

Interview Shane O'Donnell



A sense of calm after the storm



Denis Walsh

Having being catapulted into celebrity as a teenager, and suffering mental turmoil after a concussion, Shane O'Donnell has gained a new perspective on life as he eyes the end of his intercounty career

After the third goal Shane O'Donnell landed on his hands and knees in front of Hill 16, dodging a post and a quick-stepping umpire. He levered himself to his feet, slowly, in a hydraulic motion, and walked back on to the field. He didn't clench his fist or raise his arm in celebration, and when the RTE camera zoomed in tight on his face there was no trace of a smile – as if his emotions were locked in emergency session, ironing out a response to fast-moving events.

The story didn't need any seasoning. In less than 20 minutes, with his first four possessions, O'Donnell had scored a point and three goals, in that order. It was nearly 50 years since anybody had scored a hat-trick in one half of an All-Ireland hurling final, though the sensation wasn't sweating on a coat.

O'Donnell was 19 years of age, wearing number 22 on his back, plunged into the starting team at a couple of hours' notice to short-circuit his nerves. He finished the game with 3-3; Clare won.

Immediately after his last score, with four minutes of normal time remaining, he was replaced to a thunderous ovation from the Clare crowd. "3-3 in an All-Ireland final, it's a day he'll never forget," said Michael Duignan in the RTE commentary. "And God help him for the rest of his life, at 19, the pressure that's going to be on him every time he goes out from now on, to replicate this."

So, what happens when the fairytale ending comes at the beginning? What then?

It was a moment in his life. Fame enveloped him: suddenly, completely. That night the Clare players ended up in Copper Face Jacks on Harcourt Street, and what he thought might be one night of blanket attention and ceaseless intrusion turned out to be a trailer for the movie.

O'Donnell returned to Cork, to pick up the thread of his undergrad life in UCC, but everything had changed. Nights out were no longer private or simple. In the queue for nightclubs he would be ushered to the front and allowed in for free, and whoever was with him were afforded the same courtesy, but once O'Donnell was inside his evening would be colonised by strangers. People who just assumed he wouldn't mind the petty-theft of his time and personal space, or didn't even get that far in their thinking.

"You get into the nightclub and you just take photos for the entire time that you're there," he says now, 10 years later. "From the second you arrive until you leave. Some of the photos were with random people – that's grand. But some of the photos were with groups of lads, slugging you off and giving you grief. And because they can tell you don't want to be there, they start reacting to that. 'Oh, you think you're so great.' And it's just like, 'I genuinely don't want to be here [taking this photo]. That's no reflection on you.'"

"It was painful. It led to not really going out – or going out at one in the morning. I rapidly became a less shy person. I would have been relatively shy, but that had to go basically. Even at that, it was just uncomfortable. Just meeting my friends for a drink, or doing anything, now had this layer of dealing with sometimes well-meaning people and sometimes genuinely nasty enough people. It was just like, 'Why do I feel this?' Never would you think that going playing hurling for your county would end up in a situation like this."

Over the years other GAA players must have dealt with versions of instant fame, but probably not at O'Donnell's age, and definitely not after blasting from the shadows to score a hat-trick in an All-Ireland final. In the drawn 2013 final Clare had replaced three of their forwards without summoning O'Donnell from the bench; in the All-Ireland semi-final he had made a fleeting appearance in stoppage time. Outside of Clare, nobody knew who he was; now, everybody knew. The difference was stunning.

People could see that he was struggling but there was no handbook for dealing

with this. Donal Moloney had coached O'Donnell through his teenage years with Clare age-grade teams and, based in Cork, he suggested that they meet for a chat. O'Donnell wriggled; Moloney insisted.

Moloney tried to think of a venue where a hurler's face would have little or no purchase in a crowd and he thought of Hayfield Manor, a five-star hotel near the college. But one middle-aged woman spotted O'Donnell, and she pounced, politely and sweetly. With his cover blown, others followed. Moloney was gobsmacked; he thought he knew what O'Donnell was dealing with.

