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GAMECHANGER

JUST OVER nine months ago, Mícheál Ó Muircheartaigh died in high summer, and we agreed the timing felt apt.

The GAA calendar has changed in recent years, but June still means hard pitches and long days and matches and 70 minutes pregnant with promise. That the voice of Gaelic games passed away in June seemed fitting.

And that's the sort of trite verdict we reach as we try to square life away. It's a means of smoothing out its most painful edges, a way of finding sense by applying a beginning and a middle and an end to something that we maybe suspect is much more capricious and resistant to our needs than that.

And so the news that broke on Thursday morning of the death of Mick O'Dwyer, little more than two days before the start of this year's football championship, begs to be treated in a similar way.

Another legendary Kerryman that stalked our summers, gone as the evenings stretch out and even the most modest counties root out some meagre cause for optimism in the weeks ahead.

No less than Ó Muircheartaigh, Mick O'Dwyer was a man with a hinterland beyond the GAA, but we knew little of it.

And nor should we: these are figures of enormous status in our national story, because of their relationships with the national sports. Their stories as fathers, husbands, sons, bosses, employees, neighbours or patients have nothing to do with us. Their lives are fed by innumerable tributaries that create the public figure, but it is by their public faces we know them and that they gave us cause to admire them and now honour them.

To many of us, those who gawped in wonder at what a football team in his care could do, it does then seem somehow proper that Mick O'Dwyer died in the week that the Championship begins.

To mark the 40th anniversary of the 1975 Kerry All-Ireland win against Dublin, this newspaper produced a supplement featuring interviews with a number of players from that Kingdom side.

It involved spending several days in the county in glorious summer weather, and hearing the stories of Mickey Ned O'Sullivan and Brendan Lynch, two of the young lions of that O'Dwyer side.

They are contrasting characters, Mickey Ned the irrepressible extrovert, Lynch the quiet, self-contained figure whose



The inspirational Micko will forever remain one of football's defining figures

Mick O'Dwyer 1936-2025

bearing befits a man who spent his career as a psychiatrist.

There was also an afternoon in the company of Johnny Bunyan, who was full-forward on O'Dwyer's championship team before being dropped for the final.

Their stories came at you from different trajectories, but all were bent by the force of O'Dwyer's personality and his unfathomable brilliance as a man-manager and tactician.

He only turned 39 during that signal season, and it's easily forgotten 50 years on just how much pressure he was under. Kerry hadn't won the All-Ireland since 1970, a fine Cork team ruled Munster, and

Kevin Heffernan had reimagined what football could be with his dashing Dubs in 1974.

O'Dwyer had the backing of a county board that implored him to take the job, but that only provided limited cover in a county where success is assumed, and where its absence is taken as a slight.

He produced and kept on doing it, under the weight of ceaseless expectation, even as Heffernan's Dublin provided vibrant opposition.

For some of us, the story of the Golden Years was consumed as dutifully as any school lesson, but with more relish. Yet remarkably, it never felt like a history class, despite the passing of decades.

And the reason for that was Mick O'Dwyer. He never stopped.

He became a legend and then tested that legacy, time and again, at Kildare in two spells across the 1990s, then at Laois, followed by Wicklow, ending in a brief interlude in Clare.

But it was his impact in the Leinster counties that was astonishing, and which was a privilege to witness in real time.

Even the daring to work wonders in Kildare and lead them to a first Leinster title in 42 years, and then go to Laois and end a 57-year wait for provincial glory, is astonishing at a remove of two decades.

It was a tribute to his talent but

also to vast levels of self-belief. He couldn't have survived as Kerry manager for so long without imperishable confidence, but he wore it so naturally that it never felt obvious, or even there.

He moved from role to role, working the same glory, and leaving behind memories that nourish individual teams but also the wider culture.

A treasured memory is from Portlaoise on a late July night in 2009. It was one of those late-summer evening throw-ins when the weather was perfect, the light could have served as a backdrop for a Terrence Malick epic and the ground hummed from long before throw-in. There was a crowd of nearly 18,000 for a round-four qualifier, with a place in the All-Ireland quarter-finals at stake.

That prize alone would have drawn thousands from Wicklow, but the game was their fourth consecutive Saturday Championship match: they had beaten Fermanagh, Cavan and Down over the previous three weekends, and in his third season, O'Dwyer was casting old, spell-binding charms.

They lost on the night by four points, but ran an excellent Kildare team close. The sharpest memory, though, is of the crowd, Wicklow fans in particular. They started the game expectant and ended it in a sort of worship of O'Dwyer, making as much noise as the Kildare supporters as they hailed Micko.

And O'Dwyer was charming and graceful, acknowledging defeat with an honourable acceptance that mightn't have been presumed of a man who had won so much.

He must have known the esteem in which he was held, but he moved through the adulation, like a man pushing through a turnstile.

The next challenge awaited, the next story, the next interview – and most of all, the next match.

Football entranced him, and long before his death, he had been absorbed into its story.

And now, with low-key matches throwing in yesterday and some of the Broadway productions opening today, another Irish summer is upon us, whatever the calendar argues. And Mick O'Dwyer is a significant part of the Irish summer story, thanks to what he achieved but also because of the many he inspired.

He was more than a football manager, but it was through football he became ingrained in our culture, nourishing new dreams and radiating an old, undimmed passion for the great old game.

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