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Henry felt his son's presence as Honeysuckle surged up that hill

A STUDY in unbreakable devotion, in the essence of family, in a love even death is powerless to dilute, the gorgeous image is dominated by a boy not visible in the photograph.

And yet, Jack de Bromhead is present in every pixel of this evocative snapshot.

He is there in the rainbow of emotions colonising the face of his dad, Henry, in the rapture and yearning co-habiting in eyes that are somehow beaming with joy while also grieving.

In arms straining for the heavens where his forever 13-year-old son now resides.

In an ordinarily reserved man pummeling the sky, unable to contain the avalanche of feeling rising from his core.

At Henry's shoulder, his wife, Jack's mam, Heather. At once, sparkling and bereft, eyes watering, her entire being bursting with maternal attachment.

On this Mother's Day, it makes for a tender, beautiful, uplifting and heart-wrenching portrait.

Behind Heather, assembling itself into a vast, electrified human shield, bodies stretch to the Cheltenham horizon.

Wired by the understanding that they have witnessed something more than a horse race, something eternal that has touched everyone present at the marrow, they are propelled now by a hunger to wrap the de Bromhead family in a bear-hug of support, their roars reverberating across the valley.

It is simultaneously a celebration and a hymn for a lost boy.

The de Bromheads talk with quiet dignity about how they feel this

POWERFUL: Heather and Henry de Bromhead with Rachael Blackmore after Honeysuckle's win
PHOTO: TIM GOODE/PA WIRE



WHY ONE OF THE GREATEST CHELTENHAM MOMENTS IS CAPTURED IN THIS PERFECT STUDY OF UNBRIDLED JOY AND PROFOUND GRIEF

immense outpouring of communal support, how it has been a psychic fuel propelling them onwards.

On the right as we look, we find Rachael Blackmore in the blue and white silks of Jack and Ireland's favourite animal, the brilliant Honeysuckle.

Moments earlier, the Tipperary horse whisperer had piloted the great mare up Cheltenham's punishing incline for the last time, a rousing valedictory that has brought this storied acreage to an emotional fever-pitch.

With neither lady willing to accept defeat, a race that looked lost ap-

proaching the last fence was salvaged, a farewell victory — Honeysuckle's fourth in as many years at the Festival — that seemed to benefit from divine assistance.

A win which triggered a dam-burst of feeling, strangers wrapping each other in tight embrace, a communal sense of well-being washing

LOST: Jack de Bromhead

the valley in unembarrassed tears.

The palpable energy, the surge in the blood, is perfectly captured in freeze-frame.

If we were to caption the picture, it would be with Rachael's eloquent words, a simple yet lyrical tribute that perfectly captured the longing at the heart of a tumultuous Cotswold afternoon.

"We all wish a very special kid was here."

It is a little over six

months since Jack was lost in a pony race on the Glenbeigh sands. Those of us on the outside looking in can't come close to fathoming the inexplicable grief.

Many of us have buried parents, the ache of those sad days eased by the consolation of a life fully lived.

But when the natural order is turned on its head, when a mother and father are compelled to say goodbye to the child they created, systems crash, friends fumble for words.

Wishing desperately to help but clueless as to how they might.

And yet, as Henry

alluded to at Cheltenham, the outpouring of empathy has helped the family to keep on keeping on as they advance through the storm.

Just being there offering a kind utterance makes every word the right word.

The horses that were the centrepiece in every room of Jack's young life are vital support beams.

Henry felt his son's presence as Honeysuckle came surging up that hill.

"We know Jack is always with us and I'm sure he was here on Rachael's shoulder. Honeysuckle has been a huge part of our life and Jack just adored her.

"She as much did it for him as she did it for all of us."

In an RTE interview shortly before his death, Jack — a gregarious boy with a mischievous smile and a beyond-his-years wisdom — spoke of his feelings for Honeysuckle.

The words amounted to a young kid's love poem.

"She's unreal, she's unreal," he told Brian O'Connor, while cautioning that she might "turn her bum to you or bite you unless you give her carrots.

"But she's the best mare ever."

So maybe look again at the photograph armed now with a deeper understanding of all that it represents. The "best mare ever" having just sent a quiver through 75,000 hearts.

You can see him, can't you? Right there with his mam and dad, at the heart of the picture.

