



Saturday, July 4, 2020

Croker chiefs lay down the law

John Fogarty

County chairpersons have been told they will be held responsible should their county teams be found to have trained before September 14.

The possibility of their sides being thrown out of the Championship also has not been ruled out as chairs were given a warning by Croke Park officials in a conference meeting yesterday.

The chairpersons themselves have been told they will be the ones who are suspended in the event that a charge of breaching the club window before September 14, the official start date for inter-county training, is proven.

The offence for such will be considered "misconduct considered to have discredited the Association", which is outlined in Rule 7.2 (e) of the GAA's Official Guide. Suspension is a minimum of eight weeks for a member while debarment and expulsion from the GAA may also be considered. For a team, a fine, disqualification, and expulsion from the GAA are also deemed appropriate penalties.

The *Irish Examiner* understands that Croke Park hope the direct threat of embarrassment to the chairpersons will be enough to ensure county teams cease training until that time. Any chair whose county has been charged with training prior to the middle of September will have 48 hours to respond to the claim.

After last week ruling out sanctioning counties who breach the September 14 guideline, the GAA this week hardened their stance in the wake of negative commentary that their insistence on the date being respected was soft.

Croke Park had hoped the lack of insurance would be enough of a deterrent to stop teams convening for training sessions. However, aside from the criticism of their handling of the issue last week, further anecdotal evidence of counties training is also believed to have convinced top officials to act.

While GAA president John Horan ruled out the idea of teams being sanctioned for contravening the guideline, he did encourage people to come forward with information on any who were believed to be training.

He reiterated that point to county chairs yesterday but highlighted there would be serious repercussions for any counties found to have prematurely returned to collective training.

Last week, GAA director general Tom Ryan said they could look at sanctions at a later date although he was reticent about doling out punishments.

He said: "It hasn't been a summer for penalties and for sanctions and I'm not really sure that's the right realm for this thing either. We have to do an awful lot of things right in order for us to get to that stage (organising inter-county games) and part of that is abiding by the timelines and principles that we've set out."

"We'll be asking people to abide by those because they're the right thing to do. If there's a second stage required in terms of sanctions and penalties and so on, yeah of course we'll look at that."

In the conference call, Horan is also understood to have highlighted the issue of counties breaching GAA rules regarding training camps two years ago.

Ten counties were initially informed they had a case to answer for organising camps but only Waterford's hurlers and the footballers of Armagh and Laois were punished and lost home advantage for one Allianz League game last year.

Meanwhile, Clare GAA treasurer Michael Gallagher has warned that the county board could go bust if it does not rein in its expenditure.

That was his stark warning at last Monday's board meeting held in Cusack Park where delegates were told a €250,000 bank loan must be repaid to AIB by the end of the year.

With Clare accruing no income at present, Gallagher admitted he has no idea where the money will come from for that and expressed concern about what had been spent on preparing inter-county teams, which he said had become "a runaway train" with "three to four physios" treating teams, and "backroom teams of 18 people".

According to the *Clare Echo*, Gallagher stated that if the costs weren't cut "Clare County Board will bust".

Gallagher's remarks about inter-county teams were challenged by Kilmaley delegate and senior hurling team kitman Niall Romer who highlighted senior hurling manager Brian Lohan wasn't taking expenses and the backroom team was "very small".

He also highlighted players had not yet received gear, which chairman Joe Cooney said would be addressed.

Russian Emperor most credible Ballydoyle Derby contender

THE 2020 Investec Derby will be a strange event, devoid of spectators, on-course bookmakers, and the man who could today become the most successful trainer in the race's iconic 240-year history.

Quarantine restrictions mean Aidan O'Brien won't be at Epsom but a field of 16 for the famous Classic includes six Ballydoyle representatives as the master trainer goes in search of a record eighth Derby success.

O'Brien seems unsure who his primary contender is but when it emerged Thursday that Ryan Moore would partner Mogul it was inevitable his price would



contract. Whether he deserves to be so short in the betting is open to debate given he could only finish a laboured fourth in the King Edward VII Stakes at Royal Ascot in his Derby prep run.

He has reportedly thrived since but the Ascot race was only 18 days ago and there has to be a doubt about whether that's sufficient

time to find the necessary improvement.

Stablemate Vatican City was a massive eye-catcher when second to Siskin in the Irish 2000 Guineas but, while he may well stay a mile and quarter, his pedigree strongly suggests a mile and a half will prove beyond him.

Russian Emperor is the most credible Ballydoyle contender. Admittedly, the Galileo colt fluffed his lines when beaten by stablemate Cormorant in the Derrinstown Stud Trial Stakes at Leopardstown on his seasonal reappearance but he made amends when powering home late on to win the Hampton Court Stakes at Royal Ascot.

The evidence of both strongly suggests he'll relish going an extra two furlongs and it's hard to see a horse in the line-up being stronger at the finish.

Seamie Heffernan's willingness to sacrifice two weeks of domestic action to make the journey to Epsom to ride him is a further positive and, at odds of around 6-1, Russian Emperor makes considerable each-way appeal to give his jockey a second successive Epsom Derby win.

That being said, there's little doubt that Kameko is the classiest horse in the race. A Group 1 winner at two, the Andrew Balding-trained son of Kitten's Joy

was mightily impressive when winning the 2000 Guineas at Newmarket last month. If he stays the trip, he'll give O'Brien a first Derby success but, while a mile and a quarter should be within his compass, the suspicion is he won't quite get home over 12 furlongs.

And what of the favourite? English King was impressive when winning the Lingfield Derby Trial but whether Ed Walker's charge deserves to be quite so short is questionable and being drawn in stall one complicates matters for Frankie Dettori.

It promises to be a fascinating contest but, with the top three in the market all

opposable, Russian Emperor is fancied to power home late to land the spoils.

O'Brien can also provide the answer in the Investec Oaks when 1000 Guineas heroine Love should take the world of beating. She couldn't have been any more impressive at Newmarket and her pedigree suggests she'll be at least as good and possibly even better over a mile and a half.

