

## INTERVIEW

By Philip Lanigan



**J**IMMY GRAY is sitting back in a comfy chair in the back room of his house in Willow Park Drive when the doorbell goes. His wife Gretta disappears to answer it. She's just been recounting how a brief honeymoon diversion in 1959 involved her husband answering an SOS for Dublin and lining out in a Walsh Cup hurling game in Kilkenny.

The things you do for love.

In appears another figure bound up in the history and evolution of Gaelic games in the capital; Mickey Whelan, 83 years young.

Mickey was born in May 1939 as World War II loomed. Still dapper in a sports jacket, he was coaching with the St Vincent's senior camogie team up until recently.

Jimmy has a decade on him, being a child of 1929, a year when fortunes and reputations tumbled in the Wall Street Crash.

Still bright as a button at 93, easily recalling names and details and stories, whether from recent weeks – he was at both county finals involving his beloved Na Fianna – or half a century ago.

The conversation takes in two lives devoted to sport and to Dublin GAA. The Legends Series from Hero Books serves as a valuable record of Irish sporting life down the decades, offering a lovely slice of GAA social history as well.

Jimmy and Mickey are featured in separate new tomes, and over a fascinating afternoon, the pair talk through how their lives have intersected over the past 60 years and more, plus so much more.

A light touch and sense of humour is just part of the reason Gray is such a popular and esteemed part of Dublin GAA – President of the County Board, 'the Godfather of Dublin GAA' having been chairman when Kevin Heffernan was appointed and the game transformed.

Whelan, who was scouted by Manchester United aged just 15, earned a degree in Liberal Arts and Social Science at Westchester Community College in New York, with the end goal of being a PE teacher, and the sports science underpinned his time with Heffernan, St Vincent's and Dublin.

So did either think they would both have published memoirs out at the same time?

**Mickey:** 'Definitely not.'

**Jimmy:** 'Neither did I. He's more to write about than me.'

**Mickey:** 'I doubt it. How the hell did you get tied in to this?'

When did their paths cross first?

'I was chairman of Dublin when he was playing,' says Jimmy. He was only 16 when his life first intersected with that of Heffernan, sharing a bus home after a schools game with the Vincent's legend.

One of Heffernan's first acts? To offer him a cigarette.

'Sure he smoked like a train.'

'It was very hard to get close to him, he was very deep.'

'He said to me, nearly on his way out, "Do you know what Jimmy? If I was to live my life all over again, there's one thing I wouldn't have done". What's that? "I wouldn't have smoked". He thought the world of your man here.'

Jimmy's mother wanted to make a priest out of him, and he was packed off to a Carmelite school in Wales for a time before taking a different route. Married Gretta in 1959, was a dual player with Dublin before con-

# Living legends united in their utter devotion to Dublin GAA

## The enduring friendship of Whelan and Gray forged in Gaelic games

centrating on hurling. He was goalkeeper in the 1961 All-Ireland final which remains a touchstone for Dublin hurling. The 0-16 to 1-12 defeat by Tipperary featured a contentious point that arguably changed the course of history.

'It was about a yard wide,' insists Jimmy. 'Lar Foley nearly went berserk with the umpire. He started going for your man. I used to spend the whole match trying to keep Lar quiet – he'd say anything!'

When it came to the 1963 All-Ireland football final, Bertie Ahern recalls in the book how his older brother lifted him over the stiles: 'Mickey Whelan's performance a stand-out memory.'

Mickey was 24. Moved to midfield in the second half, scored 0-5 of 1-9 and finished as the Championship's top scorer and was only pipped for Footballer of the Year by Lar Foley.

Reared in Cabra West, a teacher played a part in him heading to Ringsend to play with Clanna Gael before returning from the States to embed himself in St Vincent's and the Dublin football revolution of the 1970s. It was actually while in America that he ended up lining out with a certain legend of the ash.

### Tales of Christy Ring...

In 1973 his sporting prowess saw Mickey on an American invitational team against the All-Stars. With games in Australia and New Zealand, the party was also travelling to Tahiti and Fiji. The definition of a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. And

**MAGIC MOMENT:** Jimmy Gray presents the Bob O'Keefe Cup to John McCaffrey following Dublin's Leinster SHC final win in 2013



so he found himself tagging out with the likes of Kerry's Mick O'Connell and Cork's Christy Ring.

