

## In Hurling Heaven . . . before the sky fell in

Paul Flynn celebrates scoring Waterford's second goal – a beautifully slotted strike into the bottom corner – to help Portlairge build a seemingly unassailable 11-point lead after 16 minutes in the 2001 Munster semi-final against a shell-shocked Limerick at Páirc Uí Chaoimh.

Every Déise forward had scored from play when the Ballygunner star brushed off a desperate challenge by Stephen McDonagh and bee-lined towards goal. The finish was unerring, impudent even.

'It doesn't get much better than this', we thought. And we were right. It was the match more than any other that typified the Gentle County's theretofore Jekyll and Hyde tendencies.

After twice declining then County Board Chairman Paddy Joe Ryan's offer (in 1996 and 2000) Justin McCarthy finally decided to take the Waterford challenge a year after that second 'thanks but no thanks', with a bamboozled Gerald, who'd been coaxed into giving it another 12 months, making it clear after the loss to Limerick that his time was up.

'It felt like the right time to experience the buzz again', said Justin in his autobiography, 'Hooked', published to coincide with his taking charge, adding that he'd always felt he'd 'end up coaching Waterford some day'.

Affirming, 'I've long had a soft spot for Waterford hurling', Justin believed at the time: 'The best thing that could happen to hurling would be for Waterford to win a major title. I want the people of Waterford to experience what Clare had in '95 and Wexford had in '96, or even what Limerick felt when winning Munster in '94 and '96'.

Two Munsters and now a National League later (pretty much what Limerick achieved under Tom Ryan, though they did make it to a couple of All-Ireland finals), the McCarthy Cup, that Clare/Wexford sensation/obsession is still, ultimately, what it's all about.

What possibly swung his decision to take the job almost six years ago now, apart from the good foundations his predecessor had laid, was his conviction at the time that 'they're not that far away. Take the 2001 championship,' he observed. 'Tipperary were undoubtedly the best team in it but the best 30 minutes of hurling were produced by Waterford against Limerick'. Don't we know it. [Photo: Sportsfile]

Waterford & Limerick: a various XV

Too much is written before big, and small, GAA matches that the authors, if they're honest – and I include myself in this criticism – know is just guesswork.

And a lot of the rest of it is little other than what happens when you stick the word 'hit' after 'bulls'.

I said my bit last week about how this Sunday's too-tight-to-call Munster hurling final might go (and the forecast is good, which should be in Waterford's favour) but, like the Lottery the night before, no-one knows what fate, fame and fortune will turn up until the balls fall at Semple Stadium from 4 o'clock on.

So for now, I'm going to avoid paralysis by analysis and just give you a few random nuggets of what I do know, which you may or may not have been aware of:

1. Limerick talisman Ollie Moran, 31, won an All-Ireland Freshers Hurling title with Waterford RTC in 1994, and was a member of the College side that lost that year's Fitzgibbon Cup Final to University of Limerick in extra-time. However, the Ahane clubman - who is a cousin of Tipp's Eoin and Paul Kelly and is also related to the ubiquitous 'Babs' Keating - helped bring the Fitzgibbon to 'The Regional' 12 months later. At the time the 6'2", 14.5st all-rounder (he captained the Limerick minor footballers to boot) was also on the Irish U18 and Munster U20 rugby teams as a classy, place-kicking full-back. He left UL-Bohs to sign for Shannon, but soon quit to concentrate on hurling, making his inter-county debut against Kilkenny in the League a decade ago last March.

2. Up to this Sunday's game, the Waterford senior hurlers' ten-year championship record, including the 1997 straight knock-out defeat by Limerick (2-20 to 1-17) reads: played 34, won 17, drawn 2, lost 15. The two draws of course were the 1998 Munster final against Clare and the 2003 provincial semi' versus Limerick.

3. Towering former Limerick full-back Pat Hartigan, interviewed for Eddie Keher's worthy 2000 book 'Hurling Heroes', selected Waterford's Pat McGrath at left half-back, and his Mount Sion colleague Jim Greene at left corner-forward, on his would-be Munster team of the century. Huge, but a hurler first and foremost, Hartigan, a former long puck winner in the Cooley Mountains, was one of the strongmen of the RTÉ 'Superstars' show in the Seventies (see picture). However, 'the hardest belt I ever got,' he told Keher, was from the 'human tank', Frank Cummins of Kilkenny, in the '74 All-Ireland decider when the Noresiders got revenge for the previous year's defeat, Limerick's last 'Liam Mac'.

