

the FULLBACK

Jamie O'Keefe

upfront about sport



'08 aftertaste: a sporting alphabet soup... of sorts

Aidan O'Brien, despite his own-record-equaling 23 Group One winners last season, got it in the neck following Coolmore's three-pronged disaster in the Melbourne Cup. The Australian press gave the Ballydoyle trainer a right kicking on foot of what was generally derided in the southern hemisphere as a 'suicidal' and 'arrogant' race strategy. O'Brien humbly admitted he may have things to learn yet. But with 150 Group One victories to his yard's credit, not much.

But what will Barrack do when he's over here on business and fancies 'shooting a few' with our head of government, who's more a '19th hole' man, and probably thinks a slamdunk is dropping a big, buttery biscuit in your tea?

Declan Kidney, who took over the Ireland job from Eddie O'Sullivan after a Six Nations campaign that felt and looked like a bad hangover from the World Cup, received the Irish Sports Manager of the Year accolade. (After Brian Cody bizarrely got man-of-the-match in the All-Ireland Hurling Final.) They can do no wrong, even when they lose, it seems.

Stephen Ireland remains an enigma, for the want of a nicer word. Johnny Giles reckons he could develop into one of the greatest Irish midfielders since Liam Brady, who himself concedes that the Cobh man has been City's best player by a Manchester mile this season.



Ireland's form patently hasn't suffered from his self-imposed Republic exile, which his father Michael has hinted may end sooner rather than later. "The country needs him. He's a good player and he'll go back in his own time."

Ireland, though we haven't lost a competitive match since Giovanni Trapattoni, Marco Tardelli and Liam Brady took charge, have yet to convince, with the manager's eye perhaps not on the ball as much as it should be for €2m per annum.

Nick Faldo, a man of few words as a player, and a habitual foot-muncher in his next life, wouldn't mind another go at being Europe Ryder Cup captain second time round.

Meanwhile the rest of us carry-on in real time. Giles did a solo run in headhunting Paul Jewell for the FAI, and could do worse than take it upon himself to meet Ireland and ask him what the hell is his problem. Mary Harney's had more ribbing over her hair, for Fás sake.

Beckham's brand being less in demand by Hollywood than his 'people' anticipated, and his supposed \$150m advertising-hinged 'football' contracts looking like pretty puffs of pre-recessionary smoke, David has headed to Milan to strut his stuff at the San Siro and other half-empty Serie A stadia until the spring. Well, they do like their golden oldies (and old goldenballs) at AC.

An Taoiseach wouldn't be on a fifth of that (and he's one of the highest-paid prime ministers in Europe) and he's being pilloried from pillar to post. A crew of Mr Cowen's cabinet colleagues can go on the beer in the Dáil visitors' bar of a midweek night and escape (political) censure; Sunderland substitute/TG4 seisiún star Andy Reid shows off his guitar prowess in Germany and he's exiled until hell freezes over or his banjo breaks, one or the other. Of the contrasts between Irish politics and sport, perspective is a casualty as always.

White Wales' Ian Woosnam is the bookies' favourite, Monty, snubbed by Nick, and fancied for the captaincy at Gleanegles six years hence, insists his fellow Scot Sandy Lyle should get the chance to lead the charge at Celtic Manor in 2010.

Talking is a managerial prerequisite, according to Tottenham midfielder David Bentley, who reckons Harry Redknapp's happy knack of getting his message across is the secret to the transformation he's wrought at White Hart Lane.

England boss Fabio Capello seemed content to augment Becks' post-century caps count while he was a mere star in the LA Galaxy, so presumably the genuinely great Bobby Moore's (outfield) record will soon fall to the model professional's/professional model's obsession with keeping up appearances.

Joy came delayed and hard-earned for both De La Salle and The Nire in the Waterford senior hurling and football championships. John Mullane & co, of course, went on to add a Munster title to their first county crown in unforgettable fashion and are aiming for an All-Ireland final place on St Patrick's Day, most probably against Kilkenny opposition (oh oh) if they can negotiate Ulster's hopefuls.

His record in the competition mightn't be great (nor is Tiger's) but Padraig Harrington's turn will, eventually, come. After hearing his Open one-liners, hopefully when it does he'll have learned from Nick to leave the jokes to the comedians.

"A big thing about football is communication, and Harry's got that in abundance," says Bentley, whose goal against Arsenal gets my vote for strike of the season so far. (Like Stoke fans, I'm still waiting for Rory Delap to perfect the art of meeting one of his own throw-ins at the far post.)