The talented Frankly Darling rates as an obvious danger but she didn't look entirely straightforward when winning the Ribblesdale Stakes at Royal Ascot and may find Love too tough a nut to crack.

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FIA Formula One World Championship 2020

The starting lights go up on a delayed Formula 1 World Championship season that retains the promise of thrilling manoeuvres, breathtaking drama and unrivalled precision beginning with eight highly anticipated European races

Race schedule

European races	World races
1 Austria Spielberg Jul 5	10 U.S. Austin Sep 13
2 Styria Spielberg Jul 12	11 Mexico Mexico City Sep 14
3 Britain Silverstone Aug 2	12 Brazil São Paulo Sep 15
4 70th Anniversary GP Silverstone Aug 9	13 Abu Dhabi Yas Viceroy Sep 13
5 Spain Barcelona Aug 16	
6 Belgium Spa Aug 30	
7 Italy Monza Sep 6	

TO BE CONFIRMED

8 Russia Sochi	14 Bahrain Sakhir
9 U.S. Austin	15 Vietnam Hanoi
10 Mexico Mexico City	16 China Shanghai
11 Brazil São Paulo	17 Canada Montreal

CANCELLED: Australia, Netherlands, Monaco, Azerbaijan, France, Singapore, Japan

Roll call of champions

7 Michael Schumacher Germany 1994, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004
6 Lewis Hamilton Britain 2008, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019
5 Juan Manuel Fangio Argentina 1951, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957
4 Alain Prost France 1985, 1986, 1989, 1993
4 Sebastian Vettel Germany 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013

Teams and drivers

Mercedes	Ferrari	Red Bull	McLaren	Renault	Alpha Tauri	Racing Point	Alfa Romeo	Haas	Williams
Lewis Hamilton (1st), Valtteri Bottas (2nd)	Charles Leclerc (4th), Sebastian Vettel (5th)	Max Verstappen (3rd), Alexander Albon (6th)	Carlos Sainz Jr. (7th), Lando Norris (8th)	Daniel Ricciardo (9th), Esteban Ocon (10th)	Pierre Gasly (11th), Daniil Kvyat (12th)	Sergio Perez (13th), Lance Stroll (14th)	Kimi Raikkonen (15th), Antonio Giovinazzi (16th)	Kevin Magnussen (17th), Romain Grosjean (18th)	George Russell (19th), Nicholas Latifi (20th)

How will the sport look this season?

The record-breaking 22-race calendar was effectively torn up following the outbreak of coronavirus. The Austrian Grand Prix will mark the first of eight races in 10 whirlwind weeks. Spielberg's Red Bull Ring will host the opening two rounds (July 5 and 12) before Hungary (July 19). There will then be two races at Silverstone (August 2 and 9) before rounds in Spain (August 16), Belgium (August 30) and Italy (September 6). The sport's bosses remain

F1: The key questions

hopeful of announcing at least a further eight races, with the campaign to end in Abu Dhabi in the middle of December. There will be no Monaco Grand Prix on an F1 schedule for the first time since 1954. The races in Australia, Azerbaijan, and Japan have also been cancelled. Spectators are banned, team numbers have been limited, and there will be no customary champagne spraying for the top-three

drivers. Face masks will be prevalent in the pit-lane, while all travelling personnel are required to be tested for Covid-19 every five days.

Is Lewis Hamilton the favourite to win the title?

In March, Hamilton's Mercedes team ended an impressive pre-season campaign with the fastest lap and the greatest number of miles. They also reinvented the wheel with their dual-axis

steering system (DAS) which is set to provide Hamilton and team-mate Valtteri Bottas with a fresh edge this year. Ferrari have been forced to use the prolonged break to redesign their car after several issues during testing, but their updated machine is unlikely to be ready until the third round of the campaign in Hungary.

And what about the rest?

McLaren will be keen to build on an encouraging 2019 where they finished behind only Mercedes, Ferrari, and Red Bull in the constructors' standings. Lando Norris enjoyed a strong rookie campaign, but, as he enters his second season, there will be greater pressure on the 20-year-old to regularly compete with

team-mate Carlos Sainz, who heads to Ferrari in 2021.

Will this be Vettel's last season?

Sebastian Vettel may have four world championships but he does not have a drive for next year after being dumped by Ferrari. The Scuderia have identified Charles Leclerc as their future and decided against extending Vettel's contract. Mercedes are yet to confirm their line-up for next year, but while it seems improbable that Hamilton will leave, Bottas could be moved on.

Demise of the toy snooker table underlines the fragility of all we hold sacred

THERE are no snooker tables in Smyths Toys.

Let that sink in. File that one alongside the nine million bicycles in Beijing and other startling cultural statistics of our time.

Thankfully, we have space to reflect on these important developments and what they mean. Since many of us remain in a holding pattern.

In this fast-paced social media age, the Premier League title is long forgotten, judging by Klopp's humour the other night. And as Martin Tyler reminded us, the conclusion of that other little competition Sky no longer has rights to is a while away yet: "This season's Champions League, if you have been following it, will resume in August."

The wait may be even longer for the most eagerly anticipated

sporting entertainment of the year — the inside story of Spurs' season on Amazon.

There's nothing either for the diehards who turn up to watch the county train. GAA training sessions have become the most illicit contraband in the state.

If anything hastens the end of WhatsApp and the migration to unbreachable messaging systems like Signal and Threema, it will surely be the organisation of get-togethers for county men.

Weren't they simpler times when the greatest logistical challenge was how to quietly pay the manager?

The rugby lads, at least, have started to talk again, though there are

no learnings yet, whatever about work-ons. Many of them seem to have settled on the same party line, that this merciful small break will extend their careers.

Though you wonder about this realisation that not playing rugby is the best means of staying fit to play rugby, and what it says about the future of the sport.

We have paid tribute here before to snooker's brave resistance to change in the face of constant fretting about its future. The grand old game remains the same as in its pomp. When there was a wide range of snooker tables available in any reputable toy shop.

Even as it slipped from our TV screens, snooker contented no figu-ry with the core product, no bonus points for getting out the double extension, no black card for cynically incessant cleaning of the cue ball.