4. A farmer's son, Hartigan grew up in the 50s idolising the great goalie Ollie Walsh. He admits to being 'shattered' when, listening to Micheál Ó Hehir's radio commentary, he heard Waterford's Seamus Power, with the aid of a 'Link' Walsh deflection, spoil the Kilkenny's 'keeper's clean sheet late on in the 1959 All-Ireland final to force THAT replay.

5. Ever-so-slightly bombastic breakfast radio broadcaster David Hanly, a native of Limerick, wrote in 'Ireland of the Welcomes': 'Any definition of Irish culture which excludes the Munster hurling final would be, to put it mildly, inadequate. Yet it is doubtful if the majority of self-consciously cultured people would spontaneously pronounce the final a central and important part of Irish culture, their idea of culture being cripplingly circumscribed by a dictionary definition: culture ... the intellectual side of civilisation. There is nothing even vaguely intellectual about a Munster hurling final, yet a proper enjoyment of the game presupposes a sophisticated appreciation of the finer things'. Whatever the hell that means...

6. A few random things we've in common. Both besieged by Oliver Cromwell in the 17th century, the cities were connected by the Waterford and Limerick Railway in 1853. Waterford Crystal CEO John Foley is from Mungret. Limerick City Manager Tom Mackey was Waterford City Engineer for years. Having lived during that time in an idyllic part of Tramore, he's just been appointed by Green Environment Minister John Gormley to head up the new northside and southside regeneration boards charged with overseeing an upgrade of the troubled Moyross and Southill areas of Limerick city. Wonder if he might apply to replace the departing Conn Murray here at City Hall?

7. The last man to lift the FAI Cup with Waterford FC/United was Limerick's own Al Finucane. During a 28-year career he made a record number of League of Ireland appearances, collected 11 Irish caps and won two other FAI Cups with Limerick. He played his first game for them as a 17-year-old in 1961. Paulo Maldini-watchers might note that he played for Limerick against CSKA Sofia in 1965 and 21 years later for Waterford versus Bordeaux. He was 43 at the time and the oldest player to play in a European game. Remarkably he was never sent off and only picked up 3 yellow cards during that time. Are you sure he's from Limerick? Often confused in drink with Suirside songster Val Doonican.

8. Some oddities from the unforgettable 2001 semi-final: Fergal Hartley lined out at centre forward (Peter Queally at CB); Ken, captaining the side from left half-forward got 4 points, while on the other flank of the attack Dan Shanahan was replaced by Eoin Murphy. As recently as the counties' 2003 meetings Dan was only a sub. How times change. The '01 team should have been warned. Twenty-eight years earlier Limerick reversed an eleven-point half-time deficit against a Portlairge side including the likes of Pat O'Grady, John Kirwan, Paddy Coady and Co.

9. Sean Foley, brilliant left half-back on the Luimneach Liam McCarthy-winning side of 1973, was actually born in London, but learned his hurling with Patrickswell (obviously). The story goes that as Richie Bennis bent over to take the disputed '70' that won that year's Munster final, Babs Keating said to him, 'I bet you 100/1 that you do not score a point'. The Limerick sharpshooter did, even if some Tipp backs swore it was two feet wide, and the rest of history.

10. When Limerick manager Richie Bennis won a second consecutive county title with his local Patrickswell club in 1966, he was one of six brothers on the team - the others being Phil, Gerry, Pat, Peter and Thomas. Phil coached the Limerick teams that won the Minor and U21 All-Irelands in 1984 and '87 respectively, and was the manager Gary Kirby, currently a selector alongside Richie, liked best.

11. Kirby, a 4-time All Star and talisman of the 'nearly' side of the Nineties, was credited with a rousing interval speech to bring Limerick back from the dead the first day against Tipp nearly a mad month ago now. He hails from a timeless tradition of Shannonside speech-makers. Natural-born leader Eamonn Grimes had his men crying in the dressing-room at half-time when they overcame Kilkenny 34 years ago. Of course Waterford can call on all the oratory vigour only a 48-year wait can invoke.

12. Munster Council chairman, Lismore's Jimmy O'Gorman, might have been hopping mad over it, but Richie Bennis says the mini-pitch invasion which prematurely saluted their win against Tipp was unfortunate but understandable. 'The fans couldn't contain themselves at the end of extra-time. That was born out of sheer frustration from not winning. You have to remember that this was our first championship win since the victory over Waterford in Páirc Uí Chaoimh in 2001. Maybe the omens are good'. Just as long as the green & white hordes don't do an Offaly and swarm onto the pitch if we're winning on Sunday with five minutes to go. The first Munster final between ourselves and Limerick at the Cork Athletic Grounds in 1933 was unfinished due to a 'pitch invasion' eight minutes from the end. The result awarded to Limerick, who led by eleven points (3-6 to 1-2) at the time a halt was called amid much confusion.

