

By Mark Gallagher



EAMON DEVLIN says that he never liked half-time. Not when he played Gaelic football nor in the 12 years that he spent coaching the game, including the three seasons he was in charge of Hertfordshire inter-county team. 'Ironically, I still don't like it,' he says now with a soft chuckle.

And yet, this former corporate lawyer from South Armagh is helping to change the way that professional coaches and managers view that interval in the dressing-room. This particular journey started when Devlin was living in Zurich. He was watching his daughter, Zoe's Under 10 soccer team lose heavier week after week.

'The higher the beating, the more the coaches spoke and shouted at the players. In one game, it was 24-0 by the end and the coach lectured the players for nine minutes after it. On the way home, Zoe said to me, "Dad, I'm done". And I remember thinking that's a crazy outcome. There must be a better way of communicating in sport and getting your message across,' he recalls.

Shortly after that, Devlin would leave the legal world. 'To be blunt, I had a breakdown and because of that, I ended up getting some serious psychological help and therapy that got me interested in psychology and how the brain operates.'

He enrolled in a Masters in psychology at Brunel University, which required a dissertation.

'I was scratching my baldy head for a long time, trying to come up with a topic when half-time came up on my radar. I looked up to see was there much research done on this popular interval in team sports and found there was very little.'

There was a couple of papers on half-time in football and a few more on ice hockey and basketball. But they were all from the perspective of the coach.

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'I wanted to look at it from the point of view of the player.'

So, Devlin set about interviewing 14 Sam Maguire winners about their various experiences at half-time. Three of those were in the Armagh dressing-room in 2002 for perhaps the most famous All-Ireland final team talk ever when Joe Kernan took out his loser's plaque from 1977 and they all still spoke glowingly of that. However, his research also revealed some questionable behaviour. There was the instance of a recent All-Ireland final when a player had received a bad shoulder in the first-half and was icing his swollen cheek in the dressing-room, only for his manager to come in, take the ice-pack away and ask him was he going soft? In another inter-county game, a player was told to take off his jersey and the manager proceeded to trample all over it in front of the rest of the team, saying that is what your direct opponent had done to him.

'When a manager or coach does something like that, it affects not



team-mates, because what you are doing is embarrassing their friend. Those two examples were told to us not by the players themselves, but by teammates who still felt angry and annoyed that something like that was done to their friend,' he said.

'In Gaelic, especially, there's seems a real reluctance to be positive. When I asked players do they remember a bad experience at half-time, they can all tell me several examples. But it is harder when I ask them for a positive experience. Joe's speech in 2002 was different, I talked to three players who were in the dressing-room that day and they all said his speech, throwing the loser's plaque away and breaking it into so many pieces and saying he has

all said that gave them the fuel for that second-half performance.'

The effect that Kernan had on his players proves there is still a place in the changing room for powerful storytelling – he also references a famous half-time speech by legendary San Francisco 49ers coach Bill Walsh during a NFL play-off game when they were losing heavily, that the game and season was gone and now it was about their character. The 49ers turned things around in the second-half. However, what Devlin has discovered during his research – he is currently doing a PhD into half-times in football for Leeds University – is that coaches talk too much during the break.

