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THE DECLAN BOGUE INTERVIEW

Tomorrow, at 37, Kevin Cassidy plays for Gaoh Dobhair in the Ulster Club SFC semi-final. Regarded as the unluckiest man in Donegal for missing the 2012 All-Ireland success, he sits down with the man whose book led to his exile from Jim McGuinness' setup. He doesn't have any regrets.

Missing the medal: Best decision I ever made

'We're a special kind of people'

The travelling fans from Naomh Conaill could hardly believe their eyes as they crawled along the narrow lanes of Magheragallon towards the home of Gaoh Dobhair CLG. There for all to see, was an eight by four foot sign with the message: 'We're a special kind of people, we breed defiance. We never fear. Gaoh Dobhair Abú.' A declaration of war? Perhaps. Probably.

Their surprise didn't stop there. From one end of the parish to the other, Gaoh Dobhair's former player Stephen Cassidy had taken it upon himself to fasten a green and white flag to almost everything that stood upright. 180 flags in all. It felt a bit much for a Championship group stage game.

Over the past few years, Naomh Conaill hadn't any problems with dismissing Gaoh Dobhair. In 2016, they beat them by 12 points in a county semi-final, prompting the retirement of Kevin Cassidy.

Cassidy was persuaded back the next year when Mervyn O'Donnell took the job nobody wanted, promising to restore the club's honesty. They faced Naomh Conaill in the county semi-final and although they lost, the margin was a point.

This year, Gaoh Dobhair won 0-12 to 0-6. The teams met again in the final and the Gaeltacht men clawed their way to their first Dr Maguire Cup since 2006. Back on top of the leaderboard with 15.

Now, they take on possibly the greatest ever club — Crossmaglen Rangers — in the Ulster club semi-final in Omagh this Sunday.

On the edge of the square is Stephen's brother Kevin Cassidy, 37 years old. Two-time All-Star. A serious specimen yet.

Seven years almost to the day he was cut from the Donegal squad by manager Jim McGuinness for participating in a season diary of Ulster football personalities. When you thought it couldn't get any uglier, it did when McGuinness later barred Cassidy and his wife Sarah from going on the team holiday.

Six years ago, he watched his former teammates win an All-Ireland, from the comfort of his own sofa.

And now he sits down with the author of the book that cost him all that. Me. Myself.

Or as they say in Gaoh Dobhair; 'Mise.'

'WE BREED DEFIANCE'

Declan Bogue: "Let's get straight into

it. There are many people - including myself - that think you are the unluckiest man in Donegal."

Kevin Cassidy: "Do you know what? This is 100% honest, but I never once turned to myself and said, 'fuck, I was hard done by there.'"

"People say to me that I am talking shit. People on nights out asking me about you; 'Do you talk to him?' Do I talk to you? (Laughs).

"People think because that happened that I would have a bad relationship with yourself. Or that I see myself as an unlucky person. That couldn't be further from the truth."

DB: "I have one friend who, if we are at a social occasion, likes to introduce me as 'the man who cost Kevin Cassidy a Celtic Cross.'"

KC: "Do you know what I have noticed, and I would say you see this too, but it is amazing how that affected other people."

"The amount of people from other counties that come up to me and they say, 'Do you know what, I am absolutely heart-broken that happened to you.' But they feel worse than I do!

"It just shows you the power of the GAA. I never thought it was anything else other than 'that's that thing between myself and Declan and that's it done.'"

"The amount of genuine people concerned that told me they thought about it for months afterwards. I always just say, 'aye, but sure what can you do?'"

"I don't know if it is just the way I am as a person, but there is not one day I look back and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done that.'"

DB: "Surely some family members must have been hurt by you being cut from the panel by Jim McGuinness at the time?"

KC: "On my side of the family, they are all like me. Not once did they turn around and say, 'Declan should have done this or that.' They naturally stood up for me. But if it hurt them, they didn't tell me it hurt them."

"But like, my answer is always... Fucking hell, I know this is the strangest thing to say, but it's only a game of football."

"To be honest, I never started out wanting to play for Donegal. It was never an ambition of mine to walk up those steps and lift Sam Maguire."



CALM BEFORE THE STORM: Jim McGuinness, Michael Murphy, and Kevin Cassidy, in Letterkenny ahead of the 2011 All-Ireland semi-final against Dublin. In November 2011 Cassidy was dropped from the Donegal panel. Picture: Oliver McVeigh/Sportsfile

"When you are in a team, you want to reach that because it is the highest you can go. Maybe it would have been different if I grew up and it would have been my biggest ambition."

DB: "You left Glasgow at 9?"

KC: "Yeah."

DB: "So you didn't have those common childhood dreams of playing for Donegal, rather Celtic?"

KC: "I really loved playing for Donegal and I was really proud to do it. And hopefully if my son chooses to do that now, it is a fantastic thing to do."

"But there is an element of that. I was a soccer player and then the first thing that turned me was Stephen playing for Gaoh Dobhair and they won a Ghaeltacht Championship. That was my first introduction to it and then I met Sarah (Gallagher, his wife whose father Willie played for Donegal), obviously her history and family was steeped in it."

"I spent time listening in Teach Mhic's to the older boys in the bar. My ambitions were always Gaoh Dobhair."

"The first time we won the Championship, I was thinking, 'It doesn't matter what I do now, we have done this.'"

"If you are a sportsman, you want to be the best you can be but it wasn't a childhood dream to win Sam Maguire, if I am being honest."

DB: "So where were you in 2012 when Donegal did?"

KC: "I was sitting at home. Like, it's surreal. I had been in Boston and Donegal beat Cork in the semi-final. I had watched the Kerry game in New York and at that time Cork were a good outfit."

"But they beat Cork that morning. Sarah and them had gone home and I was left behind because we were playing in the final that day in Boston. So I was listening to the radio and once they beat Cork I know they had it. Mayo weren't going to stop them."

"So the actual day of the final it didn't affect me because I knew at that stage the game was won."

"Whenever I was in the car going to training with the McGee brothers, we always talked about bringing Sam into Gaoh Dobhair and how great that would be."

"So on the Wednesday they were coming into Gaoh Dobhair. I was just in the house with Sarah. But you know our house, it's just across from the GAA pitch."

"I was sitting eating Weetabix about half eleven at night. I could see Sarah moving away, she was trying to pull the curtains as the cavalcade was taking the cup there."

"She was expecting me to be off. But if you are like that in general, then something in life is going to bring you down. If I was going around moping and crying that I didn't have an All-Ireland medal, then I wouldn't have done half the things I did after that."