13. Gambling tycoon and long-time Limerick GAA benefactor J.P. McManus was the youngest-ever chairman of the South Liberties Club as a 19-year-old. It's a uniquely amateur aspect of the GAA that while he and his Cubic Expression cohort John Magnier could purchase effective control of Manchester United for a time, no amount of cash can buy you an All-Ireland.

14. Ciarán Carey is widely regarded as the greatest hurler, of the modern era at any rate, never to win an All-Ireland medal. At this moment in time Ken McGrath is right there alongside him, but it doesn't bear thinking about that the Mount Sion man could end his career without a Celtic Cross.

15. Limerick captain Damien Reale, who's had an eventful few weeks, lost consciousness for five minutes during their replay win against Tipperary. The corner-back was clattered accidentally and while team medics were quickly at his side play continued as he was being treated on the pitch; a bad mistake which ref' Seanie McMahon has owned up to. The Hospital/Herbertstown clubman was kept overnight at Limerick Regional but rejoined the rest of the Limerick panel at a 'recovery pool session' the next evening. Presumably it was different type of pool to that enjoyed by the Roscommon footballers a few years back.

Youngat heart

Somehow I missed it, but apparently Babs Keating called Tom Ryan an 'arsehole' there recently after the ex-Limerick boss blasted the Premier incumbent's management style on Tipp FM and said the 63-year-old was "past his sell-by date" - a criticism 'Timber Tom' repeated in one of his regular rants on WLR.

'To me Tom Ryan is an arsehole and always has been an arsehole,' retorted the Ardfinnan man, who started out in management by leading Galway to the All-Ireland final in 1979. 'I regard Tom Ryan as being over the hill, a man that'd stand on his arse and didn't move, and watched Limerick being beaten in an All-Ireland'.

Keating, who got his nickname at school (he was the youngest of three Michael Keatings enrolled at the time) has always had his critics, and has been his own worst enemy at times – donkeys to sheep and what not – but he's still as colourful as the day he took his socks off. And, despite having 'heard a lot of shit going around the county last week', he's correct in asking 'why should I resign?'

Some people see him as a figure of fun. But he's never been a man to be messed with. Take Pat Hartigan's experience when they played a star-studded Tipperary in the 1971 League final. Young (21) and over-eager, he was marking Babs, notoriously fond of a wager, and before the sliotar was thrown in, riled him, by his own admission, immaturely: 'I suppose you have a bet on this game, or a bet on how much you'll score on me today. We'll see before this game is over'. At the end Keating came over to congratulate Hartigan on Limerick's win, but cut him to the bone when he said: 'I hope you'll be a better sportsman the next time we meet'.

That would be that summer's famous championship clash in Killarney. The first ball that came between them Keating pulled a little early and walloped Hartigan across the chest. 'Are we square now?' the Limerick defender wondered. 'We are,' said Babs. And that was that, with both players hurling up a storm. Keating's cuteness won the day, scoring an equalising '65' at the death thanks to a 'dry ball' smuggled on by a Tipp selector.

Anyway, what about managers and their ages? Is there a cut-off point? Ger Loughnane maintained during his retirement that a modern day manager couldn't afford to be more than 20 years older than his players. He's doubtless reviewed that judgment now.

Of the main hurling counties (and, sorry, but Dublin and Laois have yet to earn their stripes) Brian Cody is 53, Gerald McCarthy will be 62 in September, Justin is 61, Loughnane 54, Tony Considine something similar, John Meyler is 51 (though he probably aged ten years on Sunday), while Offaly's John McIntyre – who said his players 'did everything right bar win the bloody match' against his native Tipp 24 hours earlier – is a decade younger and the junior of the bunch.

The shelf-life of managers is getting shorter. Nicky English and Anthony Daly are among those who've opted out. Given the massive commitment involved, the reality is that inter-county coaching suits people who've already raised families. And if they've pedigree and personality, ageism shouldn't come into it.

Wexford woeful, but it's not alldoom and gloom

Some advertisement for the Munster hurling championship that was on Sunday, eh? If about 70 minutes too long.

You have to feel for Wexford manager John Meyler. Though the former Cork selector mightn't get much sympathy from Mark Landers, who he told to have a good look around Páirc Uí Chaoimh at training one night as the 2002 strike was brewing, because the GPA 'rebel' wouldn't be seeing it again.

The Enniscorthy man has been staring at the bottom of a barrell before. He managed to turn Kerry into a side capable of beating Waterford in the 1993 Munster championship. His club and inter-county CV before and since is impressive. He shoots from the hip, and his holster will be worn out at this rate.