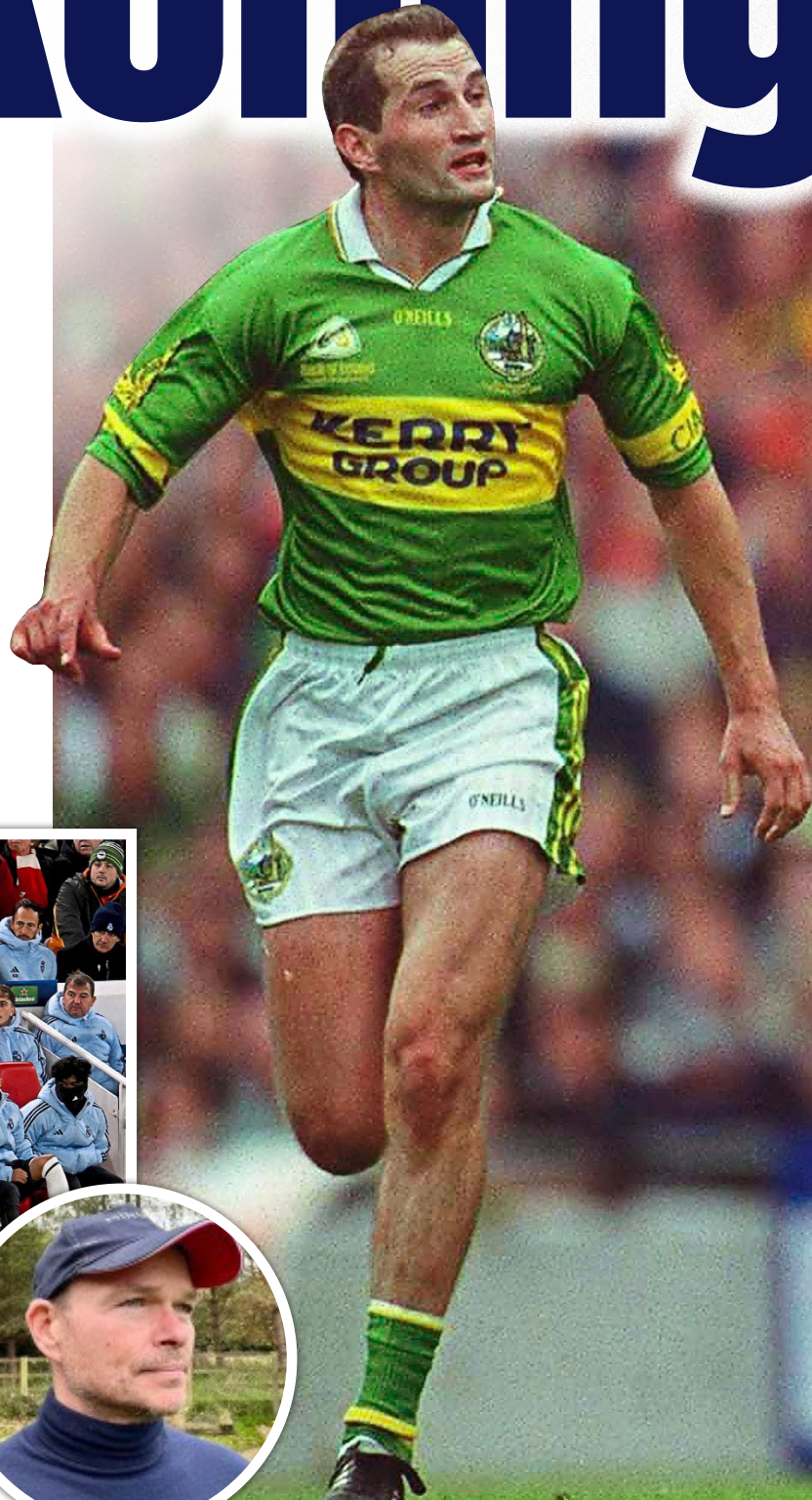
formed a company called Minute9 which offer services to coaches, clubs and teams about how to most effectively use the 15 minutes during half-time. They have worked with the likes of Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti as well as a number of other Champions League teams, the Welsh men and women's national teams, Racing 92 and other rugby teams. Last summer, they did some work with Galway hurlers.

'Dressing-rooms at half-time are

places,' Devlin explains. 'So, we have studied other similar environments to see how they deal with it. We looked at A&E departments in hospitals, where there might have 20 people coming in at once and the protocols they have in place. We also studied air-traffic controllers. That's a particularly high-pressured environment and they would not see the end of their shift if they started shouting bad language at pilots. They need to be calm and concise to get their message across.'

Time of reckoning

Every game has one, but few coaches have mastered the half-time team address



GAME OF INCHES: Kerry's Eoin Brosnan and Kieran McGeeney of Armagh contest a high ball in 2002 All-Ireland final; Devlin (left, inset) has also worked with Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti (far left)

has worked with, Devlin has tried to cut the number of people inside the changing room at half-time. He mentions one Premier League team with 28 staff in the room for away games while there was a Ligue One club who had the club President in the room and another where the club owner was there and making contributions.