DB: "At the time, we talked about this. I

told you to say some of those discussions were off the record, blame me and then you wouldn't lose your place. Why didn't you?"

KC: "I just wouldn't do that."

"The way I see it, if I do something, I do it. There is no point saying you didn't mean it, or shy away from it. I just wouldn't have done it and to be honest, it didn't enter my mind once to say, 'Oh fuck, I need to take care of this.'"

"You are going to find this strange. But I never read our book."

"I haven't read Rory Kavanagh's book either and I haven't read Jim's."

DB: "Never read Jim's?"

KC: "No. I just have no interest. It's not out of stubbornness or bitterness that I haven't read it. It's just... I don't mean this to sound bad or anything, but I have no interest in what he has to say."

DB: "Ok, what are the relationships like with former county teammates from that time? Even things in Gaoh Dobhair soured for a while."

KC: "I was explaining about Eamonn and Neil (McGee)."

"That was important to me (to repair the relationships) because they are clubmates and friends. This year has sorted all of that. The rest of it is not important."

"Let me tell you, when you are in a county squad you think you are all close and that you have so much in common. But when you step out you soon learn."

"Who would I see? The likes of (Brendan) Devenney. John Gildea. Adrian Sweeney from time to time. People you would bump into and have a conversation with. But I wouldn't see anyone else."

DB: "That day you were doing the co-commentary with TG4 and McGuinness came over for a toe-curling post-match interview..."

KC: "I am asked about that all the time. I walked away and never thought anything about it until people said it to me. I honestly didn't even feel awkward in that situation. I know your man was asking was I going back and I had said I wasn't going back."

"To me, it was a case of 'you know and I know, so let's cut the bullshit and leave it.'"

DB: "If you went back, you might have played on until 2014 or beyond."

KC: "I weighed all this up before I made the decision. What I thought I might leave behind was an All-Ireland in 2012."

"But we would have won it in 2014 and that is not being cocky. I know if I had been there and Mark McHugh was there, we would have beaten Kerry that day in 2014."

"So that's two All-Ireland medals. Chances are you might have won the odd All-Star along the way. But I still stand over the decision."

DB: "A lot of people will be reading these words and not believe it for a second. But I am looking at you now and I know it



is authentic.”

KC: “I know for a fact that the only people who probably truly believe me are Sarah and Hugh (McGinley, business partner). I don’t say it to that many people in fairness.

“People come into the pub and say, ‘Ah Jesus Christ, are you sick about missing out?’ And I have an automatic response now...”

DB: “I heard Mick McCarthy saying in an interview recently that when he and his wife go for dinner with a new couple, he counts down the minutes until the big question...”

KC: “YES! After the second pint is normally the answer.”

DB: “I read Jim’s autobiography myself. He doesn’t mention the approach he made for you to come back into the panel in Easter 2012.”

KC: “Listen, that’s Jim.

“I don’t know why. Maybe at that time he was trying to save face in front of the squad. But at the end of the day that conversation happened.

“The Thursday before the Easter Holidays he came up to the school. I was planning to go to Lanzarote on the Saturday with my family.

“PJ McGowan (former Donegal Chairman) was there, he set the thing up. Jim said, ‘Listen, let’s just get back in, come back in.’

“I said, ‘How are things going to be?’ and he said, ‘I spoke to the lads, everything is grand.’

“Well, I will need to think about it.”

“At that stage I had a fair idea that Donegal were going to go close. I thought then the text message I sent him... I was sitting on the balcony having a beer and I said, ‘I have thought about this. I don’t think that it is going to do the panel any good by me coming back in. I think it will cause more harm than good. So I am not coming back and I wish you all the best.’

“And that was it.

“I think if I had have went back, maybe they mightn’t have gone on to win it. Who knows? Maybe that unrest, or I was taking somebody’s spot who was getting a game... Myself and Sarah discussed it on holidays and we felt it was the best thing to do.

“It will sound strange to you Dec, and to a lot of people, but it is probably the best decision I ever made in my whole life.

“When I left Lanzarote and went home, within that squad I knew they wouldn’t be far away

“But I made my peace with it. I just thought, ‘where do I go from here? What do I want to focus on from here?’

“I threw myself into my family, into work, into life. I think I definitely wouldn’t have achieved half the things off the field if I didn’t make that decision.”

‘WE NEVER FEAR’

So what has he achieved? Jesus, where do you start?

Back in 2011 he was teaching in Little Angels, a school in Letterkenny for profoundly handicapped children where he would teach them songs, how to tie their shoelaces, take them to the swimming pool. A job that special people do.

Now, he has been on a sabbatical for some time. He and his best friend Hugh McGinley are on fire with ideas and creativity.

They have a residential Gaelscoil — Co-laiste Chú Chulainn — based in Gaoth Dobhair that takes in five-day courses of primary school children and the casual summer holidays crowd.

In the evenings, they organise Céili Mórs, water sports and so on, everything through the medium of Irish. It also doubles up as a venue for GAA teams to do a training weekend, where Cassidy himself will conduct a training session and arrange for challenge matches against local sides.

‘I threw myself into my family, into work, into life. I think I definitely wouldn’t have achieved half the things off the field if I didn’t make that decision,’ says Kevin Cassidy.
Picture: Brian McDaid

The teams can then stay in Teach Mhici, the pub that Kevin and Sarah along with other members of Sarah’s family, took over from her parents, Willie and Kathleen.

They have spruced the place up a bit. Gaoth Dobhair footballers of both genders are behind the bar or in the latest innovation; a wood-fired Pizza shop.

“Sarah thinks there is something wrong with me as I can’t sit still. I have to be doing something and if I am not doing something I have to be thinking about something,” he laughs.

“I love holidays but if I am sitting in the house and I have nothing to do, the mind goes into overdrive and I am thinking of this and that. Some people see it as being bad, but I see it as good. It keeps me energised and happy.

“Hugh will tell you there. We have worked together this past ten years and sometimes he will turn off the phone because I am just relentless. If I get an idea, it has to be done now.”

There’s the odd bit of leisure there too. Leisure that couldn’t be enjoyed as an inter-county player.

He spent four summers in America, playing for McBrides’ in Chicago and Donegal in New York where he never touched a drop of beer until his side were finished in their Championships. Each time, he brought his family.

Son Fionn is three on St Stephen’s Day. Aoife and Nia have First Communion in May.

