



THE

DOUBLE

HOW CORK MADE GAA HISTORY

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MERCIER PRESS

PROLOGUE

Midway through the second half of the All-Ireland hurling final of 1990, Croke Park took a breath and time slowed down. With Galway already four points ahead of an unfancied Cork side, and Galway's Martin Naughton barrelling through on goal, a green flag would surely signal the end of the contest. Led from the wilderness by a charismatic but idiosyncratic priest, the Rebels' unlikely and thrilling run through the championship would ultimately end in defeat. Or so it seemed in that moment.

A first Senior All-Ireland final capitulation to the Tribesmen would mean, too, that Cork's hopes of making history would be dashed at the first hurdle; the city and county had buzzed for weeks with the anticipation of their teams securing a Senior All-Ireland Double for the first time in one hundred years.

In contrast to the out-of-the-blue hurlers' season, the footballers were a tight-knit gang who had been on the hard road together for some time. After two years in a row of All-Ireland final devastation, they'd finally made the breakthrough in 1989. But people shrugged in reaction to their 'soft' All-Ireland, earned against an inexperienced Mayo. Now they prepared to take on their hated – the correct word at this time – rivals, Meath, in a fortnight's time. When would this opportunity come around again?

As Martin Naughton swung for history, the 63,000 people in the stadium didn't make a sound, according to one man watching on from behind dark glasses to protect his eyes. 'You know those powerful pregnant silences?' asks Brian Keenan. 'When you know there's a superb piece of play coming up ... and there's definitely going to be a score?'¹

Keenan was watching, amongst the country's VIPs, from the Hogan Stand. But his perspective on the game was unique. Born and reared in deeply loyalist Tiger's Bay in Belfast, he was not exposed to hurling's charms as a young boy. But when he pushed through Queen's University Belfast's gates as a mature student later in life, he found himself drawn to the game, as well as to Irish culture and music: 'It all came together,' he remembers.

After college, an invitation to teach at the American University in Beirut – not a hurling heartland – seemed enticing and he happily took the job. He was taken hostage by Shiite militiamen just four months later and would spend almost five years in captivity before being released on 24 August 1990. It was a few days before the All-Ireland hurling final.

In a highly emotional press conference in front of, literally, the world's media in Dublin, Keenan began the process of articulating the horrific, monotonous trauma he'd endured for so long. When returned to the Mater Hospital, he told doctors he'd like to attend the upcoming game.

The Department of Foreign Affairs contacted Croke Park about tickets (he was pressed by opportunistic friends in Ardoyne GAA club to secure them seats too) and ultimately the association's press officer, Danny Lynch, gave up his seat for the guest of honour, with Lynch sitting in the press box.

Less than a week after being pulled out of a dungeon in the Middle East, Keenan left the hospital in the boot of a car – because of the intense press attention – to head for Jones' Road, where a few bottles of Guinness were pressed into his hands and he was introduced to various dignitaries.

'I met President Hillery and I think the man was a bit bemused,' he says of the then Uachtarán na hÉireann, who was preparing to leave the Áras after a fourteen-year stay. 'He wasn't too sure who I was or why I was being presented to him.'

Keenan sat into his seat next to Ray Burke, then minister for communications in Charlie Haughey's cabinet, and tried to process the universe that suddenly yawned in front of him.

PROLOGUE

‘The numbers of people all around!’ says Keenan of the view he attempted to compute through his shades, which were needed after so much time in the dark. ‘I’d been locked up in a hole in the ground for nearly five years. Jesus Christ, the crowds of people! That was the fascination. I couldn’t tune in to the game. I was almost hypnotised by the noise of the crowd rather than the game itself.’

The Belfast man had to compose himself at various points during the game, leaving his seat every now and then. If it happened today the reaction video would surely go viral, along with ‘Angry Athenry Dad Puts Foot through Telly at Full Time’ and footage of lads in county jerseys crying at a Sydney bar counter.

‘I had super-tuned ears from not hearing anything for five years. It was like being on another planet to me. Suddenly you’re amongst this sea of noise and it’s overwhelming.’