At this point, Ring was into his 50s, retired. Yet lined out for both hurling and football teams. 'That was some journey, Tahiti, Fiji Islands,' says Mickey. 'Mick O'Connell was on it too. Ring played the hurling. Then the football. I was on the football team. At half-time he called Mick O'Connell and myself over. "I didn't come down here to lose!" he says. 50-plus years of age. And he after playing in the previous game!'

'Every ball I get, he says, I'm going to give to you – and you better score!'

'And he said to Micko, every ball you get, you better give it to him. And then you better score!'

'It shows his competitive spirit.' Jimmy too had his own dealings with Christy, on and off the field.

'First time I ever played for Dublin down in Cork, in the old Athletic Grounds. The dressing room was under the stand. There were broken bits – if you were in the stand, you could see straight into the dressing room.

'During the course of the match, there was a high ball going way over the bar. I was watching it in my innocence. Next second – waarrgh! I get a thump in the chest and was stuck in the back of the net by Ring. He never said a word. Just got up and went out again.'

'About two years afterwards, I joined the Sugar Company. Eithne Haughey who was Charlie's sister, she was the receptionist. 'She says, "There's a gentleman over here. He's asking for you." Who is it? "I didn't ask him his name."

'It was Christy, there with his niece. She had applied for a job. He came over afterwards and said, "Listen, that young lassie of mine, she's the best one for that job". He hadn't a feckin' clue. "You better make sure she gets it. And don't forget the lesson I taught you in Cork years ago!'

'Sure I was only in the company three months!'

### Heffo's Army and the Dublin Revolution...

Jimmy: 'There was consternation

that he introduced training on a Saturday morning. Before that it was usually Tuesday and Thursday, and a bit of an exaggeration to call it training. A couple of lads and a kickaround. Heff came in – you (Mickey) did the training programme – and it was all very professional. It was different, modern. Worked a bomb.'

He laughs at a story from his own time in the early 90s when he took over as Dublin hurling manager before bringing Whelan in as trainer.

'Mick Ryan, a Kilkenny man, we used to train the hurlers. Left the army, went into the Vocational School, North Strand. Part of the training was, there were bars along the wall in the gym, we used to climb up the bars and down. That was part of it.'

'The chat around the city was. "You hear what the Dublin hurlers are doing in training. North Strand Tech. They're running up the walls and down the walls".'

'Times have changed.' So how does the modern golden era – eight All-Ireland football crowns since 2011 – compare to Heffo and the 70s?

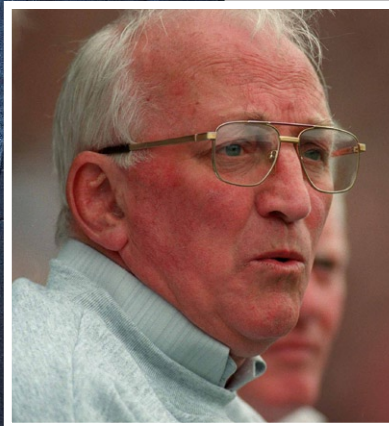
'It's a different era. Much more sophisticated in Jim's (Gavin) time







Picture: Fran Veale



**BLUES BROTHERS:** Jimmy Gray (above) did time as Dublin hurling manager and (main) with his long-time friend Mickey Whelan last week

of Finance. Same day, down to Leinster House.

'In we go. A bloody big office – the biggest you ever saw in your life. And a desk in the middle of it. Charlie was there,

'I'd never met him. My father introduced him. My father was calling him Minister, he was Minister for Finance at the time. He didn't seem interested, he was looking for a letter in the drawer.

'So my father said, "for f\*\*\*'s sake Charlie, would you look up and pay attention!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. So he listened. Said, "Okay, I'll be in touch." I never thought I'd hear from him again. Well, a week later, a letter came, with a copy of a letter from Charlie to the board of works that we were to be

accommodated at Mobhi Road.'

The club continues to build a proud legacy there, reaching both of this year's senior county finals.

