

No Ordinary Joe

Portumna prodigy has the potential to join the greats

■ Jamie O'Keefe

When Eoin Kelly beat Wexford more or less on his own last July, those Waterford fans who headed home instead of waiting around for the double-header headliner between Cork and Galway thought they'd just seen the solo performance of the summer.

However, little over an hour later Joe Canning had come up just a point short of Kelly's extraordinary 2-13 tally, with one of the finest individual performances ever seen in championship hurling; and certainly by a player on a losing team.

Canning's misfortune in happening upon Cork the night they decided to stop sulking for half-an-hour didn't prevent the 20-year-old from claiming an All Star at the first attempt. Indeed, his selection in the full-forward line at season's end came at the expense of John Mullane, the 2008 championship's top scorer from play.

However, with 4-27 to his credit from just three championship appearances, Canning was a more-than-credible candidate and also collected the Young Hurler of the Year trophy. "The media usually go for the new kid on the block," the De La Salle skipper shrugged when asked about his disappointment by Bill O'Herlihy at the Park Hotel Awards in Dungarvan in January.

Canning is no Ordinary Joe, however. The biggest regret of Ger Loughnane's time in charge of the Tribesman is probably the fact that he didn't have either of the Canning brothers to call on in the first season of his two-year plan to lift the Liam McCarthy.

The pair didn't make themselves available for reasons thought to be related to the Galway county board's ambivalent attitude to the treatment meted out to Joe in particular during the 2006 county final against Loughrea; after which Portumna, despite seeing themselves as having been more sinned against than sinning, received the heavier punishments, including a 12-week ban imposed on another of the Canning brothers, Davy.

Shocking pictures of a boot apparently about to be trampled into the then 18-year-old's faceguard as he lay prone of the turf were prominently featured in the national media, and it was speculated that the game's most promising teenager could walk away from hurling altogether.

However, he's made of sterner stuff. The supposed reasons for his putting off his senior inter-county debut were that he wanted to take a gap year to travel and do the things teenagers do before starting college in Limerick IT, where he's studying Business and Marketing.

He insists that wasn't how it was, apart from a couple of weekends away. He trained and played as much as ever, just not for the Galway seniors.

"Time-out", or not, it didn't seem to do him any harm. He powered his college to the 2007



Ground force: Joe Canning watches his ground flick find the net against Ballyhale Shamrocks in the All-Ireland semi-final. In previewing the game, Sunday Tribune GAA correspondent and sometime Munster Express contributor Enda McEvoy billed it as a battle royale between hurling's King Henry and his heir apparent. As things transpired, Shefflin did all he could, scoring 10 points, but they couldn't live with the Galway champions, for whom Canning bagged 2-5.

Fitzgibbon Cup as a fresher, and, in seeking to defend their crown, his display for Davy Fitzgerald's side in the Fitzgibbon final against Waterford IT last March was another one-man tour de force; Canning scoring a mammoth 1-16 in what GAA President Nicky Brennan went so far as to describe as "the best game of hurling I have ever seen." Remarkably he ended on the wrong side of the result.

He bounced back to fire Portumna to the All-Ireland Club Championship on St Patrick's Day after a fiery final versus Birr in Croke Park – a match mainly remembered for Brian Whelahan's late sending-off.

The youngest of six children and one of five brothers, whose father Seán is Portumna President, Joe was never going to be anything other than GAA born and bred – even though, given his natural attributes, he was a promising underage rugby player and it's his second favourite sport, then golf.

He was converting 65s for the club's Under 14s when he was 11 and expectancy has followed his every appearance since – none more so than his belated first championship outing for the Westerners in the rout over Antrim in Belfast, when he helped himself to 2-6, 1-4 from play.

Laois weren't up to much either in the next phase, though he'd to settle for single figures (nine points), and then came the Semple Stadium masterclass. He scored both Galway's goals and a dozen of their 15 points. His 1-5 from play included two points off his right, three from the other side, not to mention that monster sideline cut: a Canning trademark.

Still, Galway contrived to lose to a team down to 14 men for half the game. If JC had anyone with him that night Gerald McCarthy might never have got

a second bite at the Cork crab apple.

Natural born thriller

Canning's pet hates are people who come up to him and "talk shit" about hurling ("that wrecks my head" – which wouldn't encourage a journalist to chance asking for a quick chat), and he's a thing against those who judge before meeting and getting to know him. (Sure don't we all.)

Those who do know the man say he's very down-to-earth, good craic, and likes his social life. He loves hurling but it's not the be all and end all. As for reservations that he could have trouble keeping his weight down, so far his size hasn't proved a hindrance. On the contrary, as Diarmuid O'Sullivan would tell you.

Club-wise, his impact at senior level was instant. Having won his first county and Connacht titles in 2005, Canning scored 1-6 against the O'Connor twins and co in a man-of-the-match performance in the All-Ireland final.

The following season he suffered at the hands of Loughrea in the aforementioned Galway decider (something he refuses to discuss) but

12 months later he picked up a second set of county and provincial medals, and was Portumna's star man yet again, hitting 10 points as they went on to prevent Birr taking a record fifth All-Ireland title.

Canning had earlier been a member of the Galway team that beat Kilkenny after a replay in the 2004 All-Ireland Minor final, aged just 15. He made it back-to-back U18 successes the following year and in 2006 was captain in attempting to equal Jimmy Doyle's record of three minor All-Ireland championships in-a-row. However, Tipperary didn't read the script and "blew us off the pitch."

That year Canning also lined out for the U21s, and added to his burgeoning reputation when, after coming on as a sub in the All-Ireland semi-final against Kilkenny, racked up 2-4, all but a point from play, and finished the game's top scorer, even though the Cats won comfortably.

Canning declined a late call-up by Conor Hayes for the All-Ireland senior quarter-final against Kilkenny that July, and in '07 decided, to Loughnane's dismay, to bide his time before making the step up (though he was already an Adidas ambassador alongside established inter-county stars like Ken McGrath and Seán Óg O hAilpín by then).

As he points out, he was certainly not short of hurling, being a key figure as Galway captured the U21 All-Ireland against Dublin. That he is still eligible for that grade this year says a lot about how much he's achieved for one so young. Many experts feel he has the potential to become the greatest hurler of all-time, despite being at the geographical disadvantage of hailing from Galway, rather than Kilkenny or Cork.

He certainly seems to have everything a 6'2 full-forward should have and more besides: strength, skill, poise, anticipation, aerial prowess (whether catching or doubling), and remarkable vision; his eye for a pass and rare ability to deliver it, usually with an element of surprise, making him as much a creator as a finisher.

Will he become the best ever? It's too early to tell. But if anyone can, Canning can.



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Best Wishes to
De La Salle Hurling Team
in the All-Ireland Final from us all