

MICHAEL FOLEY



With Kenmare Bay shrouded in mist and the rain pelting down, the sports channels had illuminated Pat Spillane's sitting room all morning. First racing from Hereford, then two hours of one-day cricket between South Africa and the Netherlands, with England-Italy already slated to fill a gap that night.

Live sport all day – that's his heaven. Sport is enjoyed best in the now. There are no medals in the cabinet; no jerseys or old photographs on the walls. The eight All-Ireland medals? One was made into a bracelet for his wife Rosarii. The rest?

"They're in a box or whatever," he says. "It's probably a reflection of my life in a sense. I compartmentalise things. When I finished playing football I was finished. When I finished school – teaching – *The Sunday Game*, that chapter finished. Whether they were good news or bad news, I never looked back."

There was never time to pause either, life forever speeding along like Spillane in full flow. After a career that placed him securely among the greatest footballers of all time he was publican, author of three books, and scourge of the thin-skinned, mediocre footballer on *The Sunday Game*. As a teacher in Bantry he brought pupils to the inquiry into the Whiddy Island disaster that claimed 51 lives when an oil tanker exploded in Bantry Bay in 1979, and bore witness over 30 years to the damage wrought to the town by the catastrophe. "Every social problem you'd associate with an inner city area," he says, "they were there in Bantry."

When he pushed back hard publicly in 2019 against the mess of bureaucracy that doomed his work as chairman of CEDRA (Committee for the Economic Development of Rural Affairs), he suffered levels of scrutiny that almost broke him.

"When I was operating in *The Sunday Game*, no one got more threatening letters than I did," he says. "Threatening to kill me ... It was non-stop. Social media, no GAA person got more abuse than I did."

"But [after CEDRA] it was the drip-drip of stories to papers. When they ran out of things, they started with investigations from everyone you could think of – bodies you never heard of."

After 30 years, his time on *The Sunday Game* ended in 2022 with Kerry as All-Ireland champions – all the strands of family, football and home entwined. Two of his nephews won All-Ireland medals. Adrian Spillane had "1964" written on his gloves in memory of his grandfather – Spillane's father, who died a couple of days after losing that year's final to Galway as Kerry selector.

In that moment, Spillane broke down in tears on air. Among the torrent of good-luck messages and Mass cards that followed, Spillane also received stories of his father, fitting together like pieces of a mosaic.

He met him again as the hackney driver bringing people to emigrant

'No one got more threatening letters than I did'

Pat Spillane's refusal to wear a mask has defined his career and his reputation, for good or bad

trains, boats and planes – the community man who played for Templenoe a year before his death. The day after the launch of his autobiography at the family pub recently an old friend of his father's told Spillane he hadn't seen such a crowd in the yard since his father's funeral. He painted a picture for him – three men with ropes carefully lowering the coffin from the top window on to two stout planks below.

"It was eerie," he says. Having packed these feelings away for years the grief creeps up on him in different ways. "What did he sound like?" he says. "I know what he looked like. I've been trying to figure out – what's my father's voice like? I can't think of it. I can't recall anything. It doesn't resonate. And that's bothering me."

"My sister or my brothers, we never discussed my father. Or my mother either. Maybe we didn't do grieving. When my mother lost her husband at a young age, life had to go on. It wasn't about looking back and grieving. She decided to look after herself and everything was about rearing kids. She parked her life. It was unreal what she did. When you think about it, for 20 years she never took a day off."

She versed all her children in the value of hard work, with dispensations for the boys. The footballers slept until midday and allowed hours for their craft. Before every match she

The wear and tear on Spillane's body is such that he increasingly struggles for mobility

would send them away with the same message – always remember who you are. What that meant?

"Never losing the run of yourself," he answers. "Respect for yourself as a person; respect for your family. Respect for everyone else. Staying grounded. It was 1984 and I should have been back Tuesday but I came back on the Wednesday. I had just won my sixth All-Ireland medal and got man-of-the-match. The first thing my mother said. 'Get down inside the counter to work. You should have been home yesterday.' And that was it. There was no well done or hug. You were back; you were serving pints. Life went on."

His mother never went to a game; never witnessed her boys winning an All-Ireland. Sharing with his son Pat the joy of winning a league title this year with Sligo, his mother's county, was a moment Spillane always wished for himself.

"Ah Jesus," he says. "Christ almighty. Was it better than any of my All-Ireland medals? It was. This was about family. I would have given away all my All-Ireland medals and All Stars for that occasion."

Everything about football then was business – maybe too much. After games the brothers usually hung out together with the Templenoe gang. "I wasn't friends with the Kerry players," says Spillane. "We were colleagues."

