

## Quarter-finals

Sideline Cut

## Keith Duggan

## Fate of England team continues to be Ireland's dark obsession



A friend of mine spent a few weeks in the summer of 1996 tumbling through Galway pubs watching the European football championships.

Naturally, he didn't miss an England game and every time El Tel's boys played, anti-imperial sentiment ran high across the counter-tops; this was, remember, a little over a year since the Lansdowne riots.

It was the usual Irish pastime of following England's progression through a major football tournament in a kind of appalled fascination with the thought that they might somehow win the thing – and England were pretty good that summer,

their homecoming tournament.

Things began to get serious when they beat a doughty Swiss team, causing one aggrieved punter watching the fare in Myles Lee's pub to stand up and channel Ciarán Fitzgerald as he bellowed at the television: "Where's yer \*\*\*ken pride, Switzerland?"

By the time England played Germany in the semi-final, every place in town was packed and my friend ended up in a pub in which the atmosphere was one of loathing at the thought of an England success.

When the game went to penalties, every German score was greeted as if the future of mankind depended on it. What made

my friend remember the moment was that he happened to be sitting close to an English family who had the misfortune to be watching the game in the same pub.

Their little boy, no more than ten, was visibly shocked by the unsparing venom on display towards his team, his country. When Germany's Andre Moller buckled England with that unforgettable arrogant penalty of his, the pub, my friend says, "erupted in joy". The little lad was beyond confusion and in tears. "Why do they hate us, Dad?" he asked.

Well, son...

I rang my friend on Friday morning to see how he was fixed at the thought of England winning the World Cup on Sunday week. He actually lives fairly close to England nowadays, in Liverpool.

He was in full agreement that there is something different about this England side, that the old boor boy element seems absent and that Gareth Southgate, their bespoke coach, seems incapable of uttering a graceless remark or behaving with anything other than class. Talk turned to that little English boy in the pub.

## Ireland panics

My friend had, in the back of his mind, felt kind of bad about that night. But, the place was heaving and the night was great fun. England had gone out on penalties. They were disconsolate. It was summertime. What could be better? He knew that deep down there was something a bit disturbed about the emotional investment involved in seeing England crushed. But he also knew it was real.

The little English lad would be in his early 30s now. Maybe he has long forgotten about his evening spent with Eng-

land-hating neighbours. Or maybe it caused him to become chair of his local Brexit committee.

This summer the same sentiment is beginning to bubble to the surface. Whenever an England football team threatens to win a tournament, Ireland panics. Ireland spent 800 years trying to get rid of the English and, once achieved, spent the next few decades obsessing about how to feel about England.

It's understandable because the vast majority of Irish people from the age 70 down have been blitzed with English pop and cultural references and heroes and voices for all of their lives.

Tens of thousands went to work in English cities, made families and settled; many thousands have been educated in English universities. Kate Bush, Hillary Mantel, *Grange Hill*, *Blackadder*, the Beatles, the Busby Babes, Richmal Crompton, Robert Smith, Julie Christie, *Withnail and I*, Brighton Rock, *Goldilocks*, *Top of the Pops*, Ted Hughes, *Panorama*, the Ford Cortina... England's touchstones have crowded the Irish imagination for generations and will continue to do so.

Countless Irish boys and girls grew up adoring Bowie or Damon or Amy; countless others spending their Saturdays agonising over the fortunes of the Leeds or the Arsenal or Man United or whoever. And nothing much has changed. The Premier League rules the waves. Countless Irish are hooked on *Love Island* this summer; how many Irish have binge-watched *The Crown* on Netflix?

All very well, but what about Cromwell, comes the argument.

And it's true. The bogey man in all his guises lurks deep. There is always a fear

about England that the imperial impulse is just taking a nap. England football teams act as a kind of pulse checker. The further they advance, the more loudly Ireland believes it can hear the tone of Cecil Rhodes and the brassy triumphalism of *Rule Britannia*.

During the frenzy of Royal Family interest generated by the Harry-Meghan romance and the success of *The Crown*, Craig Brown's *Ma'am Darling: 99 Glimpses of Princess Margaret* was published.

"It is a collage, montage or bricolage of glittery bits culled from two hundred biographies, authorised and unauthorised, written by cashiered gossip columnists and treacherous butlers and chauvinists, plus odds and ends such as the complete transcript of the princess's *Desert Island Discs* and the catalogue of her jewellery, sold after her death for £9 million," summarised Ferdinand Mount in a review which adds this brilliant passage:

"The effect is like one of those sweeping Klimt portraits, in which the comet trail of colourful fragments leaves a lasting

impression of an era on the skids. The book is extremely funny and extremely sad. As Brown says towards the end of it, 'It is *Cinderella* in reverse. Is it hope dashed, happiness mislaid, life mishandled. Nothing is as thrilling as they said it would be, no one is as amusing, as clever, as attractive or as interesting.'

## Gentle disappointment

All of 'England' seems packed into those few lines: the scope, the class system, the sense of an era in decline; dear old *Desert Island Discs*, the gentle disappointment with it all.

And what has summed up English 'hope dashed' – again and again and again – over the past 40-plus years more than the England football team? In Ireland, in a heatwave now, comes the latest test of how 'we' feel about it all: are we ready to forgive and forget and just allow a pretty decent-seeming bunch of footballers to end the years of hurt?