Hurling can cause sensory overload, even if you haven’t been chained to a radiator for half a decade. But the 1990 final was particularly overwhelming.

Cork were five points down at half-time and their manager, the hurling fundamentalist Fr Michael O’Brien, lashed into his side in the dressing room, questioning their manliness, character and work rate, with those in the room recalling the priest shouting:

‘Are you scared of Keady?’

‘Look at you, you big lump of lazy shit!’

‘We’re Cork; go out and do this.’

The Carrigaline parish priest punctuated his speech by throwing buckets of water over some players and punching another, for dramatic effect.

After the interval, Cork slipped further behind before Tomás Mulcahy scored a captain’s goal. And then the ball broke down for Martin Naughton. ‘A goal chance for Galway now!’ the television viewers didn’t need to be told.

The Cork goalkeeper darted from his goal. 'In those situations in a one-to-one you half-gamble,' Ger Cunningham says.²

'This was amazing to me,' says Keenan, who watched from over the shoulder of former Taoiseach and Cork GAA icon Jack Lynch, in the good seats, as he heard a familiar silence for the first time all day.³

The welcome silence was broken by roars from the Cork supporters. Ger Cunningham had stopped the sliotar with his face, but an oblivious umpire waved it wide.

Cork got the next score through Tony O'Sullivan and the penny dropped for Galway. 'When those little things start going against you,' recalls the Tribesmen's boss Cyril Farrell, 'you know.'⁴

Cork kept the momentum and noise on an upward curve thanks to an inspirational over-the-shoulder point from a dual star and goals from an enigmatic forward.

The Rebels won a rare thing: an All-Ireland as underdogs.

Sitting not far from Keenan, Cork's football boss was tapped on the shoulder by an unknown Leesider as he filed out of the old stand. It seemed he'd been sent as an emissary by the rest of the county's supporters, with a single message.

'It's down to ye now,' the fan told Billy Morgan.

'And that's all he said,' recalls Morgan.⁵ It was heard loud and clear.

The Double was on. And it was down to the footballers.



SECTION

1

FOOTBALL ORIGINS

CHAPTER 1

A PUNCHER'S CHANCE

If anyone could sense if the footballers were up to the task of creating sporting history in 1990, John 'Kid' Cronin was the man. An astute and hugely popular corner man for both hurlers and footballers, he could read a dressing room expertly.

Though the septuagenarian had been involved with Cork GAA since the early 1970s, he'd punched out a professional boxing career for himself before that. Cork in the 1930s, and particularly the northside of the city, had been fertile ground for the sport. Shadow-boxing in the middle of it all was a young middleweight called John, from the Fairhill club, who turned professional and was billed as 'Kid' Cronin.

The Kid fought three times at Tolka Park, beating Siki O'Neill of the Liberties, his great rival, on one occasion in the Drumcondra football ground. They fought twice more on Leaside, recording a victory each. Cronin beat Clonmel flyweight Johnny Healy twice at Cork City Hall on cards that filled the Anglesea Street venue. He travelled the roads of Ireland – and particularly the old one to the capital – for fights alongside his friend 'Butcher' Howell. The heavyweight had, unsurprisingly, a butcher's shop in Blackpool, while his wife had a pub in the neighbourhood.

Cronin later opted to follow another neighbour, Pat Mulcahy, to England, where the pair fought in the so-called 'booths', a serious apprenticeship during which fighters needed to know every trick in the professional's book to thrive. The booths, a feature of British boxing from the eighteenth century up until they disappeared in the 1970s, were essentially travelling circuses with a cast of hardened pugilists, who'd pitch up in provincial and

seaside English towns like Margate, Blackpool and Middlesbrough in a convoy of wagons.

An end-of-the-pier type showman would entice crowds to the big top – which the boxers usually erected themselves – with a roll-up roll-up routine, before the fighters would line out, stripped for a shift. Local hardmen would be invited to take on their pick of the visiting bunch, with the incentive of up to £5 – a serious prize for the mainly working-class crowds – if they survived a round or three in the ring.

These were crucibles in which serious fighters learned their trade through practice rather than theory, and experienced boxers sharpened up before fully sanctioned bouts. It was also sometimes just a bit of pantomime, with a plant often emerging from the audience to go through a pre-arranged routine that had seen as many towns as the boxers.