Sarah is keeping well too, recently doing her second Dublin marathon and is kept busy with Teach Mhici and her teaching job.

He is a regular with RTÉ on co-commentary and files a weekly column for Ulster weekly ‘Gaelic Life.’

A couple of months back, Fionn got his first taste of a Celtic match. Cassidy’s season ticket is in the thick of The Green Brigade. Good times.

Not everything has been easy. He lost his father on St Brigid’s Day 2013. In truth, he was lost long before that, a victim of his addiction. “He landed around Christmas Eve (2012) down to the house,” says Cassidy.

“The twins were only newly born. He seen one of them and then I gave him a lift. I dropped him up to the pub and of course he was looking for a few pound for a few pints so I gave him a few pound.

“And then two weeks before he died, I had the twins in the car and noticed him walking in Gaoth Dobhair. So I swung around the car and just as I pulled into the car park of the pub, I could just see him close the door behind him. And he died the following week or so.

“That was kind of the relationship. You know with your father you are always striving for that kind of relationship and that wee turn I did that day was like what I did through my youth. You want that attention but the pub was just the bigger draw.

“It’s funny how that was the last... It just kind of symbolised that’s the way he was.”

Sarah’s parents are still trucking along. Her mother Kathleen will still venture in behind the bar at Teach Mhici, but, “We are trying to give her a break. She has worked so hard there. She still enjoys the craic and she will come in behind the bar and she will help out and stuff.

“But the day to day running, the late nights and the locking up, that’s all taken off her. It was time for her to go and enjoy



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her life and the girls were keen for that to happen."

The Saturday night before Gaoth Dobhair beat Cargin in the Ulster club Championship, Kevin and family were up to visit Sarah's father Willie for his 94th birthday.

The day after the county final when half of Gaoth Dobhair was sideways and the party reached Teach Mhici, Willie popped in and ordered up a Smirnoff Ice.

"He has five county Championships," proudly boasts his son-in-law.

"I was telling the boys how many he had and the McGees were saying they have three and they were catching him."

'GAOTH DOBHAIR ABÚ'

"When Mervyn (O'Donnell, manager) came in last year, I was gone. And he said to me that he wanted — not to win anything — but just to be honest. Bring the honesty back to the club, put in the effort and be there on time, when you said you were going to be there," reflects Cassidy of this renaissance.

He understood where Mervyn comes from. He tackled the role himself, becoming manager at 34 with an inside knowledge of the depth of talent coming through the underage structures through his close friendship with Tom Beag Gillespie, a man who gave hundreds of hours to perfecting Cassidy's shooting with endless drills in all weathers.

But that year of 2014, Donegal seniors and minors went all the way to the All-Ireland final. Cassidy got his players back five days before the Championship commenced and they never got out of their group.

"I enjoyed the time but it was probably the wrong time for me to take it," he says. "Will I ever manage again? Probably not!"

"You just think that if you play for Donegal or Gaoth Dobhair at a high level you have to do certain things to get yourself into shape. You expect that everybody else will do that naturally too, but that's not

the way it is. You have all sort of excuses to deal with."

In his columns in *Gaelic Life*, he has made no secret that his preference for styles is more closely aligned with Crossmaglen than that which for some years became 'house style' in Donegal.

And yet, Gaoth Dobhair looked most vulnerable in the Donegal county final and the Ulster quarter-final while retreating back and trying to protect a lead.

"We discussed this among ourselves," Cassidy reveals.

"Against St Eunan's and Glenties, it wasn't the plan. We had massive rows afterwards and we have some of the most pacy and explosive forwards about. I think there was that much pressure and expectation against Eunan's and Glenties, and even against Cargin in the second half, we got naturally sucked back into defence.

"A lot of those lads, probably 99% of the squad have played for county at some level over the last ten years and they are used to it.

"I really think the game against Crossmaglen will be a real humdinger because our lads love to play ball."

At full-forward, he is integral to the plan. He picked up two points at crucial times in the county final. Against Cargin he cut loose with three points from play and a fisted goal.

When the game was in the balance he executed a clever tap-down to Michael Carroll to seal the game.

"I started out playing forward with the county minors. We got to the Ulster final and I played full-forward and was replaced in every game, never touched leather in any of the games. Not once!" he recalls.

"Anthony Molloy was the manager. He came and talked to me.

"I was playing midfield for my club and was probably one of the more influential players at that age group. But I wasn't touching leather and he said he would have to try me somewhere else and put me wing back.

Gaoth Dobhair's Kevin Cassidy and Odhran McFadden-Ferry celebrate after the final whistle in the Donegal Club SFC final against Naomh Conaill Glenties in Ballybofey.

Picture: Oliver McVeigh/Sportsfile

And that's where I played for 19 years after that."

Gaoth Dobhair are getting it right. O'Donnell has been assisted by Michael Boyle who spent years as Paul Durcan's understudy in the Donegal panel and is already showing immense promise as a coach. The commitment is there. The belief is there. John Morrison, Cassidy's former county co-manager has been on the phone and helped with his individual mental preparations.

Most importantly though, Cassidy and Eamon McGee have mended a serious relationship breakdown.

In September 2016 in his column for the Irish Star, McGee detailed the stinking atmosphere in the dressing room after that 12-point Championship defeat to Naomh Conaill.

"After Gaoth Dobhair lost to Glenties in the Donegal club championship, Kevin announced that was it for him. He was hanging up his boots," McGee wrote.

"I've been through a hell of a lot with that man, but we walked out of that room without saying a word to one another.

"It's sad, it's depressing, and it's all rooted in the fall-out to the book *This Is Our Year* that Kevin collaborated on with Declan Bogue."

He finished that column by leaving both men some wriggle room, his conclusion: "I hope we can get back to something like the way we used to be. He's still the Kevin Cassidy I looked up to when I was 15 years old."

"Somebody sent me a pic of that column and it didn't put me up or down. I didn't have a discussion with him about it," says Cassidy.

"I know the game I am in now and the

game he is in, you have to produce something every week and it's fucking hard to do it! So I know where he is coming from.

"To be honest, had I not have gone back (to play senior) one of the biggest regrets would have been not getting back to normal with the lads.

"Whatever happened, happened. But life can be too short at times. And we might have got to that stage where we could have just passed each other but through pure hard work together on the training field and going hell for leather, we have buried the hatchet and put it behind us. Outside of football, regardless of what happens, it is always a good thing to have down the line."