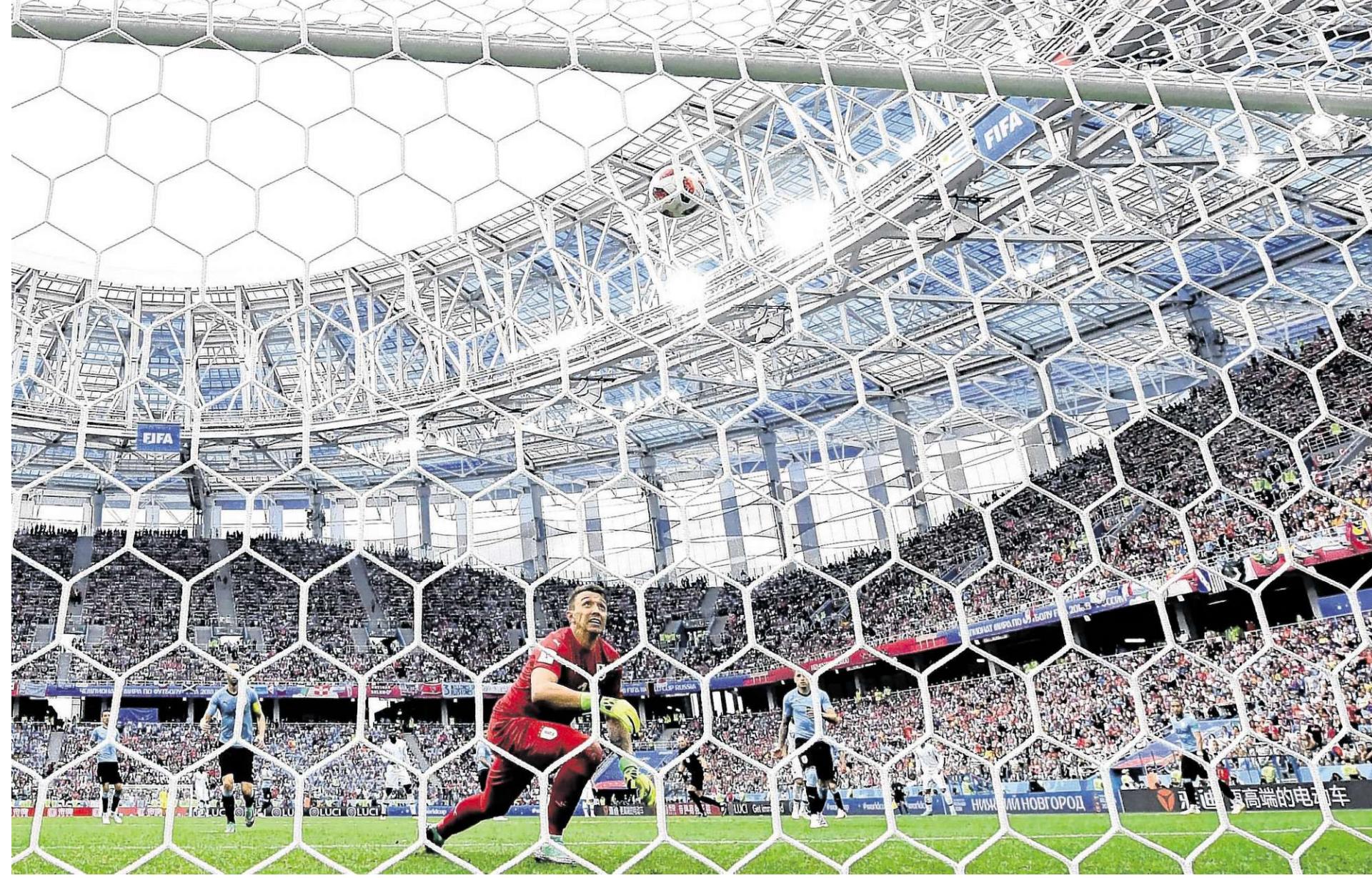
Are we grown up enough now to acknowledge that many of us live in England, have found England's cities to be brilliant places and spend so many of our idle hours lost in English words and English music?

"I know, I know," my friend and several others agreed. "I don't mind if they beat Sweden. But what if they... win it?"

The England football team remains Ireland's dark obsession.

The strange thing is that the English, almost unanimously well-disposed towards the Irish (at least since the bombs stopped exploding in their cities) have no idea that the Irish feel like this. That's because they never stop to think twice about the Irish. They think it's all over.

## Uruguay v France



## France fail to dazzle but easily see off Uruguay



## Ken Early in Nizhny Novgorod

Deschamps' side played very much to the manager's style in getting job done

## Uruguay

takes extraordinary luck for a smaller country not to simply run out of players, like a meteorite burning up to nothing on as it passes through earth's atmosphere.

A calf injury deprived Uruguay of Edinson Cavani, scorer of the two goals that got them past Portugal in the last round. Unlike France, who were without Blaise Matuidi due to suspension, they did not have the reserves to cope.

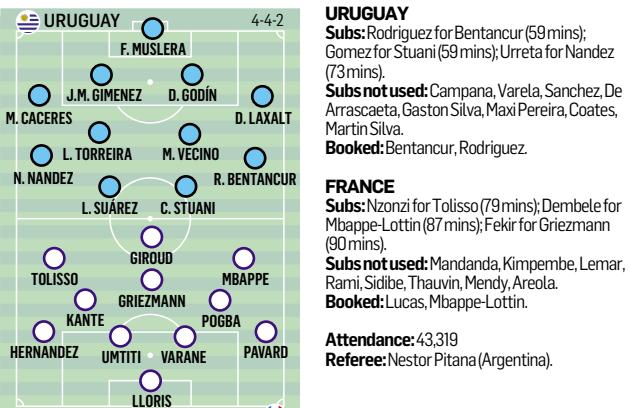
**Lightblue**  
They gave it their best shot; football means more in Uruguay than it does in France. That was reflected in the stands in Nizhny Novgorod, which were populated by far more light blue than dark.

There were also plenty of empty seats, appropriately blue and white in the colours of Argentine owners who hadn't turned up. Uruguay fans in Moscow wearing their colours could hardly move for Argentinians fans offering their tickets for sale.

The only Argentine involved out on the field was referee Nestor Pitana, who was clearly aware that this match had the potential to degenerate into acrimony, like England v Colombia, when the American referee Mark Geiger had lost control.

Pitana took just a few minutes to show he was no Geiger, when Suarez protested furiously against a challenge by Raphael Varane, miming the Uruguayan

## Nizhny Novgorod Stadium How they lined out



an's exaggerated gesticulations of complaint, Pitana bawled something obviously to the effect that Suarez was not refereeing this match, so he needed to shut up and let the real referee get on with his job.

Suarez started the match still unbeaten in meaningful World Cup play – a remarkable record for a veteran in his third tournament. The only World Cup match Uruguay had lost with Suarez on the field was the third-place play-off against Germany in 2010.

He began as though determined to compensate for the absence of his strike partner with sheer ruthlessness. Early in the match he planted his studs into the ribs of Hugo Lloris under cover of a goalmouth scramble.

Next he tried to crush France's willowy right-back Benjamin Pavard, checking the 22-year-old's run with his substantial backside. Surprisingly Pitana did not show him a card.

Four of the last five matches between these teams had finished 0-0 and from an early stage another scoreless draw looked likely. While Uruguay were busy but limited, France were ponderous, moving the ball slowly and without real purpose. They only came alive when the ball arrived at the feet of Kylian Mbappe, who seemed able to run past opponents at speed.

But this is the France of Didier Deschamps and they prefer to keep things cagey. The second half was more of the same, with France happy to contain the tiring Uruguayans. Just after the hour mark, they sealed victory with a goal that was painful to watch. Antoine Griez-

mann's shot from 25 yards was going straight at Fernando Muslera, but the Uruguayan goalkeeper misjudged the flight of the ball and spooned it into the net à la Liverpool's Karuis.

Given the pride Uruguay take in their ferocious defensive ethic, there was something sad and farcical in their hopes being extinguished by such a goal. Everyone in the stadium knew the game was up at that point, and all that remained was to finish out the remaining 29 minutes, with Uruguay aiming to keep what was left of their dignity and France playing cautiously to avoid injuries.

No side at this tournament is quicker, or stronger, or more skilled than France, yet we still await a truly dazzling performance from them at this World Cup, tearing up a shambolic Argentina side does not quite convince.

But the fact that they look "hard to beat" rather than "sensational" still leaves opponents with the problem of beating them, and inwardly Deschamps must now believe that he is about to emulate Franz Beckenbauer's achievement of captaining and then coaching his country to World Cup victory.

Uruguay's goalkeeper Fernando Muslera concedes the second goal during the quarter-final defeat to France at the Nizhny Novgorod Stadium. PHOTOGRAPH: FRANCK FIFE/AFP/GETTY

## Connemara is rooting for Kane

## JOHN FALLON

World Cup fever is set to grip a small Connemara outpost on Saturday as locals cheer on one of their own, with England captain Harry Kane bidding to guide his side into the semi-finals.