Jack de Bromhead, forever young, celebrating a special day as only a mesmerised, joyous child can.

'A win which captured a dam-burst of feeling'



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Mullins, a titan who brought colour to a drab city



GAA TITAN:
Dublin player Brian Mullins enlivened us all with his sporting prowess

“Mullins would never be mistaken for a cuddly toy, but there was an intelligence and depth and essential decency to his personality”

HE WAS a footballer first, of course, a flaxen summer colossus, but above all else, Brian Mullins was a missionary.

An evangelist at the forefront of a cultural revolution, converting swathes of his Dublin tribe to the GAA church; an apostle ministering a profound and powerful message to us city kids of the economically bleak, emigration ruined 1970s.

One that radically announced that it was okay to feel a swell of pride in the place of your birth.

If you are long enough of tooth to recall those wild, delirious, insurgent days you will understand implicitly the bottomless impact of their thunderclap declaration.

It is no exaggeration to declare that Mullins, Anton O’Toole and David Hickey, Paddy Cullen, Jimmy Keaveney and John McCarthy, Kevin Heffernan’s dashing princes of the city, transformed, maybe even saved, so many lives.

I know, because I was among their number. Heffo was the patriarch, Noah.

We stepped two by two onto Hill 16’s towering concrete ark, a lifeboat ferrying us beyond the flood of despondency that threatened to engulf Dublin in that bleak, hopeless decade.

There were no jobs, no prospects, nothing inspirational to cling to; a derelict, drab city was drowning in its own despair.

And then Heffo’s floating palace sailed across the horizon, an imperious galleon, the wind in its proud blue mainsail.

On that steep Hill 16 terrace, one that seemed to rise, rung by rung, to the very heavens, we found our kin, our identity, our home, a sense of place that made our young hearts soar.

At last, we belonged. A monochrome world was suddenly draped in intoxicating colour. It was like being gifted a nugget of gold.

Match of the Day had recently launched in England, introducing those of us on the Celtic side of the Irish Sea what our young eyes perceived as unimaginable glamour.

Now, out of nowhere, we had our own Manchester United; Liverpool or Leeds with an Anna Livia twist.

This Sky Blue typhoon gusted and scudded across the landscape in 1974, sweeping away old preconceptions.

Mullins bounded across Croke Park’s rectangle of green like a mulleted Achilles, a glorious athletic specimen, and it no longer felt like being born in one of the city’s vast working class suburbs was a full-stop on the story of your potential.

What Heffernan oversaw was

nothing less than a regeneration project for the urban soul.

If we couldn’t match Mullins’s majesty, we could metaphorically stand as tall as this skyscraping boy in blue.

Even now, fortysomething years on, I can feel the endorphins coursing through my being just recalling the fever-dream of euphoria as we belted out The Memories’ anthem.

“We’ll be marching down from Ringsend
And Ballyfermot too.

From East Wall and Marino
To support the boys in blue
For 11 years we’ve waited
And there’s nothing left to prove
So let’s here it now from Dublin
Heffo’s army’s on the loose.”

Decades later, as a young journalist, I would come to know so many of these mighty pathfinders, enjoy the immense privilege of being able to call them friends.

The handsome, always smiling, urbane Cullen; McCarthy, a force of nature, wild and wise and forever young; Keaveney, a salt-of-the-earth rogue blissfully unaffected by his football genius; Hickey, a creature too brilliant and selfless for words.

And, of course, the Blue Panther himself, the gentle, giant-hearted, beautiful Anton O’Toole, a man I loved like a brother.

CRUSHING

Mullins would never be mistaken for a cuddly toy, but there was an intelligence and depth and essential decency to his personality. I will always treasure a lovely message he sent me after reading a piece I had written when we lost Anton in May of 2019.

His final words in that text, in which he described what being a Dublin footballer meant to him, resonate this morning.

“We started out as team-mates, we became brothers. Anton’s death reinforces that bond.”

On Friday, just after 5pm, Fran Ryder, Brian’s compadre at St Vincent’s, at Thomond College and Dublin – as close as a sibling to Mullins – messaged me with the news we all knew was coming for several weeks.

Moments later, David Hickey phoned with the same crushing news. Another of their family had fallen.

Ryder, another of Heffo’s crew I’m proud to call a friend, forwarded the most gorgeous black and white picture of Brian and Anton at an awards dinner just a few years back.