On October 22nd past, McGee posted up a picture of himself and Cassidy on Twitter. Arm in arm with beers, toasting their Donegal Championship. "The best of friends. Most of the time" read his caption. So, to this Sunday.

Just before the Gaoth Dobhair team leave the dressing rooms in Omagh, they follow a tradition passed down from when the majority of the team were fishermen.

As he has done for the last twenty years, selector James Gallagher will lead a decade of the rosary in Donegal Gaelic. Even avowed atheist Eamon McGee complies.

For every game since that win over Glenties in September, Stephen Cassidy has been out with his old team mates from 2002 and 2006 sticking up more flags, more posters.

Gaoth Dobhair is devastated by economic neglect and successive governments that don't care their region is torn asunder by emigration and closures of factories and hotels.

At times it feels the football is the only thing keeping them going.

And now they play Crossmaglen Rangers.

This wasn't supposed to happen to a man like Cassidy.

A special kind, that breeds defiance. And never fears.

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The Declan Bogue interview

Twenty five years ago this weekend, Johnny McGurk won an All-Ireland title with Derry. Life changed dramatically for him in retirement from football. He ended up in prison for almost six months after defrauding his employers of more than £500,000 to feed his gambling addiction. Here, he speaks for the first time about his journey, his addiction, how he can help others in the future, and how his club, Erin's Own, have been his saviour.

'I lost my marriage, I left the house and I finished up in prison'

September 2, 2018. Croke Park, All-Ireland football final day, 2.30pm. The 1993 Derry team are being honoured for their only All-Ireland title, out there on the pitch. It's hot and humid in their matching suits. Some have loosened their ties and unfastened the top button. 'Jayz boys, she's close.'

Thomas Niblock, of Magherafelt and BBC Northern Ireland, has the honour of introducing his childhood heroes to step forward and take the applause.

First up, goalkeeper Damian McCusker. Then corner-back Kieran McKeever. Tony Scullion. Fergal P McCusker.

"At right-half back," Niblock called, "a Lavey man. His late winner against Dublin in the 1993 All-Ireland semi-final is the stuff of legend. A famous footballing name from a famous footballing family. Number five, was John McGurk."

Out he comes to be clapped on the turf. Bald headed, clear-eyed and so, so lean looking.

Twenty five years ago, Dermot McNicholl overcooked a handpass to McGurk as they sought a winner against Dublin in the semi-final.

The wing-back retrieved the ball, cut back inside on his left foot and slotted it over.

Before they had walked out the tunnel, a Croke Park steward told Johnny not to let the Dublin fans forget about that day. And so, with the eyes of the stadium and an international audience looking on, he turned to Hill 16 and mimed a shot over the bar with his left foot.

The following day, pupils of St Patrick's Maghera would replicate 'the kick' to Johnny's sons.

A few seconds of nostalgia across a whole weekend soaked in it.

"There's a fantastic atmosphere in Croke Park anyway on All-Ireland final day. If you don't feel it, there's something wrong with you," says McGurk now, sitting in a hotel on the outskirts of Derry city.

"The tension of the day is there anyway, but to be standing in a line with the same players over again, ay, it was quite emotional. And enjoyable."

There's one person missing, of course. Their manager; Eamonn Coleman who died in 2007.

The year 1993 was the pinnacle. Events the next year would not so much accel-

erate an inevitable decline, but shunt the train off its tracks altogether.

Thursday, September 4, 1994

An apartment, Chicago, Illinois.

Eamonn Coleman has the news relayed down the phone in a trans-Atlantic call from Derry County Board chairman Harry Chivers, that, "You are not being re-appointed."

A day later, Coleman's trainer Mickey Moran is interviewed for the job. News leaks out that he has the job. Perhaps he had it before the interview anyway.

The following Tuesday, a meeting is called for players and Moran at The Elk public house in Toomebridge. Accusations of lying and swearwords fill the airless room. The players are distraught by what they feel is a betrayal of Coleman.

Eamonn Coleman, the players' man, would not be back with this group again. He even encouraged the players to go back himself, as poison seeped out of an open wound that even though it is 25 years ago, gets a new airing this week with the publication of *The Boys of '93*; an autobiography of Coleman. (Sample quote from Coleman's son Gary to a Derry selector after his father was betrayed; 'You're only a fucking ball pumper; balls and water that's all you're good for and I think you're only a c**t.')

"The county board got it wrong and

there is always a bit of tension there about it. It still hangs about that panel, full stop," McGurk says.

"There's never a day you don't think that if we would have won another All-Ireland if Eamonn had stayed.

"I do feel his absence contributed to the fact Derry did not get back there. Big time.

"It took a lot for Coleman to get that team where he did, because he was the personality man.

"In 1990, I hadn't played any county football and I was 24. Then, when he came in, you felt that something could be done and players started to believe.

"Coleman said 'we wull wan this, biys.' He brought the whole team together because Lavey and Dungiven, they despised each other at club level and still did, but he glued the thing together.

"You can't underestimate how big of a players' man he was. Mickey Moran would have sat at the front of the bus and he was fantastic at coaching, he did all of that. Coleman would have been standing about watching if boys were on their game, joking and having a bit of craic, but he had the players wanting to play with each other."

The players went back to play for Derry again under Mickey Moran. McGurk went back, but he was, "Like a lot of players; begrudging.

"When you go back like that, the heart is out of it. Like, when Eamonn had to go back to the players in the first place to tell them to go back...

"Mickey Moran — best coach in the world. And his variety of training, brilliant. Every night you came out there was something different and it was great to train under him. But he just couldn't do it on his own. Mickey hadn't the charisma or the personality for it. How he expected to do it all, I don't know. He underestimated the power and the personality of the group."

Derry won an Ulster title in 1998 and have threatened from time to time since, but they never had a team like the one that McGurk was part of in 1993.

Earlier this summer, the Derry GAA Twitter account ran a fun feature, video clips of famous scores for the county team and let the public vote on their own personal favourite. Thousands went to the polls, and McGurk's point against Dublin was the preferred option for 53% of the vote.

In a lot of ways, the final and the win over Cork was amazing, but the semi-final win was just incredible.

Man, those heights are fleeting.

May 12, 2016 Antrim Crown Court

Judge Desmond Marrinan hands down a 30-month sentence to John Malachy McGurk for defrauding Patrick Bradley Ltd of Kilrea.

McGurk had pleaded guilty to theft of £572,206 and 34 other charges involving fraud by abuse of his position of trust as the company accountant.

