

TOMMY CONLON



IT WAS July 1997 and Bernard Cusack, at the age of 102, knew that his time left on earth could now be counted in days. He was ready to meet his maker, recalled his son Owen last week, "but he didn't want to meet him until the game was over".

The game in question was the Ulster football final, to be played in Clones on Sunday, July 20, between Derry and his beloved Cavan. Born in 1895, Mr Cusack had known all the glory days and seen most of them. He was there when Cavan were lords of Ulster for the first 50 years of the 20th century, and lords of Ireland in 1933, '35, '47, '48 and '52.

But by 1997 they'd been reduced to starvation rations. They hadn't won Ulster since '69. In the days of plenty it was inconceivable that they would have to wait 28 years for a provincial title. And having waited that long, Bernard decided that the God in whom he deeply believed could wait a bit longer for him too.

Owen Cusack is himself now 80. He remembers his father's final week like it was yesterday. Bernard had broken his hip a few weeks earlier. He was in Lisdarn Hospital in Cavan town. "And he was ready to — he was just ready to die. But he had his senses and all that."

A farmer in the parish of Lacken, he would regularly go for a drink in Phil Masterson's pub in nearby Ballinagh. "And then you see, he used to meet some of the Cavan footballers in Masterson's, Stephen King and (Bernard) Morris and a lot of them maybe after matches."

Bernard had the height of time for Stephen King, a midfielder who in his prime could stand toe-to-toe with the best midfielders in Ireland. The Killeshandra man was captain in '97 and on his last legs as a footballer.

He was pushing 35 and in his 18th season with the county. He had known nothing but the doldrums wearing Breffni blue but wasn't the type to mope about it; he loved his time in the county jersey, irrespective of the absence of medals. Bernard Cusack had seen all the Cavan greats over the previous 80 years and admired King as much as he admired any of them.

Three or four days before the '97 final, the doctors moved him to a private room. They could do no more. Phil and his wife Eileen were regular visitors during those weeks.

"So then Mrs Masterson went in to see him one day in the hospital before he died," recalls Owen, "and he was praying. And she said to him, 'What are you praying for?' Well, he said, 'I'm praying that Stephen King will lift the cup, that Cavan will win the Ulster championship. I know I'm gonna die but I'll not die,' says he, 'until the game is over.' That was a couple of days before the match."

He lapsed in and out of consciousness during the following days. On the Friday he seemed close to exhaustion. But he rallied somewhat. Owen says he was always hardy — a country man, an outdoors man.

"Ah he was always tough, you know, he was a very healthy man. He was a great huntsman, a very active little man, blessed with good health and great memory." He'd been a footballer too. "He played with Bruskey in the 1920s, they had a team in Bruskey that time, there was no team in Lacken. They got



Captain Raymond Calligan (centre) celebrates with his Cavan and team-mates following the Breffni County's Ulster football final victory over Donegal in the Athletic Ground in Armagh last weekend. Photo: David Fitzgerald

Glorious past mixes with unexpected joy of present

to a final that time but he couldn't play because he got his back broke, a wall fell on him and broke his back."

In his room in the Lisdarn was a television attached to the wall. On the Sunday, Owen and his five sisters kept a bedside vigil around their father. They followed the match on TV.

It was an agonisingly tight game. The teams were level no less than eight times in the first half alone. Their father could only "see glimpses of it" but they were updating him with every score and he could grasp the ebb and flow. "Oh he could know, oh by God he could." Then young Jason Reilly, in off the bench, drilled the game's only goal ten minutes from time. The match had broken Cavan's way. They saw it out to win by the narrowest of margins, 1-14 to 0-16.

"And when the game was over he said, 'Thank God it's all over now, I can go'. And he died the next morning at five o'clock, the Monday morning. And Stephen King rang Masterson's, because we had no phone at the time, on the Monday about 11 o'clock to see when would he bring in the cup (into the hospital) but he had passed away."