Cash, or the lack of it, has various Irish sporting bodies tightening their belts faster than a weightlifter on amphetamines. Even before the 'Cowenturn' (nifty coinage, eh), the FAI was already up against it trying to get sell all those dear seats in the new Lansdowne (unless Denis O'Brien fancies putting up the full €74m-€90m the FAI is obliged to contribute towards the stadium's cost).

On the Gaelic front, possibly benefiting (at the second attempt) from the holders' hurling exertions with Abbeyside, Ballymacarbry/Fourmilewater's finest, due to a combination of woeful weather and dubious decision-making, have been denied a shot at what was possibly Waterford's best-ever chance of bringing the provincial cup back to the Decies, and avenging their agonising Munster decider defeat two years ago. Shame.

Open, The Irish one, was announced just the other week as being bound for Mount Juliet in 2009. However, Sports Minister Martin Cullen seems to have done the equivalent of signing for the wrong card by declaring a golden opportunity for the Kilkenny cause that they hadn't even sought, never mind accepted.

Bentley says the previous coaching set-up "had a more continental way of doing things. Whether it worked here, I'm not too sure." He should be, considering he described Spurs' displays under new Real Madrid coach Juande Ramos as "shit" and was promptly dropped.

The GAA is warning its 'units' to curtail expenditure on non-essential items for senior inter-county panels. (Sliotars might be in scarcer supply at certain training sessions for starters.)

And lest one forget, Santa hats off to all connected with FAI Junior Cup winners Carrick United, and the De La Salle College hurlers on retaining the Harty and Croke Cups. There's nothing like local heroes in a world gone money-mad.

The Thomastown track simply would not be ready in time for the May tournament, at least in the condition to which top players have become accustomed over the years; something the owners told the people who should know better not once, but three times. Memo: Money isn't everything.

The ex-Gunner must be doubly-happy with Redknapp's gift of the gab given that he himself has admitted, "I think I might be addicted to talking. People say I'm the new David Beckham. [They do?] I don't mind that at all, it's nice being compared to a legend. I grew up watching him and admiring him, and I still do. He's better looking than me, though. Much. You can actually lose yourself thinking about what a good-looking guy he is... I've never had any media training, maybe it shows."

The GPA, meanwhile, are facing the vista of waging an unpopular protest campaign over the possible withdrawal of players' expenses just one year into the 'grants' scheme.

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Padraig Harrington might have missed out on the Order of Merit, and been overtaken by new No2 Sergio Garcia in the world rankings, but he is indisputably Europe's leading golfer: a fact just attested to by PGA members in the States.

Joe Kinnear's a talker too. And he hasn't had much media training either by the sounds of things. But I'd rather listen to old Joe than the new Dave.

The solution? Scrap the new 'national stadium', keep renting out Croke Park to rugby and soccer, reinvest the proceeds (€1.35m per international match) in the GAA's grassroots and GPA members, and everyone's quids in. Simple?

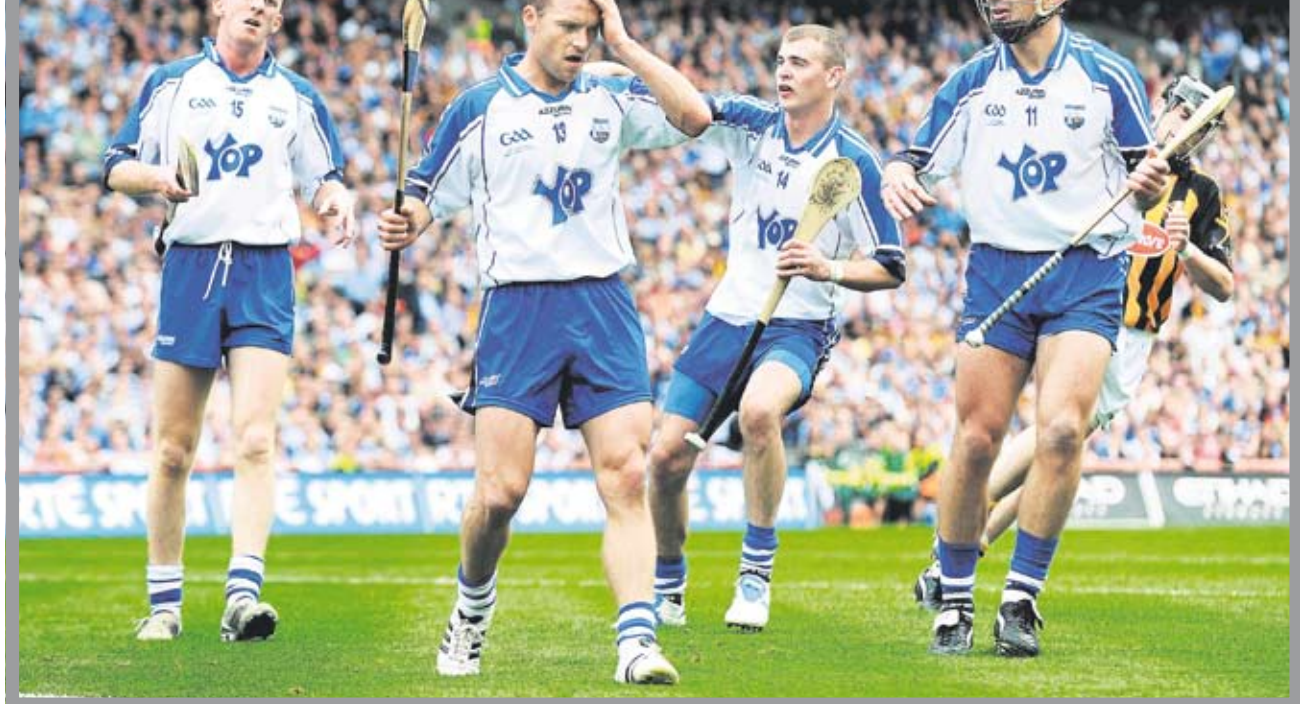
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His self-appreciation is less assured, however. Mulling over whether to buy a jet to boost his ego and, the Dubliner reckons, his game as well, he still struggles to see himself on the same 'plane' as his contemporaries in the three-majors club - Els, Mickelson and Singh