That gap rarely closed much through the years. Some comments in his first book upset his teammates. When Spillane refused to accept the diagnosis that he wouldn't play football again having wrecked his knee in



DON MACMONAGLE

1981, he submitted to a sadistic, home-made regime working in a makeshift gym in a shed where the rats scurried between the porter bottles. That changed him.

"There wasn't many that contacted me," he says. "[Mick O']Dwyer occasionally; Frank King [Kerry chairman]. Players? Maybe once or twice. You were gone and that was it. That's football. You're in the zone; you're selfish; you're about yourself."

"I said if I ever came back, I'm doing it for myself. I was so driven. I was doing mad things. Running 40

laps around the field with 10lb weights around my legs. I know the price I've paid now with knees banded and I'd do the same again."

His knee? Shagged. Bone on bone. He can walk for maybe an hour and swim in the summer. That's it.

"I can't kick around," he continues. "Do I miss it? I don't know. It's gone. That chapter's closed."

Writing this book felt different to the rest. His first autobiography upset too many people. The second was a

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Spillane on...



THE SUNDAY GAME

Myself and Joe Brolly were both equipped with transmitters. We love to talk



HIS SON WINNING A LEAGUE FINAL

Was it better than any of my All-Ireland medals? It was. This was about family

Casement Park can pay the bills – and fits the bill for Euro 2028

Michael Foley

It was a grim measure of the low expectations around this sort of thing when the protest against Casement Park as a Euro 2028 venue before Northern Ireland played Slovenia the other night was considered less visceral than during the previous match against San Marino. The banner in the corner of the Kop Stand at Windsor Park read “No Casement”, and “You Can Stick Your Casement Park Up Your Hole” got another rendition, but it was more disgruntled rumble than raging scream.

Flicking through the vox pops in the papers the following few days at least suggested the majority of the public in Northern Ireland are again ahead of everyone else and happy to visit Casement if Northern Ireland makes the Euros. Jarlath Burns, the GAA’s incoming president, also said the right things last week about the GAA as an inclusive organisation respectful of British and Irish culture, understanding of the reservations among some Northern Ireland supporters but also pressing the need in general for everyone to step out of their own trenches if any form of shared community is going to work.

“We will always look at the difficulties or things that are going to pull us back,” he said, “but that’s not what leadership is about. Leadership is about bridge-building and going over to the other side.

“It is difficult, but events around the world show how things can deteriorate if we are not always focused on making sure we look over in friendship and appreciation and not with suspicion.”

Casement was always going to require a tricky jump for everyone. The usual lineup of hardliners have been pushing back against giving Casement any matches or another public penny to cover the spiralling cost of the rebuild. For all their work in erasing the sectarian vibes around the atmosphere at Windsor Park the Amalgamated Official Northern Ireland Supporters Club (AONISC) have consistently resisted taking



Northern Ireland’s games away from their home ground.

In a recent letter to the IFA, the AONISC requested a feasibility study into the possibility of somehow inflating Windsor Park’s 18,500 capacity to the 30,000 minimum required by Uefa for tournament venues. They also raised questions about the real benefits for domestic football from hosting the tournament.

They’re not wrong either on that one. Big tournaments tend to operate similarly to vultures – they arrive,



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take over for a while, suck up the local dollar, and fly off again leaving nothing behind.

The idea that the biggest winners from Euro 2028 won’t be domestic Irish football but the GAA as a result of Casement being completed also holds plenty of water. Which isn’t to say Casement shouldn’t have been built by now, but behind any soapy talk about the feelgood vibes of one, big, swinging party joining the islands together, no one expects any game at Casement to inspire a recruitment drive in traditional nationalist areas for the green and white army. Questions have also been raised about the safety for Northern Ireland fans entering nationalist west Belfast. Just to flip that around for a second, navigating streets lined with UVF flags that lead to Windsor Park isn’t exactly like walking down Wembley Way for anyone outside the unionist community.

If Northern Ireland playing at a ground named after an Irish revolutionary causes problems for some supporters, the trappings of a

Northern Ireland match will pose its own challenges for some of the locals around Casement. God Save the King will be played. The Northern Ireland flag will be flown. Fair chance the union jack will feature in the vicinity as well. All this will have to be absorbed with the polite acceptance of gracious hosts.

Everyone in this transaction will be required to make compromises, but the games can also remind two communities how much they have in common economically, socially and culturally. It’s not that sport can ever support the impossible burden of joining two deeply polarised societies – bombs still went off during the 1982 World Cup when the entirety of Northern Ireland wished the national team well, or at least no specific ill-will.