The exploits of the England captain have been cheered on in the Letterfrack and Tullycross areas of north Connemara, as they celebrate the achievements of the grandson of a local.

Michael John Kane left Letterfrack and emigrated to England, but the Kane family have been regular visitors to County Galway over the decades.

Harry's father Pat returned to Connemara recently and presented Angler's Rest pub owner Patrick Sammon with a signed Spurs shirt.

And World Cup fever has gripped Molly's bar in Letterfrack, where pub owner Gerry

Lyons is sticking to his promise to put up a free round of drinks for customers every time Kane scores.

It's proving a costly exercise as Kane has so far netted six goals and will be hoping to find the target again today.

Kane has many relatives living in the area but they were keeping a low profile yesterday as they geared up for the showdown with Sweden.

But cousin Liz Kane said previously they were so proud of Harry's achievements.

"Harry's father Pat and his brothers, who are based in London, are real sociable lads when they come home," said Liz.

Kane, who was born in Walthamstow in north-east London, was a regular visitor to Connemara growing up and was back five years ago for the funeral of his grandfather Michael John, who is buried locally at Baunogue cemetery.

Interview



Above and bottom: Aidan Harris Igienhon in Dublin in August 2017.

Left: in his formative basketball days with friends playing for the Dublin Lions

PHOTOGRAPHS: TOM HONAN

# Straight outta Clondalkin



Keith Duggan

Dublin-born and reared Aidan Harris Igienhon is on the cusp of joining basketball's NBA elite

**O**n Friday October 19th last, lost in the usual bulletins and white noise concerning Premier League turbulence, rugby updates and obscure golf tournaments results was one of the most remarkable Irish sporting achievements in many, many years.

Aidan Harris Igienhon, a Dublin teenager who is on a high-school basketball scholarship in New York, formally accepted the offer of a full basketball scholarship to the University of Louisville. Right now, Igienhon is ranked as number 36 on ESPN's list of the top high-school players in America (out of a pool of around 545,000).

If anything, that placing is falsely low: in several authoritative NBA draft projections, the Clondalkin teenager is forecast to be selected around 12th overall in the 2021 draft lottery. Igienhon's progression to the elite tier of the best young basketball players in America has been a story of exceptional perseverance and under-the-radar ambition. And what makes it implausible is that it has all happened within six years – and almost by accident.

Picture it. As a youngster, Igienhon was obsessed with soccer. He was with a friend kicking a ball around, outside Moyle Park, one non-descript afternoon, killing time, maybe daydreaming of the Premier League. In the gym, Mick White was holding trials for the under-13 age group. Anyone in Irish basketball knows of White: one of those guys who has for years worked quietly and brilliantly and anonymously, teaching kids the skills and values of his sport.

He saw two lads kicking ball, Aidan and Joe, and encouraged them to come in, coaxing them to give the game a go.

"They didn't have enough players and the coach came out and asked me if I would come in to fill up spots," Igienhon recalls now, speaking on a break from Sunday afternoon practice in New York. Through his mobile comes the clear sound

of the game: rubber sole against hard wood and the booming echo of a ball.

"And I picked up the orange ball and I started dribbling it. And I kind of fell in love with it from that day. But . . . at that time I was 5'6" and really short and couldn't play at all. I was horrible."

That same afternoon, Rob White received a call from his Dad, Mick White. He was ecstatic. He didn't see the horribleness. He told his son about these two kids who wandered in to the gym. "Mick said that one of the boys was going to be phenomenal. That he didn't know which end of him was up but the potential was huge. That was the first I heard of Aidan. Then, when I saw him, he was extremely long, even before he started to grow."

Was the day providential? Aidan thinks so. Almost as soon as he touched a basketball, his body began to change. For the next 12 months, he kept on growing and growing at a rate that made his coaches and team-mates slack-jawed – 5'8" and stretching.

Touching 6' by Christmas. Still no let up. By the time he was approaching his 14th birthday, he was 6'5" tall. In the densely populated world of Dublin underage basketball, he was half-curiosity, half-phenomenon, racking up 30-plus points a game, exuberantly finishing breakaway dunks and generally destroying the other "big men" in his age group.

## Dilemma

The Whites and other Dublin Lions coaches were left with a dilemma. They had watched the profile of ball players in West Dublin change dramatically over the past two decades. Aidan Igienhon was born in the Coombe hospital. His parents are from Lagos, but Clondalkin was his world and he was one of a number of Irish kids with African or Eastern European backgrounds radically changing the height and athleticism standard of the city game. "Aidan made people sit up," Rob White says. "He has always been a very strong personality. He was getting to a unique stage where we were at a fine line between keeping him and not seeing him progress, or sending him away and he would flourish out there. And that is exactly what happened."

They decided to organise a trip to camps in New York and Philadelphia in the summer of 2014. Twenty-two kids signed up. It was self-financed: €2,500 per player. The Lions' coaches had no contacts or promises; the idea was to allow youngsters like Aidan showcase their game at camps populated by high-school coaches.

Within a week, he had offers which required a sudden and radical change in life: swapping the familiarity of home for a

basketball scholarship in New York. Mick White found himself calling Nibo, Aidan's mother, to tell her to come over: that things were starting to happen fast. It was good luck that his aunt, Zenobia, and his uncle, Solomon, were living in Brooklyn and had the space to welcome their nephew into their home.

But it was serendipitous that Zenobia, Aidan's aunt through marriage, knew the realpolitik of basketball; that her brothers had played at a serious level in the city and then pro basketball abroad. She had an instinct for just how ferocious the competition among teenage basketball prodigies in New York can be, let alone across the whole of America.

"She has been just so supportive of me. She motivated me and she pushed me. And she made sure I worked my butt off."

In one way, it has been a demanding and solemn adolescence. There were occasional tears on the phone home to Nibo; to Rob White. The arrival of his brother Brandon on a soccer scholarship made home feel closer. But his hours were mapped out. Free time is a luxury he seldom grants himself. 4.30 am wake-ups. Shooting for 90 minutes daily before school. Post-off drills after school, then full training. It can be solitary, exhausting.

"For sure," he laughs. "I'm only human. Pushing your body to its limits . . . it's very, very tiring. I take rest pretty seriously too."

Over the last year, weights training fills in two hours at lunchtime. His school, Lawrence Woodmere Academy, is in Long Island and so his day involves the energising hustle of the subway; the perishing-cold winter commutes, and the broiling summer afternoons when it is basketball, basketball, always basketball.

"I don't think any of us, even me, fully understand, how much he has given this," says Rob White.

Lawrence Woodmere Academy is not one of the powerhouses of the New York high-school basketball scene. When Aidan began to exert his prowess – still growing until he achieved what he jokingly refers to as "athletic freak" status: a 17-year-old, 6'10", 240 lbs leaper – the bigger, flashier high schools came calling but he stayed loyal: he liked his teammates, his routine, his coach. He trusted it.

He was still just 15 when he began to receive a formal college scholarship offer from St John's, one of the prestige basketball schools in New York. And that's when the things began to change at speed of sound rate. Letters of interest. Phone calls. Invitations. Then firm offers.