Looking at the vivid sparkle in the eyes of these two titans who transformed the city, I was again a child of the ‘70s.

A flash flood of tears cascaded from the depths as I sang aloud.

“The Jacks are back, the Jacks are back,

Let the Railway End go barmy
Because Hill 16 has never seen
The likes of Heffo’s Army.”

HOW BRIAN AND HEFFO’S ARMY INFUSED DUBS WITH PRIDE

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NOT even the melting cubes of memory can reduce those eternal images of Liam Brady forging magic on the anvil of his scorching imagination to slush.

For those of us of a certain age, last week's engaging RTE documentary, *Liam Brady: An Irishman Abroad*, brought a stirring truth about this soulful, song-like poet rolling back across the decades.

The one that places the Dubliner among that tiny elite of sporting alchemists who, to paraphrase the American writer Don DeLillo, make the distance between truth and wonder erode and crumble until they are one and the same.

Liam's left foot was less the lower part of a limb than a divine, spell-casting wand.

He dizzied opponents not with power or pace, but feints and shimmies, balance and daring.

Brady was a high-wire artist who just happened to operate at street level.

Seated alongside Roy Keane, Paul McGrath and John Giles in the Republic of Ireland pantheon, he conjured wizardry with the ease of a Hogwarts graduate.

ARTIST

His unbreakable impulse to create something beautiful and profound and everlasting was that of a fearless renaissance artist at his easel, mind bursting with ideas.

All the stimulating colours in the innovative rainbow overflowed in the palette of Brady's imagination.

In an age when football was far more feral and poorly policed, Liam was a bard among the brutes, a laureate whose vibrant, eloquent sonnets were composed using a football as his quill.

Remember that May afternoon in 1979 when Brady seized the title deeds to an epic FA Cup final, back then the biggest day in England's football calendar?

Or goals that downed Brazil and France on wild Lansdowne Road afternoons; a strength of mind to relocate to Italy – at 24.

In an age where big-name footballers moving from England to the continent was a rarity, his flight to Turin felt as exotic as Columbus sailing off for the New World.

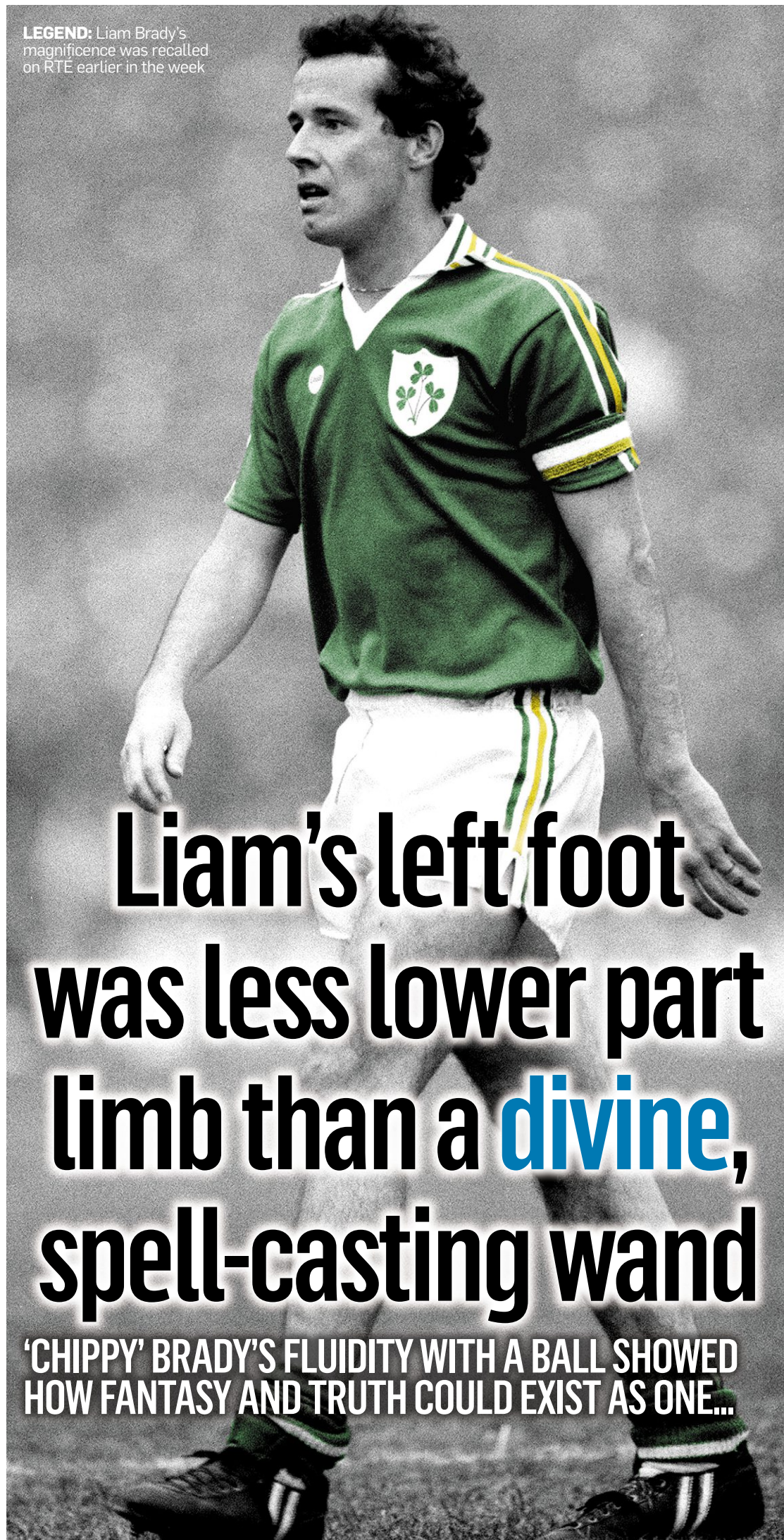
Some will know Liam best from his punditry, or from his days as Giovanni Trapattoni's Irish wing-man, times when the weather of his face was often as frigid as a January frost.