Mickey talks of another Taoiseach. St Patrick's Day, 2008. Bertie Ahern couldn't make it to Croke Park for the final between St Vincent's and Nemo Rangers - he had a date with President George W Bush at the White House.

'Bertie was such a Dublin football fan. And a fan of the club championship.

'He was away five years in a row for St Patrick's Day, in the White House. He loved to be at the club finals. He had an aide coming in whispering in his ear.'

To the point where First Lady Laura Bush wondered whether there were alarm bells coming from Ireland.

'She said, "Taoiseach, have you problems at home?"

"No, why?"

"Your aide-de-camp is coming in and out."

"Ah no, he's giving me the scores!"

When Vincent's won, Ahern wrote a letter of congratulations to Mickey.

**IRA protests and hotel alibis...**

Jimmy Gray tells the story of the 1977 National League final between Dublin and Kerry, caught up in political turmoil to the extent a couple of Dublin players had to use alibis on the All-Stars trip.

'There was a National League match. Kerry and Dublin. At half-time, IRA or Republican supporters came onto the pitch in protest.

'There was a bit of hassle. John McCarthy and David Hickey gave a couple of them kicks in the arse. There was a meeting in O'Connell Street that night where

their names were dirt, they gave out hell about them.

'John O'Donnell was in the paper saying the Hickeys, or John McCarthy wouldn't be welcome in New York for the All-Stars trip.

'The gas thing, John wasn't going to America. The Hickeys, David and Michael, had special cops looking after them in Chicago and New York. The cop's name was O'Malley. And the fictitious name they were given was O'Malley. It was a real high-tech escapade. Two or three cop cars – one of them was a decoy. They'd go off with a motorbike cop – and then the Hickeys would go in a different one.

'It was quite serious. There were all sorts of threats.'

In the end, they all got home safely.

**Jack Charlton, Italia 90, and Manchester United scout...**

Whelan recalls the day a Manchester United scout turned up at his door.

'I was only young at that stage, only 15. My father came out to the door. I knew I was wanted. An uncle Tom of mine who'd been in Frongach was in the house. Johnny Giles' father was there, he was a pal of my dad's.

"This gentleman wants to talk to you," I was told. Billy Beehan, the scout. My dad says, "he's from Manchester United.

'I started to cry. I said, "Daddy, I don't want to go to England."

'But one of the guys said, "it might make you rich".

'My dad said, "go on back out and play, son".

'All my father's people were living in England. They'd come home at Christmas and summer, playing cards, having a few beers. When it came to go home, they were all crying. It was very upsetting for a young kid to see adults crying.'

Mick Byrne mentions your talent in the book in the same breath as Kevin Keegan and George Best – do you think you had the talent to make it?

'Of course,' says Mickey. 'Sure I did it in America. I'm honoured over there in two different associations.'

He was named the MVP on Westchester's soccer team, but he never wanted to follow the path of Kevin Moran at Old Trafford?

'No, no. I did what I did.'

Whelan's involvement with different teams at university level saw him bring a colleges team to Italy in 1990, dovetailing games with the national team. He ended up in Genoa in the company of Jack Charlton and the senior players the night they knocked Romania out on penalties.

'I did a bit of work for the FAI for about two years. Mick saw me and said, "come in". We all went in there. Jack told the team to go out – and my gang went with them. They had a great experience.

'I was walking down the street with him and cops kept pulling up in cars. He was telling them "Go away, nobody is going to do anything to me. I'm going down here for a few pints".

Just one of many both Mickey and Jimmy have enjoyed down the years.

As they stand outside the house for a photograph, a neighbour stops to say hello and shoot the breeze. It's former Dublin player Dermot Deasy, who, in his spare time, cuts Jimmy's grass and keeps an eye out.

As an illustration of how they are venerated on the northside of the city, it tells its own tale.

because he brought his army training with him. He'd about 16 in the background, didn't he?"

Whelan was there as coach in 2011 along with Pat Gilroy for the breakthrough win that paved the way. It was redemption especially after his own ill-fated tenure as Dublin manager. He was confidant to Gilroy as the Dubs finally reached the Holy Grail, the win that acted as a springboard for the creation of arguably the greatest football team in GAA history.

'We handed over the Crown Jewels to Jim,' he says. 'That team went on to win another five or six All-Irelands. And there's still three of them playing. I stepped down because my wife Irene was ill. And I had two more great years with her.'