## The best fit

"By the summer of me going into what



would be fifth year in Ireland, all the top schools [as in American universities] in the country started calling me. So suddenly I had these scholarship offers all over the country. How that works is that you talk with each coach and get to know them a bit. And their job is basically to get you familiar with their programme and show you why they are the best fit for you.

And that's where it gets really complicated because you are not comparing the pros and cons of different colleges. You are kind of looking at the pros and cons because they all have so many good things to offer. And that's where I began to struggle. I had to trim those, this summer, down to 10 schools. And that was extremely hard. After that you do what is called 'official visits' and that meant cutting the list again to four of five.

"And that was harder again. Because by then you are quite close to the head coach of each of the 10 schools and you are in tune with the system they have in place. So around August, after I came back from Ireland, I trimmed it down to four: University of Kentucky, St John's, Louisville and Oregon."

If you are 6'10" and are knee-deep in collegiate offers, then your name is in the notebooks of all NBA scouts, probably surrounded by bullet points and question marks. At that rarefied tier, you are

entering a very exact and calculating business. About 1 per cent of high-school players get offers to play college basketball: three in every 10,000 make it to the NBA. Almost all of those go through the elite collegiate basketball system. The most coveted players declare for the NBA draft after their first year, part of the "one-and-done phenomenon". American college basketball is a beautiful illusion.

## Sporting purity

As a television spectacle, set against the backdrop of euphoric students fans and featuring rivalries that date back to the sepia age, the competition is presented as the pinnacle of amateur sporting purity. And it is in the sense that the athletes are strictly and rigorously unpaid. Their coaches, however, earn vast salaries, with the top 10 commanding between \$3 million and \$10 million per year.

Basketball teams generate huge sums for their colleges: in a recent *Wall Street Journal* report, Louisville's basketball set-up was valued at the equivalent of \$320 million on the open market. Michael Bree, from Sligo town, was the first Irish-born player to play NCAA division one basketball when he went to Davidson in North Carolina.

Since then, a handful of Irish players have made that grade. Conor Grace, a 6'10" forward from Dublin, followed Bree to Davidson: he graduated in 2005, two years before Steph Curry arrived in the college as a relatively unheralded point guard.

Grace has been working in Kingston, Jamaica since 2016. A hand injury has interrupted his basketball career, but he keeps a close eye on the Irish game and has followed Aidan Igienhon's rise with incredulity.

"It's just very, very exciting," he says. "Irish basketball has had people who have gone over to the States. Some stayed and some didn't like it. But to go over there as young as Aidan was and have that single-mindedness and outlook is pretty cool. And then, Louisville is such an historic basketball school. They have this monster tradition in the game. I don't know Aidan at all but I imagine the reason he chose there is that he will be expected to come in and contribute in a big way immediately."

Grace played professionally in Europe for several years. In summertime, he'd return to Davidson to work out. It was on

one such visit that he first encountered Steph Curry. Last year, Curry became the highest-paid player in the NBA, when he signed a five-year contract with the Golden State Warriors worth \$201 million. When Grace played pick-up games with him, though, he was a slender, unheralded guard with an unorthodox shooting stroke and a preternatural disposition for hard work.

Nobody knew it then but Curry was at the beginning of a dazzling ascent to the apex of basketball, a transformative figure in sport. Each year, Curry hosts a camp for 24 high-school players he chooses. This summer Aidan Igienhon was among that class. Curry flies the players and their families out to Northern California for a week that is part try-out, part motivational retreat.

"There were 76 NBA scouts there," Igienhon says. "You see those faces sitting on the sideline and you think: 'wow, ok, now the heat is on'. You have to perform at 110 per cent every time. And I think I had a good camp . . . I dominated and left a good taste there. It was all . . . it was pretty amazing. Steph Curry: he is a very humble guy. I mean, he is one of the names in the game of basketball right now."

"But it was so easy to talk with him. It was as if he looked at us as little brothers. He was hanging around with us and shooting with us. He hosted an All-Star game and he was my coach. He was giving me little pointers and advice. And I played extremely well. The type of passion he has is contagious. And to have him saying: if you work hard you can be whatever you want: that felt pretty amazing."

That's where Aidan Igienhon has moved to in the five short years since Mick White handed him a ball. There's a video on YouTube that Igienhon did for Overtime, a sports network, in which he goes along to the 2018 NBA draft and interviews the new recruits. He's a likeable combination of hyper-excited and confident and unaffected. But what's striking, though, is that all of the brand new NBA stars know exactly who he is. When you enter the 1 per cent of basketball potential, it's a small community.

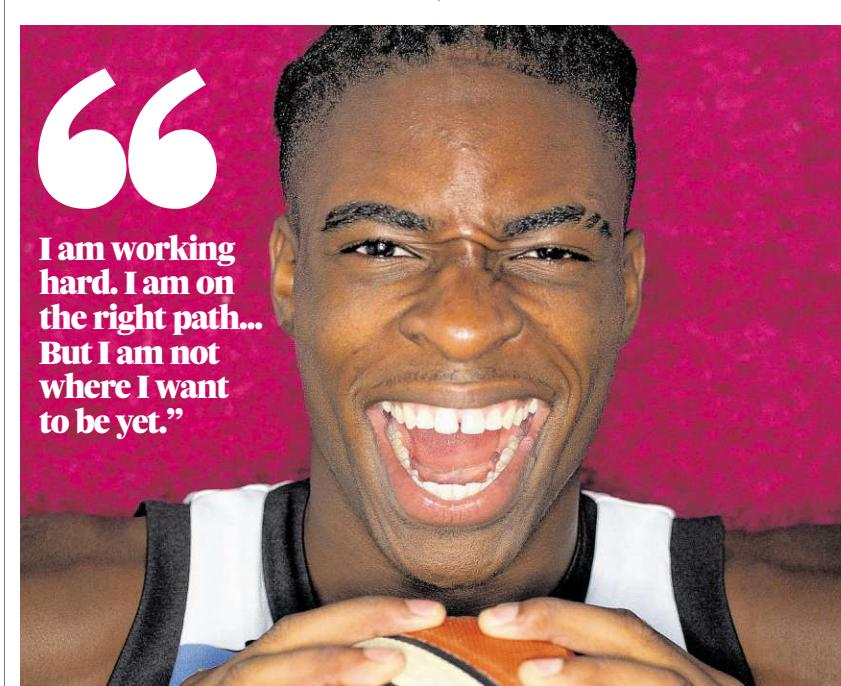
"You know, I don't want to say that that surprised me, because it didn't. But it was a kind of re-assurance to me and made me feel: yeah, I am doing the right thing. I am working hard. I am on the right path. I don't let stuff like blow my head up because I am not where I want to be yet."

Where he wants to be, ultimately, is a big name in the NBA. What he has done will only really hit home when Marv Albert or some other famous voice croons over the word "Irishman" and it suddenly becomes clear that a Dublin basketball kid has made it to a place that had seemed impossible. He doesn't permit himself those daydreams or to presume that he has cleared the obstacles.

He still has a winter of high school before he moves to Kentucky. He still has thousands of hours to fill. He has promised Nibo to push himself academically. And he has listened to what he has been told. "You can get blinded. You can lose focus. It's flattering that people think I can be there. But I have to do it now."

