



STILL FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

IF HE could add time-travel to an uncommonly-impressive list of accomplishments, David Hickey would bypass Croke Park and that high-octane decade as a prince of the city, the thunder of Hill 16 invading his blood.

He would not disembark at the operating theatre to revisit his time among the planet's most consummate transplantation surgeons — a vocational physician who evicted the Grim Reaper from a thousand doorsteps.

His destination would not be life before savage duels with cancer, ferocious battles which have left many craters on the landscape of his days, not the least of them half a dozen years without eating a scrap of solid food.

He certainly would not hurtle back to a time in advance of his emergence as an impassioned ambassador for the oppressed (Palestine, Ukraine, Cuba), a fearless speaker of unvarnished truth, for to do so would take a lifelong agitator for justice back to the womb.

As Hickey says of his activism: "I don't know where it comes from, but I think Che Guevara had a very nice comment, it is a very sad thing in life not to have friends, but it's even sadder not to have enemies."

"If you tell the truth (and he has been among the most tireless in detailing the catastrophe visited upon Gaza) you are going to step on toes. All hierarchies need to be challenged in my book. Football, medicine, everything."

No, place this singular figure into a time capsule with a chance to punch one set of coordinates into the master computer and he would not hesitate.

Among the most brilliant of a 11 Irishmen, a giant of



Roy CURTIS
EXCLUSIVE

sport, medicine and campaigning, a principled, compassionate, erudite figure imbued with an unbreakable sense of right and wrong, his ideals non-perishable, Hickey would choose January 17 2020, his terminus Havana, Cuba.

The day and the place Yamile, his wife and soul-mate, the love of his life, a fellow surgeon and free-spirit, tragically drowned.

David and his son (also David), then in his Leaving Cert year, had flown back to Dublin after a holiday. Work commitments kept Yamile in Cuba for an additional month.

"I would go back to Havana on January 17 and decide not to fly back to Dublin. Whatever reasons we had for David and myself to go back, I would say 'no, we're staying for another week's holiday.' That's exactly where I'd go back to. I'd like to be able to turn that clock back there.

"The football was great, the transplantation surgery was fantastic, playing rugby in France was very nice, but family... We kind of left after a row. Things weren't said and things were said. The phone call came just as we arrived in Dublin and we were told we needed to get back to Cuba immediately.

"My wife was dead..." His voice trails away, the loss rendering this triumph of eloquence (another legacy of cancer, as those who watched his contribution to the second episode of RTE's epic Gaelic Football history *Hell for Leather* this week will have noted, is badly muffled speech — "People find it very hard to understand me.") momentarily mute.

When I last visited David's home in North County Dublin in late 2022 he showed me a memorial to Yamile, overlooking the sea on his back lawn. Part of his soul inhabits that beautiful, intimate garden of remembrance.

Tragic loss has given Hickey a new perspective on a life of incredible achievements