If this was Gaelic football, they'd have been ruing lost skills and contriving rule changes to restore them, perhaps installed a chicane around the black spot to encourage swerving the cue ball.

But snooker stuck to its guns and sadly has not been rewarded for its con-

viction. Today's central lament bears repeating — there are currently no snooker tables in Smyths Toys. And it's not that they are out of stock, the snooker table appears to have been scrubbed from our culture.

RECALL, if you were so lucky,

the arrival of your first 30-inch table. You mightn't have held for the black too often, but there was still pure joy in poking those plastic marbles around with knitting needle cues.

Maybe you enjoyed the life-changing graduation to four feet by two, or even the expansive acreage of six by three. And discovered the perfect girth of a *Reader's Digest*, for slipping under a leg to eliminate roll.

With birthday season looming for the youngsters in this house, naturally attempts were being made to steer the conversation down certain channels, out of earshot of 'er indoors.

Only to discover the tragic truth. I tell a small lie. There is a tiny 40cm 'pool table' in Smyths, for a fiver. You know yourself, the reviews are not kind. It might even be a bum steer, planted by some well-meaning agency

to discourage misspent youths. Of course, there are all the options in the world if you favour the crude business of air hockey — snooker as played by Tony Pulis' Stoke.

Granted, you can still buy snooker tables from many reputable stockists across the land. But it was still a jolt to see the beautiful game banished from the mainstream, underlining the fragility of all we hold sacred.

You feel a certain responsibility to future anthropologists to leave behind clues to our lost civilisation. And to celebrate the place those first snooker tables played in our lives.

To many, it is the single most meaningful metric of wealth — your snooker table and its size. No property can justifiably be described as 'lavish' unless it holds at least one. When *The Sun* last week profiled Scottish comedian Kevin Bridges' 'amazing Glasgow home', what got top billing? Of course it was the 'full-sized' snooker table.

There must have been a time when it ranked high among the answers supplied to career guidance counsellors — 'whatever you think will get me enough money for a full-sized snooker table one day'.

That was the dream. But sadly, as we weigh our first world problems, there invariably comes a time in so many lives and careers where childhood dreams are scaled down, and the vow becomes to do up the attic one day — and get in a pool table. For some of us, even that proves elusive. And there must be a life lesson there somewhere, that we can toil day after day in the rat race while still failing to make this one change we know will improve the quality of our lives — a pool table, with a slate bed and ball return system.

It probably says it all about the fundamentally flawed human condition that our homes become filled with the kinds of things that make it impossible to fit in a pool table. Such as wives.

But the human spirit is resilient and this is the season when we go again. Planting seeds and dreaming childhood dreams. Old gambits are recycled and we have one more look online at that beautiful 7x4 table crafted from the finest hardwoods and Italian slate.

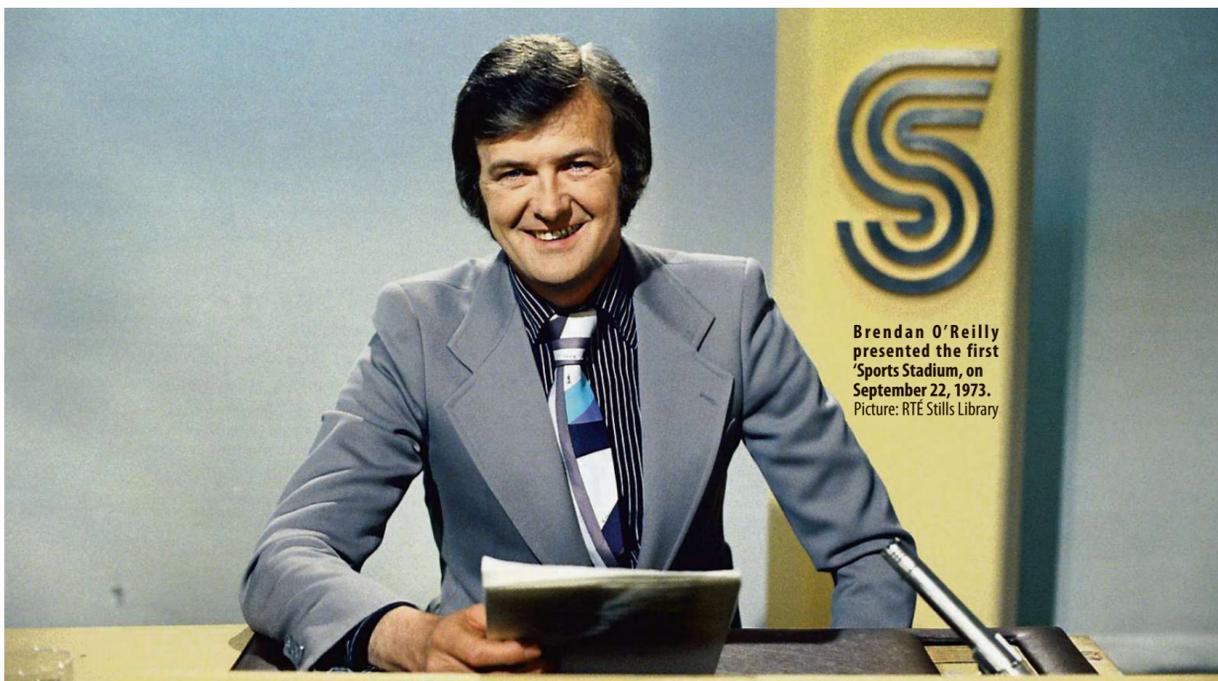
The one that converts into a dining table, for emergencies.

And yet, even as she hears you say those reasonable words, it's as if she doesn't really hear you at all.