'One of the first things we try to establish is who exactly is in the dressing room,' he says. 'We have had chairmen in there, owners, board members, sporting directors, sponsors, people getting

shirts signed, shareholders, bankers. People say that it does not matter because they are not saying anything but that does not mean they are not communicating. They are still causing a distraction.

'The challenge is the power dynamics in that room. Players wonder who is in charge. As soon as they are thinking that, you have lost their attention. Keep it simple. Generally, just try to clear the room. It gives managers more chance of being listened to. The players need to know who is in

charge. Ideally – and this is from all our research – elite players just want to hear one voice and ideally, that is the head coach, not a number of different coaches. Because if they are hearing a number of different voices, their ability to retain information diminishes.'

And players also want to feel safe and secure in the environment. One of the things that Devlin has discovered is that loneliness, anxiety and fear can all affect players at the break. 'If you feel down and lonely, your ability to take information on board is

affected. People have asked why is loneliness such a factor in team sport, but you are very exposed when you are playing and maybe things didn't go well in the first-half.

'And in the Premier League, you might have six or seven different nationalities in the team, you might be Ecuadorian and have nothing in common to the guy next to you, who is Danish or French. So, we have advised teams to have players sit together in cultural or language groupings, as opposed to just randomness down to squad numbers, to alleviate that.'

There is still a cultural change needed for the idea of half-time. During his work with clubs, Devlin has found managers talking from two minutes up to 14 minutes during the break. 'Think about how many words that is, talking for 14 minutes, there is no way that players could take all of that on board.'

'In most sports, the dynamic in a changing room is still very lecture-like, where a coach decides he is going to go in here and fix all these problems and everyone is going to listen to me for six minutes. Actually, in rugby, it is a bit different. It's not a game I know particularly well, but coaches are a lot more relaxed and the players have more of an input. I have been in rugby dressing-rooms where coaches don't say a word and the players are more empowered to speak.'

His research has revealed that the average half-time speech lasts for five minutes and 30 seconds. Devlin tries to bring that down to just 60 seconds. And he tries to explain to his clients what players want from the interval.

'Players do believe that a good half-time interaction can positively affect the outcome of the game. But before they start thinking about what their coach might say, players need rest, food, water and togetherness in the dressing-room. Some of the football teams I have worked with, a coach will come in within 60 seconds to talk to the players. And when the coach and what I call the circus, ie the backroom team, come in, the players generally stop drinking water or eating, they sit up out of respect or fear. But as soon as the coaching team come in, the players' needs aren't being met.

'We try to tell coaches that they should leave players in their own space for the first eight minutes of half-time – that is why we call the company Minute9. But that can be hard, especially in football, where

the environment has always been the manager needs to fix all these problems at half-time. But you can only fix the problems if the players are listening to you.'

Devlin has spoken to boxing trainers, including Billy Walsh, as part of his research and has found out that physical touch is important for fighters between rounds. He encourages coaches to engage in more physical touch in dressing-rooms.

'Physical touch is a way of communicating. Go into professional changing rooms and they are all very sterile environments, players are sitting over here, coaches on other side, there is not much eye contact and certainly not much physical contact. So, by touching players, a

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coach can make them feel a bit more safe and secure.'

It is a fascinating area, one that has been largely unexplored. Devlin doesn't claim to have all the answers and he says that his company makes clear that their protocols and advice for managing half-time won't necessarily yield a positive outcome in the match. 'There are too many factors that go into that, player fitness, yellow or red cards, all of that kind of thing. But managing half-time effectively is just one of those.'

As with anything new, he has met some scepticism but what he has found is that the very elite coaches, such as Ancelotti, are much more receptive to the ideas. 'What we have found is the better and more elite the coaches, the more time they set aside to learn and develop new skills. And they have been more interested in what we are trying to do.'

Zoe is back playing soccer in Oxford after her experiences at U10 sent Eamon Devlin on a voyage of discovery that – inspired by Joe Kernan throwing his loser's plaque across the Croke Park dressing-room – is making sports teams look at half-time in a fresh and novel way.

Maybe, that 15-minute period is growing on him.



INSPIRED: Armagh's Joe Kernan after the 2002 win