It didn't matter. The man died peacefully and happily having his final wish fulfilled. He had lived long enough to hear the good news. King and Morris and several more of the victorious Cavan players paid their respects at Bernard's funeral.

After '97, Cavan would have to wait another 23 years for their next Ulster title, delivered last Sunday against all the odds with a performance that will

go down in the local annals. Veteran followers of the county's fortunes say it is up there with their defeat of Down, then the All-Ireland champions, in '62, or their 1969 victory, also against Down who were again the defending All-Ireland champions. Owen Cusack was at those games and many more besides, like his father before him. In all honesty, he has to admit, he did not see last Sunday's performance coming.

"Not at all, no, not at all! I knew they had a bit of fight in them but sure Donegal, they were talking about them as the only team that'd bate Dublin and that." He has two young neighbours who starred last Sunday, Thomas Galligan and his cousin Raymond Calligan, the goalkeeper and captain. They live only "a stone's throw across the fields".

He was extremely proud of them last Sunday.

In normal times, the county would have jacked the traces for a week of celebrations. Instead they had to make do with a cavalcade of cars on Sunday evening beeping their horns and flashing their lights in a drive-by salute to their heroes outside Breffni Park. The players stood up on an open-sided lorry and took the acclaim as Cavan's supporters

The only regret is that there wasn't an auld pub open

cheered them from the safety of their cars. It was the best that everyone could do in the circumstances.

Owen lives on his own but had a nephew over for company. "The only regret is that there wasn't an auld pub open. But we had a couple of little supps. It wasn't tae now we drank, I tell ya."

Sadly, since '97, Phil and Eileen have also gone to their eternal reward. And their bar that was once the vibrant centre of community life for Cavan's standing army of supporters has also long since closed. Times have changed, society has changed, and one cannot but feel a pang of sadness at the passing, one by one, of these modest establishments that offered a home away from home for lovers of the game.

It was Phil himself who told this writer the story of Bernard Cusack a few days after Stephen King had lifted the cup. I had gone down to write a colour piece for the *Sunday Times*, knowing well that a county besotted with Gaelic football would offer rich material for a good story. But even knowing this, one didn't expect to hear about a man of 102 who literally postponed his own death until he got word that the team had won. In the circumstances it was surely meant to be: no one but no one could deny a dying man his heart's desire.

I wrote the story for the following Sunday's edition. The headline on the piece was "Heaven can wait for Cavan".

Rowe goals see Dubs past Armagh

CONOR MCKEON

Dublin	3-13
Armagh	3-8
BREFFNI PARK	



Carla Rowe notched a personal tally of 2-4

DUBLIN are into a seventh All-Ireland ladies senior football final in succession, but not without a fight and not without a worrying injury suffered by captain Sinéad Aherne.

They beat a strong Armagh team, inspired by the excellent Aimee Mackin, to secure a crack at a fourth Brendan Martin Cup in a row. Driven by Noelle Healy and Carla Rowe, who stepped into Aherne's free-taking role after the seven-time All Star limped off in the first half, Dublin eventually pulled away, having gone into the break level.

The winners enjoyed the ideal start. Only three minutes in, they scored a goal through Nicole Owens — a late addition to the attack in place of Niamh McEvoy — after Healy squared following a surging run.

They had their second goal just seven minutes later. Rowe kicked a point to put Dublin 1-2 to 0-1 up and from the following kick-out, Lyndsey Davey won clean possession. Dublin pounced, methodically working the ball to Rowe,

who slammed a shot beyond the reach of Anna Carr. That put Dublin into a 2-2 to 0-1 lead and granted them the appearance of complete authority.

Aimee Mackin, who scored 2-7 against Mayo in Armagh's last game, was a peripheral figure during that early passage, but she sprang to life just as the game seemed to be moving beyond the Ulster side.

In the 15th minute, Mackin caught a '45 that dropped just outside the Dublin square. She turned sharply just as Lauren Magee attempted a challenge and the referee awarded a penalty.