Aidan Igienhon was born in the summer of 2000. He was one year old when Denny Crum retired as head coach at Louisville after 30 years that crystallised the obsession with basketball. Crum had this saying that became celebrated. Funny, it could serve as a motto for Aidan Igienhon.

Crum said: "Most of our future lies ahead."





# It was the summer of 1969



**Keith Duggan**

The men who won the All-Ireland U-21 football title for Antrim as the Troubles took hold have some tales to tell

**M**ost evenings that summer, you'd see them outside the Florida after training; faces flushed, gear bags dumped at their feet, enjoying the dusk and the gossip. The cafe was just a few minutes walk from Casement Park and from their homes. They were local boys in a city that was about to turn molten and complex with violence even if, in 1969, nobody could have guessed at the black enormity the coming decades would hold.

Their world was still largely confined to the latticework of streets and cul-de-sacs encircled by the main thoroughfares of the Glen Road, Kennedy Way, Andersonstown Road and Shaw's Road. "It's like an island," Andy McCallin says.

He grew up in a family of eight on the last house on Commedagh Drive. Andy was a wisp; slight, genius feet, prodigiously gifted at hurling and football and singularly devoted to practicing his craft. The elders reckoned he was better at hurling. The little drain holes in the low wall across from the McCallin house served as markers as he'd fire sliotars and footballs at them for hours, for days, for years.

"I had no choice," Andy says sitting in his car and looking through the window at those same drain holes. It's a crisp school day in early January: Commedagh is quiet and the sloping green nearby is empty. "My father was chairman of St John's and, for me, he was the be all and end all."

Andy would score 1-5 of Antrim's total of 1-8 against Roscommon in the All-Ireland under-21 final that September. His mother would tell him that his father left Croke Park with tears running freely down his face. The man was overcome; overjoyed. He communicated this with his son the only way he knew how: by sitting him down at home to go through every-

thing Andy had done wrong in the final. The two words both speaker and listener were waiting on – Well Done – never came. Even now, McCallin can't explain why that under-21 side came together and kept winning. Nobody was expecting it. Antrim were a non-entity. "That team," Andy says "... it was a freak."

It may be the only word for it. Antrim footballers had won 10 Ulster senior titles but nothing since 1951. They'd appeared and were defeated in the All-Ireland finals of 1910 and 1911. Other places were defining the winning of GAA competitions.

Then, out of the blue, Tommy Hall got a squad together intent on making sure that, if nothing else, when the boys walked through the gates of Casement Park, the street noise would remain outside. For a couple of hours, they'd just play ball on a summer's evening.

"It was an unwritten law," Hall would tell the GAA's oral history project in 2012, a few years before he died. "I got them all to mix. And I used to say if I wanted a packet of sweets, 10 would go. It became a good family situation."

It was almost that anyhow. One third of the entire team had been knocking about as soon as they were old enough to leave the house. Gerry McCann, one of Andy's best friends, lived on a terrace on Trostan Way. Daniel 'Din Joe' McGrogan was North Green. Liam Boyle lived parallel on Corby Way. Martin McGranaghan, whose family ran a chain of bookies, lived in a stand-alone house further up the Glen Road. It was, in spirit and in fact, a city team. Thirteen of the 15 players who started the All-Ireland final were from Belfast.

Even now, they're not fully sure how they came to be selected. No official trials were held. They were just told to show up. So they did. The events of their first match, a preliminary round against Monaghan in Castleblaney are so obscured in their minds that none of them have the faintest memory of it. "Monaghan?" a perplexed Michael Colbert repeats down the phone when told that's where the campaign had started. The others forgot about it too.

## Outrage

Tommy Hall, though, would always see John Burns sprinting towards him a few minutes before the throw-in, his face lit with indignation. He'd overheard the Monaghan manager chatting with the Derry manager about where they'd play the next round. He was outraged at the

slight. Hall smiled, pleased. Antrim ran riot that day. "It was," Hall would say, "the spark that set the whole thing going."

On paper, Antrim's 1969 football odyssey was a litany of close run things: one-point wins over Derry, Down, Cork and Roscommon. Dermot Earley, the legend in full Technicolor even then, had an outstanding game in the final but Mickey Freyne screwed a late, long-range free narrowly wide as the Connacht men lost out by the narrowest margin. It was Antrim's summer.

At the whistle, a fair section of the Antrim crowd jumped the wire on Croke Park and chaired Liam Boyle, the captain, off the field. They carried him towards the Hogan Stand singing *We Shall Overcome*, the civil rights anthem. Liam was too caught up in the moment to even hear them. "Someone told me afterwards. But it was one of those games that was so tight and at the end, when the whistle went, I wasn't sure of the score. Gerry Neills came over to me and just said: 'We've won it.' We were hugging each other and the next thing I know I was being carried to the stand. But yeah, the Antrim crowd enjoyed it and didn't worry about the rules and regulations too much that day."

What the moment in Croke Park represented was the illusion of normalcy, the wilful pretence that their daily lives were the same as those of the boys whose counties they faced throughout that summer. Being flown to Cork for the semi-final was a jape; a first plane ride for most of the team and a good laugh. But the reality was that the flight was reportedly organised on the edict of Taoiseach Jack Lynch to make it easier for the team to get to and from Belfast.

Their city had been transformed physically and in atmosphere within the space of 12 months and the emergence of 130 odd barricades and a Citizens Defence Committee was dominating the August news. Everyone was guarded. The buses didn't run after six o'clock. All of the streets around Andersonstown were barricaded and manned each night.

## Exotic trip

Andy McCallin had started going with Josephine in 1968. She lived a mile and a half down from his house and to see her that summer, he had to climb over the barricade and walk down the Falls Road. "With the army and everything else. And I will tell you! There'd be evenings when there would be nobody about. It was empty. There were people being shot on the Falls for no reason. Five nights a week."

Through all that, they trained, they wandered up to the Florida and they kept on winning. They received a mayoral reception when they landed in Cork on that exotic plane trip: unusual treatment for an U-21 team; further evidence that they were, somehow, special. Their Cork hosts probably imagined that Antrim's journey would end there. When they were about to go out on the field, Din Joe McGrogan must have noticed Tommy Hall looking pensive because he approached him to offer some of his uncontrollable zest and energy.

"Don't be worryin'," he said breezily. "Sure I'll score two goals today." Antrim won by 3-7 to 1-2. Grogan scored two goals. It was after two o'clock in the morning when they got home. When Tommy Hall arrived at the street where he lived after the Cork semi-final, he rolled down the car window and was told: "Well done Tommy. Great win today. But you're not getting in this way." He was told to go around to Cavendish Square where he encountered the same thing. The simple act of driving home after a football match

was impossible. He left the car on the Falls Road and told a few young lads to watch it until the morning.

It would be foolish to suggest that their win was celebrated across the city – the saffron flags flying – but in the GAA enclaves, the fact that an Antrim team was doing well was something to celebrate. On their team bus journeys or dressing rooms, there were never any conversations about the firing of houses, the killings on the streets or how any of them felt about it all. They belonged to the generation of Belfast citizens whose childhood in the 1950s had been peaceful and offered no hint of the next 30 years.