Usain Bolt was athletics' main man in 2008 and, by virtue of his astonishing triple Olympic gold medal-winning performances, must be regarded as the greatest, clean sprinter of all time. Right? Quite possibly, but such is the cynicism surrounding track & field, and most 'power'/endurance sports, that sceptics will contend, without proof, that he's simply too good to be true.



Doping. I've been accused of having a fixation with cycling, so here's one from the world of soccer, which I've always been pretty sure must have its 'fair' share of substance-abusers. Carlo Petrini, AC Milan star of the '60s and '70s and well-known to our man 'Trap', recently lifted the latest lid on the drugs culture that seems to have been endemic in Italian soccer down through the decades. He is one of dozens of ex-footballers in Italy suffering from the fatal ALS motor neuron disease.



7/9/'08: 'Just when you thought that things couldn't get any worse...' Eoin McGrath of Waterford despairs - as do John Mullane, Eoin Kelly and Seamus Prendergast - after missing a first-half goal chance against Kilkenny. This image is one of a collection of superb shots (including several others with a Deise slant) in the Sportsfile photographic agency's annual 'A Season of Sundays', available now in all good bookshops priced €34.95. See X. Do yourself a favour and try and get your hands on a copy of Denis Walsh's in-depth feature on where it all went wrong for Waterford in the build-up to, and during, the All-Ireland final from last weekend's 'Sunday Times'.

Personally I think Bolt could be the first credible 100/200m double-act in ages. A natural phenomenon in the strictest and most honest sense of the word. Let's hope he is. Should any doping scandals sully the Jamaican's world-record-setting exploits, sprinting might as well fill its spiked shoes with steroids and be done with it.

"At that time disposable syringes didn't exist so big glass syringes that were boiled up along with the needles were used... whether it was running, jumping, falling, or going for goal we had energy to burn. Every day there were injections going around... At the end of the match we thought it would end there, but you had so much energy left you couldn't sit still. At three or four (o'clock) in the morning, when fatigue started to set in, you'd fall asleep on the spot," he recalled. They just call it 'Red Bull' nowadays.

Kilkenny, without going into the gory details just yet (filed under 'X'), were more than worthy winners of the Liam McCarthy Cup, handed to them a third successive time by Nicky Brennan, one of their own. Their utter domination of the All Stars, and Eoin Larkin's selection as Hurler of the Year, showcased the individual talents that Brian Cody has moulded into what the Dutch might describe as a 'total hurling' team. For all the fine print that will be devoted to the also-rans' chances of bridging what's in danger of becoming a chasm, never mind a gap, it will be shock if the Cats don't make it four on the spin next September. Quite simply unstoppable. But then so were Kerry before Seamus Darby.