Mackin directed her shot just beyond Ciara Trant and Armagh suddenly had something to work with.

Largely, they dominated possession and territory for the next ten or so minutes, pinning Dublin in on their kick-outs. On the rare occasions they managed to take a quick kick-out in that

phase, Armagh were tigerish in their tackling and forced numerous turnovers. Healy's mazy running and sharp finishing gave Dublin another boost, but Armagh dominated the closing stages of the half.

Worse for Dublin was the loss of captain Aherne, who pulled up after appearing to jar her knee. When Aoife McCoy slammed home a second Armagh goal, they clearly had the momentum and Dublin required a point just on the hooter from Healy to go in level at 2-6 to 2-6.

Clearly, Armagh had the firepower to hurt Dublin. But their cause was damaged early in the second half when Clodagh McCambridge was booked for a foul on McEvoy.

Rowe scored the resultant penalty and in the 10 minutes Armagh's numbers were reduced, Dublin scored 1-4 to 0-1.

Effectively, that was the winning of the game but Mackin scored a brilliant second goal to ensure the All-Ireland champions had to keep their wits about them before booking their place in the final on December 20.

Scorers — Dublin: C Rowe 2-4 (1-0 pen, 2f), N Owens 1-0, N Healy 0-3, L Davey 0-2, S Aherne (f), S McCaffrey, K Sullivan, S Killeen 0-1 each. Armagh: A Mackin 2-4 (1-0 pen, 2f), A McCoy 1-0, K Mallon 0-2 (2f), B Mackin, A Marley 0-1 each. Dublin: C Trant, M Byrne, N Collins, A Kane, L Caffrey, S McGrath, S Goldrick, L Magee, J Dunne, C Rowe, L Davey, S McCaffrey; S Aherne, N Owens, M Healy. Subs: S Killeen for Aherne (25 inj), N McEvoy for 12 (h-t), K Sullivan for Dunne (53), C O'Connor for Owens (53), O Nolan for Kae (56). Armagh: A Carr, S Marley, C McCambridge, S Grey, T Grimes, B Mackin, G Ferguson; N Coleman, A Bellow, C Marley, A McCoy, A Mackin; C O'Hanlon, K Mallon, E Lavery. Subs: T McVeigh for Ferguson (46), N Reel for Lavery (55). Referee: G McMahon (Mayo).

Bradley points way in outstanding Antrim showing

Antrim	2-30
Meath	3-10
PÁIRC TAILTEANN	

IMPRESSIVE Antrim set up a repeat of the recent Division 2A NHL decider against Kerry when they made certain of a Joe McDonagh Cup final spot at Páirc Tailteann, Navan yesterday.

The Glensmen produced some excellent play following a slow start against the home side seeking a first ever win in the competition. Meath were boosted by an early long range goal from James Kelly and led by four points 1-8 to 0-7 after 24

minutes. However, once the visitors got into their stride the outcome was rarely in doubt. Antrim finished the half strongly outscoring the hosts 1-6 to 0-1, with the goal coming from Niall McKenna, to lead 1-13 to 1-9 at the break.

With Ciarán Clarke excelling from placed balls and Michael Bradley accounting for some wonderful long range points Antrim restarted in similar fashion.

A goal from Stephen Morris against the run of play was Meath's only score in the third quarter. Antrim's second goal from Daniel McCloskey left it 2-19 to 2-9 after 49 minutes.

Clarke eventually took his points tally to 12 before the finish while all eight of Bradley's points came from play.

Damien Healy blasted a close range free

to the net for a consolation goal for Meath in added time.