The documentary was revelatory in the way it opened a frequently padlocked gateway to his too-often hidden essence.

A bright, thoughtful figure with a passion for music, an easy and warm smile, a capacity for sharp self-reflection and, a treasure trove of memories.

An individual of depth and

LEGEND: Liam Brady's magnificence was recalled on RTE earlier in the week



Liam's left foot was less lower part limb than a **divine**, spell-casting wand

'CHIPPY' BRADY'S FLUIDITY WITH A BALL SHOWED HOW FANTASY AND TRUTH COULD EXIST AS ONE...

His effortless grace lit up the lives of so many in council estates

emotional intelligence, throwing off the guarded, suspicious public persona.

There were authentically moving and surprising snapshots: Brady close to tears as he sang along with the John Lennon song (Just Like) Starting Over blaring from his car stereo.

Tender again, as he read a lovely letter from Jack Charlton, one that debunked the notion of a lasting feud between the Irish manager and the genius he relegated to the international fringes.

Both the letter and its effect on Brady oozed humanity, it threw open a window to his soul.

It made for magnificent, affecting TV.

As an aside, it was a reminder, too, to those who prefer to reduce Big Jack to gruff caricature that the Geordie was actually the custodian of a multi-layered, often sensitive personality.

Brady was an heroic figure to many of us who grew up in 1970s' Dublin.

SUCCESS

PFA Footballer of the Year in 1979, a rebuke to the notion that to be Irish in that largely grim decade bolted the door shut on adventure or success or any kind of escape from a stunting melancholy.

Sashaying along Broadway, Brady was an antidote to our communal inferiority complex.

"Chippy" stepped onto a rectangle of grass and his effortless grace, the fluency and poise with which he conducted the Arsenal choir, lit up the lives of so many in the council estates he had left behind.

The bravery, joy and sheer brilliance with which he – one of us – glided across the turf delivered the ultimate remedy to gloom...a license to dream.

A gorgeous passage from Danya Kukafka's *Notes on an Execution* fits a younger Brady like a tailored suit.

"Hazel was her real self when she danced, but she was more than that. She was feather, she was breath. She was an illusion, a mirage that answered only to music and memory. She flew."

Through the 1970s and deep into the next decade, Liam Brady flew.

On the plumage of his feathered wings, he transported many of us to a place above the clouds.

And persuaded his Irish congregation that eloquence with a ball was a kind of magic, that fantasy and truth could be one and the same.