There was the odd incident – Gerry McCann remembers one day himself and Andy were climbing trees down near Musgrave. A group of lads happened on them and instructed them to get down and say the *Our Father*. The pair started their recitation, read each other's eyes and instinctively knew what to do. "We ran," Gerry laughs. "That was the one thing we knew how to do."

For Andy McCallin, the most difficult years came later, when the army took over Casement. For Andy, the ground was "theirs": a local theatre of glamour since he was a kid, helping the groundsman. To him, the Troubles became what they were for the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland: a daily low-grade source of tension and fear and inconvenience.

Once, on a black, dark night near Blacklion after a league game, he felt truly frightened when a car full of the team was stopped and asked for identification. They were wearing Sunday suits: their driver's licences were at home. "In the jeans in the bedroom after the Saturday night." They were told to go outside. "And they stood there pointing guns. And I never saw darkness like it in my life." In that moment, he didn't know if he'd make it to the next. But he did. They drove home, shaken.

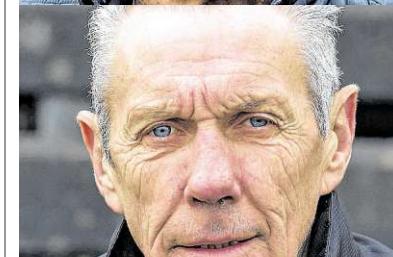
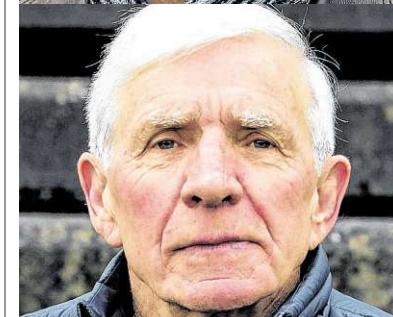
The next day came. "I have never been involved or interested in my life. All I was interested in was football and hurling. Me and Gerry didn't know anything about it. You wouldn't have known if your own brother was involved. You just wouldn't have known. That's what it was."

So that summer, the training, the championship, offered a bit of light relief. It wasn't at all solemn. Their recollection of the matches is hazy; the fun stayed with them. Michael Culbert elected to skip the Ulster final so he could go on a hotel tour of Ireland with his girlfriend. "As you do," he says drily. "Young love."

He was dropped for the semi-final and came on as a substitute. "Not sure who I impressed because I hardly saw the ball. But I was back in for the final." It was different then. They knew of other players by reputation or by what they read in the newspaper. The coverage was smaller so imagination took over. The players never thought too much about what was happening – what they were doing – until the night they found themselves in the hall in St Teresa's with the Clarke Cup and this new fact that distinguished them: the first Antrim team to win an All-Ireland football championship.

That evening, they were entitled to predict a heady few years. But it never worked out that way. Some stayed immersed in the game – Andy McCallin would go on to become Antrim's first and so far – only football player to win an All-Star award in 1971. Both he and Gerry McCann are still deeply involved in their club, St John's. Others faded out of sight.

Liam Boyle spent two decades in Seattle and has only recently returned home. Din Joe Grogan was killed when a bomb went off in a pub on the Andersonstown Road on a summer's afternoon. Séamus Killough, the full back, graduated from Queen's in dentistry and left the city. Billy



■ Above (from left): Seamus Killough, Liam Boyle, Gerry McCann, and Andy McCallin of the Antrim team who won the 1969 All-Ireland under-21 Football Championship, pictured at Casement Park in Belfast.

PHOTOGRAPHS: LIAM MCBURNEY

Millar made a life in Canada. Aidan Hamill became head of the Northern Ireland Education Board. Jimmy Mullan disappeared entirely. Michael Culbert became a social worker and, ultimately a Republican activist who served 16 years in prison.

"We all had our own backgrounds," Culbert says now. "Take my family ... my family was very pro-British. I am named after my grandfather who never came home from the first war. And my uncle Jack lived in Bombay Street and was burnt out of it. He had one arm – he lost the other in the first World War. So it is not as if I was raised in a Republican cauldron. But my politics evolved and probably climaxed in Bloody Sunday."

"There is never a one thing. Accumulatively, people come to their own conclusions about stuff. And I came to mine. I wasn't a kid. I was a social worker, my wife a school teacher when I went to jail. I was nobody's mug. I was no victim of circumstance. But the only thing we had in common on that team is that we were playing Gaelic football. What was happening was never part of our conversation. We just played."

"Out of their skins. And when the whistle blew in Croke Park, on September 14th, Antrim were champions of Ireland; a good news story at the end of a disturbing summer, a young team with it all ahead of them until, magically, inevitably, 50 years slipped by."

## Childlike delight

Andy McCallin is already sitting in the social club in Casement Park when the others arrive. Raymond, who runs the bar, has served up coffee, a plate of kitkats, bakewell tarts. Normally, he doesn't open until the evening but he has made an exception. Just after 11am, Liam Boyle, Gerry McCann and Séamus Killough dander in. "We're out standin' in the cold and youse in having coffee," someone shouts.

McCann and McCallin see each other frequently but Andy hasn't seen Liam in many, many years. He hasn't seen Killough for a long time either. If you were to describe Séamus Killough's face in repose, then "childlike delight" is the only phrase. He's a huge, genial, cheerful man, relishing sending himself up as the country bumbkin among slick Belfast kids. He's plainly thrilled to see them all.

"I hadn't seen this man for 40 years," he says nodding towards Liam Boyle, "until I met him in a chemist in Ballycastle a few days ago. Now, I'm seeing him twice in a week. What's going on?" And he fills the room – all of Casement, in fact – with this gargantuan laugh. The former team-mates are meeting up to try and make sense of what they achieved that summer. McCann and Boyle are still greyhound-slender, McCallin retains the efficient, elusive movement and Killough looks fresh-faced even if they are all in and around a landmark 70th year.

It's clear none of them see age in each other, though. Once the coffee is poured, they tear into it and one another, rifling through old newspaper clippings, momentarily stunned by the few photos from that summer they've managed to preserve and fuzzily trying to summon the bare bones of those games. In the empty lounge, the voices merge.

"Wasn't it Fermanagh in the first round?"

“

**The only thing we had in common on that team is that we were playing Gaelic football. What was happening was never part of our conversation. We just played.**



"I remember Adrian McGuckin crying after the Derry game. They were some team."

"Meself and Gerry and my younger brother went touring Ireland after the Fermanagh game."

"Down had won the senior All-Ireland the year before. They had Colm McIlerny, Peter Rooney and a few more from the senior team. And we beat them by a point."

"I was in Casement Park once ever before I played my first county match. And I remember being absolutely astounded by Jim McCorry from Glenade."

"Jungle Jim".

"I never saw legs the size of them in my life."

"Gerry Donnell's the only man I ever saw who'd go into a shower with a cigarette in his mouth and not get it wet."

"This boy decided to stay on to do a Masters cos he didn't want to leave Queen's. So he came up with Street Lighting in Belfast. Sure by 1972 there wasn't a street light left."