In lockdown, Stephen Cluxton was one of those in touch with Whelan. 'That's Stephen. He's a great human being – you just have to get to know him. He doesn't go outside his friendship. A lovely guy.

'He rang me four or five times during lockdown – "Is there anything I can do? Get you any food or anything?"

'I said no, I'm living with my daughter, she's looking after me.

'But he was always touching base.'

Recent times have seen some friends lost, Brian Mullins the latest. Another friend and Dublin GAA icon. The emotion of it is still raw, Mickey's voice catching slightly as he says: 'He was a tough guy but gentle behind it all.'

There a photo in the book of the pair in China at the World University Games, both there through their third-level involvement.

Adds Jimmy: 'I remember one of the trips to Los Angeles where Dublin were playing the All-Stars. At half-time, his team were 15 points behind. Well, Brian gave a display in the second half in 90 degrees of heat – and we won the match by a point. Unbelievable. A one-man show.'

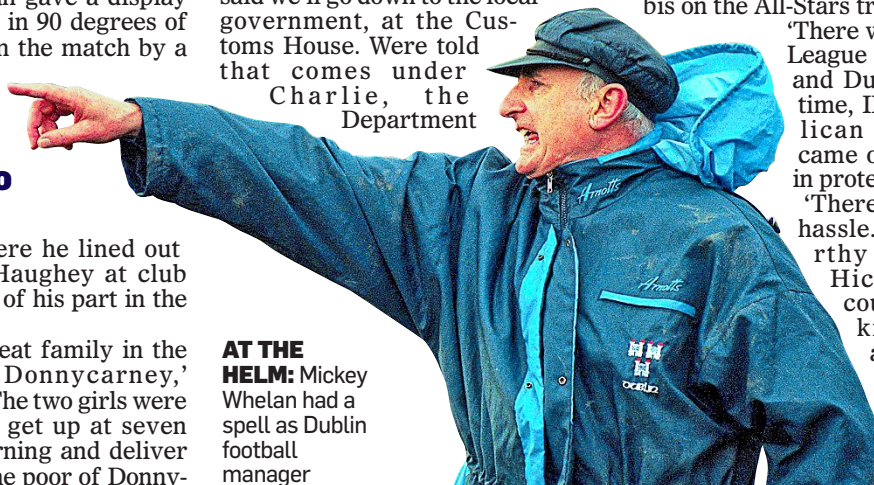
**A tale of two Taoisigh...**

From a point where he lined out against Charlie Haughey at club level, Jimmy tells of his part in the Na Fianna story.

'They were a great family in the community in Donnycarney,' explains Jimmy. 'The two girls were brilliant. Used to get up at seven o'clock every morning and deliver breakfast out to the poor of Donny-

carney. In fairness to Charlie, he did good too for a lot of people. He did Na Fianna a great favour. We were supposed to be kicked out of Mobhi Road. We didn't have the most secure tenure. The Board of Works were the controlling unit for public parks and that. We had to leave it by first of July one year. There was consternation in the club. We were halfway through building the clubhouse, were after collecting a fair few bob plus voluntary work.

'My father was involved with Fianna Fáil. I'm non-political. He said we'll go down to the local government, at the Customs House. Were told that comes under Charlie, the Department



**AT THE HELM:** Mickey Whelan had a spell as Dublin football manager



By Philip Lanigan



**M**ICHAEL O'HEHIR made a famous plea over the airwaves from the Polo Grounds in New York, as the iconic 1947 All-Ireland football final between Cavan and Kerry came to a dramatic finale.

'And if there's anybody along the way there listening in, just give us five minutes more...'

His request was facilitated.

It's just one unscripted line from a broadcaster who became the voice of Gaelic games for an entire generation and more. Someone who 'held a nation spellbound' as one of the most fitting tributes to his talent put it.

That famous quote is preserved for all to see in an eye-catching plaque as you enter the main entrance of Croke Park on the Hogan Stand side. It captures a legacy that is timeless and a career that encompassed 99 All-Ireland final broadcasts between 1938 and 1985 on RTE radio and television. And at times drifted beyond the sphere of sport or Gaelic games.