The GPA reached out and offered the services of a life coach. "He was lovely, but a personal coach wasn't useful to me at the time because I saw it as another person that I had to interact with – and I just didn't interact with him. I was so burned with being asked to do everything that I stopped answering my phone. There was no point in people checking in on me because I was actively avoiding any contact. I probably isolated myself a bit in that regard."

"It lasted two winters, solid. So, obviously the winter after the All-Ireland, but actually the winter after that as well. When it came into the winter of the next year I couldn't believe I was dealing with it again. I just thought people in Cork would stop caring. I was just like, 'I can't believe I'm wasting another three months of my off-season – that I should be enjoying – dealing with more of this.'"

"It definitely colours my memory [of that time]. When I think about the All-Ireland I think about the aftermath as well. Nothing like, 'I wish it never happened' – it doesn't come near that. But it [the attention] came in tandem with it. That was the part I didn't enjoy."

There was a time, in the late summer of 2021, when O'Donnell wasn't sure where he stood. Would he play again? Did he care if he didn't?

The concussion happened at a Clare training session. People tell him that his arms were pinned in a tackle, and when he fell, his head collided with the sun-baked turf. He spent that night in Limerick hospital, "not able to formulate a thought."

O'Donnell was due to be groomsman at his brother's wedding in Donegal the following day, but dessert was being served by the time he reached the hotel. The photographer hung around long enough to include O'Donnell in one of the family portraits. Everyone was pleased to see him again and concerned by the state he was in.

Over the next 10 days the symptoms intensified. He had started a new job but when he presented himself at a computer screen he couldn't concentrate properly, and the following day was worse. He felt "severe pressure" in his head, and oppres-

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sive nausea.

"There was a two-week period where I was dealing with symptoms that were 9/10 [for severity]. I wasn't able to read, or look at my phone, or watch TV. So, actually, I sat in my sittingroom and looked at the wall, for weeks. I could have a conversation but my eyes couldn't track the person. I was worried. We were all worried. My parents were very worried. The issue as well was that it took about 10 days to get to the real bottom and, at the time, I didn't know that was the bottom."

"I kept going on this thing, 'I think I'm getting better. And because I thought I was getting slightly better I would do more things – and because of that it would kick off more symptoms – which meant I would get worse, worse than I'd ever been. I was on this kind of wave, but the trajectory was down. Oisín [O'Donnell's brother] and his wife Clodagh are both doctors and they didn't understand what was happening. I definitely didn't understand. It just added to the fear."

With the symptoms of concussion the common medical advice is to rest. The advice from concussion specialists, however, is completely different. It was weeks before O'Donnell discovered that doctors differ. During that time, he suffered.

"When I was first dealing with it, when I was in the throes of the symptoms, I was like, 'I'm never playing again.' And that was an easy price to pay for never again having to deal with the symptoms I was dealing with. I wouldn't even say I was resigned because I wasn't in any way upset about that. I was like, 'If I can get through these symptoms and return to normalcy – not playing hurling or not playing sport again is, whatever.'"

It was about a month before he was put in contact with UPMC, an American healthcare company with clinics in Ireland. At his first appointment they assured him that everything he was experiencing was normal and that he would make a full

recovery. The prescription was to exercise, to use his phone, to sit at a computer screen, not to run away from noise, or take shelter in a darkened room. They pushed him to go back playing hurling, too, when his recovery came to that point.

He walked out of the room carrying all the same symptoms he had arrived with; all they had treated was his anxiety and his ignorance. It felt like a cure.

A few weeks later he passed what is called an exit test and was free to play hurling again. The club season had started and Éire Óg were keen to have him back. O'Donnell was reluctant. He toggled out for the first championship match and agreed with the manager that he would come on only if they were "eight or nine points" behind, he can't remember which. Anyway, by half-time, that dire situation had materialised.