"The only thing different about the All-Ireland final is that we trained on the Saturday beforehand. Other than that, it was like any game."

"I don't remember us having tactics, really. Like what were the tactics?"

"Get the ball to Andy."

"It was like a bit of craic. There was never any pressure or tension that you see in teams now."

"That was down to Din Joe. But in all seriousness: what was ahead of me on the field. Ye were bloody good footballers. That was obvious. One of the papers said we were favourites for the final. I can't remember that."

"I felt sorry for Dermot Early after that game. He was one of the best players to ever take a field, I thought."

"Aye, and Dunlop had the audacity to say to me afterwards, 'Seamus, he never got a kick of the ball.'"

"As they warm to it, Din Joe McGrogan's name keeps fizzing about the room."

"He was a special character," Gerry McCann explains. "Din Joe was like a split personality – three ways: he was Din Joe, he was Denis Law and Elvis Presley. He had red hair and the quiff. Loved Elvis. If you went into Din Joe's wardrobe and had a look at his ties, they were about one inch long because he fucken' cut them off after the knot. He didn't like the bits sticking out at the end. He'd be up and down the bus singing. He was very quick. He was very sharp. Din Joe didn't ever just score a goal: it was a sensational goal. He didn't like a high ball. He'd say: 'don't be giving me any suicides.'

"He more or less won that game for us against Cork," says McCallin.

The photograph of the '69 team has been removed from the wall in Casement. Some of the frames were taken down when the stadium was closed and boarded up for the £80 million redevelopment that has since become mired in a planning and political stalemate.

"See that place out there," Gerry McCann says. "We don't have a base and that is a travesty. When you were a kid the big ambition was to play in Casement."

You can still see the floodlights as you approach the park but inside, it has become an eerie skeleton of a football stadium. It must be the loneliest place in Belfast. The posts and nets are gone, the yellow bucket seats gone and the field turned to knee-high weeds and strictly speaking, the field is out of bounds: boarded up and off limits. It's a place that means a lot to the Andersonstown group. "Without being too nostalgic, it was where we always wanted to play," Liam Boyle says. "It was our Wembley."

"It was a big auld place to run around, mind," Séamus Killough says.

"Lap after lap," sighs McCallin. "In the

muck and shit."

"Jesus, I always wanted more running," says Boyle.

## Moving on

In his GAA oral history, Tommy McDonnell remembers two things about the All-Ireland final: the tussle between Boyle and Earley at midfield and Killough's hour at full back.

"At that time you had everyone stuck to their positions," he said. "We changed it a wee bit with Andy McCallin, who was very clever. But anyway, Killough was tremendous. There was one particular save in the last few minutes of the game where he caught a ball in the square and next thing: bang. He was on the ground. I ran onto the field and he just looked up at me as if to say: I am taking a rest. So the ball was cleared out and who gets it but Earley. They had a free very late on. The referee said: this is the last kick. He emphasised it. And it just went wide. People went ... mad. And that feeling never left me. It did Antrim good."

Could it have been more? The 1969 team was, Andy McCallin thinks now, unusual. "We weren't the best team in the world but it had this mismatch of personalities and abilities. The way things had gone, it looked as if we were going to win more."

The following summer, five of the side were on the Antrim senior team that made it to the Ulster final. Gerry McCann remembers Eamon Grieve ripping into them for laughing and joking as they got off the bus in Clones. The lightness was all they knew. There was something stirring in the city game in the early part of the decade. The county won further Ulster U-21 titles in 1974 and 1975. It was clear that there was latent talent scattered around the city and county.

Assembling them remained a problem. Jimmy Ward was managing the senior team around then. "Jimmy was the best manager I played under for Antrim," says Andy. "I hated his guts because he tried to kill me on the field but he had us moving in the right direction."

Séamus Killough's easy assuredness at full back saw him fast-tracked to the senior team but life was pulling him in other directions. He married Sinéad a week after graduating from Queen's and they were settling uneasily into professional life in Belfast. A killing nearby – a ladder used to gain entry to an upstairs window – convinced them that it was time to move. They were either going to New Zealand or Wexford," he tells the others.

"Bit of a difference," Gerry McCann says.

Then an opening came up for a dental position in Ballycastle and that was it. Killough didn't play for Antrim again. Liam Boyle was interned for a period and when he returned to his first training session, he nearly got sick. "I thought I was in kind of good shape," Liam was thinking of heading to the US that summer when he circumstances changed and he was imprisoned for 11 years. His Antrim career ended there.

Din Joe McGrogan was due to head to Newcastle in Co Down for his summer holidays on the Friday that he was killed. He had popped home to visit his mum and then went down to place a quick bet. He stopped into the Whitefort Inn on Andersonstown Road for a pint and was there when a bomb exploded. He was one of three people killed. It was July 29th, 1976. By then, such deaths in the city and across Northern Ireland were everyday occurrences.

"It affected us all, yeah," says Gerry McCann. "But it killed his mother. She didn't last too long after it."

Grogan was still kicking football for the Johnnies that summer. His death reaffirmed at once how trivial and vital playing GAA was during those times. It was almost impossible for Antrim to field what could have been its best ever team during the 1970s. When the group is asked how Antrim football would have been like without the violence and civil strife, they are stumped. It's like asking players from the west coast of Donegal what it would have been like to train without rain and wind. The violence became part of the elements. "Things," Gerry McCann says, "just fractured."

## Results man

Do All-Ireland medals truly matter? One thing the 1969 players learned quickly was that winning altered or changed nothing. They were feted for a week in the areas of the city where Gaelic games held tradition and currency but it was a sharp time. Mickey Culbert says now that he was "grossly underwhelmed" by it all in those weeks. It's only years later that he has begun to think about what it meant. His 16 years in prison in the Crumlin Road and, later, Long Kesh was for being charged, in the Diplock judicial system, and found guilty of the murder of a UDR officer in Lisburn.

"Well, I was never proven guilty of it. I've never denied being an activist and I'm not crying poverty or anything else but you have to bear in mind that Castlereagh, the Diplock courts, it was very easy to put people away. But yeah, I am very up front about my Republican activism."

In prison, Culbert was the results man. He'd swallow a cellulophane note with all the Antrim GAA scores and became expert at reproducing it at haste – the method dependent on the importance of the championship games. It was probably daff but those scorelines were like a voltage back to a lost normalcy. Culbert

remains deeply involved in Antrim GAA, managing both football and hurling teams. His St Gall's team play Oranmore in the intermediate club hurling semi-final this very weekend. When he is asked why the 1969 victory didn't lead to further triumphs for Antrim, he pauses down the phone.

"That was the assumption made. That we'd win more. Why it didn't take place? Was it the conflict? It was difficult to move around for training and all that, yes. All those wee things are factors as to why Antrim didn't come through. You'd probably need a psychologist to work that one out. And: maybe we weren't good enough. Maybe there wasn't enough investment."

"But see those fellas you were talking to? They were quality footballers. McCann and McCallin – I was normally the fellas delegated to chase them around the field. Liam Boyle and Séamus Killough... those boys were really fine footballers. I, in all honesty, was a journeyman. But those boys could really play. And I think that was

it. A manager can only do so much. There was just some very good players there. And I'm proud of having that medal. Now, in talking about it... I don't actually know where it is. My wife would know where it is."