Kerry, like Kilkenny, were also chasing a three-in-a-row, but came a-cropper on several fronts: Paul Galvin, arguably the worst captain in that proud county's history, produced a display of petulance that wouldn't look out of place on the abominable 'I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out Of Here'; his team-mates took an eternity to shake off a mediocre Cork side, were at their brilliant best in beating Galway, then were out-thought and out-fought by Tyrone; while the Aidan O'Mahony asthma episode signed off on a sorry season.

never mind a serious rival to Tiger Woods on his return. His endorsers clearly feel Harrington is a class act, throwing millions at him to sport their logos next season. Or at least most of them do. Fáilte Ireland felt having him as an ambassador for Irish golf and the country at large wasn't worth an average (in every sense) TD's annual expenses; deciding to discontinue a deal worth a mere €75,000 a year just before he won the 2008 British Open and US PGA. As Padraig will tell you, timing is everything.



Venus Williams won the Wimbledon women's singles crown for a fifth time last summer, seeing off her younger, less-committed sister Serena in a one-sided final. However, though they were playing for the same prize-money as the men (€750,000 to the winner), the siblings' Saturday centre-court set-to paled in comparison to the classic male decider between reigning champion, the sweater-wearing, Swiss slickster Roger Federer, and the musclebound, sleeveless Spaniard Rafael Nadal. It was dark as the famous trophy was presented to Nadal but, just as one senses Federer, though only 27, may be on the slide, his successor's already glittering career (including four French Opens) is on an inexorable upward curve; at least till he reaches that strangely-premature Bjorgesque breaking-point.



Frank Murphy looks like being Secretary on Leaside for as long as he, rather than Donal Og, likes, and his ever-compliant county board's best and (purportedly) brightest hurlers are training away during the 'closed season' in 'development squad' guise for league/championship action that may never come their way.

Loughane throwing muck at the Galway County Board was as predictable as over-the-top tears at the end of The X-Factor. Cyril Farrell, who led the Tribesmen to three All-Ireland senior titles in a decade, says that, whatever the excuses (and the one about there being no pitches to train teams in Galway bates banagher; maybe that's why he'd them running on a racetrack in year one), the buck had to stop with Ger, who is oblivious to the obvious as usual.

quotes, as in this column's 'Choice Words' slot. I've covered quite a few, so here are some recent ones:

Walking is something Roy Keane's becoming rather famous for, whether it be out on country or club, or just taking the dog for another brisk stroll followed by kamikaze cameramen.



It's, after all, a sport not a war," says the manager, having written to each of last year's panellists to ascertain their availability. "Even Ian Paisley sat down with Martin McGuinness eventually," noted former Cork boss Donal O'Grady in the early days of The Strike, Part III. True, but that was war, not sport.

He may have taken Salbutamol for medical reasons but the only reason O'Mahony hit the deck so amateur-dramatically when featherdusted by Cork's Donncha O'Connor had nothing to do with a shortage of breath; simply a breathtaking and embarrassing act of duplicity.

"We hear a lot nowadays about professionalism in sport. Maybe we need a bit more amateurism of people who are prepared to go out there and play for the honour of the jersey and for Cork county, to get players who are not worried about their media image and not worried about their image on advertising boards all over the country."

His parting of company with Sunderland, or vice versa, came as no real surprise to anyone. Most likely burnt-out after barely taking a break on hanging up his boots, Keane, like a lot of Cork folk, doesn't tend to worry too much about what others think of him. (Just as well.)



Brian Cody and Gerald McCarthy (K and F): in many ways it was the year GAA managers (including one of the youngest, Waterford man Jason Ryan with the Wexford footballers) took centre stage, with so many controversial comings and goings, including Justin and Davy Fitz, and the Kilkenny boss, though he'll probably still blush at the thought, taking the MOTM award in the All-Ireland Hurling final. Baintisteoirs will no doubt be big news again in 2009.

- Youghal priest Fr Bernie Cotter, a former Cork hurler, in his "laughing stock of the county" homily to a Mass for deceased members at Páirc Uí Chaoimh immediately before the annual convention. You tell 'em Father.

Having jacked it in (again), his reputation has been dented, most definitely, but there will always be a club willing to take a chance on a marquee appointment. Plus you can't imagine Roy will like being out of the limelight too long.

Gareth Cronin quit, somewhat messily, as manager of Waterford United at the end of a domestic season that can only be described as more of the same: a lot of pain and little gain. The League of Ireland, or whatever it'll be called next season, with no sponsor and crises in every corner of the map, has rarely been in worse fettle financially and image-wise. Not something the FAI envisaged, or indeed promised, when they took it over.

Munster by the grace of God. The irony is that the nation's, in some quarters grudging, but undeniably growing affection for Munster rugby really reached a popular crescendo thanks to a defeat suffered by the province's second-string side (that unforgettable night against New Zealand) rather than the terrific Heineken Cup triumph of the first-team versus Toulouse last May.