In passing sentence, Judge Marrinan stated it appeared the 'excitement and the thrill one gets out of playing at the very highest level needs to be replaced with something,' as McGurk became chronically addicted to gambling.

This demonstrated, he continued, how, 'a decent man can ruin his life by succumbing to the seductive siren call of gambling.'

The judge was very kind to me, he said. "I had a lot of good references, a lot of people from both sides of the community spoke up for me and I had a great barrister and a solicitor. The judge told me

why I got it (the sentence) and how I got it and he was very fair. I would be honest — the day I got it I just thought, 'fuck, this is over.' I went in and only served five and a half (months). There was a rule where if you had a low score, based on what you had done, how likely you were to re-offend, how dangerous you were. If you had less than 15 you were liable to get a few months off your sentence.

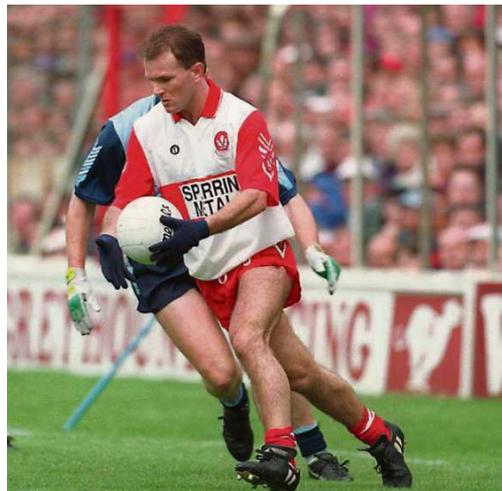
"So I went in and attended different things in there, Gambler's Anonymous and so on. Just as long as you didn't mess up, be found with a phone or drugs or alcohol. So I only served five and half months. Out in October.

"I served the first week, three or four days in Maghaberry and my old mate Martin McGuinness got me moved to Magilligan very quickly.

"Maghaberry was an absolute disaster. I wouldn't have survived. It was 24-hour lockdown almost, only let out one hour a day. And you were sharing a cell.

"I shared a cell with a big fella for a few days with a toilet on the floor. And you ate your food and everything in there. Absolute disaster.

"I got to Magilligan, and served the rest there. It was a bit more friendly than Mag-



John McGurk in action for Derry in the 1993 All-Ireland semi-final against Dublin. Picture: James Meehan



haberry. Still, not the easiest thing in the world to go into prison, from where my life had come from, but it had to be done.

"My first bet would have been when I was still in St Pat's (secondary school), probably lower sixth. I had a friend who owned dogs.

"You get into that company where you have the odd soccer bet or whatever. Then I went to Queen's and... it became a bit of a problem. I would have spent a lot of time in the bookies, not gambling a lot, but gambling often. Even before I left Queen's I nearly didn't sit my exams because I was messing about and never went to class in third year. I did Accountancy and Business Studies. I hadn't any notes, I didn't attend classes and they came to me and said, 'look, the best that you can get there is a third (class honours) if you sit it now. But you need to go and get all your coursework up to date.'

So at that stage he copped himself on. "That was '87. Got my work in, got a third degree and at that stage I thought 'fuck this', Lavey were coming good and I stepped away from gambling. We got our first championship in '88 under John Brennan and I said that gambling had to go because it would just ruin your head anyway.

"At that stage I just parked it. Well, I didn't gamble much. An odd bet here and there but it wasn't a problem. It didn't dominate my mind.

"Once I finished playing, I started to gamble again, probably for the adrenalin... until it must have been 2006.

At that stage, myself and my wife had £50,000 in an account, sold a house here and there and I had saved up money and whatever. And I gambled the whole 50 grand. And lost it. And at that, I started to chase it.

"I can't gamble properly. I'll give you an example. During the 2006 to 2011 period, at one stage I looked at soccer bets and I was gambling £2,000 on a soccer bet on a Saturday. And thinking about these soccer teams for day after day after day, looking at their form. And nearly hell-bent that

they were going to win on the Saturday.

"I had an account with an online book-makers and over a period of about five or six months I was completely disciplined, just doing this soccer and winning.

"Until one day, I had 68 grand in it. And I put on my soccer bet as normal, the soccer bet lost and by seven o'clock that evening, I had nothing left.

"I mean, I was betting on reserve teams in Turkey.

"I had no comprehension of anything. I can't gamble. As well as that, it doesn't matter how much.

"I mean, you can drink, and you fall down. But you gamble, you keep gambling and I had no concept of money. I got myself into a cloud and you woke up in the morning saying, 'fuck this, I am not going back there again.' And then it would just eat at you again, and again.

"And you thinking, 'I have to get this 50 grand. And I owe Bradley's (his employer) money and I need to get it too.'

"You found soon that you are not in your own conversation. It's like living a life outside of where you are. I could have been out for a meal with my wife and another couple and I was nowhere. I was sitting watching a screen behind her where there was a football game on. You aren't there. I did this for five, six years and I lived a lie.

"The loneliest time of my life. (An) absolutely lonely period where the sweat was pissing off me at night with worry, the debt. Nobody knowing about it. You were completely on your own. It was a horrible, horrible time.

"The gambling came out, and the money and all that and people think... But, the only reason I got the sentence I got was because I was able to prove that every penny that I took went straight into gambling, straight into a credit card that was put into gambling straight away.

"I didn't buy a house, didn't spend it on anything. What I did was gamble it.

"When it came out, I was a nervous wreck. I never contemplated suicide because of my weans (kids). My marriage was breaking up around that time. I

Johnny McGurk: 'It was amazing to be out walking about and everybody, people that know you as a footballer, as a person and none of them had a clue what I was doing my life... living a massive lie.'

Picture: Oliver McVeigh

couldn't invest my head in anything at that stage. My mind was invested in gambling.

"I always said I would never let my children down, but as a husband I was a disaster. We broke up shortly after, because there was no trust there. I had fooled her for five years of her life where she hadn't a clue what was going on. Absolutely no clue.

"It was amazing to be out walking about and everybody, people that know you as a footballer, as a person and none of them had a clue what I was doing with my life. Living a massive lie.

"In prison, you had the choice of getting a job, so I volunteered for the kitchen. You got £18 a week. Peeling spuds, onions, cleaning, washing dishes, all that. You started about half seven and worked to three. The rest of the day was yours.

"I went in with some intentions. I knew my young boys would be starting their GCSE maths and James, who was fourth year, he was struggling with his maths a wee bit.