While he was only obeying the maxim about not kicking people when they're down, his Kilkenny counterpart Brian Cody wasn't fooling anybody afterwards when he insisted that it had been 'a challenge'. A challenge alright, of the very 'friendly' variety. As Donal O'Grady put it, 'you'd get more intensity at the opening of a field on a Sunday night'.

Lumping Galway ('absolutely terrible' in beating Laois at the weekend, according to the ever-reliable Ger Loughnane) in with

the Leinster lads looks like an obvious short-term solution. For political purposes just call it the Leinster/Connacht Championship and get on with it. It's not ideal but the status quo is just giving the game outside of Munster a bad name.

Though in saying that, you get the impression that Wexford (who shocked the Cats and should have beaten Cork only three years ago) and Offaly (who defeated Waterford in this year's League and left it behind them in Thurles on Saturday) have developed a mental block when it comes to playing the Black & Amber.

On Monday night, '96 'Crossroads/Riverdance' choreographer Liam Griffin compared Wexford to an 18-handicapper playing Kilkenny's scratch golfer and not bothering to practice. But that's hardly fair. Myler's men have put in a massive effort since last autumn, even getting in the 'Health Squad' fitness fella to build up their strength and stamina. The manager, with his ardent 'zero negativity' approach, thought they were right mentally too. But faced with Shefflin et al they froze.

Leinster Council chairman Liam O'Neill says 'parachuting' in the Tribesmen 'would provide Kilkenny with meaningful opposition, but the improvement in Leinster hurling would have to be complete before our other counties would be ready to cope with, never mind compete with, Galway hurling on a regular basis'. And he has a point when he asks 'what about Antrim, Down and Derry? They are on a par with some of our aspiring counties and need to be included in the debate if hurling is to be put on a sound footing'.

Dublin's second Leinster minor success in three years, and their involvement with Offaly in this year's under 21 decider, shows it's not all doom and gloom in the province. But Limerick won three U21 All-Irelands around the turn of the millennium and they've still done nothing yet. However, they manage it, and maybe it's the absence of 'big smoke' distractions (apologies Marble citizens), Kilkenny are past and present masters at making men out of boys.

However, while it must be relatively easy encouraging kids at grassroots level in Kilkenny, Cork and Waterford given the constant high-profile of their senior hurlers - and a cursory flick through these pages any week will tell you there's Trojan work going on around this county - it must be depressingly bleak trying to raise a gallop among the underage ranks in Wexford this week. We were in the same boat after Myler's Kingdom came and conquered 14 years ago. But if you keep plugging away the tide eventually turns.

So, just who was this Tom Semple anyway?

Waterford County Secretary Seamus Grant thought people headed for the Stadium that perpetuates his memory this Sunday (Semple's not Seamus's) - some of whom, forgivably, only fastened onto hurling in the last decade or so - might be interested to know a bit about the man himself.

Tom, though born in Glebe, Drombane in the heart of Premier country in 1879, moved to Thurles at 16. He won his first All-Ireland medal in 1900 with his club Two-Mile-Borris, before going on to join and captain the Thurles Blues [Sarsfields] in their championship triumphs of 1906 and '08.

'He was known to have a great lash of a ball, not surprising perhaps, considering his body frame was over six feet tall,' Seamus says. In 1910, he spearheaded the Committee that purchased the show grounds in Thurles to be used for GAA activities, and the same year took Tipperary on a European Tour - a Pan Celtic Congress in Brussels, at which Cork also played.

The quintessential captain fantastic, on the pitch Semple led Sarsfields to six county titles in eight years, as well as three Munster clubs and two All-Irelands. As a coach he was ahead of his time in terms of innovative tactics and training methods - including hours spent skipping and punch-ball boxing sessions - and favoured a fast ground-hurling style, which he himself perfected off both sides.

The strong sinewy type, Semple was handy with 'sliotar sa lámh' too, winning the 1906 All-Ireland long-puck title, when he hit a 9oz ball – twice the weight of a modern day O'Neills, or whatever you're having yourself (see photo) – all of 96 yards.

'Outside of the GAA,' says Seamus, 'his involvement in local activism was deep, and he played an integral role for Republicans in the War of Independence courtesy of his involvement with the legendary Great Southern & Western Railway.'

'Of him it was said by his contemporaries that he was born to be a 'leader of men – and who recognised how important his town was in the life of the GAA , and how important the GAA is to the nation'.'