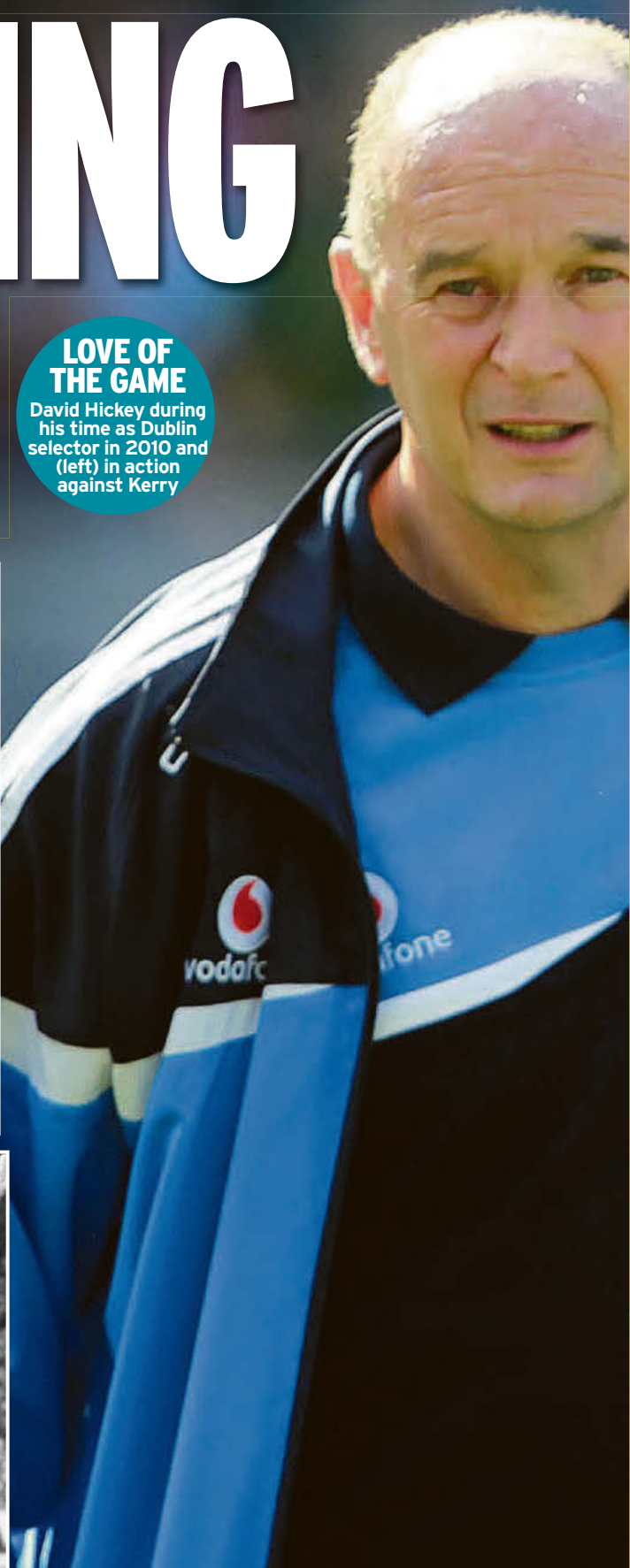


As he told me, then: "It's three years now and I still haven't...all the stuff is still here that belonged to her. I haven't changed anything. I haven't changed any of the rooms.

"Nothing. I had just finished [work] in Dubai and we were about to sort ourselves out, have a bit of life. Maybe go back to Cuba. So, yeah, it has been devastating.

"I still hear her voice. And I also have a real voice on the mobile phone. All her messages

LOVE OF THE GAME
David Hickey during his time as Dublin selector in 2010 and (left) in action against Kerry



"You don't move on, you don't get over it, you don't get used to it."

"I rise with her every morning. I go to sleep with her every night."

In a long and winding road through a life in journalism, I have sat down with thousands of athletes and ex-athletes.

From global titans like Michael Jordan, Jonah Lomu and Tiger Woods to beloved Irish figures Paul McGrath, Katie Taylor, Charlie Redmond, Joe Canning, Brian O'Driscoll, Sonia O'Sullivan and Ruby Walsh.

Many have been compelling, but Hickey, evoking that Orwellian line that says "in a time of universal deceit — telling the truth is a revolutionary act," a man weathered by life's battles, transcends the rest of the field.

A hypnotising philosopher whose political antennae never take a vocation, assured yet self-deprecating, guardian of a quick, hypersmart, unorthodox mind that ceaselessly spits out intelligent, challenging, unapologetically opinionated viewpoints.

First introduced to him by our

dear mutual friend, Anton O'Toole, it was like being body slammed by a typhoon of principle, a man of rare, intense loyalty to friends and causes and a best lived life.

Utterly fearless, his intellect and conscience the twin towers of his existence, a maverick, one genetically incapable of bullshit, a daily exhibitor of unfathomable moral and physical courage.

The finest Uachtarán na hÉireann Ireland never heard. He was one of Dublin's pathfinders under Kevin Heffernan, though typically forthright he

challenges the notion that it was managerial magic that propelled the wave of success that awakened the city in 1974.

