

Braveheart in Blue



Ken McGrath in the white and blue he wore 51 times in Championship action. See Sport 2 and 3 for more on Friday night's All-Star Challenge.

It was shortly after I had joined Mount Sion, while training one night that I noticed a particular young fella pucking around behind one of the goals.

I was amazed how this chubby cheeked kid could strike that ball further than I could even though he was obviously not old enough to require the daily use of a razor.

Twelve months later this kid was playing alongside me in the Mount Sion senior team and the following year was making his Munster Senior Hurling championship debut for Waterford. The kid was Ken McGrath.

In 1996, Ken made his Senior Championship debut for Waterford in Walsh Park while still a minor, this feat put Ken in the same rarefied club as the great Jimmy Doyle. The child prodigy was a child no more.

Talent is a wonderful thing and from the moment I met Ken I knew that this was a kid with levels of ability that just put him on a different plateau to everyone else.

Ken had that rare mix of prodigious talent augmented with a toughness in both mind and spirit that set him apart.

There were times over the years that Mac's skills levels would just leave you aghast. His ability to win the ball in the air, yes to win his own ball man on man, almost outlawed these days, was exceptional.

In Ken McGrath we had a diamond and one that didn't require polish or tactical input. The only instructions required for Ken was to just go out and hurl, the rest took care of itself. Thanks to the posterity of You Tube 'the catch' from the Munster final 2004 or the other one versus Kilkenny in the All-Ireland semi-final where Mac caught the ball behind his back while running backwards, will be replayed for eternity.

In 'The Club' we invariably played Ken at centre-forward for the sensible reason that he had both hurling and the ability to score. Ken McGrath, it must be said, could play anywhere and All-Stars in defence, midfield and attack is a testimony to that fact.

One of Mac's traits in relation to fielding the dropping ball was to attack his marker from the side, jumping from an angle rather than straight on and taking the ball at the highest point at the last second. Almost impossible to defend against.

Following England's World Cup defeat to Uruguay, John Giles spoke about players that 'would kill their Granny' to succeed and while I'm certain Ken never actually killed his (or anyone else's) Gran, he had that obsessive competitive streak where you feared he might actually kill you!

Mac could put the fear of God into any opponent. In hurling we frequently talk about players that have a certain 'streak' in them and Ken certainly inherited that gene.

If there's ever a remake of the Scottish epic 'Braveheart', well then move over Mel Gibson because Ken McGrath fits the bill better than any I know.

Fearless and without concern for his own safety Ken McGrath was the swashbuckling hero of his hurling generation.

Of course I'd never dream of saying anything like this to Ken himself - we don't do sentiment, testimonials or emotion well in the GAA. However, my presence and please God, your presence this Friday night in Walsh Park and afterwards at the Mount Sion Club will be the appropriate 'nod' and acknowledgement of one of our greatest ever hurlers.