When he was in America on holidays in 1963, he was asked to fill in and follow up an event that shocked and then stopped the world – the assassination of John F Kennedy. The manner in which he stepped in to commentate for the live five-hour broadcast brought its own acclaim.

A racing commentator as well as a Gaelic games commentator, he memorably put his personal stamp on Foinavon's famous victory in the 1967 Grand National.

And it's a legacy that lives on too from father to son... to grandson.

The O'Hehir clan is stitched into the national sporting fabric. No more than his brother Tony, the sports bug and the media bug bit Peter early.

And has been passed down to the next generation of their own families.

In Peter's case, to his own two sons. The eldest, Conor, is now 30. He represented Naas all the way up and lined out at Croke Park in a Kildare senior shirt. His talent with a small ball extends to being a scratch golfer who works in the RTE sports department now himself.

Then there's 26-year-old Eoin. An accountant by trade. Part of the Naas senior hurling squad that became the first from Kildare to win an intermediate club All-Ireland at Croke Park last February. And is now back at the same venue this afternoon for what is another landmark moment for Naas, sharing the same stage as hurling royalty Ballyhale Shamrocks in a Leinster Club SHC semi-final.

It's 35 years ago that Peter witnessed a packed stadium rising to acclaim his father. Deprived the milestone of commentating on his 100th All-Ireland by an untimely stroke, it was Peter who pushed him onto the field in a wheelchair to an impromptu ovation that reduced his father to a tearful thank-you.

No wonder then that this afternoon – walking in to Croke Park where that plaque hangs – will strike a chord for both Peter and Eoin. Here, they both talk about the line from the Polo Grounds in New York to Croke Park 75 years later.

Peter admits that heading into the stadium always strikes a chord. It carries a special resonance given his father's association with the place and the GAA. Particularly so

with Eoin part of the Naas squad and that reminder hanging for all to see.

'It does. Not that I get to see it very often but Conor has worked in there a good bit over the years and Eoin has been doing stats for TV for Sky and for RTE from time to time. Every time he walks through the tunnel he sends me a picture of it.

'I'm going to Croke Park since I was five or six. We were only living up the road. As a teenager, on a Sunday, I'd walk down Griffith Avenue to Parnell Park in the morning if there was a decent club match on. Go to Croke Park then of an afternoon. We would have all gone through the phase of keeping notes for my dad in the commentary box. I did it for a few years until the Dubs came on the scene in '74 and I was too excitable – I had to be thrown out!

'Between the Irish Press days and covering matches in there – my time in the commentary box – there would have been some memorable days.

'National Anthem time is a bad time for me. It's the one time on a big day when time stands still for a minute. And yeah, you starting thinking... That's just me, I'm a softie.

'Last year on the day of the All-Ireland final, Eoin didn't play but the run the lads had through the county and then the intermediate and on to win the All-Ireland was amazing. The best day I ever had up there.'

Emotional?

'Very much so. When you've been surrounded by it for 60 years. The two lads had played there as kids.

Eoin played in a Cumann na mBunscol game, at half-time in the middle of a Railway Cup game, many years ago. Conor played there in a Leinster inter-county blitz at Croke Park when he was Under 14. They brought the U14 county panels in for the day.

'Conor played for Kildare in there as well. It's been ongoing...'

Eoin himself describes the emotion of that All-Ireland final day and Naas' rise from the intermediate ranks to sharing a stage this afternoon with Kilkenny kingpins Ballyhale Shamrocks.

'The journey has been unbelievable, to be part of it. It's a special bunch of lads that we've had over the last few years. That day was up there with the best of them all. Dad being a Dub, he's had the success with the footballers in recent years but he gets a real kick out of Naas hurling – he loves it.

'Croke Park is a special place for any GAA person but with the second name, I've been lucky enough to be there for many All-Ireland finals, semi-finals, all sorts of big

matches down the years. Then this year, getting the chance with Naas for us to be out there last February in the All-Ireland final against Kilmoyley was very special. And now to be going back, it's another special one.'

**L**AST Thursday was actually the 26th anniversary of Michael O'Hehir's passing. And yet he lives on, in so many ways.

When Major winner Shane Lowry managed a hole in one at the signature island hole that is the 17th at the prestigious Players Championship last March, one creative spark dubbed Michael O'Hehir's commentary over the footage, commentary of Seamus Darby scoring the winning goal for Offaly against Kerry in the 1982 All-Ireland.