Scorers — Antrim: C Clarke 0-12 (0f), M Bradley 0-8; N McKenna, D McCloskey 1-0 each; C McCann, J McNaughton, N McKeage 0-2 each; R McGarry, E Campbell, D Nugent, D McMullan 0-1 each. Meath: J Kelly 1-1, S Morris, D Healy 1-0 each; P O'Hanrahan (1f, 1'65), A Douglas 0-2 each; D McGowan, J Walsh, K Keoghlan, D Kelly (f), P Potterton 0-1 each. Antrim: C McAllister; P Duffin, M Donnelly, S Rooney, G Walsh, P Burke, R McGarry; E Campbell, A O'Brien; N McKenna, J McNaughton, M Bradley, D McCloskey, C McCann, C Clarke. Subs: D McMullan for Walsh (45), D Nugent for McCann (45), N McKeage for McKenna (50), E O'Neill for McCloskey (60), C Johnston for McGarry (63). Meath: C Ennis; S Geraghty, S Brennan, M Burke; S Whitty, D Kelly, B McGowan; A Douglas, P O'Hanrahan, J Kelly, S Morris, D McGowan; P Potterton, K Keoghlan, J Walsh. Subs: P Conneely for Geraghty (28), D Healy for Walsh (47), J McGowan for Morris (51), N Potterton for Keoghlan (63), E O'Donnchadha for O'Hanrahan (63). Referee: D Hughes (Kilkenny).

Clarke inspires Westmeath as Murtagh ends his 20-year career

Westmeath	1-21
Carlow	2-13
CUSACK PARK	

WITH Aonghus Clarke in top form, Westmeath were far from flattered by their five-point winning margin over Carlow in the last round robin game of the Joe McDonagh Cup in Mullingar yesterday. Westmeath

started the better and led by 0-4 to 0-1 after seven minutes. However, a fine goal from John Michael Nolan levelled the scoring. Carlow led by two points (1-5 to 0-6) when a run from Robbie Greville tied up Niall Mitchell for a well-taken goal in the 27th minute. Westmeath led by 1-9 to 1-7 at the interval.

The home team were three points clear (1-13 to 1-10) at the second water break. Then Clarke took control, scoring six unanswered points, three each from frees and open play. A 70th-minute goal from John Nolan was merely a consolation score for a disappointing Carlow side. The game

marked the end of Brendan Murtagh's 20-year career as a Westmeath senior player.

Scorers — Westmeath: A Clarke 0-13 (6f, 2'65), C Boyle 0-4, N Mitchell 1-0, S Williams, J Galvin, L Loughlin, B Murtagh 0-1 each. Carlow: C Nolan 0-5 (2f), K McDonald 0-4 (3f), J Nolan 1-1, JM Nolan 1-0, J Kavanagh 0-2, E Byrne 0-1. Westmeath: E Skelly; B Doyle, D Egerton, C Shaw; A Craig, T Doyle, A Cox; C Boyle; R Greville; J Boyle, A Clarke, J Galvin, D Clinton, N Mitchell, S Williams. Subs: L Loughlin for Williams (35), B Murtagh for Galvin (50), C Kane for Cox (52), E Price for Clinton (55), D McNicholas for Mitchell (65). Carlow: D Jordan; R Smithers, P Doyle, M Doyle; G Coady, D English, D Byrne; J Kavanagh, A Ammond; JM Nolan, P Coady, E Byrne; C Nolan, K McDonald, J Nolan. Subs: J Doyle for C Nolan (43), R Coady for Ammond (57). Referee: T Walsh (Waterford).

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UP CLOSE & INDEPENDENT

Blackmore's potent mix of style and substance

Rachael didn't have greatness thrust upon her as a prodigy – she acquired it

Tommy Conlon



At the precise moment in her life when she was never more in control of her destiny, Rachael Blackmore was never less in control of the consequences of her actions.

Happily, said consequences were of the most benign and wholesome kind. But when an estimated 600 million audience is watching you reach the pinnacle of your profession live on television around the world, that is a lot of people projecting what they want to project onto you.

It means you are going to have the designation of role model thrust upon you, even though you never asked for it and apparently never gave it much thought in the years before. You were just too busy trying to make a living back then, trying to get better at your job, trying to make your way in the world.

