

Time to ring the bell on player treatment?



Waterford's Philip Mahony takes the hit from Clare's John Conlon during last year's Division 1A meeting in Ennis.
| Photos: Noel Browne

The recent revelations that have emerged from the Clare hurling camp has left me perplexed. The story which The Irish Times broke over a week ago now describes how two players left the Clare panel after they were "humiliated" by the treatment they received from the Clare management.

It's that word "humiliated" that has been rattling around my head since then and leaves me questioning what on Earth is going on that would cause such damaging emotions for high achieving inter-county hurlers.

The story goes that two Clare panellists Davy O'Halloran and Nicky O'Connell (both injured at the time) were caught out on a night out by a team selector two nights before a League game and despite the fact that they weren't drinking apparently this was a breach of discipline.

The punishment dished out included banishment from the team changing rooms, inability to wear official team gear at training, having to train alone in the corner of the field, not allowed to speak to any other panel member and refusal to attend matches or travel with the official panel.

Just picturing the scene of these two ostracised players training alone in a corner of a field conjures up all sorts of images and comparisons. I imagined a scene from some sort of war movie, 'Platoon' or 'American Sniper' perhaps.

A 'Navy Seal' training camp with a Drill Sergeant in the figure of Clint Eastwood screaming at them while they trained, bating them to give in and 'Ring the Bell' signifying that they were quitting.

Perhaps 'The Shawshank Redemption' is a closer analogy with Andy Dufresne being sent to the 'hole' for some minor

misdemeanour. Is this really the kind of punishments handed out to inter-county hurlers these days?

Davy O'Halloran and Nicky O'Connell did indeed 'Ring the Bell'. They had enough and promptly left the panel.

It is further alleged that a letter from O'Halloran and O'Connell to the rest of the panel explaining their reasons for withdrawing from the panel was ripped up in front of the squad by Banner boss Davy Fitzgerald.

Surprisingly it was as much the arbitrary use of this punishment rather than the punishments themselves that appears to have been the final straw.

O'Halloran claims that one of the 'pivotal' players who was also out and drinking escaped punishment and hence the accusation of double standards by the Clare management.

An official statement has since been released by the Clare management which was also signed by joint team captains Pat Donnellan and Cian Dillon.

It's the kind of PR statement that says everything and says nothing. The letter claims "numerous inaccuracies" without actually naming them or indeed refuting any specific claim made by Davy O'Halloran.

I noted that O'Halloran was referred to as "a former player" rather than by his name, is it a further attempt to distance O'Halloran from the Clare panel? Surely he is entitled to be referred to by name.

Referring to players like Davy O'Halloran and Nick O'Connell, both in their early 20s, All-Ireland medal winners with Clare, as former players, appears unnecessarily callous and cold to me.

Needless to say the letter from the team management ends declaring that "the matter is now closed and we, as a group, are happy to move forward".

Well bully for them but what about the two players who felt "humiliated", are they also supposed to "move forward" too?

Of course the main issue here is one of player welfare and what is actually acceptable and what is a step too far.

There are all sorts of codes and protocols for players these days. There is a list of gear which players are entitled to, a set mileage allowance, medical supports etc. Is there a code of conduct for players and management teams?

Well no, or none that I'm aware of anyway. In the past common sense was sufficient but as the saying goes the problem with common sense is that it's not that common.

What has the bastion of player welfare, the Gaelic Players Association (GPA), had to say on the matter as of yet? Not much really.

As communicated to The Irish Times, the GPA plan to investigate the matter without making any comment on the issue or giving any details regarding the nature of said planned investigation.

GAA HQ have also decreed that they have no comment to make and have no plans to investigate this matter for the bullshit reason that they have not received any official complaint.

If a manager makes any derogatory comments in the media about a referee he is immediately summoned to Croke Park to explain himself, no official complaint required in this instance.

Surely there is sufficient evidence as reported in this case to warrant an investigation by the GAA.

The GAA launched a 'Give Respect Get Respect' campaign a number of years ago and while targeted at youth level it detailed behaviours equally applicable at adult level.

It stated that coaches should "respect the rights, dignity and worth of each person and treat each one equally regardless of ability, age, cultural or ethnic origin, gender, sexual orientation, or religious belief".

At the very least an inquiry is merited to establish the truth and if there are lessons to be learned let it be for the betterment of all teams.

A proper enquiry would also offer Davy Fitzgerald the opportunity for exoneration if as claimed everything was done proper and correct.

Players can be vulnerable in situations like this, especially young players. When I was in my early 20s I would have walked barefooted on glass if I thought it would help me win an All-Ireland.

Yes, it is true that hurling is an amateur sport and ultimately players can walk away as has happened here but should players ever have to feel "humiliated" to be part of a GAA team?

Davy O'Halloran and Nicky O'Connell are some mothers sons too and have made the brave decision to express their feelings on the matter in public.

Whistleblowers in general are not universally welcomed in Irish society but have made valuable contributions to help bring about necessary change. Sometimes just following orders is not the right the thing to do.

The demands on inter-county players are enormous and players willingly sacrifice themselves in order to wear their county jersey.

Players' well-being and dignity should always be protected and if ever threatened, well then we should all be willing to 'Ring the Bell'.