World flyweight champion in the 1920s Jimmy Wilde, who operated under the wonderful nickname ‘the Ghost with the Hammer in His Hand’, had plotted his nascent career ‘as a paper-thin fifteen-year-old, clattering sixteen-stone coal miners’ in the booths. Tommy Farr, a heavyweight champion who later dismissed the fighting qualities of the great Muhammad Ali with the words ‘He wouldn’t have hit Joe Louis’s arse with a handful of rice’, also ran away with the booths before reaching greater heights in his career.¹

A young miner in the northeast of England did survive three rounds with a boxer around this time and used the pound he won to buy an engagement ring for his sweetheart. Robert Charlton and his fiancée, Cissie, gave the world Bobby, as well as Ireland’s Italia ’90 mastermind Jack, during their subsequent marriage.

Amid this vaudeville milieu, Kid Cronin was well-fed, well-trained and well-rewarded as he jabbed his way around England in the 1930s, knocking out cocky young sailors attempting to impress a local girl, or the pitmen who fancied their chances at earning a couple of extra quid.

After his return to Cork, the Glen hurling club and St Nick's football club got the benefit of the Kid's experience from the 1960s onwards and when club stalwart Donie O'Donovan took over the county football side in the early 1970s, he brought the corner man with him, beginning a relationship with Cork GAA that would go on until Cronin's death many years later.

Fr Michael O'Brien, who'd ultimately take the reins of the Cork hurlers in 1990, was impressed by Cronin and asked him to make his way up Redemption Road to help out with the famous hurling nursery St Finbarr's, Farranferris, or 'Farna' as the now-closed diocesan seminary was known. He was present for their golden era of four in a row Harty Cups and then later the All-Ireland triumph under Sean O'Riordan in the mid-1980s. Ever in demand, Cronin was later asked to help out with UCC by O'Brien and with Coláiste Iognaid Rís by Billy Morgan.

'They talk about psychologists today; he was a psychologist in his own way,' says Conor Counihan, who got to know the Kid when the uncompromising Aghada defender took his seat on the Cork footballers' bus in the 1980s.²

Moments before a Harty Cup final with Farna, the Kid identified one nervous player in the dressing room and, reaching into his inside jacket pocket, offered him a tablet: 'Take that, it'll calm you down. Ringy always took one before a big match.'³

The player took the pill and played all before him as St Finbarr's added to their ever-growing tally of Hartys. Later an intrigued Fr O'Brien inquired about the tablet.

'Half a polo mint,' said the Kid, with a wink.

Before an All-Ireland final with the northside college, Cronin was rubbing down Johnny Crowley under the watchful eye of O'Brien. It's said that when the priest left the room, the future All Star defender asked the masseur for a cigarette, which he duly passed over. Puffing away during his massage, Crowley thought he was caught when O'Brien burst back into the room. Cronin put the lit fag into his pocket and continued his task.

'Do I smell smoke?' O'Brien asked.

'No, father,' the Kid replied, 'that's just the embrocation I'm using for the rubdown.'⁴

His trousers were ruined, he later lamented.

A real odd couple, Cronin constantly wound up O'Brien, deliberately or otherwise.

'He was very droll,' says fellow Glen Rovers man Kieran McGuckin, who regularly sat next to his clubmate on bus journeys and was privy to round after round of fascinating boxing tales. 'Nothing could phase the Kid. He'd always have an answer if someone targeted him for a ball hop or something like that. Of course he was well down the road at his age, he'd have heard it all. He hopped off the Canon [Fr O'Brien] and he didn't pull his punches with him either. The Canon could be cutting a bit at times and the Kid would bring him down to size fairly quick.'⁵

On the way to a Munster hurling final against arch-rivals Tipperary in Páirc Uí Chaoimh, the Cork bus snaked its way through the rainy streets. O'Brien had adapted a UCC chant from his successful time with the college to suit his stint with the intercounty side. His call-and-response mantra involved the priest shouting 'Who are we?' and the players roaring back: 'Cork!' This would, ideally, work up into a frenzy, like a soccer crowd in the minutes before a local derby.