'It is nice of course,' admits Peter. 'Any time the voice or name is linked, he'd be proud himself to be linked with such things so many years on. The technology and the things people can do – not always for the better!'

'Certain times of the year, All-Ireland times or whatever, the old foot-

# Glorious O'Hehir legacy lives on

As Naas face hurling royalty Ballyhale today, a name forever linked with Croker's biggest days will be represented

age comes on. It's strange because it comes on and people of a certain generation, their ears will prick and they'll say, "Oh, there he is". And yet 1985 was his last broadcast. It's a long time ago.'

An avid golfer like his brother Conor – both of the scratch variety – Eoin got a kick out of the Lowry clip that did the rounds online.

'I was born in April 1996 and Granddad died in November – so I was only around for six months when he was around. So seeing and hearing those clips is class.'

There has rarely been an ovation though to match the one offered to Michael O'Hehir on All-Ireland final day in 1987. A special series of events was planned to mark the centenary football final, including a parade of the 1947 Polo Grounds finalists. Nothing matched the reception and outpouring of emotion when Peter pushed his father onto the grass in a wheelchair.







**GENERATION GAME:**  
(clockwise from main)  
Michael O'Hehir in his commentary heyday; his grandson Conor playing for Kildare in 2012; son Peter; and another grandson Eoin, aged 11 in 2007, who is part of the Naas squad today



**He died when I was only six months, so hearing all his old clips is class**



Given his self-proclaimed 'softie' status, that must have really tugged at the heartstrings?

'It did, especially as I was the one who pushed him onto the pitch. From my own selfish point of view, it was a case of put my head down and push.

'But it was a big day for him in that, I felt at the time that after he had the stroke, he had worked and made a bit of progress. Had the dream that he was going to be back as good as new. And then the realisation probably came that it wasn't going to happen. It was Liam Mulvihill (GAA director general) who asked him would he be willing and

he said, "Why not?" That was a big step for him. There were floods of tears.'

Was there any anticipation of the reaction that he'd get from the crowd?

'You would expect a certain level of respect from people but to have the whole crowd, whatever it was at the time, 70 something thousand, on their feet – it was crazy stuff.'

A quirk of fate saw the O'Hehirs end up settling in Naas.

'We were living in an apartment in Killester, myself and Margaret,' explains Peter. 'Conor was gone a year old, we were wondering would it be big enough for all of us. We

came down this direction for a drive one Sunday. Spotted a development. Before we'd seen a house Margaret said, "I think I like the look of this."

The sporting pedigree runs deep in the family, too, given Peter's wife played representative basketball for Ireland.

More a self-confessed hurler on the ditch than a hurler himself, Peter soon found himself roped into a bit of coaching as the kids went through the ranks from nursery all

the way up to adult hurling. Never did he imagine that journey would end up in an intermediate All-Ireland final at Croke Park last spring.

'For these lads it's been great, even from last year where we won a third county senior championship and went through Leinster. We had a great day when beating Tooreen in Ballinasloe, a big entourage travelled. With the footballers winning the double – as we've done again this year, although the footballers went out early to Kilmacud – there has been a great buzz around the town.

'It ran through last summer, autumn and it lasted until February – all of a sudden there were blue and white flags all up and down the street. Everywhere you went in the town there were signs there was something happening.'

Taking on Ballyhale Shamrocks, a club just after making history with

their own five in a row of Kilkenny titles, is a challenge that takes them to the next level.

'From this time last year we were mooching away at intermediate level. Now we're playing the best club team in the country in recent years – I know they were beaten in the final last year. I'd say there's lads losing sleep over facing up to TJ and Fennelly and Joey Holden and so on.'

For anyone looking in, how do you explain the Naas success story?

Eoin puts together some of the pieces. 'It's been going on a number of years. It's only now that people outside the club are seeing it. So many good people have been involved at underage. Starting all the way up from nursery. John Holmes gets mentioned a lot and rightly so, he started a lot of us out in the nursery and he's still down there coaching kids.