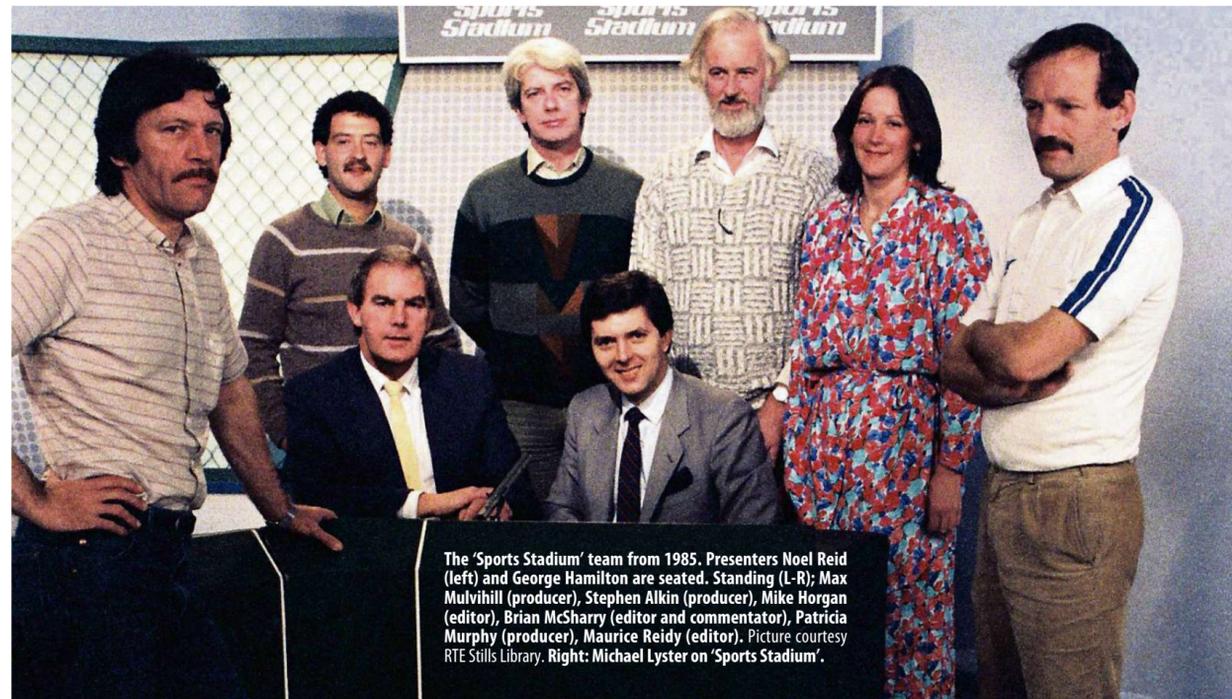


Larry Ryan

'It was the Carlsberg job, paid to bring sport to the Irish people'



Brendan O'Reilly presented the first 'Sports Stadium' on September 22, 1973. Picture: RTE Stills Library



The 'Sports Stadium' team from 1985. Presenters Noel Reid (left) and George Hamilton are seated. Standing (L-R); Max Mulvihill (producer), Stephen Alkin (producer), Mike Horgan (editor), Brian McSharry (editor and commentator), Patricia Murphy (producer), Maurice Reidy (editor). Picture courtesy RTE Stills Library. Right: Michael Lyster on 'Sports Stadium'.

Larry Ryan talks to Michael Lyster, Stephen Alkin, George Hamilton, Maurice Reidy and Michael O'Carroll to recall the heyday of RTÉ's flagship Saturday show 'Sports Stadium'.



Now we have no sport, maybe it's easier to look back at *Sports Stadium* and consider those to be glory days.

Happier times, when the only disease we knew was the liver fluke and brucellosis and scour infecting every second advert.

We hadn't much of anything but we had a little of a lot.

And we arguably had too much racing. Every Saturday, we were at Naas, or Newbury, or the Curragh. *Non-runner number nine, 11 ran*. And it was always raining.

But we had a lot more besides. A scattering of seeds that grew a love of sport. And a few magic beans.

Over 40? Shut your eyes and see what floods back. Hockey from Three Rock Rovers. Shannon in the AIL. Niall Quinn's debut goal for Arsenal against Liverpool. Pat Kirby in the handball. Cross-country. Mick Dunne's goals and saves of the year.

Luton's plastic pitch and Steve Foster's headband. Kerry Dixon projecting every ounce of fluid from his body by placing one finger on the adjacent nostril. The cars parked behind the Stamford Bridge goal. A union strike when Fred Cogley had to commentate on everything.

'Now to rallying'. Or Bowling. Dogs. Basketball. Boxing. Pitch 'n Putt. Tug of War. YouTube confirms Sports Stadium showed the World Tug of War Championships from Oriel Park. And footage of the Boley boys from Wexford digging very deep suggests that may well be the day the pitch's problems began.

Happier times? More democratic anyway. Perhaps the heyday of all sports outside the big guns in the struggle for hearts and minds.

"It totally was," says Michael Lyster, in the presenter's chair from 1985. "We weren't really paying any rights fees. But when we started writing big cheques to the GAA or IRFU or whoever, everything else kind of got wiped off the slate."

"You could watch 20 minutes of handball and then maybe a horse race. It catered for everybody. You can find the minority sports now on your TV, but you have to decide to watch the whole thing. And people aren't necessarily interested enough."

"I remember presenting the hockey from Three Rock. And it would be a full outside broadcast. All the coloured wagons would show up and it was kind of a big deal. The fact the national broadcaster was there would give it a status."

Stephen Alkin, on board as editor or producer from 1983, as well as soccer commentator, was captain when it sank in 1997.

"I have seen sport move from being owned by the people to being owned by billionaires. Everything in sport is now contingent on television and what television is prepared to pay."

Not that any of them will say it was perfect then. Things didn't always run smoothly. *Après Match of the Day* captures the mayhem well. Before digital, before computers. When live meant unpredictable. When the director was forever telling the presenter to fill a bit more.

"Especially *Sports Stadium*, because it was a bit of this, a bit of that. Half the time it was chaos, seat of your pants doesn't describe it," says Lyster.

He remembers well the afternoon he landed into Montrose for a soft shift. Do

the first hour then hand over to Fred Cogley at the Irish Open for the next four.