"I got my brother who was a maths teacher to send me the syllabus, the whole thing. So I started every evening just going through it methodically. I had done Maths to A Level anyway so I just did the GCSE course in the evenings and reviewed it and got myself up to speed.

"When I came out, I tutored James and a couple of students for a year or two.

"It was good for my head too, to do something positive and contribute, rather than lying watching TV all the time."

There was violence in the place.

"One fella tried it one day. Typical, he was the biggest fucker in the place too. And something had gone wrong with him that morning and he came over and put his head right into me and I thought, 'I am not going to cower down here', so I looked straight into his face.

"There were about 10 fellas in the kitchen and immediately, they all walked out to leave me on my own.

"I was looking over at him and he asked, 'what the fuck are you looking at?' And I

said, 'I can look wherever I want.'

"Eventually he just got up and walked out, left me. That was the end of it."

At that stage, 2016, (his children) James would have been 13, 12 (Patrick) and 10 (Mark). Very tough on them to come into a prison.

"I had a girlfriend at this stage, Helen. But Deborah, my ex-wife came in first of all with Helen to see the conditions and if she was happy with them. And after that, Helen brought them up. And they came every week.

"Because of my good behaviour, at times you were allowed out on a Saturday and I was allowed to go into Derry City, for five or six hours, as long as you came back in time. Every two weeks you could do that, go away and get a pizza or something, some time away with them.

"All you had was the end of the phone to speak to your children and Helen so it was great to have those five or six hours rather than sitting in a room, in a prison."

How do you rebuild a life after that? Brick by brick.

You start with the constants; his sons James, Patrick and Mark. Even when it all came out, they told him, "I love you anyway, daddy."

He has a fourth child now, with Helen; little Fiadh, his first daughter and a girl that his sons have "spoiled into the ground," sitting there laughing at every little thing she does.

For two people that went through what they went through, he has a good relationship with his ex-wife Deborah, who lives in Maghera now.

They share the children but sure the



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boys are on the Lavey field most nights of the week anyway.

Which is the other, unyielding, constant.

On May 30, 1992, a number of Lavey players dashed from a Greenlough pitch during a championship game against Newbridge.

Hugh A McGurk, in attendance to watch his sons and his club, took ill and passed away aged 76 years.

The game was abandoned. Naturally, it was a night that his son Johnny will never forget.

"The following year we were preparing to play Down in the Ulster Championship in Newry," he recalls. "A few days before the game, Eamonn took me aside. Away from the rest of the players, he spoke quietly. He asked me did I know what date the game was on."

"My father's anniversary," I replied.

"So, you'll be delivering a big performance then," he said. "You're on (James) McCartan."

For his father, for his club, he held McCartan scoreless that day in Newry. McCartan was taken off and McGurk's hands were sore from grabbing his jersey all day. Now, he passes on his talents. He captained this club to an All-Ireland football Championship in 1991. He lost five Ulster club hurling finals. The club has been good to him and he gives everything back.

Young James is with the minors on a Monday night. The following night Patrick is out with the under-14s, Saturday mornings is Mark with the under-12s. Johnny coaches the under-16s and 12s.

There's barely a night that he isn't on

the Lavey pitch with some team or other. And afterwards if there is a kick-about on the estate up the road, he will give another half hour of detailed coaching before finally heading indoors.

He doesn't attend Gambler's Anonymous.

"What I found was a lot of men just want to listen to themselves. And tell the same story week after week after week," he says.

"I just say, I can't gamble, because I can't. We have a family of 13. My whole family stood by me and backed me in everything. My friends from home, my clubmates, the whole GAA community stood by me and I always believe that if I ever fucked up again, I couldn't look for them. Because I let them down again. They backed me and stayed with me through all this and I can't gamble."

"The story about the 68 grand says everything about me. If you gave me a million pounds and stood me outside a bookies, I would spend that million in a day. I wouldn't have had a concept of what I was betting on."

He continues: "Lavey were very strong for me. And I went back to training teams, there were no issues with that. They told me to go back, do my own thing again and I just started to live life again."

"She was a local girl, she played camogie for Lavey and won an All-Ireland intermediate with Lavey a few years back. She was there for me, very strong for me when I was down about things, kept my head up when I would have thought..."

"Like, the whole time waiting for the sentencing and that... Just depression. And the gambling left you with a real depression as well, it was one of the things about it, waking up and the lows..."

"But she was very strong for me the last number of years, my family, the club. All good to me."

This modern-day scourge is everywhere. Only this February the GAA voted at Congress to ban all sponsorship from gambling companies but on purely practi-

'Lavey were very strong for me. And I went back to training teams, there were no issues with that. They told me to go back, do my own thing again and I just started to live life again.'

cal terms that changes nothing.

"Online is serious. I know from my own parish a lot of young fellas will gamble. Most of them will be normal but a lot of them will be spending more than they can (afford)," says McGurk.

"I met a bank manager not that long ago. And she said, the amount of accounts they see with people overspending with gambling is ridiculous. She said it's going to be an epidemic shortly."

"She said even somebody that earns £100 a week will be spending £110 a week on gambling. Someone who earns £400 a week, will be spending £500 on gambling. It is rife, particularly within GAA as well."

"Gambling just seems to be an easy outlet for GAA people."

Every morning he rises at half six and within an hour, he is on a building site fitting windows. As a sideline he does accounts work for some self-employed friends and a bit of tutoring here and there. He even went back to some accountancy work for a while but got fed up with it and prefers the sites.

"You know something, you see your head? There's nothing going through your head about having to complete something and I had years and years of waiting for a court case and my head was away," he says.

"Some days you walk out, fit a lock of windows and there is no stress. And I am fit to do it. How long can I keep it going though? Even though I was an accountant I am still strong enough to do this when I can, but I must be fresh as well."

He holds ambitions in life and football.

Over the last several years there has been an enormous push in the Erin's Own Lavey club at underage. While Johnny, his brother Collie, and the Downeys and so on won an All-Ireland club in 1991, they haven't won a county football title since 1993.

In hurling, they sit second in the roll of honour with 18 titles, but it was 2010 since the last one. Building their superb facilities, shared with the Termononey community group was a risk at the time, but has enabled them to grow their underage structures and along with Magherafelt and Bellaghy, those trio are hoovering up the underage titles.

In time, he would like to take the senior team again, when the fruits of the underage work ripen. The last time he did so was 2006, but the circumstances for team and manager were all wrong.

And if anyone wishes to talk to him about gambling, he is available.

"I have let a few boys know that I would be available if ever anybody needed me, because I suppose for any young fella, I am the biggest case of falling flat on your face with gambling there is," he sums up.