All of their medals have led a precarious existence through the five decades since. Gerry McCann landed home one day to find the house raided. He feared the worst when he noticed that his wife's engagement and wedding rings gone from the dresser. "But my fucking All-Ireland medal was still there," he laughs. "I just shouted: Yessssss! I got her another engagement ring. Mind you, she's still hunting me to buy the wedding one."

Andy McCallin gave his medal to his mother. "She was very proud of it. She kept it with her. My Dad didn't bring her to many matches but he brought her to Croke Park some time after that. She bumped into an old acquaintance... a big hug and what have you. Next thing in Wednesday's *Irish News*: All-Ireland medal found in Croke Park. Can anyone claim this? They got it back to her. At this stage, I didn't know anything about it."

Liam Boyle's medal was lost or taken during a raid. His mother wrote to Croke Park in 1993 and they sent out a replica. They turn to Séamus Killough. "I'll break down," the big man confesses. "I gave it to Sinéad early on and she wore it on a gold chain. And the number of people who stopped and admired it. Because it made the most wonderful piece of jewellery. When people asked her about it, she always said it was for her Irish dancing. Everywhere she went. And it's a major concern now... who is going to get it."

In 2010 Liam Boyle lived in America, family and friends would often introduce him as "Liam... he captained Antrim to the All-Ireland U-21." It used to irk him and amuse him. "I'd played for the bloody seniors too," he laughs.

## Different city

He didn't really want this one summer, this one team, defining him. Recently he found himself walking through Belfast and was struck by how much it has changed – the skin colours, the atmosphere, the affluence, the sense of possibility. He happened to be carrying a bag with a GAA logo and was disguised it on instinct until he realised that nobody cared a hoot.

Belfast is a different city now and Antrim is very far away from winning a football All-Ireland. There are no formal plans as yet to mark the 50th anniversary of a shining achievement in the county's GAA history. But as they leave Casement, the team-mates make loose plans to see each other soon again. Funny, they finished up at Casement, too, on the night they came home to Belfast as champions.

Late on, after the speeches and the celebrations had wound down at St Terese's, Liam Boyle and a few of the others decided to wander down to the stadium to see if the club was still open, hoping to get a late drink. But it was a Monday night in September: the city was darkening in every sense. The party was over. "So we were leaving and a voice said halt," Liam Boyle says.

"There was a group of people at the gates. And one of them had a gun. And the questions came: What are you doing here? Who are you? They were local vigilantes. It was normal then so you didn't think about it."

The street guardians moved away. The newly minted All-Ireland champions stood there for a few minutes, alone together on the Andersonstown Road. Then they headed up home.

## O'Byrne Cup Final

# Egan shows the way as Westmeath beat lacklustre Dublin

Dublin

0-10

Westmeath

1-12

Westmeath produced an impressive defensive display in accounting for a lacklustre Dublin by five points in their Bord na Móna O'Byrne Cup final at Parnell Park last night.

In doing so the Lake County claimed their first O'Byrne Cup since 1988, and they were full value for their victory, with wing-forward Ger Egan leading the way with a match-winning tally of 1-5.

Following their facile win over Longford six days previously, Westmeath made the brighter start, but failed to take advantage of some promising attacking positions as they registered two early wides.

The visitors were indebted to goalkeeper Eoin Carberry, who displayed sound reflexes in the 3rd minute to thwart Stephen Smith after the Skerries Harps player had managed to pierce the heavily-manned Westmeath defence.

Dublin were similarly profligate in attack initially as the normally reliable Ryan Basquel spurned two presentable chances, with Westmeath finally taking the lead through a fine Egan score in the 8th minute.

Irrespective of the Sigerson Cup commitments of a number of the players involved, the opening quarter still left an awful lot to be desired in terms of pace and intensity, before the hosts finally awoke from their collective slumber to level matters through a Séan Bugler point in the 18th minute.

From the resultant kick-out, Aaron Byrne, who impressed in Dublin's semi-final against Meath last Saturday, edged the hosts ahead with a smart score on the run.

That proved an isolated period of pressure from Dublin as their error count increased at an alarming rate, betraying their lack of group matches in the competition.

**WESTMEATH:** E Carberry; K Daly, R Wallace, B Sayeh; J Dolan, N Mulligan, N O'Reilly, S Flanagan, S Duncan; D Lynch, C McCormack, G Egan (1-5, one free); R O'Toole (0-2), K Martin (0-1), H Hartigan, Subs: T McDaniel (for O'Carroll), T Gleeson (for Gleech) (0-1) for Hartigan, T Cullinan for Flanagan (0-1), J Maxwell for McDaniel (0-2), C Murphy for O'Toole (0-1).

**DUBLIN:** A Bunyan, N Doran, S McMahon, C Smith, A McGowan, C Murphy (0-3, two frees) for Lynch (ht), T Lahiff for Hazley (ht), S Boland for R Basquel (0-0), D Monaghan for McGowan (0-0), C Diamond for Smith (0-0), L Galvin for Howley (0-0), L Flatman for Doran (0-0), Hazley for Byrne (0-0).

**Referee:** David Hickey (Carlow).



■ Westmeath players celebrate with the O'Byrne Cup after last night's final at Parnell Park. PHOTOGRAPH: OISIN KENRY/INPHO

## This weekend's GAA previews

### SATURDAY

#### McKenna Cup final

Armagh v Tyrone

Athletic Grounds, 7.30; Live, TG4

Tyrone's grip on the trophy, rudely

disrupted by Donegal last year, is set to be re-established for the seventh time in eight years.

Armagh are already looking stronger this year, especially in attack with Jamie Clarke back from his travels and sufficiently enthused to be playing McKenna Cup. Stefan Campbell has also ended his exile.

Tyrone are hit by the Sigerson clash but Mickey Harren has been able to bring in a raft of last year's championship team. Armagh had good wins over Monaghan and Donegal and will give this a rattle but Tyrone have to be favourites.

**Verdict:** Armagh

### All-Ireland club semi-finals

Matches at 2.00 unless stated

Pride of place on a big weekend for clubs around the country goes to junior hurling semi-finalists Carrick, the first Leitrim club to win a Connacht title and within one match of becoming a rare hurling side from the county to play competitively in Croke Park.

Cillian McDaid's return from Australia is a boost, as is the involvement of some Corofin players in the weeks before their All-Ireland club semi-final.

**Verdict:** Carrick

**Walsh Cup final**  
Galway v Wexford  
Bellefield, Enniscorthy, 2.00

Interesting semi-finals a week ago

gave Wexford another win over

Kilkenny in the competition and it was

the familiar strength of Paudie Foley's

free taking – which nearly kept them

afloat in the championship last year – that saw them home.

Galway effectively had to beat

Dublin twice and although there was a

good run for some younger players,

Joe Canning was still on hand to come

in and cut over the winning line ball.

**Verdict:** Wexford

### Kehoe Cup final Leinster SH

Antrim v Westmeath,

Abbottstown, 2.00

All-Ireland club IHC semi-final

Graigue-Ballycallan (Kilkenny) v Charleville (Cork)