"I'm not delusional. I've still got self-belief that I can become world heavyweight champion next year."

X-rated viewing. That's the only way to describe Waterford's wallowing by Kilkenny in what was one of the most eagerly-awaited All-Ireland finals in years.

Though survival from week-to-week will remain the name of the game locally, The Blues are in nowhere near as bad a state, say, Drogheda United - where, unbelievably, they'd nearly 30 full-time players and 10 'technical staff' on the payroll; one of two clubs, remember, in the smallest county in Ireland.

While Leinster, rightly or wrongly, are seen as a bunch of underachieving/non-trying primadonnas from the posh side of the tracks, Munster are viewed as the epitome of blood-and-guts, muck-and-bullets 'rural' rugby. Though it's all much of a middle-class muckness, if we're honest.

"He is so laid-back. Sometimes when he was playing I thought he was asleep!"

Recapping on the hurling calendar in the official Croke Park annual, journalist Martin Breheny writes: "The manner in which Brian Cody and his backroom team managed to separate the hype from the fundamentals of what they were setting out to do was very important."

The recession couldn't have come at a worse time for many clubs but maybe it's the best thing for all concerned. Realities, ignored for so long, have to be faced and fast.

Even Munster's sometime anti-heroes get serious slack, with the hit-and-miss Ronan O'Gara's warts-and-all autobiography being generally touted by critics as the (unofficial) Irish sports book of the year to boot.



West Brom's Paul Robinson on the sleeping giant that was former team-mate Kanu. Reminds me of Johnny Giles' quip a while back about clanger-prone Wigan 'defender' Titus Bramble: "I don't know how Steve Bruce sleeps at night. Titus sleeps pretty alright. He sleeps during the match."

"While Waterford overdosed on the sheer delight of being in their first All-Ireland final for 45 years, Kilkenny locked themselves into low-profile mode. It worked to perfection as they blitzed Waterford in what turned out to be one of the most embarrassingly one-sided All-Ireland finals for many years."

George W Bush, like Bill Clinton before him, was a golf nut and they could always rely on somewhere like Ballybunion for some Irish peacetime R&R.

Robbie Keane's confidence has always seemed skin-deep to me. Whatever self-assurance the Republic's record goalscorer has is being sorely tested by his 'dream' move to his childhood heroes Liverpool; a transfer that was turning into a bit of a nightmare before his superb finish against Arsenal on Sunday. (Maybe the manager should stay at home more often.)

Breheny argues that "Waterford's collapse... revealed more about them than the champions. Kilkenny had to do little more than be efficient as Waterford froze solid. Waterford are a far better side than they looked that day, but it remains to be seen if this year's drubbing will have a damaging effect on their psyche."

In fairness Keane isn't the first striker who's struggled to adjust to life at Anfield, which has been the undoing of many an apparently decent centre-forward since the heyday of Dalglish and Rush.

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Liverpool have almost always had a principal, prolific frontman (e.g. Fowler, Owen, Torres; in each case when fit) alongside a procession of tried but never-quite-trusted partners.

Rafael Benitez has happy to meet Spurs' inflated fee of €20m for Keane; which, when you think about it, is twice what Man U paid for Cristiano Ronaldo. (Though one was potential, the other proven, up to a point.)

However, Liverpool's gaffer is to logic what Harry Kewell was to courage. Benitez, who seems to like his attackers to defend (like Dirk Kuyt) was much more patient and accommodating with Peter Crouch than he's been with Keane. But just when Crouch was playing like a world-beater he seemed to take a total dip on him. It might have been that robot dance.

As Waterford supporters go, including those of us part-responsible for the unavoidable hype, we were stunned by what happened, but not sorry. Just sad for the lads that they didn't nearly do themselves justice on the day.

Before the weekend it looked like Robbie's exit from Merseyside could be swift and ignominious. However, he could come good yet. Confidence is everything. Nothing to do with Ireland but I really hope he does prove his worth.

Having jacked it in (again), his reputation has been dented, most definitely, but there will always be a club willing to take a chance on a marquee appointment. Plus you can't imagine Roy will like being out of the limelight too long.

Zzzzzzzzzzz. Finally, assuming you've made it this far, or just skipped to the end of the alphabet, a few of the sporting sagas that sent us to sleep faster than an Enda Kenny Ard Fheis address: Ronaldo to Real Madrid; the megaphone diplomacy between the various Rebel GAA rabble-rousers; Andy Murray's perennial Wimbledon ambitions; Chelsea, full-stop.

Have a ball this Christmas, and here's to a better, if thriftier, 2009. At least we'll have the oul' sport to keep us semi-sane!