"There were others, like Oisín McConville, Mark Hehir from Galway and that, but I am the one who did time, probably the biggest fall anyone had."

"In a way, if they want to see the worst-case scenario, they could come to me. I nearly lost my children, I lost my marriage, I left the house and I finished up in prison. So I suppose if anybody wants to see what it can do to you, well then..."

The last thing he wants is for any of this to sound trite. This is not a happy ending. Redemption is fleeting. There is no such thing when events like these occur. You can only make it as good as it can be.

He insists that relationships have been destroyed, but what he will also realise but not say is that other relationships have flourished between him and the people he holds dear.

The man who walks down the street and gossips about him stealing or gambling, he cannot help. It is not within his gift.

"I don't feel sorry for anyone who holds ill-will to me. I don't owe them an apology."

"But I do feel hurt for the people who I harmed."

"I feel remorse for all the people I offended."

"And I will carry that with me."



The Declan Bogue Interview

Ryan McAnespie lives his life in Tyrone but tomorrow will go to battle for Monaghan against the Red Hands. Here, he unravels the reasons for his Oriel links, the illustrious careers of his mother and sisters and how his family continue to strive for justice for his uncle, Aidan.

Life in a border town

At 1am last Sunday, Ryan McAnespie stepped off the Monaghan team bus following a trip back from Galway that might have been gruelling under other circumstances, but for a side having qualified for their first All-Ireland semi-final since 1988, felt like float home.

He stretched his weary limbs, the ones that gathered four points from play and covered big mileage in a performance that put him in contention for the GAA.ie player of the week, before heading for home.

On he went from Monaghan town, through Emyvale where he plays his club football. Across the Moy Bridge and into Tyrone, up the hill into Aghnacloy's main thoroughfare and out the far side of the town to the family home.

The reason he lives there is knotted and intertwined with a structure that he passes every time he heads off to training or a match with his club or county.

On the roadside outside the grounds of the Aghaloo O'Neill's club in Aghnacloy is a squat monument. The inscription reads: 'In Loving Memory of Aidan McAnespie. Murdered at this spot by Crown Forces on 21st Feb 1988. Aged 23 years. RIP.'

30 years ago.

23 years old.

One year older than his nephew Ryan is now.

Aidan was making his way to an Aghaloo game against Killeeshil when he went through the British army checkpoint, the ground being close to the Moy bridge border. He had been the target of constant harassment at the scene by British soldiers who would hold him for hours at a time. Working in a poultry farm and checking on cattle across the border, it became a daily experience. He could almost be sanguine about it.

Frequent threats were made to end his life. In the end, the family would bring his dinner down to the barracks, knowing he would be detained for most of the evening.

On this Sunday morning, a bullet fired from a machine gun went into his back and as he lay on the ground, cars swerved past to make their way on through the checkpoint, oblivious to the carnage, deaf to the whistle of the bullet.

"When we are younger we would have moved to Emyvale. And that was probably one of the reasons why we moved down south. We were kept away from the area, not told anything, as such," says Ryan now.

"But as you get older, you get more inquisitive and start to ask more questions and learn more about it. When I was growing up, the checkpoint... I vaguely remember it there. I might have been six or seven. And remembering the soldiers along the street, but I wouldn't have strong

memories about it."

Partition and checkpoints destroyed the town. Tailbacks were often a mile long and agitation from holdups was a sad fact of life. Latter-day talk of hard Brexits and EU frontiers leaves the locals, who experienced the worst that barriers and divisions can sow, dismayed.

In an RTE radio documentary aired earlier this year, neighbours recounted how there were cheers coming from the barracks at the time of the shooting and how the road was later closed with gunshots going off, the implication that some fresh 'ricochets' were being gouged into the tar.

Charges were brought against Grenadier Guard David Jonathan Holden for manslaughter but were later dropped.

The day after the killing, Garda Deputy Commissioner Eugene Crowley was appointed by the Irish Government to investigate the incident.

The results of the investigation were received by the Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform but have never been published.

An RUC investigation concluded that the killing was accidental. One of the claims made in the aftermath was that Holden's hands were wet and the gun slipped.

That version of events was later weighed up against the nine pounds of pressure it takes to pull the trigger on such apparatus.

A 2008 Historical Enquiries Team found that the soldier's explanation was the 'least likely version' of what happened, adding the chances of this happening were, "so remote as to be virtually disregarded".

In June of this year, the North's Public Prosecution Service announced they would be charging Holden, now 48, for gross negligence manslaughter.

In one of his final duties before signing off as director-general of the GAA, Páirc Duffy — himself a Monaghan man and a former coach of an Aghaloo O'Neill's senior team — wrote to justice minister Charlie Flanagan asking for the Crowley Re-

port to be published. Calls of support have been added by Peter Canavan and former GAA President Peter Quinn.

In May, it emerged that a part of his rib cage was removed during a post-mortem and — without the knowledge or consent of the family — was disposed of. Potentially vital when it comes to ballistics evidence.

"I think the family are delighted now with the way it is going at the minute. Barry Lenihan from RTE, the family are very pleased with him, he has taken a lot on board and opened the whole thing up again, moving it forward. At a better pace at what might have been previously," says McAnespie.

"But they are happy with the progress made and the publicity it is getting. I wouldn't look too much into it, but the family are happy with how it is progressing and it is not being left as history, that they are going to get answers."

His uncle's name is preserved in history and lives in the public consciousness. A club in Boston are named 'Aidan McAnespie's'. After Monaghan were knocked out of the 2016 All-Ireland Championship, his nephew wanted to go and play a summer for them but time was too tight to sort out visas. Some day he will.

"To play for a club named after my uncle... For my family and all it would be nice. Nice to get out and be in somewhere different, but it would be a big thing for the family to play for them," he says.

The ballad Aidan McAnespie has the refrain, 'You murdered Aidan McAnespie on his way to the Gaelic ground.'

His name goes before him.

"You would get people making the connection. A couple of times, such as when you are going to the gym or whatever, I don't know if they would think it a good connection or whatever, but different areas of Belfast you would be signing up for gyms and asked if you were any connection to Aidan McAnespie."

The monument in memory of Aidan McAnespie.



Other people might ask him if he was any connection to Brenda Mohan. Long before Ryan was winning an Ulster Championship still in his teens, his mother was with Monaghan.