"The team has been airbrushed out of history to some extent. Heffernan, the genius, the magician, blah, blah, f***ing blah. It wasn't like that. We got on a run and the players themselves took it on as much as Kevin.

"Now Kevin saw some angles. He knew fitness was an issue as he knew matches were 80 minutes at that time. And he saw the advantages in the hand

pass and he exploited that. I'm not keen on Heffo's heroes."

His affection for those with whom he shared a dressing-room is palpable and unbreakable, young men grown old, some lost to mortality, their meeting up evoking a memorable verse from The Band Played Waltzing Matilda.

"Now every April I sit on my porch/And I watch the parade pass before me/I see my old comrades, how proudly they march/Renewing their dreams of pass glories."

Hickey is clear-minded about it all: "Winning medals and All

Stars and, I'm not being conceited, it means nothing. It is the journey rather than the arrival, though that's a cliché I suppose.

"What stands out in my mind are the great times we had together socialising after the match. The matches weren't enjoyable in my book."

He speaks of John McCarthy ("a force of nature, brave, so bloody brave, far better than he got credit it for, he had his jaw broken twice scoring goals for us, there's a lot of the father in his son").

Of Jimmy Keaveney and the



LIFELONG FRIENDS
Dublin All-Ireland winning team of 1974 and (above) Dublin's 1978 All-Ireland winning team

They have a presence. And in some ways they have more of a presence in my life than they did when they were alive, because I didn't see them that often. I see them every day now.

"Brian and Anton are mythological characters for people who played with them and it's very hard to reconcile that they are not on earth today.

"My brother Michael described Anton perfectly as a footballer. He was like a Picasso painting, Guernica. The parts didn't make any sense, but the whole was a f***ing masterpiece. He had big hands, he had feet moving in opposite directions, he was very unorthodox. But what a player.

"Anton played the game at the highest level for 15 years, hard, sometimes brutal games. But nobody had a bad word to say about him. Nobody. Ever."

"He loved football, he lived for it. But it certainly wasn't his life. He was immersed in the music world; the horse racing world and he was an incredibly well-read fella.

"He would discuss the situation in Palestine or Ukraine today with real input. It wouldn't be what he gets off the stenographers of the New York Times. An amazing man."

"It's a pity there aren't small O'Tooles hanging around now. It is a shame he didn't have a family. A real shame, because what a father he would have been.

"Brian is maybe the greatest to have played the game. He had great plans for his retirement. He had a holiday planned for three months in New Zealand. Snap, gone."

As a surgeon, death was forever lurking at the other end of the scapula.

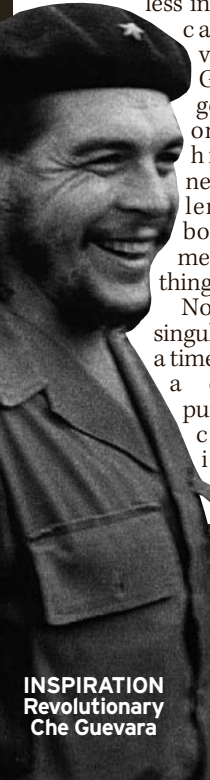
The impact of a life during which he conducted more than a thousand transplantations is everywhere in his outlook.

David is a joyous man, his stories laced with humour, but when he talks about work is tone is serious and mesmerising.

A brilliant mind opening the window to his inner-self, exposing himself absolutely, the stresses and heartache and scars on full public view.

"When an organ doesn't take, it's a major catastrophe for everybody involved. It's usually a technical problem rather than a rejection because the immunology is very sophisticated right now.

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INSPIRATION
Revolutionary
Che Guevara

IRISH DAILY
STAR
insidesport

FROM PAGE 7

"It happens in about five per cent of cases and it is shattering. Now the person who gave still has the immense consolation of having done it and suffered from his friend.

"And the friend gets consolation from the fact that somebody loved them enough to do it. But it is a pretty devastating thing as well."

Though he has lengthened so many lives, stole so many from death's embrace, there is one case that continues to haunt his dreams.

