

# the FULLBACK

Jamie O'Keeffe



upfront about sport

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

**A**idan 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.

**S**tephen 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." 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.

**B**eckham'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.

**I**reland, 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.

**N**ick 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. The best thing that could be said about that prospect is if his alter-ego was able to learn from his endless mistakes, his 'take 2' team would be high-on unbeatable.

**T**alking 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.

**E**ngland 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.

**J**oy 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.

**O**pen, 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.

"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.)

**C**ash, 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).

**O**n 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.

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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.

**T**he 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.)

**A**nd 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.

**H**is 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

**T**he 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." 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.

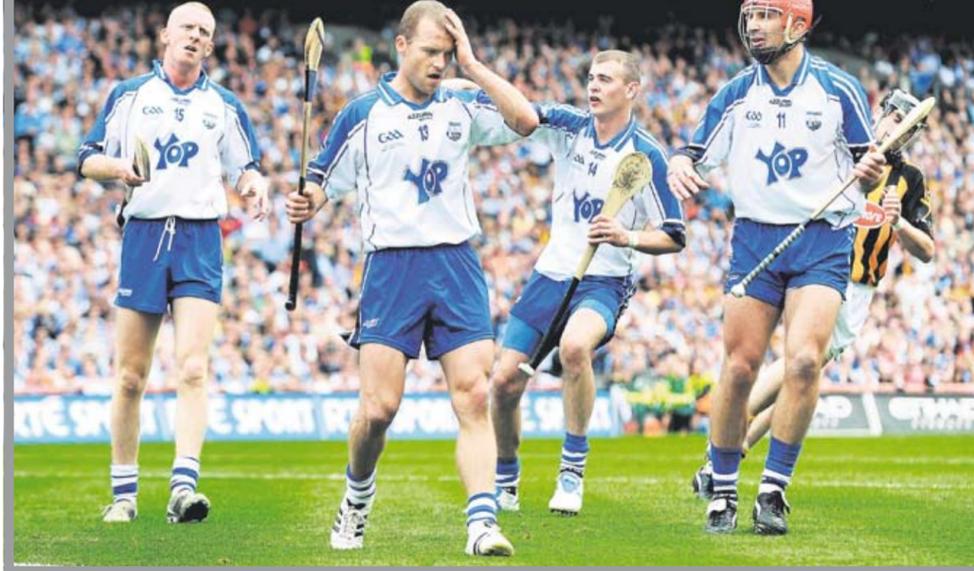
**T**he solution? Scrap the new 'national stadium', keep renting out Croke Park to rugby and soccer, reinvest the proceeds (€1.35m per international match) in the GAA's grassroots and GPA members, and everyone's quids in. Simple?

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**D**oping. 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'.

**"**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.

**K**ilkenny, 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.

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

**V**enus 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

**E**gan, Kenny, silver medallist, along with bronze-winners Darren Sutherland and Paddy Barnes, salvaged Irish pride with the boxing team's remarkable record in the Beijing Olympic rings. Incredibly, or perhaps typically, it seems as if one of the key figures behind their success could be snapped up to spearhead Britain's medal assault in London 2012 after being snubbed by the insult-prone Olympic Council of Ireland over in the Orient.

**F**or 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.

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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.

**G**ary Keegan, Director of the High Performance Programme for Irish boxing since it started in 2002, and also involved in Katie Taylor's subsequent stunning lightweight world championship defence, was denied accreditation for the Summer Games, and had to liaise with head coach Billy Walsh from a private apartment close to the athletes' village.

**K**erry, 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.

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**W**alking 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.

**F**rank Murphy looks like being Secretary on Leeside 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. It's Cork GAA's version of Groundhog Day. Will Gerald McCarthy be able to stand firm and field a team full of unknowns in next year's competitions? That so many of the knowns were perceived to be past-it means that a championship effectively minus Cork wouldn't be the devalued currency it might have been a few campaigns ago.

**H**e 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.

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**H**is 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.

**L**oughane 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.

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**G**areth 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.

**M**unster 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.

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**T**he 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.

**E**ven 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.

**R**obbie 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.)

**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. 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."

**H**oops, heck that's what Barrack Obama loves to shoot in his soon-to-be non-existent spare time. The US President-elect has even had a basketball court laid out around the back of the White House. 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.

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**I**n 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.

**W**hile 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."

**R**afael 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.)

**B**reheny 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."

**B**efore 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.

**A**s 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.

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**Y**outh eh. You'll never win anything with kids, or so Alan Hansen famously contended as Alex Ferguson's fledglings set out towards pulling off the 1995-'96 Premiership. Arsene Wenger has taken the Man U approach (which in reality was based on an experienced backbone infused with some magical marrow) and tried to surpass it with inevitably mixed results. "The Invincibles", possibly the finest pure football team England's top flight has seen, were a mixture of audacity and maturity. With Henry, Viera, Pires and a few others gone, the next batch plucked from Arsenal's academy have shown fleeting brilliance but lacked sufficient grit to go with their guile. Will Wenger give his brain a break and convince his not-exactly-extravagant employers to buy a few older heads, wiser than William Gallas?

**Z**zzzzzzzzzz. 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!*