Coming from Scotstown and immersed in their illustrious teams of the '80s, she played in All-Ireland finals when Ryan was a newborn, winning an All-Star from centre-back in 1997. She played in another final while just pregnant with daughter Eimear and kept it to herself.

When her daughters Ciara and Aoife came of age and Emyvale gathered up to relaunch their ladies team, she transferred from Monaghan Harps to play alongside them as they jumped rapidly through junior and intermediate ranks.



Aidan McAnespie was shot in the back at a British army checkpoint in Co Tyrone.

Now when Ryan has his post-training snack at the Monaghan training complex, a framed picture of sister Ciara accepting her 2016 All-Star award on stage beams down at him.

"She only had one brother and she would have been mad into the football when she was younger," he says of his mother.

"But up in Scotstown the club football would have been big up there when she was growing up, the Caulfields and McCarvilles at that time.

"I would get people making the connection and everything, in at Monaghan Harps there and different places around the county, Magheraclone and so on."

His father, Vincie, played a bit for Aghaloo, a bit for Emyvale. As much as the knees would allow.

"My father would have been taking me to a lot of Tyrone games and aunts and uncles would have been big into Tyrone," he says.

"Whenever Monaghan were beaten, Tyrone were the next team you were supporting. The likes of Peter Canavan were playing, someone you were looking up to when you were kicking about in the back garden too."

"It would have been more Championship games we would have went to (than league). I remember going to see them play Down in 2008 when they drew."

"I suppose, when you have a mother winning All-Irelands and All-Stars and a couple of All-Stars in sisters too, there is a lot to live up to."

He's one of seven children altogether. The youngest, Darren is 10 now, the same age Ryan was when he came across the border for good.

While he couldn't sever the tie with Emyvale, his attempts to bring Darren there haven't worked out. He wanted to stay with his friends and so is an Aghaloo clubman through and through.



"I was never going to leave Emyvale," he says of himself.

"I grew up there and went to my primary school. Even with my father, cousins, and relatives in Aghaloo, but I was happy to be with Emyvale."

His first memory of Monaghan came in the Division Two final of 2005. Seamus Banty McEnaney's first year and Paul Finlay's lofted free-kick dropped into the net by Meath's Mark Ward in the last play to win the title.

"We all ran on to the pitch at the end," he smiles.

"That was my most vivid memory. I was only 10 or 11 at the time."

Still, he owes his footballing education to Tyrone.

During the week he would attend school in St Ciaran's, Ballygawley where he came into contact with Pascal Canavan and Martin McElkennon, and the now Antrim backroom team of Fintan Devlin and Brendan Trainor.



The funeral procession of Aidan McAnespie at Aghnacloy in 1988. The funeral cortege walked past the checkpoint on the way to the graveyard. Picture: Pacemaker

"It was a very football-oriented school," he recalls.

"It was a good environment to come through as well. Even the kind of football, you are playing with boys and it is different from club football, what I would have been playing down in Monaghan."

"It was completely different, the way they play, even the way they train and all. I suppose in the schools, it's just the difference in school's football than club football. It would be a lot more physical and more pace to it. Maybe it's because you are playing with the pick of the club footballers but it was enjoyable to play there."

On the evenings and weekends, he developed that huge lung capacity with Glaslough Harriers, starting at 800 and 1,000 metre runs, developing to 3k events before football commitments squeezed the time available.

He explains: "I would have known it was one of the stronger areas of my game; my endurance and athletic ability, so I tried to implement that into my game as best I could."

Naturally, at one point Tyrone came calling. The minor manager in 2013 was Mickey Donnelly, of Aghaloo by coincidence. He made enquiries. It was a close run thing to one extent, but the insistence that he would have to switch clubs was never going to fly.

"There was interest there," he reveals.

"I think they were in the stages of sorting out something. I

ROAD NOT TAKEN: As a minor player, Monaghan's Ryan McAnespie came close to throwing his weight behind Tyrone's cause.

Picture: Tommy Dickson

wasn't pushed. My time in St Ciaran's there too, there might have been a bit of a draw, but I am happy with the way things worked out. I wouldn't do anything different. You would have to move clubs and things like that. I would have been happy enough to play with Emyvale."

He still leans towards Tyrone in other ways. A few weeks back, he graduated with his Sports Science degree from University Ulster Jordanstown. He was living in a student house with

Tyrone panellist Ben McDonnell, and other footballers from Errigal Ciaran and Beragh.

Right now, he is one of the most important players in the Monaghan team. Talk to anyone around the panel and they will speak of a seriously level-headed, softly spoken grounded lad.

"I wouldn't be outspoken," he says. "I would be quiet enough and wouldn't do any talking or speaking before games. I focus on my own performance more than anything."

He has the full sweep of honours, winning an Ulster minor title in 2013 and getting pulled into Malachy O'Rourke's senior training panel the following February at just 18, having dragged Emyvale to an All-Ireland junior semi-final.

A year later, he won an Ulster U21 Championship and by the height of the summer, came off the bench after 45 minutes to replace Owen Duffy in the Ulster final as Monaghan beat Donegal.

His fitness levels and composure has always been off the charts, but now he has added a serious scoring threat, he is in All-Star territory.

Right now though, all he can think of is

Tyrone. "I suppose you always dreamed of playing in All-Ireland semi-finals or finals, but I never witnessed a Monaghan team getting to those stages."

"Tyrone were the team getting there. And Armagh, they would have been the main Ulster teams."

"You are always hoping and dreaming it might change and that Monaghan might go up to the top and at the minute, we are getting close."

Around Aghnacloy, all the conversations are of football right now. McAnespie stays inside his own bubble, a satellite of the greater Monaghan orbit.

On Thursday, a man by the name of Mickey Muldoon went over to the monument. An old friend of Aidan's, he has lived his adult life in Coronation Park, hard up against where the barracks were. Even on his own wedding day, he and his bride Philomena were stopped, searched and detained in the wedding car as they travelled to their own reception in Monaghan town.

There are flagpoles just behind the monument and on the week of a big game, Muldoon runs flags of the competing counties up the poles.

This week, it's Tyrone and Monaghan, right there, on the significant ground.

The Tyrone team bus will see it as one of the last things before they cross the border for an All-Ireland semi-final.

As will the McAnespies, different strands of the family wearing different county colours as they creep past the monument, over an invisible and frictionless border.

A century and one week after Gaelic Sunday when the Gaels of the country defied a Crowns Forces ruling, forbidding them from playing their games.

Onto Croke Park. To watch their son, brother and cousin, Ryan.

On their way to the Gaelic ground.