Last Saturday, at the age of 31, Blackmore reached a career zenith by winning the Aintree Grand National. But by becoming also the first woman to win it, she became a pioneer for the feminist cause although it seemed to have little or no relevance to the daily grind of her existence over the previous decade.

She had found her passion young and it meant she spent a lot more time reading the pages of the *Racing Post* than, say, the polemics of Andrea Dworkin. Nothing in the back pages of her interviews, profiles and public comments suggests she saw herself as a pathfinder in the broader battle for gender rights.

But the traditional male hegemony in society must surely have had an impact in her sphere too. Horse racing has also been ruled by men for hundreds of years, albeit that women historically seemed to have had some measure of influence in training yards and the industry overall. Being a rural sport, maybe it had more room for the type of capable, resourceful, earthy woman that is routinely found in agriculture and rural life generally.

These women have their own formidable agency, coming naturally and autonomously to them, whilst usually remaining oblivious to the work of professional feminism in academia

and the metropolitan media.

Blackmore grew up on a dairy farm outside of Killenaule in Tipperary. If she ever considered herself a victim of racing's gender inequality, she hasn't said it. Maybe she was too tough-minded to take refuge in victimhood. Maybe she would have seen that as a cop-out, an excuse, a weakness. Maybe she too had her own sense of agency and autonomy; the sense that she could be a self-made woman irrespective of the circumstances.

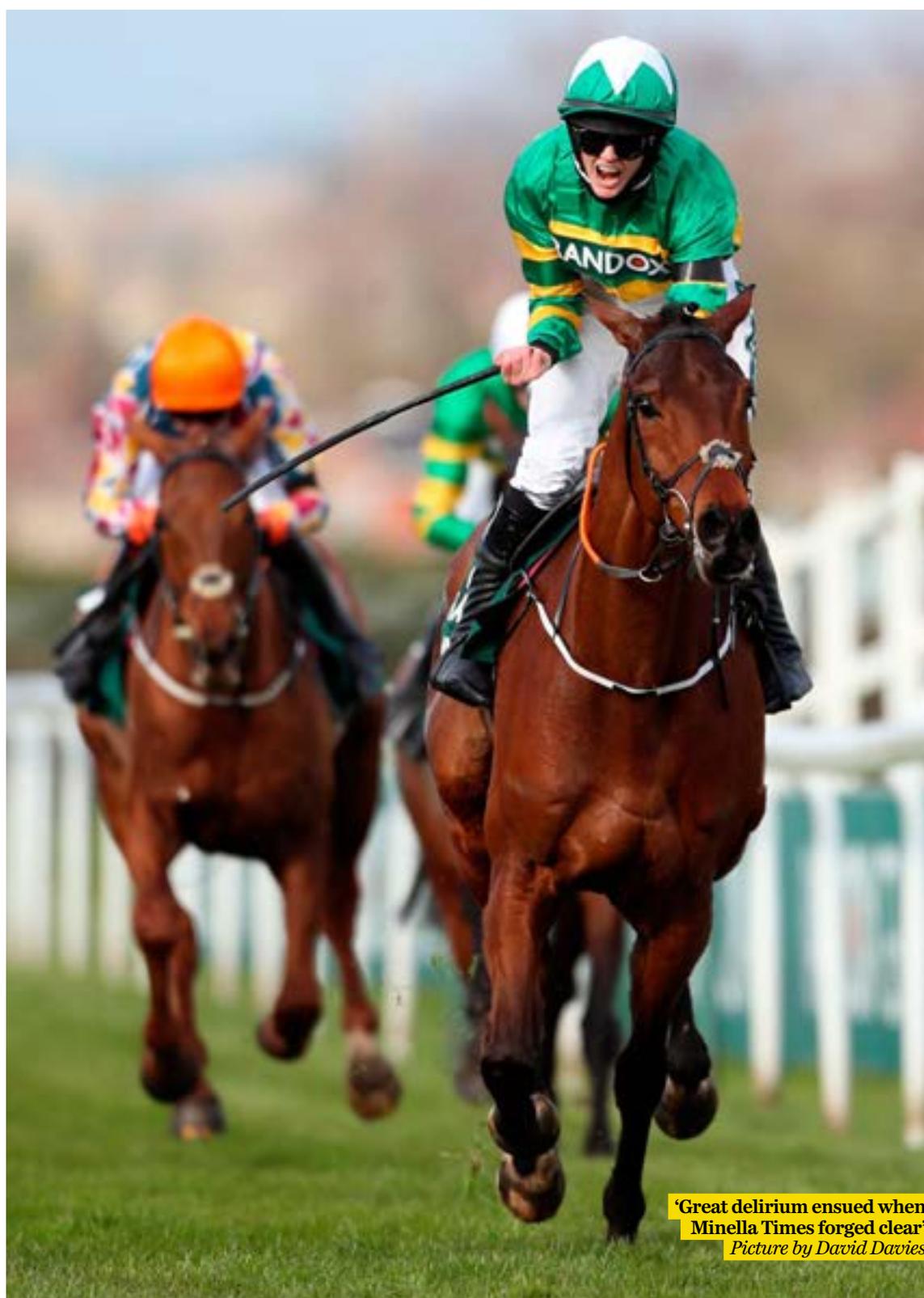
In the 2019 TG4 documentary *Jump Girls*, she makes just a passing reference to the old-school attitudes she evidently encountered. "A trainer," she says, "might decide, 'I don't want her on that (horse), she's a girl,' blah blah blah. But another trainer might decide, 'No, I think I would like a girl on this horse, I think a girl might make a bit of a difference,' so it completely balances out, you know?"

