



Roy
CURTIS
EXCLUSIVE

LIKE an old pitman descending into the gaping mouth of a coal mine, Liam Hayes clocks in for our conversation, grabs his pick and lamp and stoically lowers himself into the deepest tunnels of a complex mind.

At 63, the former Meath footballer and ex-award-winning sports writer remains compelling, introspective, self-aware, the custodian of what he calls a “mad brain”, one that facilitates a refreshingly off-piste way of thinking.

Excavating private thoughts, chiselling into parts of the psyche where most fear to tread, exposing old wounds, walking towards the showers of black rain which occasionally pass through his head, decoding his fears and regrets, unlocking doors to his innermost self and inviting you across the threshold, Hayes is a slave to his own brutal honesty.

We’ve known each other almost 40 years. We soldiered together on the sports beat in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

I’d like to think we were friends. Some of the more thoughtful, profound but also - and this is a part many miss about Liam - fun nights I’ve had were over Chinese meals and beers on what were then Five Nations nights in Paris, London, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

Though this is our first direct contact in maybe a decade, it feels like picking up a conversation in mid-sentence.

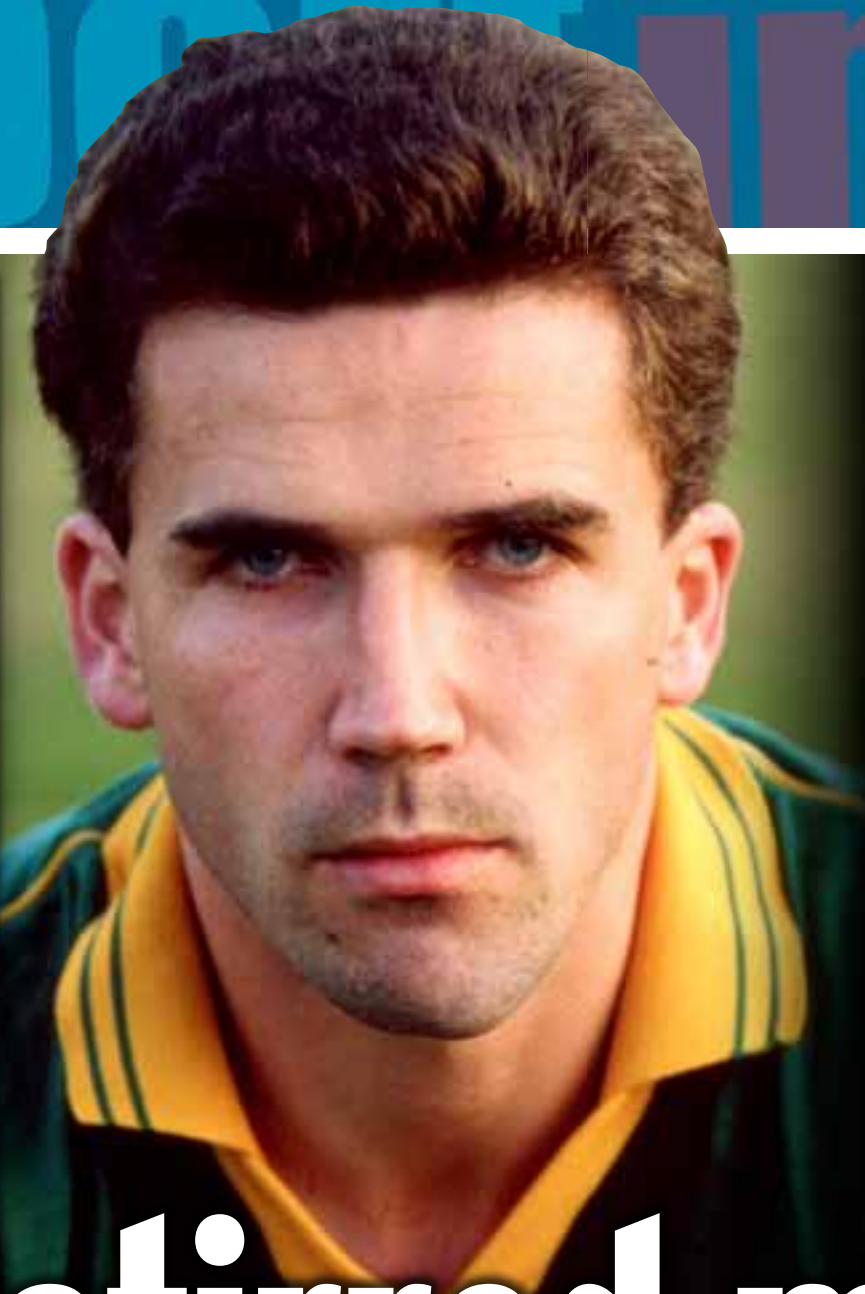
Across our 65-minute chat, Hayes is a superior, Ballon d’Or-quality interviewee. Trusting, presenting the gift of unedited thoughts. An open book, we veer across a rainbow of topics: mortality, social inhibition, wanderlust, cancer, the joy of grandkids, life regrets, how the passing years have gifted him a new way of viewing the man in the shaving mirror.