This particular day, sensing his side needed to boost their energy levels behind the condensated windscreen of the stuffy team bus, O'Brien stood at the top of the coach and began his well-rehearsed 'Who are we?' routine.

Cronin, however – who'd assisted with Fitzgibbon Cup games through the years too – sitting in the very centre of the back row, chatting happily to some of the players, quickly shouted 'U-C-C!'

The bus was rocked by gales of laughter and O'Brien quickly sat back into his seat at the top of the coach.

'And the Canon gets a bit sulky – because he would do that,' says

former intercounty hurler John Considine, ‘and turns around to sit down and it could have got a bit funny, you know ... but then the Kid broke out and sang “Beautiful City”. And honest to God now it was amazing and of course there was cheering and the whole lot.

‘I never met anybody that didn’t like Kid Cronin. He was the masseur and he was working there,’ the Sarsfields man adds, rubbing his thighs, ‘but it was actually here,’ he says, tapping his temple. ‘So, you could be dying and Kid – at that age, like, he was literally only coating you with the oil – and he’d be telling you you’re fine. You could be dead and he’s saying, “You’re never in such great shape.” And Frank Cogan came in to help Kid [with the massaging], and Frank would do one leg ... and the joke would be that you’d end up running around in a circle because you would have one leg that’d be flying.’⁶

Though players from both the hurling and football panels now recognise Cronin was there for the encouraging, intelligent word in their ears as much as the liniment on their joints or his famous ‘karate chop’, he lasted long enough to see the introduction of actual psychologists to the Cork camp. He wasn’t impressed.

‘There’d be sniggering and everything going on,’ says 1990 hurling coach Gerald McCarthy of the reaction to the headshrinkers’ rituals. ‘This went on for a couple of weeks and it wasn’t really working. And we were all sitting down waiting for your man to come in one night and the Kid says, “Jesus, lads I think the pathologists are here again tonight.” That’s what he called them.’⁷

Sitting amongst the players was where Cronin seemed most happy, exchanging ‘a shilling or two shillings’ in a game of poker, but more importantly dealing in wisecracks.

‘He had a very young mind,’ says Dinny Allen, who first got to know Cronin in the early 1970s, when the young Nemo forward joined the intercounty football set-up.⁸ One of the panel’s natural comedians as well as leaders, Allen once attempted to fill a few minutes of a train journey to

Dublin with a joke, while a couple of players and the Kid went through the custom of a game of Hold 'Em.

The set-up for Allen's gag revolved around a Kerryman finding a false wall in his bedroom while extending his house. The punchline was the discovery of a skeleton with a sign around his neck reading: 'All-Ireland Hide and Seek Champion 1932'.

'When I told the Kid,' says Allen, 'I'm not coddling you – he was laughing for fucking three hours.'

Cronin worked in the distillery, now gone, in Blackpool and it was suspected he used some of the weekly product rations that employees were afforded to make up the famous mixture he rubbed into generations of Cork players. The secret sauce's exact ingredients remain a mystery, however.

'He used to have this amazing rub with poitín and oil and all sorts of stuff, and Jesus Christ, he'd rub the calves but you'd feel great coming off the table,' says Kieran McGuckin. 'You'd say, "Thanks Kid!"

"The way you thank me now, boy," came Cronin's stock response, "is the way you go out and play.""

That farewell as the players went onto the field was often bookended by his greeting as they arrived back in from training: 'Jesus lads, I was sweating watching ye.'

It was a catchphrase often repeated, out of context, on team holidays and elsewhere, of course.

For Cork he was a vibes man, a friend, a secret keeper, an eternal thread between panels and generations. The beloved and respected Grandad Trotter character who kept everyone's feet on the ground behind the Páirc Uí Chaoimh gates – including those who held the keys.

The players might have just won a Munster final or dismantled another opposing team, but he'd be gently chiding them to get on the bus while tapping the face of his watch with his finger: 'Come on, I have to get back to Blackpool for a game of don.'