This next story tells you all you need to know about David Hickey and his bottomless humanity.

"The perceived wisdom in medicine is professionalism and distance. I think that's horseshit. I got absolutely emotionally involved with my patients.

"I wanted all the best for them and when it didn't work out for them, it hit me as hard as it hit them.

"There was this little darling that I had transplanted, three or four years of age, beautiful, beautiful little girl. She had a kidney transplant, it worked perfectly but she had a brain haemorrhage and died.

"I tell you (here, his already weak voice cracks and falters), I was never the same after it. I remember saying prayers, going to church, promising heaven I'd become a saint, the whole lot. But she didn't make it.

"Tara was her name.

"The family's response when it happened...unbelievable. I was in tears myself. I said, 'I'm so, so sorry'.

"They said 'listen you did your best; we just want to ask you one thing. Tara got a great gift of a kidney from somebody.

"Unfortunately, it didn't work for her, do you want to take it and give it to somebody else?"

"I just hadn't the strength to do it. I regret to this day that I didn't. Because it would have meant a part of her lived on.

"That was 1992 and it's like yesterday."

If you can still stand after such a tender and heart-wrenching story, then another cascade of emotion is already rolling down the next hill.

Hickey's own life has been stalked by ill-health, a quarter-century fist-fight with the the Sonny Liston of sicknesses, the coldest, most remorseless of knockout punchers, the rapacious foe that is cancer.

It has ransacked his body again and again, stolen so much, yet still — somehow — his humour and spirit and hunger for justice and life remain untouched.

That he retains the will to fight for others while staging such a fight for his own life feels miraculous to a

I would've been better off having a patch and a parrott

DUBS LEGEND REVEALS THE COST OF CANCER TREATMENT ON HIS BODY

ON THE BALL

David Hickey in action for Dublin during the 1979 All-Ireland final



Roy **CURTIS**
EXCLUSIVE

self-pitying coward like myself.

"I'm having my dinner right now (Hickey points to a milkshake type drink in his hand). I'm having strawberry flavour today for a change. There are two flavours vanilla and strawberry. I haven't eaten in years.

"In my opinion, not being able to eat is more socially disabling than blindness. Everything in our society revolves around breaking bread and having a few scoops. You meet people over a meal or a pint.

"Travel is about the lovely new foods you are going to experience. Its very, very hard. Very hard.

"I can still have a pint, but it takes me the whole evening to drink the thing. And I would only do it with people who know me very well because if I lose my concentration it comes out of my nose and down your clothes and you are embarrassing to everybody.

"I lost the floor of my mouth. They took all my teeth out."

"The first time around I had [the tumour] removed in Beaumont. They couldn't get it all because it was sitting on the eye. I went to a number of

different people to see how I should treat the remainder.

"A fella in England said 'your fucked, you have no chance'.

"We went to France then and a guy said 'take the eye out.' A very arrogant, ignorant f***.

"So we went to Canada, to the Princess Margaret Hospital and met four people, three of whom I had worked with. The fourth was an Englishman, his name was Bill Irish. You couldn't make it up.

"I went and did the radiation with them in Canada. They make this face mask for you and they screw you onto this table. Because if you move your head you are in trouble.

You can't budge for 20 minutes while you are hit with this radiation. It's torment.

"Twenty years later, the French fella was right. I should have had my eye taken out. The radiation has been a life-long disease. I got three cancers as a result. It affected me in a lot of ways.

"I'd have been better having a patch and a parrot on my shoulder."

Dublin play Cork tonight, the odds reversed from the 1974 All-Ireland semi-final when Hickey's team, one that had emerged fully-formed from absolute darkness, took down the defending champions.

"They were the kings and they thought they would have no problem with us. Anton and Brian made their point that day."

As Hickey has across a distinguished life of fighting for the little guy.

Many of us handed the opportunity to time travel discussed at the top of this piece, would, like Hickey, not hesitate.

We would punch in the coordinates of any day spent in the riveting, rewarding company of a unique, inspirational, figure.

David Hickey, a man apart, maybe the greatest of all living Irishmen.