"And as I hand over, the first thing I see is Fred taking out an umbrella. And next thing I hear is 'golf has been suspended for the day'. Then a five-second delay, while I could hear the director, I think Max Mulvihill, saying 'ah, what did Fred just say there'."

"And then the shit hit the fan. And Fred was handing back to me and we had nothing."

He recalled a story about Terry Wogan, in his time as a continuity announcer on RTÉ Radio, on a day when it all broke down. How Terry got out an *RTÉ Guide* and just read, holding court in that way he had.

"And I happened to have a copy of it on the desk and said, if it was good enough for Terry... So I just started reeling things off. 'Here's a programme you might be interested in on Tuesday'. And I could hear footsteps running and I knew it was Brian McSharry desperately looking for a tape, any tape, to shove into a machine."

We probably didn't appreciate the joy in all that, back then. They didn't on the switchboard, which often lit up.

"Did we get complaints, did we what?" laughs Maurice Reidy, regarded among RTÉ's finest editors.

"When we started doing the rugby, turning around highlights the same day, there was great juggling of tapes and people. Greystones, Blackrock, Cork Con, crowds of 10,000 or more, and you'd have three or four motorbikes standing by to get the tapes to studio. The first tape would be driven away after 20 minutes and set up. You were hoping there was no crash or traffic problems. And you didn't know until you had the tape in the machine whether you had pictures or not. It was very hairy stuff, hard on the nerves, but it was exciting."

One thing they all agree on — the man you need to talk to first is Michael O'Carroll. The innovator.

THE BEGINNING

The real Michael O'Carroll interview will need more space. When he has the book out. Would you believe he just finished it the day I rang? For the children, even if nobody else reads it.

He's 64 now, living in Foxrock, but from Dunkerrin, on the border of the promised land. So a Tipp hurling nut with a soft spot for Offaly.

This man learned TV in the States, but first he served in the merchant navy as a pastry chef. He was in Cuba the day Castro took over and jumped ship. He covered 40 All-Ireland finals as TV director. "Pushing the button to change the picture."

He produced *Know Your Sport*, until somebody told him it "wasn't RTÉ enough". He survived a heart attack at 42 but almost died in a helicopter crash shooting footage of the gallops at Ballydoyle, for a piece on Derby horse, Celine. But we'll let Michael keep those yarns for the book.

Today, he's just the producer of the first *Sports Stadium*, on September 22, 1973. And he remembers it like yesterday.

"It was presented by Brendan O'Reilly. We decided we'd have a special guest every week, and we had a lot of racing so we decided this guest would pick a couple of what he would hope to be winners.

"The first guest got five winners and

his name was Michael O'Connell, you might have heard of him... Yes, the great Mick O'Connell. And I think he was there for a couple of weeks because he was so successful.

"Eventually he got tired of coming up and we got Billy Coleman to do it."

Gradually, a show took some sort of shape. Boxing highlights from the Stadium. A few League of Ireland goals from the week before. Last Sunday's hurling or football.

"It wasn't easy. Our relationship with the GAA was always fraught because they didn't want to give us live matches. Just the All-Ireland finals and semi-finals and the Railway Cup."

Much like BBC created *Pot Black* to show snooker in half-hour chunks, O'Carroll and Mick Dunne came up with the Top Ace format for handball, to help fill Sports Stadium.

Dunne — owner of that magnificently nasal 'ohhhh what a goaaaal' voice — created Gaelic Stadium with Reidy, pre-viewing games.

And Michael O'Carroll kept pitching ideas.

"You'd say, can I have 25 or 30 minutes. It was political really. You had to lobby. You'd have to ask fellas, if I bring this up at a meeting, will you support me. And once you got a good

“(Sports Stadium) was a bit of this, a bit of that. Half the time it was chaos, seat of your pants doesn't describe it

programme out of it and got a reaction, you got to do it again.

"So we'd do highlights of the Tour of Ireland or the Dunlop Rally."

"Michael was the first to introduce same day coverage of a rally, even before the big boys like Eurosport," says Reidy. "And he was a great innovator of coverage in cycling. We had no experience of it. He was the first to organise live helicopter coverage."

"Nobody created events and got them to air like he did," says Alkin. "He had that American entrepreneurial spirit. The Nissan Classic cycle races, he made those happen."

Michael O'Carroll worked with them all. He rates George Hamilton, who often served as main presenter during the summer, "one of the best performers I've ever come across as a producer. You just ask George to say something and it comes out exactly as you wanted."

But for a long time his main man was the unique Brendan O'Reilly.

THIS CHARMING MAN

You'd need another book for the late Brendan O'Reilly. Ronnie O'Sullivan couldn't pot his history.

Top 10 in the world at the high jump. World class decathlete. Singer-songwriter. Composer of the Olympic Song 'Let the Nations Play' and the 'Ballad of Michael Collins'. Documentary maker. Actor in 1971 film *Flight of the Doves*.

Is it urban legend that he was pipped by Sean Connery to be Bond? You couldn't rule it out.

On one thing they are unanimous. Michael Lyster: "I loved him. A lovely guy. A real gentleman."

Michael O'Carroll: "The loveliest man."

Stephen Alkin: "An amazing character. An absolute gentleman, the loveliest man you'll ever meet."

George Hamilton: "A lovely fella, very gregarious. A charmer."

But was Brendan born to present Sports Stadium?

Lyster: "He was probably writing a song in his head some of the time."

Alkin: "Athletics was his bag, and he didn't really know much about football, racing or Gaelic. The producer or editor would be constantly in his ear, Arsenal 1 Manchester 0, so and so the scorer, and it was like a foreign language to Brendan."

Hamilton: "There was the famed day when he was handed news from the golf and the leader in the clubhouse was Gerry Pate. He read it as Gerry páté."

O'Carroll: "There were some terrible tricks played on him. Scottish football 'Hearts v Lungs', that kind of thing. Guys who thought they were funny by writing that on a piece of paper and Brendan would read it on air. But Brendan really wanted to be a singer and do light entertainment. So he was devil-may-care."