In a dressing room with a passionate football manager who earned the

nickname ‘Semtex’, and another led by a hurling-obsessed parish priest prone to histrionics, the Kid brought some much-needed yin to their yang.

Beating his way to Páirc Uí Chaoimh from North Cork, Danny Culloty used to swing into the now demolished Blackpool flats next to the old Glen Hall to pick up Cronin on their way to football training; northsiders Tomás Mulcahy and Tony O’Sullivan regularly called in on the way to hurling sessions.

‘I loved the guy,’ says Culloty. ‘If a player was down, he’d come over and gee them up. He wasn’t just a masseur, he did lots of other jobs as well. I remember one time I was dropped and he had a word in my ear on the way home and it meant a lot. Oh, I was very fond of him, very fond of him.’¹⁰

On one trip to the States, the hurling panel knew they’d have to rush between terminals in New York to make their connecting flight home. Cronin, who naturally enough was slowing down at this stage, was told to sit at the top of the plane for the first flight and a couple of players were assigned to assist him during the transfer. ‘They were under each arm and the Kid’s legs don’t touch the ground half the time going through JFK,’ says Kevin Hennessy.¹¹

‘Kid was the grandfather that everyone wanted to have,’ says Colman Corrigan, part of the football side that ended Kerry’s dominance in the late 1980s. ‘He was the nicest man that you’d ever meet in your life. He was possibly the worst masseur that you’d ever meet in your life. He wouldn’t rub a gooseberry, but once you were up on the table when Kid was rubbing you, he’d always say, “Jaysus, you’re flying.” And you could be absolutely totally unfit, but you were still flying with the Kid.

‘We brought him out to the Canaries and you know the old-fashioned way he’d wear the handkerchief on the top of his head,’ recalls Corrigan. ‘He laid out on the beach and got fucking browned to a cinder. He came in and arrived into some pub and he was after buying some T-shirt off one of the lucky-lucky fellas. You can imagine now this man was seventy-something years of age. He comes into the thing – and he was wearing a

jumper in thirty-degree heat, he lifted up his jumper and written across it was “Don’t Mess With The Kid Cronin”.¹²

The teams’ soigneur had seen it all and was a direct line through the twin narratives of Cork GAA from 1973. Like Dr Con Murphy alongside him on the bench for all those years, he sat through three-in-a-row reigns, All-Irelands in 1984 and 1986, and famous provincial wins in Thurles.

But so too was he a witness to lots and lots of defeats to Kerry.

Arriving back into hurling training on the Tuesday night after another traumatic trip with the footballers to Killarney, Kevin Hennessy recalls lifting his head from the massage table to ask: ‘That’s not the bottle you used in Killarney now, Kid, is it?’

Without looking up from his work, Cronin replied: ‘Oh no, no; it’s their heads I should be rubbing, not their legs.’¹³

The footballers’ minds were – at least part of – the problem after years and years of Kerry dominance. Ever astute, however, when Cronin saw an old friend walk back in the gates of Páirc Uí Chaoimh late in 1986, he must have known Cork football had a puncher’s chance once again.

'The greatest achievement in GAA history finally gets its due: *The Double* is a singular triumph.' *Michael Moynihan*

'One of the greatest Irish sporting stories finally gets the brilliant book it deserves.' *Dave Hannigan*

A county winning both the All-Ireland Senior Football and Hurling Championships in the same year. It was unheard of in modern Gaelic games. Many considered it impossible. Yet, in 1990, Cork achieved just that.

The Double: How Cork Made GAA History details this remarkable journey, with extensive interviews from those at the centre of this piece of sporting history. Billy Morgan and Larry Tompkins, among others, recount the footballers' efforts to keep Kerry down in Munster, as well as their run-ins with bitter rivals Meath. Key members of the hurling panel like Tomás Mulcahy, Mark Foley and coach Gerald McCarthy remember the hurlers' tumultuous road to success, from their shock 1989 defeat to lowly Waterford up to the classic 'donkeys don't win derbies' Munster final against Tipperary in 1990 and beyond. Full of insight into these remarkable teams, as well as powerful and often humorous anecdotes, *The Double* captures an unparalleled year of success for Cork GAA.



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