Why one of the pilot lights of Sean Boylan’s first great team hasn’t been to a Meath game in almost two decades and, why, though it has given him immense solace to find the Royal class of 2025 again stirring his blood, he won’t be anywhere near Croke Park tomorrow for the county’s first All-Ireland semi-final in 16 years.

“No, but I feel a bit guilty. I’m semi-retired from any interviews or PR activity. Obviously I’m more than happy to talk to you, but I’ve kept my nose out of everything. I know if the young lads on the team are reading



THE WAY
WE WERE
Liam Hayes in his
playing days for
Meath and (right)
with the great
Sean Boylan



WHAT A
SUMMER
Brian O’Halloran
celebrates after
Meath beat Galway in
the All-Ireland
quarter-final

Meath win stirred my soul again, but I won’t be a fan in Croke Park

LIAM HAYES ON HOW HE’S STILL LEARNING ABOUT HIMSELF

me saying I don’t go to Meath games or if I had read that back in my day, I would have said f**k him, what does he know. He’s got some attitude.”

“Because when you are in the middle of it, you think it’s life and death and the most important thing in the world. This summer already I’ve been driving in the opposite direction to thousands of Meath cars on match days because I’m going home to my senior mother in Skryne. And in those moments, I feel no guilt whatsoever.

“It just goes out of your blood. You are interested in the lads and you wish them the best and this summer it has been bril-

liant to see. Any time they are on the TV I’ll watch them, but you wouldn’t drag me to Croke Park.

“If you paid me 10 grand you wouldn’t get me to Croke Park next Sunday. I know that sounds awful and please, mind me here, because I don’t want to sound like I’m up my own arse. I’m truly not being disrespectful.

“It’s a mental thing. When you are involved like we were in the day, you are living and breathing it, like its 24/7 for 10 or 12 years. Nothing else is important in life. And then when it ends, it ends with a bang, a crashing steel door and it’s over.

“And you’re out of it. Then you go through four or five or six years, and this is true for every sportsperson, when you don’t know whether you are coming or going. You feel guilty and you feel dispassionate and you hope they lose all their matches because you are not part of it. You feel selfish and all these horrible emotions.

“Then you come through that and you say ‘you know what, I may as well become a supporter or not.’

“And you know what, I’m not going to become a supporter. I wish them the very best, but I’m not going to trail all over Ireland watching the team, I can’t do

that. I don’t think many (ex-players) do that to be honest with you.

“Ah Jaysus, I’m not trying to be up my own arse, but you just go into a different place mentally where you say ‘okay, I went through all of that, it’s over.”

Hayes has written and spoken with extraordinary eloquence about finding his brother Gerard, with whom he shared a bedroom for 20 years, dead at the GAA field in Skryne next to the family home after his elder sibling took his own life.

Forty years on he was able to recall how he “ran far and fast away. I was devastated by it. I

don’t think I have every fully recovered from it.”

He doesn’t make the link during our chat, but the suspicion is that such an horrendously traumatic experience has shaped much of his character, influenced and perhaps stymied other friendships, contributed to him being what he calls “an outlier.”

An All-Ireland winner in 1987 and 1988, captain of the team that emerged from that four-game epic that brought a jackhammer pulse to the summer of 1991, he sees little of most of the players with whom he authored history.

“Yeah you see I don’t do reun-

ions. I don’t do school reunions. I’ve never done business reunions, I’ve done one Meath reunion in 30 years. I don’t know why. It’s something I’m not good at, it’s a weakness of the mind, something in my psyche that I just don’t like doing reunions. It’s not a strength, I’m not proud of it. I just don’t do them. It’s a social inhibition.