Perhaps one story from his athletics career encapsulates O'Reilly's even

Remember in England at that time, you couldn't even announce your radio commentary match until 3pm and you were only allowed to cover the second half."

Reidy: "The 3pm games were a huge coup for our late boss."

They were the ratings winner, and George took up where he had left off on BBC Radio 2, traversing Britain every Saturday. What sticks in his mind is all the climbing. Those days, a commentator needed a head for heights as much as facts.

"The glamour factor when there was no health and safety! Grimsby v Arsenal in the FA Cup. January in Cleethorpes. Up this fire escape and across the roof of the stand and a blast coming in from the North Sea.

"Or Plough Lane, where the stand was on the roadside, so the ladder was actually on the footpath outside. Climbing up this huge ladder, no cage, going vertically all the way up to the top of the stand, on a South London street."

Goodison was another deathtrap. When he had a co-comm, George always sent John Giles up the ladder first. Until one day at QPR, when Giles got stuck in traffic.

"It must have been the start of the health and safety era. Because they pulled up the ladder at quarter to three and John arrived at ten to. And they wouldn't put it down again for him until half-time. So we had no Gilesey until the second half."

Soon, everything was delayed until nearly half-time.

Alkin: "By the early 90s, Sky had started making shapes. They were spending fortunes, why was Ireland getting it for free. They saw Ireland as a potential market in the future. So we had to start deferring coverage by half an hour, go on air at 3.30."

Almost live added another layer of complication.

Reidy: "We'd record up to about 3.20, take that tape off and set it up for transmission. We'd get three or four tapes per game. But if anything went wrong, or there was a delay... And one day the goalkeeper was injured for ages and we ran out of tape and eventually we had to go live. And then the phone rings and it was this guy from the BBC, 'we've noticed you're live. We'll discuss the matter on Monday, it could well lead to the loss of your contract'. Turns out someone in-house did it as a prank. But I spent the whole weekend worrying."

Alkin: "There was one funny day. Newcastle were playing. Somehow or other, it got really screwed up. They were one-inch tape machines, pretty cumbersome. And it was a nightmare. Whoever it was had two machines to record and play back and got mixed up. So we put out the end of the match in the wrong order, missing a goal. And it was a 3-2 match."

They all, in turn, mention one other word about those 3pm games. Hillsborough.

Reidy and Alkin were working back at base, with Hamilton on the scene, and the horror will forever live with them. As they turned news reporters, trying to make sense of devastation. "An ordinary day that turned into one of the worst days of my life," is how Alkin puts it.

Reidy recalls another grim Saturday evening in 1981, when they were turfed out of studio before the show finished by the news crew, because word was breaking of the Stardust fire.

THE END

From 1988, the theme tune was Europe's 'The Final Countdown'. The countdown gathered pace when Sky Television launched in February, 1989. By 1997, it hit zero, with the battle for 3pm finally lost.

"Then we started *Premier Soccer Saturday* in '98. The day the referee (Paul) Alcock was pushed over, that was the very first programme. It was timed to start right opposite the launch of TV3. Tim O'Connor's idea. And we were turning it all around for 7pm. It was a huge ask."

Fine Gael TD Bernard Allen had stood up in the Dáil and talked of a "pathetic surrender to the greedy empire of Rupert Murdoch and Sky Sports".

But by the end, *Sports Stadium* had not been satisfying many.

Even fans of minority sports wanted more than 20 minutes of last week's action.

Alkin: "As the final editor of *Sports Stadium*, I can say that I was in charge during its demise. However, RTÉ moved to a tranche of live programming to better compete with Sky Sports and the emerging TV3."

Long after the chaos, what they remember best is the fun.

Lyster: "In my early days, they put me together with Tracy Piggott. Tim O'Connor thought it was very funny — Lyster-Piggott."

"There was a great atmosphere. They used put on a tab in the social club on the Saturday evening. The notion was to entertain any guest we had on the programme. But when we finished at half five or whatever, any guests were long since gone home. So we drank the tab ourselves. Now people finish a programme and go home. Those days are gone."

Reidy: "Looking back, it was a great place to work and RTÉ was a very good employer. I loved the place. I have great memories."

Alkin: "It was a privilege and an honour. It was the Carlsberg job, paid to bring sport to the Irish people."

The sadness now is around when they meet up.

Michael O'Carroll often calls out to his old pal Maurice Reidy. But so many of the others are gone.

Brendan O'Reilly, Noel Reid, Mick Dunne, Fred Cogley, Tim O'Connor, Brian McSharry, the voice of show-jumping, Brendan Delaney, the voice of results from start to finish.

"Myself and Noel were together at Brendan's funeral and then Noel himself passed away," says Lyster.

"Noel was a wonderful man," says Hamilton.

"After he retired he threw himself into life with the Dublin County choir. I would hear from him before every concert for a plug on the radio."

"I can imagine sitting beside him while the racing is on. A sound operator called John Hederman (who died in 2007) made it his business to photocopy the *Irish Times* Crossaire crossword and deliver it to every member of the crew. So there would be a competition to see who could finish it by the end of the show."

When the show ended for good, on December 20, 1997, with Brendan O'Reilly back in the hotseat alongside Tracy Piggott, the final credits rolled to the strains of 'Those were the days, my friend'.

It might appear flippant to termise Eoin O'Sullivan's extraordinary story in the context of club hurling matches. But Eoin wouldn't see it like that.

"It's all linked with the hurling for me," he says. "You can link every surgery, every treatment, every setback to the game. I got back for."

Want to offend Eoin? Suggest that all he has been through must put sport in perspective, that he's got bigger problems than a free drifting wide.

"I don't think anything healthwise would impact on how I'd view a mistake, or anything like that. Because a game is still the biggest thing in the world to me."

Call it obsession. Call it love. It's unfair that none of the matches that won Eoin his four Cork senior championship medals will feature here.

Nor will any of his appearances for the Cork minors or the U21s.

But in the five years since the last of those triumphant seasons, through all he has dealt with, he has drawn strength from hurling and from his club.