But if a match can open up half of the city for another community, there’s got to be some good in that. As Northern Ireland’s largest sporting venue, Casement Park will have to shed whatever reputation it once had and become more than a GAA ground

DRAW FOR 2024 PROVINCIAL FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIPS

CONNACHT SFC Quarter-finals

New York v Mayo, London v Galway Sligo v Leitrim

Semi-finals

New York/Mayo v Roscommon Sligo/Leitrim v Galway

LEINSTER SFC Round One

Westmeath v Wicklow, Carlow v Wexford Longford v Meath

Quarter-finals

Kildare v Westmeath/Wicklow (A) Louth v Carlow/Wexford (B) Dublin v Longford/Meath (C) Offaly v Laois (D)

Semi-finals

A v B; C v D

MUNSTER SFC Quarter-finals

Tipperary v Waterford (A) Limerick v Cork (B)

Semi-finals

Clare v A; B v Kerry

ULSTER SFC Preliminary Round Quarter-finals

Down v Antrim (A) Fermanagh v Armagh (B) Derry v Donegal (C) Tyrone v Monaghan/Cavan (D)

Semi-finals

A v B; C v D

in the coming years anyway, just to pay the bills. Euro 2028 is only the start.

Ultimately this whole business brings back into focus the folly of failing to build a multi-sports stadium at the site of the old Maze prison that could have stood as a ecumenical monument to the benefits of inclusion. Instead, too many people said “No”. It would be nice this time if everyone took a chance on each other, and said “Yes”.

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collection of stories and jokes and sold like hot cakes. This was the book to bolt the doors on one epic stretch of life. The conversations were long, demanding, and went everywhere. “It was mesmeric in a way,” he says. “I was in a hypnotic state. It was coming from very deep. I want to leave a legacy that people know who I am – a private person. I’m not the fella on *The Sunday Game*. Everything to me is very deep inside.”

Creating that distinction between his private and public self is sometimes difficult when so much of his life has been defined by performance. The competitor is intrinsic to his being. He made enormous demands of himself and others as a footballer. That seeped into television.

“I went on the field so single-minded, so focused, so cranky because I was seeking perfection,” he says. “I hated losing. I was horrible on the field. But whether it was *The Sunday Game* or it was playing, I wasn’t going to go with the herd. I was very much my own man. So be it.”

The stories are still scary – the death threats; hiding in Ger Canning’s back seat to escape Croke Park; the letters that arrived merely addressed to ‘Pat Bollocks, Kerry’. One reprimand from RTE in 30 years was a good return for a pundit who lived on the edge, but did he go too hard to establish a reputation in the early years?

“Guilty on all counts,” he says. “I was being controversial for the sake of it because [Eamon] Dunphy was getting away with it. I look back and I

would cringe at it as well. But I created that caricature in the early years and it’s hard to escape from that.”

In the end the show and Spillane had moved too far away from each other. The old thrill was gone. Tag-teaming with Colm O’Rourke and Joe Brolly had allowed Spillane to blend his knowledge of the game with his natural tendency to let fly. “It was a magic carpet ride,” he says. “Myself and Brolly were both equipped with transmitters. We have no receivers at all. We love to talk.

“We had the nation talking about us for three or four days after the programme. Now it’s generic. It’s safety first. Most sports analysis shows now are brilliant because they satisfy the need. You look good; speak well; the gizmos; the gadgets. But two hours

later you haven’t a clue what they said. We forgot what we were good at in RTE. Reflecting the game; the passion; the crack; the colour. It was the three fellas talking in the corner of the pub. And people loved that.”

Does he watch the shows now? “I don’t watch *The Sunday Game* night programme anymore. I’d have no interest at all. During the day? I’d watch it for the game. There was a year or two it was as boring as s***e. There was nights driving home I was thinking I could have phoned this in.”

Old friends have been back in touch since the book came out – their memories stirred by stories. Michael Kingston, whose father died in the Whiddy disaster, sent a message. Brolly, representing families at the Stardust inquiry, wants to hear more about

Whiddy. If nothing else emerged from the book, Spillane says, a fresh inquiry would be worth everything.

The future for now is shaped around the quiet things in his life, but the public side always tugs at the private. His newspaper column will continue. Maybe a podcast? Last Friday week he finished up a conversation on *The Late Late Show* declaring modern football is “s***e”.

“That’s me,” he says. “I’m passionate and opinionated and outspoken. Is there a sin against that? When you were behind a bar counter you were a performer. Teaching, you’re a performer. Sunday Game, you’re a performer. But when I’m here, and this is where I am 95 per cent of the time, this is a different me.”

Every version of him the real deal.