes the fact that we're a family team, and a happy rider is fast**

So, too, Seán's old company MMD Construction and others like Kinsale Hotel and Spa and VTL Transport in Dublin. Other main sponsors like Retro Traffic and Dave Barry Plastics.

Who all together help keep the show on the road.

For Jacqui, it was a whirlwind of emotions.

'The manoeuvre on the final corner of the final race is genuinely one of the most outrageous sporting moments I've ever witnessed.'

Working weekends with RTE means she doesn't get to many of the races. This time, her mam made sure she had a spare 'Seán' t-shirt packed, the same they all wore at the wedding.

'Well, watching the race was really hard because they have this thing called The Paddock Show.

'So in the middle of the whole track, there's a big, massive, giant screen. There's two commentators doing live commentary there.

'And so Michael Hill is doing the commentary and he could see us down there with the t-shirts on and he knows my mum and dad from going to the races. And he kept referring to the story all the way through. He was like, "And this team in front is set up because of Seán Hurley and his mum is here."

'And so while all that was going on, people were coming over to my mum. Because the race is going on for 20 minutes, so people are kind of chatting and whatever.

'But when it was in the final lap, I looked over and my mum is just bawling crying.

'And then when he crossed the line, we were all in tears. And all the lads were there, all the sponsors, all of those who've been there through it all. They all just happened to be there on the final day.

'And there was just this embrace. My father came running through the paddock to my mum. And then, even when he came in with the bike, the whole team were there and everyone was singing "Champions". And it was just like, genuinely, it was like something out of a movie. It's emotional even remembering it.

'But I think when you turn to your mum and you see the tears rolling down her eyes, you realise this is more than just a race.'

Her own Instagram post was a lovely capture of Seán's story.

'Even when I was doing the post for Instagram, I was saying, "this is more than just a good story. It's a legacy of a lifetime." And my mum would give up everything to have him back.'

Her voice is cracking now as she adds: 'I do think just having a small piece of him there that sits for the world to see was just an unbelievable legacy for us all to be able to be part of. And it was so emotional to be there, but I'm so glad that I was there for it.

'To be honest, it's kind of surreal. I don't know if any of us ever saw this day coming. Like genuinely 14 years when Seán passed away, we had the bucket list as something to kind of remember him by. It was genuinely just something for us to cling to, to be able to do something together. But I don't even think in our wildest dreams, we thought it was going to come to this.

She pays a fulsome tribute to 'Toby', saying simply 'they wouldn't have won it without him'.

Back in Cork, too, the stars were aligning with home parish Ballinhassig winning the Cork Premier Intermediate Championship.

'Well, Sunday was like a Super Sunday because the race was on at maybe one o'clock Irish time, something like that. And the county final then was on at two, I think.

'So by the time we had won the World Championship, word had filtered into Páirc Uí Chaoimh that Team 109 had won it. And the Ballinhassig lads knew that before they took to the field.

'And I saw some videos of them afterwards and Fintan O'Leary who would have hurled with Cork and played with Ballinhassig and would have been one of my brother's best friends, there was a fabulous video of him back in the village afterwards, lifting the Cup up and everybody's there.

'And I was chatting to him during the week. And he was, like, "Jesus, Seán would have thought this was the day of days, you know?"

'He was just like, "We did it as much for him as anything else."