It would be crass to tell his story in terms of winning and losing. Illness doesn't work that way. But Eoin's sport has always given him a chance to feel like he's winning. Given him one constant, driving focus: To get back on the field.

So, we start, not at the beginning, but in Páirc Uí Rinn last August, the night of the Douglas shopping centre fire, when Eoin's beloved Sarsfields ended the latest Douglas championship dream.

That evening, Eoin's mind wandered, despite everything he has taught himself about staying locked in the moment, about refusing to glance up the track. A few times, crouched over the slotar, in the autumn dusk, he let the weight of it all lean on him.

But he still nailed those crucial frees. "Thank God."

AUGUST 31, 2019: CORK SHC FINAL 3: SARSFIELDS 0-19, DOUGLAS 0-15

Sars were two up, three minutes left, when Eoin O'Sullivan hunched over another. He'd already struck over 10, but this was right on the sideline, just in front of the Douglas dugout.

If he heard anything from behind him, it was drowned out by the voices in his head. "I knew I had this surgery the Tuesday after, in the Mercy."

"I remember even hearing those frees, the last couple... They were big frees. I was saying to myself, 'you're going to be lying down for how long after this?'"

Make sure you look back over 10, but this was right on the sideline, just in front of the Douglas dugout.

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It should be. But my swelling is mild.

I'm lucky. I wear a compression sock and I'm disciplined in wearing it."

They'd patched up his foot with a graft from his thigh and now they stapled a 10-inch wound running down from his groin.

Until all this, the boy born with a hurley had never had a stitch.

MAY 22, 2016: MUNSTER IHC QUARTER-FINAL, TIPPERARY 3-20, CORK 1-15

You need to know the kind of dreamer he was, that boy born with a hurley.

Cork superstar Joe Deane was his idol. And one year, Eoin's now big mother Mary dispatched a letter to the bank, in the name of her besotted son, addressed to Joe Deane.

She put a phone number on the letter and one day the house phone rang and it was Joe, just ringing to have a chat.

Eoin was 12 and his day, month, and life were made. He kept the number that showed up on the phone, and so, before every Cork championship game, from that day on, he'd text Joe.

"The morning of the game," he laughs. "I was probably annoying him. But he used always text me back."

Joe has his own experience with testicular cancer and he reached out again last year and the two hurlers shared a long lunch, which meant as much as that first phonecall.

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Taking on every obstacle to get back on the field



Back in 2016, it was the blood and bandage of Cork firing up Eoin for his first many comebacks.

"I'd been going to Declan O'Sullivan, the physio with Cork, since I was 14. He was excellent, setting me up with rehab and a plan to return."

"It was slow enough; maybe around April I got back training.

"And when I was easing myself back with the club, I played a challenge game against Meelin, with our intermediates. Ronan Dwanne was in charge of them and I played quite well. And he was Cork's intermediate manager. So off the back of that, he brought me in.

"And I started with Cork intermediates against Tipp. In Thurles, the day the Cork seniors were hammered by Tipp in the lashing rain.

"We were hammered before it as well. But that was something I was really proud of. I didn't play that well or anything. But to get back to that stage so soon, it sort of showed me how big sport was for me. It can make you feel like you're winning.

"The way melanoma goes, you get something removed, you watch it, watch it, something pops up, you deal with it, you watch and watch. Scan every three months.

"But I felt great. I did perfect. There was nothing really holding me back. As far as I knew, there was no disease in my body. There was no evidence of anything."

AUGUST 28, 2016: CORK SHC FINAL 4: SARSFIELDS 1-15, MIDLETON 2-21

He badly wants them all to know how much he appreciates them.

His dad, David, who'd drop everything, any time, and drive wherever. Mom, who keeps track of every appointment; logs every twist in his road. Nan Bridle, who just loves him. Alanna, whose deeper understanding of everything Eoin is up against means she's asked too many questions.

And Conor O'Leary, his brother and sister. And everyone at the club. The friends who can talk about it and the ones who can't.

"Everyone helps in their own way, according to their own personality."

"Then there's his consultant Dr Derek Power and his clinical nurse specialist, Emma O'Riordan.

"I remember my first time talking to him. He emailed me information. I was worried. I had a lot of questions. I was going to bed. Half 11, 12. I emailed him; thought he'd see it in the morning. At ten past 12, he emailed me back. "He was worried about melanoma and he's unbelievably available and empathetic. A really good guy and I'm lucky to have him."

Dr Power found a medical trial in London. No disease was showing, but this was another layer of precaution. "I had to give you a drug, see if it will keep melanoma away."

"The caveat was it's double blind. Every trial needs that. The patient doesn't know if they're getting the treatment and the people giving it don't know if you're getting the real drug or the placebo."

By now, he had finished a masters in education at UCC and was teaching in Christians. The school freed his timetable to allow him to travel to London on Wednesdays.

A new routine formed: Train Tuesday night; CityJet Wednesday morning; fly home Wednesday evening; train Thursday.

"I never gave myself the out to miss training. I didn't think I had an excuse. I was feeling fine, so much so that we were thinking I'm getting the placebo, not the treatment."

The only thing he's ever asked of the club is that they treat him like any other player. The only thing he doesn't want is minding.

"That first year, he did wonder, once or twice, if he'd made a mistake being so open about his illness.

After his own was fella, not the manager, who said it to me, that he thought you were a good bit weaker because of the treatment. That pissed me off, because I was not missing training. I was keeping an eye on everything I was doing in the gym, my numbers were up.

"When you hear that, you're thinking, 'maybe it's not something I need to be saying, because people are making inferences.'"

He was in London, getting treatment, the Wednesday before they lost the championship. "We had a disaster against Midleton.

He doesn't mention he scored the goal. And then, a few weeks later, London rang.

"I got a scan every fourth time I was over and something showed up.

"They could tell me then that I was on the drug, because that would impact my future treatment choices. Which was good and bad, because it meant that drug wasn't an option. But they had to release me from the trial.

"So, I went back in for surgery in the CUIH, to take out much deeper lymph nodes. Another wound. More staples.

"But that was fine."