“I think the older you get the more you realise how many issues you have had all your life. And it’s good to deal with them. My family hate me saying this, but I think everyone is on the spectrum. We all have our problems, our issues.

“There’s some reason why I don’t do reunions. And I don’t know what it is. I just don’t do them. It’s something you’d like to find out more about and discover why.

“I finally did a counselling session a couple of years back and found it very interesting. I was due to do six, but I never went back after the first one.

“When you are in that dressing room, it’s all emotion and high-octane. You are this big band of brothers. You are all just ordinary individuals with not that much in common, so why would you want to do reunions. I’m not sure why you would want to do them.

“Gerry (McEntee, his long-time midfield partner back when they were kings) phoned me the other day.

“He said, ‘We are all going down to Royal Tara, 15 or 16 of the lads, we are playing nine holes. What are you at?’

“I said ‘nothing’ so he asked me to come down with him. Gerry would be good at that. Gerry would always try to get me involved. We were buddies in the middle of the field. We would be buddies. I said, ‘no’

“He said, ‘You don’t have to play golf, just come down for a pint with the lads and a bite to eat.’

“Again, I said, ‘no.’ Friday night is a big night for me, an important night, I’m not going to share it. It would be lovely to meet the lads for three or four hours, but you decide in you heard that you are not going to do that.

“Sean Boylan had a big 80th birthday, there were about 5,000 people at it, but I didn’t get an invite. Rourke had a 65th or a retirement gig and I didn’t get

an invite. For half a second after I heard about the latter, I was a bit put out.

“But I think both of them knew, I wouldn’t have wanted to go. So they didn’t invite me. They were actually being kind to me. . I think they know who I am.”

The interactions he does have - walks with the great corner-back Bob O’Malley and McEntee - are typically profound.

“When Bob and I meet up, it’s not a handshake, it’s a hug, a big hug, full of meaning. We talk about life, mortality, politics, Ukraine, Gaza, anything and everything. But football just wouldn’t come up in conversation.”

Mortality invaded Hayes’s private space in 2010. Diag-

nosed with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma, he spent much of the next decade in and out of St. James’s Hospital, undergoing chemotherapy and radiotherapy.

The experienced altered his view about both life and death.

“I was afraid, fearful at the start. But the older you get... you get to 63 and you see so many people dying.

“When you get to mid 60s, you think you should have another 10 years left, but then you look, even this last week or two, and you see all the people - like Jota at 28 - dying.

“It makes you realise that you have no entitlement to live as long as you’d like to live.

“You’ve got to be ready for anything and I think once you go through an illness you are.

You’ve got out of jail once.

“As a young man you don’t know who you are. I was far too self analytical as a footballer - before games, after and during games. I came to realise that there is a compulsive disorder with that. You are just born with it. A bit of OCD there.

“But we all have those mental issues and the older I’ve got the more I’ve understood it. I think you are always discovering. I don’t think it ever ends.”

I ask him what he’d change about himself. The answer comes from left field, as he would seek the key that enables him to escape the cell where he has been a prisoner of his own social inhibitions.

“If I could sing, I would be a social animal. I’d love to be able to sing like Bob O’Malley (pictured). I’d learn so many songs and I’d sing, even now, at 63, in front of everybody. I would love to be able to hold an audience big or small and sing my heart out.

“I think maybe what I am saying is I feel socially inadequate. I’m socially inhibited in some shape or form.”



He wants to return to Meath’s restoring of the old psychic connection with their people after becoming the first team since Offaly in 1982 to defeat Dublin, Kerry and Galway in the same summer.

“It is important for me that the players I played with don’t think I don’t like them or that I’m being disrespectful. The same with the young Meath lads now.

“If I was on the team and I read about an old Meath footballer saying they didn’t go to Meath matches any more, I would have said to myself, ‘well he is some arrogant fker.’**

“I thought Meath were magnificent the last day. I thought their goose was cooked when Galway came back and hit them with those goals. But they showed amazing character to come back. It was the first time in a long, long time that I felt stirred by it.

“I just felt very proud of those young lads in the green jersey when I saw the last 15 minutes. A Meath team standing up for the first time in 20 years and it did stir my soul a little bit (here he laughs in a self-deprecating fashion). Ah no it did, I felt it and I thought ‘I love that spirit.’

“I haven’t had that feeling in a long time to be honest.. It was a good feeling to watch and feel really proud of them, feel just a twinge of emotion.”