'The late Denis Hanley was involved in underage stuff as well, all the coaches we've had up along.'

'Then the last three years we've had Tom Mullally and Christy Kealy, they are two of the best I've ever played under. They're top class. But it does go back a long way, the success we're having now. The underage teams playing in Kilkenny, that helps massively.'

Peter recalls the time the club had entered the Kilkenny leagues and beat Ballyhale Shamrocks in an U16 Kilkenny Shield final back in October 2015. 'It's a small thing and will probably have no bearing on Sunday but it's just a thing in their heads, sure we've played these lads before. Plus the fact they were in Croke Park last year so won't be overawed.'

'As long as they perform and don't freeze... it's going to be a huge task obviously.'

Eoin says to be sharing a stage with the likes of TJ Reid is exactly where Naas want to be, the match live on TG4 too. Thumping Offaly champions Shinrone in their senior Leinster bow was another significant step.

'You want to be playing against the best. The mood is good. The last day against Shinrone was massive for us. After coming up from intermediate, we had to win to feel that we were able for that step up. If we'd lost that, there would be people saying, "Jeez, what are they doing at senior?". So to get that first win in senior championship was huge.'

'The competition for places is unbelievable. To me, there's lads there who would get a game with a lot of teams in the country. It's a serious standard, compared to where Naas hurling was many years ago.'

'The last one was a massive one. We'll be going out there giving it 150 per cent.'

Peter's job as long-time racing correspondent for the Irish Mirror means that Croke Park won't be the only sporting event on his radar on Sunday, ready to hightail it from there 'to be back at my desk at a reasonable hour to catch up on things.'

The line from the Polo Grounds to present day continues on in more ways than one. Just this week, a statue of 1947 All-Ireland winning Cavan captain John Joe O'Reilly was officially unveiled in the Market Square in Cavan Town.

Kerry great Mick O'Connell was at that, just as he was at the funeral of Michael O'Hehir in 1996, President Mary Robinson amongst the mourners. Five minutes more?

Seventy five years on, the O'Hehir name and spirit carries on down the generations.





# Phil Lannan

@lanno10

**P**ERHAPS it's the island mentality that sees the Irish gaze instinctively turn to foreign fields. Particularly foreign playing fields. To look to other countries to find our own value.

The whistle had barely sounded on Ireland's historic winning tour of New Zealand, when the latest edition of the great Irish sporting debate kicked off and quickly descended into sporting one-upmanship.

It's only six years ago that beating the All Blacks felt like a seminal moment in the history of Irish rugby. Events at Soldier Field in Chicago in an autumn international on American soil even sparked a documentary.

Now, here was the fifth victory over the side that have long been the gold-standard in the sport that is their national obsession.

Could it really be the greatest achievement in Irish rugby – ahead of Six Nations trophies and Grand Slams and memories of Ronan O'Gara's dramatic dropped goal against Wales or Johnny Sexton's against France?

Could it really be the greatest achievement in modern Irish sport? Ahead of the Republic of Ireland team's ground-breaking displays in Euro 88 and the World Cups of 1990 and 1994 – eclipsing Ray Houghton's headed winner against England in Stuttgart or Paul McGrath's peerless defensive exhibition in the 1-0 victory over Italy at Giants Stadium?

Those not lulled by the siren song of Ireland's Call suggested it wouldn't even have been the greatest Irish achievement that weekend, never mind this last 50 years, if Rory McIlroy happened to win the 150th Open at the home of golf to claim his fifth Major. In Oregon, Ireland's excellent athletics team too, continued to set a high bar at the World Championships.

**T**HROW in Kellie Harrington's Olympic gold, Katie Taylor's pioneering exploits in professional boxing or Rachael Blackmore's version of same in National Hunt racing and the mature thing was to suggest they could all co-exist peacefully as landmark achievements in their own right.

That is, without the social media version of the melee that the footballers of Galway and Armagh served up at Croke Park earlier this year which involved plenty of pushing, shoving, and shouting down, even the odd sneaky finger to the eye.

Come back when you beat the All Blacks in a competition that actually counts, like say a World Cup quarter-final, summed up the contrarian view. Or when the competition is truly international and not just a closed shop top table consisting of a clutch of southern hemisphere and northern hemisphere countries.