SEPTEMBER 4, 2017: CORK SHC QUARTER-FINAL, UCC 0-18, SARSFIELDS 1-15

"But that was fine."

Along the way, Eoin started to study

the teachings of performance guru Gary Keegan. And he began to hold one line of Keegan's very close.

"The obstacle is the way."

"It was probably the way I'd been living anyway, to a degree. But it made me think about it even more.

"Instead of showing resistance to something, the way I interpreted it is, 'what must have been on his mind?'"

"And I was something I was really proud of. I didn't play that well or anything. But to get back to that stage so soon, it sort of showed me how big sport was for me. It can make you feel like you're winning.

"The way melanoma goes, you get something removed, you watch it, watch it, something pops up, you deal with it, you watch and watch. Scan every three months.

"But I felt great. I did perfect. There was nothing really holding me back. As far as I knew, there was no disease in my body. There was no evidence of anything."

something tangible. You can do your rehab; go to the gym, do your runs, tick all the boxes. It's tangible, it's easy, in a way.

"The harder part is the intangibles. Your mindset about keeping on top of that. It's the same with hurling. If you're going well, you can take your foot off the pedal. 'What am I doing with negative thoughts?' Am I managing them?"

Not long ago, he got a text from a former manager, Conor Cusack, who'd taken his inmocky group at U15 and U16.

"I read: 'Cancer picked the wrong party.' And Eoin sent one back, reminding the sender of his part in building what strength he had.

"He changed me. The way I think and the way I'm able to deal with this. I'd attribute back to him. The tools he gave me when we were 14.

"And I kind of felt, 'if it's something you want to do, why didn't you do it?'"

So, I went back to do a masters in anatomy, because I had no science. And eventually, I got accepted into physio in UCC."

And now Declan O'Sullivan, his physio since he was 14, is his teacher too.

SEPTEMBER 16, 2018: CORK SHC QUARTER-FINAL: SARSFIELDS 1-14, UCC 0-20

"During that winter, I started doing this terrible back pain.

"I'm mad into NFL and NBA, so if I woke at two in the morning, I'd get up and watch something. But I remember the pain was so bad you literally couldn't focus on the game."

More scans showed there was something left over and it wasn't removable by surgery. "I missed the semi-final of the league against the Barr's. I was too sore; couldn't play. I couldn't do anything.

"The consultant had a new drug he offered me. Many people with melanoma have the BRAF gene. And there are drug options to target that gene. It's immunotherapy. An immunosuppressant. It targets the gene that makes melanoma spread and causes it to stop the spread.

"He said in the doc, 'and I couldn't understand it, that he needed melanoma to happen to him. His life was gone in a way that he needed it. I'd never say I needed it but I understand it now, in that it's definitely changed me, changed my mindset."

"The Reach Foundation Stynes helped build is dedicated to inspiring young people to believe in themselves and get the most out of life.

Eoin was drawn to it, and its Irish

counterpart, Soar, founded by former Cork hurler Tony Griffin, with Karl Swan.

"I just loved the messages they were giving."

"Tony is one of the best men I've ever met. When you're talking to him, you have 100% his attention. He's so present. It's really special. It's a gift."

"I had a scan a couple of weeks later: Everything was gone. Unbelievable.

"But the thing with these drugs, they are like antibiotics: They have a shelf life. The max, normally, is five years, though there are people on it five years and still going on. But you know there's a timeline. If it stop working at some stage.

"But I was flying. You take them every morning and every evening. It's slightly inconvenient. You can't eat an hour before and two hours after, but it's nothing, really, with something like this.

"So it meant more than a regular league title that they won with him a captain, beating the Barr's in the final."

response to his illness, it's just his total dedication anyway. If you pass the field, you're 90% sure of seeing him in there, practising, practising. And it has paid off: His ratio on the frees has improved in recent years.

"We all know the knock-backs he has had. That day against Douglas, he was just out of hospital a few days.

"And rooted on the edge of the Cork square, they'll all tell you that O'Donoghue took some picking."

Club chairman Tadhg Murphy, the former Cork dual star, was inspired by him.

"My first year was Tom's last year," he said. "It was an honour when Blackrock and the Glen were doing our best. And Tom was an inspirational guy for us because he was our only man on the Cork team and that win in '66 was very special in Cork."

When the cup came back to Riverstown it was a huge night, after such a long wait.

For 30 days, six sessions, Monday to Friday, moved into the hospital grounds.

"But I started feeling queasy and sick. And I knew it wasn't just anxiety. We played Blackrock in the league final and I was feeling terrible, but I played. And then I asked for a scan, and I was told I had a hernia, but I knew something was up."

A tailor altered it for me to protect exactly where my stitches were.

"The last advice I got was maybe not to play, that the wound was a bit deep. But I had my mind made up at that stage."

"I knew I was pushing the boat out but it was in my mind."

Not much.

"This has definitely changed me, for the better in a lot of ways. Before, you'd have a scan, and I'd be shitting it out. And not worrying about the future. I've to wait a week, then worry, worry, thinking, thinking. Now, I walk in, get the scan, walk out, and I wouldn't think about it until the day I'm finding out.

"Any book you read about mindset, it is all about being in the moment. And not worrying about the future."

"I definitely do worry about things. I worried about that back pain. I'd look at my back and think, 'God, I hope I can think like that."

"You need to be better; you're not being fair to yourself thinking like that, or being fair to people around you."

The illness has made him less selfish, he hopes, more interested in other people. He gets my life story before I sit back in the car.

He's grateful for so much. He knows it's a luxury that he can stay in college, change career, that his parents look after him.

"And I was delighted it did, because I was able to be in and around it, taking photos. And it was something to be proud of."

STAYING IN THE MOMENT

Of course he'll hurt this year, if there are matches.

"I was training away mad up to the shoulder. We did a 50km training, with Sars in April."

"Before everything closed down, I went down to the Sars gym and we all took a barbell and some weights."

"If the GAA opened it up and they were happy for hurling to go ahead, that would be enough for me."

"You can only mind yourself so much. But I'm being responsible. I'm basically just following the government guidelines.

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