It is the "blah blah blah" in this soundbite which is particularly revealing. It would suggest she didn't give this mentality the time of day. It suggests it was so beneath her level of intelligence, she couldn't take it seriously enough to let it affect her. How could you possibly even allow yourself to be a victim of something so obviously second rate?

Whatever basic discrimination was there, Blackmore has consistently downplayed it in public. Maybe now that her stardom has given her the sort of platform enjoyed by someone like Katie Taylor, she might feel in a position to admit that it was more of an issue than she thought at the time. Or maybe it genuinely was never an issue at all. In the documentary she says that predecessors such as Nina Carberry and Katie Walsh had done most of the heavy lifting anyway.

"Katie and Nina have blown any stigma away," she says, "they're phenomenal, there were no big barriers for me to try and climb or anything, they got rid of all them."

For her, as for Carberry and Walsh, the main barrier, as it is at the elite end of any sport, was competition. The competition among equally talented, equally hungry young professionals scrambling for their rung on the ladder too. The fact that these were mostly young men meant they had a natural advantage in physical strength. But the solution, as it usually is at this level, was to outwork and outlast and ultimately outperform one's rivals. She had to stay the course, take the punishment, absorb the setbacks,



'Great delirium ensued when Minella Times forged clear'
Picture by David Davies

keep learning and keep going.

The parable behind Blackmore's success is, in one way, a lot more orthodox than the headlines over the last week would suggest. It is the conventional wisdom that applies across all sports at all times: talent multiplied by dedication, perseverance and courage. She followed that formula to the letter. And it is not an easy thing to do; so many others fall by the wayside because they cannot do it. But the fundamental lesson is gender-neutral; Blackmore is just the latest triumphant example. She did not have greatness thrust upon her as a teenage prodigy. She acquired it through 10 years of tough graft and incremental progress.



The solution was to outwork and outlast and ultimately outperform one's rivals

And now as a result, she has had the feminist cause thrust upon her, in one way or another. If she spent most of her life in a state of apparent indifference to it, she probably cannot do so any longer. She has become an inspiration and hopefully she will find it a privilege not a burden.