Tom Semple died in 1943 at the relatively young age of 64. Given his exploits as a player and administrator – County Board Chairman, Munster delegate, Central Council Treasurer – Thurles Sportsfield, where he established a system of stewarding that was the envy of the country, was renamed Semple Stadium in his honour in 1971. His name is more famous today than ever thanks to what's been rechristened 'The Field of Legends'.

And throughout its various revamps, the traditionally blade-perfect Thurles pitch has stayed true to Tom Semple's grass-based beliefs.

Adios Becks

'Get divorced and stay here,' urged a banner in the crowd dedicated to David Beckham after Real Madrid's La Liga title win.

The LA-bound Londoner introduced Take That and paid an 'emotional tribute' to the late 'nation's princess' at the generally cringeworthy Diana Concert on Sunday, sporting a peroxide crew cut and black beard. Nice.

'David's life is going to be hell in America,' reckons Rodney Marsh, who went to the States with George Best in the 1970s. 'He won't know what's hit him... over a four-day period, you can fly almost 9,000 miles and play twice. Do that four or five times, factoring in time changes, training and media engagements, and it becomes very wearing.'

'Other aspects he won't understand until he gets here is the fact that the referees are next to useless and offer little protection from young men who will be looking to make a name for themselves at David's expense'.

It's the young women that Rebecca Loos' alleged 'ex' might want to be watching out for. Speaking of which...

Quoteworthy

'It was like I got divorced and now I have fallen in love with my ex-husband again.'

- Victoria Beckham on the (Old) Spice Girls' £100m reunion tour. Are they for real? ...the Spices, I mean...

'Six foot seven and fifteen-and-a-half stone... considering I'm five-foot nothing I wouldn't like to be marking him that's for sure'.

- Marty Morrissey on Cork's Kieran Donaghy clone Michael Cussen. Are GAA players generally getting bigger all the time? As DJ Carey remarked after Sunday's Leinster final cakewalk: 'I'm 5'11' and I'd have been the smallest Kilkenny forward out there'.

'Just two minutes of the seventy left to play... I might add the word: mercifully'.

- Ger Canning in sense-of-humour shocker towards the end of Kilkenny's whipping of Wexford.

'Floyd has never taken any fight personally. But he's taking this personally. Floyd is going to kick his butt'.

- Lenard Ellerbe, advisor to the suddenly unretired Floyd Mayweather Jnr, on a proposed megabucks bout with 'fat' Ricky Hatton. There's nothing pro' boxers take more personally than an opportunity to make millions.

'Clare [Balding] shared carriage duties with an extremely posh, very camp man called James Sherwood, who sounded like the bastard love child of Dale Winton and Brian Sewell, and knew more about hats than could possibly be healthy'.

- Martin Kelner in The Guardian on the BBC's Royal Ascot fashionista.

'...Sharapova has really taken the whole thing to another level now. It brings a new meaning to the phrase 'tennis racket'. If she ever has a babby that lass, there is going to be a midwife crisis after the sixth one runs out of the labour ward clutching her bleeding eardrums... I reckon if you can challenge a decision based on Hawk-eye, you should be able to challenge noise based on the aural equivalent - Hawk-ear, if you will... It's ironic that the Russian beauty is wearing a swan outfit. Your regular English swan, I'm told, is called the mute swan. D'you hear that, Maria, pet? Mute. Not a sound'.

- BBC sports critic 'Robbo Robson'.

'When the going gets tough, keep on pushing. That's what I'm like'.

- Lewis Hamilton's sage, Billy Ocean-esque advice for all those racing drivers just starting out on the road to nowhere fast. Shoving a F1 car around is surely bad for your back, though?

Make money legit: because they're worth it

I can well believe former Kerry football manager Jack O'Connor when he protests that 'you actually lose money in the GAA' after his autobiography revealed the County Board allegedly 'reimbursed'/compensated' him for loss of earnings as a teacher during his time in charge of the All-Ireland champions.

Anyway, Kerry Chairman Sean Walsh insisted, 'There was no over the counter payments to Jack'. So that's alright then...

Nickey Brennan raised the money being made by bainisteoirs at inter-county and club level just days after assuming the presidency; however, he was accused of fishing for red herrings when there were more serious issues to be dealt with.

Personally I've no problem whatsoever with managers effectively being paid (let's not split hairs about reclaimed expenses or cash in hand; it's all good) – up to a point.

However, while I'm not suggesting anything was amiss in O'Connor's case – and I'm sure there wasn't, or else he wouldn't have mentioned it in his book – but what about the dreaded three-letter word: tax.

If we're going to be all sanctimonious, and rightly so, about the antics of the brass-necked Beverly Flynn – Bertie's very own 'insurance policy'? – then we can't go applying a separate set of rules to the 'Gaelic Amateur Association'.