With his first possession he was met with a clothesline tackle. In the next match he was struck on the helmet with a hurley and he didn't continue. "After that game I was still convinced I had symptoms. It brought me back into this murky place. I'm thinking, I got over the first one [concussion] and maybe now I have another one – and the fear of that was so powerful. I was experiencing symptoms but it was fully through the fear of going back to where I was."

"I remember that night I couldn't go to sleep. I used to have serious trouble sleeping. I tried to go to sleep and I whipped myself into a total frenzy of fear. Had loads of symptoms coming on. My head was spinning, all this kind of stuff. It was all in my head – it was completely created by my own fear around it. I got up and I was in tears, and I was like, 'I can't do this again. I can't do this again.'"

"That bled on for months. The club campaign ended, I still felt like I wasn't fully okay. I went skiing in January and I couldn't get it out of my head that I shouldn't be skiing – even though I love skiing. I just wasn't able to let go and relax. I had no physical issues, it was just pure fear. I had a couple of falls. I fell on my back and I'm freaking out about my head. I couldn't get away from it."

The spring came round and Brian Lohan asked him to rejoin the Clare panel. O'Donnell couldn't give him a straight answer. He went back to UPMC and did another exit test. "They were like, 'You are okay, the rest is up to you'. Once you step back in there's no pretending that you're going to be able to avoid physical contact. Even when I was worried about it I acknowledged that I'm just going to have to commit here, or not play at all. Those were the only two options."

In the autumn of 2018 O'Donnell was awarded a Fulbright scholarship to Har-

vard University in Boston. He had completed a four-year undergraduate degree in Genetics and had committed another four years to a PhD in Microbiology. Harvard represented a golden opportunity for research, and a place where no one knew his name.

Being away for seven months, he wondered how much he would miss hurling. Dónal Óg Cusack was part of the Clare management team for a couple of seasons, and he spoke to the players once about retirement, and the hole it had drilled in him. "He said that when he retired, his daydreaming around hurling stopped. He felt like there was this void. The way he painted it, he was never going to be able to fill it. I would genuinely have had a fear that that was going to happen to me. That when I retired from hurling, I was going to be always missing hurling, and that the best part of my life was over. Boston made me realise that that was definitely not the case."

Apart from the 2018 season, the last two years have been the best of his Clare career. Lohan moved him to the half-forward line and O'Donnell flourished in a new environment. Deliberately, he reshaped his game. When he started he was convinced that he was a goalscorer who couldn't score points. By necessity, he changed his mind.

"Basically, I didn't want to shoot. I never felt confident in my shooting. My first thought was to take on my man, and if that didn't work then I'm going to pass it to somebody who can shoot. It was a two-step process in my brain. I basically played that role for a long number of years."

"Moving to wing forward I realised, 'I need to be able to hit the ball. I need to be able to score'. I was definitely not able to do that. I changed my hurley. I used to have a very light hurley and I did not appreciate how much of a difference that would make. When I was 50 or 60 metres from the goal, I would swing and the shot would fold, basically. My Dad makes the hurleys for me and my brothers. He's an engineer and he's always tinkering away. To him, hitting the ball further meant a heavier hurley."

Next season will be his 12th on the Clare panel and, as things stand, it is likely to be his last. He will turn 30 in June. His girlfriend, Niamh, is a clinical psychologist and it has been on their minds to uproot and live abroad for a while. Since Boston, that impulse has hardened.

"There's a few of the senior lads in the same boat, thinking the same thing [about finishing]. We've had this batch of players, my age and one year above – myself, Davy McInerney, Tony [Kelly], Conor Cleary, Peter [Duggan] – who are now coming to that stage. I guess it always happens this way – where one goes there's a good chance that you'll lose five, six, seven, and the next generation steps up."

"Bar the year we won [2013], the last two years have been the most enjoyable, I would say. When you get far into a season [All-Ireland semi-finals] that's when you really start to obsess about it and absolutely love it, and going to training takes on a life of its own. You're experiencing all this with lads that you've known for 10 years or more, a savage group of your best friends that you've been on this journey with. It's been incredible."

It was never about the fairytale.