It's funny how Gaelic games can always be relied on to be glossed over in the eternal search for Irish sporting high performance.

Does native Irish sport not also count among the greatest feats of Irish sport?



History: William O'Donoghue lifts the Liam MacCarthy Cup as he leads Limerick on a lap of honour

## Don't look past All-Ireland day for the best of Irish sport

Why the need to look to Wellington, to St Andrews, to Oregon, for Irish sporting validation when history and the highest level of sporting achievement in our national games are unfolding in front of our eyes? At a stadium which doesn't bear the name of an insurance company – at least not yet.

It was a privilege to be in Croke Park on Sunday on All-Ireland final day, to witness greatness in Irish sport unfold in the shape of Limerick's three-in-a-row and a final that carried such a breathless, relentless and record-breaking scoring quality that it quickly went down as a modern classic.

A sun-scorched day to go with a unique July decider.

Jones' Road milling with Limerick and Kilkenny fans before 82,300 packed into the ground.

Marty Morrissey's hurling final preamble on RTE, such an established part of the showpiece that one version features as part of the Transition Year curriculum at secondary school level.

Tommy Walsh's own rich introductory monologue on News-talk, Kilkenny's retired nine-time All-Ireland winner now watching from the press box as the red carpet is rolled out for president Michael D Higgins and the handshake protocol that he knows only too well.

The two sets of players shaking hands, the Kilkenny players taking their water bottles around in the parade, thanks to the soaring temperature.

The pomp, the pageantry. The line from Limerick great Mick Mackey and the team of the 1930s that won three All-Irelands to present day. On the sideline still for Kilkenny Brian Cody, an institution in Irish sporting life.

On the field, TJ Reid, continuing his claim to be the greatest forward of the modern era, another debate altogether.

Raging against the notion of any dying of the light, just like Sexton the previous morning.

Gearóid Hegarty is an admitted fan of The High Performance Pod-

cast, which features a roll call of the best across different spheres.

Here was a living, breathing embodiment of that attitude as he produced a second Man of the Match performance in an All-Ireland final, his 1-5 the perfect companion piece to his seven from play in the 2020 decider.

Add in the 2-2 against Cork last year and it's 3-14 across the span of Limerick's three in a row.

The same winter of 2020 that he scooped the Hurler of the Year award, he declared himself a big fan of US Open winner Bryson DeChambeau who won with the sort of power play that was forcing the game to rethink itself.

Limerick have done a version of same in hurling, this final shattering various scoring records, just as Limerick did in blitzing Cork to the tune of 3-18 by half-time of the 2021 decider with their own interpretation of Total Hurling, inspired by the coaching mind of Paul Kinnerk and the management skills of John Kiely.

Personally? For me, the cultural,

historical and sporting significance of All-Ireland final day remains unmatched in the Irish sporting calendar.

It's one that is bound up in the status of the GAA as an amateur, community-based organisation.

**H**ONOURING the Jubilee teams is one of the enduring All-Ireland final day traditions. So it was nice to see Clare have all the band back together and the likes of Davy Fitzgerald, Brian Lohan and Anthony Daly striding out, just as they still stride across the hurling landscape.

And Wexford too, George O'Connor just one of the cult heroes waving to the crowd, the bent fingers a testimony to a career where he put his body on the line for the cause.

There was the moment's silence for Bobby Aylward, the popular former TD and chairman of Ballyhale Shamrocks, which morphed into a warm minute's applause.

The noise as the players walked behind the Artane Band was deafening, like a release of pent up energy after the behind-closed-doors championship of 2020 followed by the Covid restrictions of 2021.

The hold of All-Ireland final day on the national consciousness is such that nearly one million people tuned in, the television peak audience of 882,000 on RTE1 added to by 113,000 streams on the RTE Player.

In terms of Irish sporting feats, what Limerick have done this past five seasons in winning four All-Irelands is what constitutes sporting greatness, the same as the Dublin football team that went where no team in either code has gone before to win six All-Ireland titles in a row.

In captaining Limerick to success for a fourth time, Declan Hannon surpassed all existing records, including that of Christy Ring who was the only previous player to lift the Liam MacCarthy Cup three times.

Now that's sporting greatness right there.