As it happens, three female generations in my family sat down together to watch the National last Saturday. Among them were two 13-year-old girls, first cousins, one of whom does her pony riding every weekend. The other was having her first bet on the National. Her dad took her through the runners and riders. She knew nothing about horses but when he told her about Rachael Blackmore, no more needed to be said. Her fiver was going on "the lady jockey". Great delirium ensued when Minella Times forged clear after the final fence and sailed home. Among the smiles and laughter in our living room were a few moist eyes too.

The TV audience: 600 million people. Even if half that number is closer to reality, it is still an awful lot of people worldwide. It is the power

of fame writ large in the sky. And it is the power of fame to do good, as opposed to the power of celebrity to dumb down. Here is another distinction worth noting: Blackmore's fame has substance and achievement underpinning it. In passing she is offering lessons in authenticity too, an alternative version to the synthetic artifice of social media fame.

And of that 600 million, how many girls around the world, living in societies where misogyny is an ever-present menace, saw this woman make history right in front of their eyes? And quietly noted it and tucked it away in their consciousness like a secret. We will never know whose horizons were opened by the sight of a woman doing something world class on a world stage – and beating the best men in her game while so doing.

Blah blah blah is right. The trainers who encouraged Blackmore, the ones who said "a girl might make a bit of a difference", clearly had no idea just how big a difference she would ultimately make – not just on a horse, but to the sport itself. In fairness, back then she didn't seem to have any idea either. She does now; she definitely does now.

United arrive at crossroads over future of Pogba

Mike McGrath

When he went to the World Cup in Brazil seven years ago, Paul Pogba started learning Portuguese. He has picked up more since, to the extent it is the fifth in his portfolio of languages.

He can talk in Bruno Fernandes's mother tongue during training at Carrington, then happily speak French or Spanish to one of his closest friends, Eric Bailly. The session would be in English, and Pogba can also speak Italian from his four years at Juventus.

Those close to him say he is the type of person to let someone know he can speak their language, but that should not be mistaken for being a braggart. The misconception of Pogba is that he puts swagger over substance. He is more likely ingratiating himself to his team-mates.

Pogba has been at Manchester United for five seasons, and many are still trying to understand him. The most expensive signing by a Premier League team is as enigmatic as his fellow Frenchman Eric Cantona. There is also a touch of Mario Balotelli's genuineness and spontaneity.

Half a decade at United, the wealthiest team in England, and there is no public relations machine behind the £89.3m player. His agent, Mino Raiola, sorts the deals, Pogba does the rest. If a picture appears on his Instagram, it is not part of a big media game.

Not all of it is for show. When he moved back to Manchester he brought over his private chef from Turin and paid for their family to stay in England. They only just moved back to Italy after missing being away from loved ones during lockdown.

Pogba also reconnected with John Cofie, his old team-mate from United's youth team who had dropped into non-League football and was on the books at Southport. He brought presents back for the staff behind the scenes when he went to Italy four years earlier. The tea lady would be as important as a first-team player, which is said to be true to his upbringing in Roissy-en-Brie, near Paris.

His relationships with his team-mates have been fluid. That would be expected given the transition at United in his time there.

Pogba's peak years have been at Old Trafford at a time when there has been a change of strategy from the days of marquee signings and a steady turnover of players. One year after his arrival his good friend Romelu Lukaku joined.

Chelsea were looking to re-sign the player they sold to Everton but

he ended up at Old Trafford. At the time of his decision he was on holiday with Pogba in Los Angeles, where the Frenchman called himself 'agent' after his friend signed. Raiola was the real agent, representing United's two most expensive signings to date.

Pogba had rented the most sought-after mansion on Mount Pleasant. It had been used in hip-hop videos for Tyga. United ended up unveiling Lukaku at the house, having decorated it red before the photoshoot. Lukaku and Pogba were best friends for a while, before drifting apart.

The dynamic of the United dressing room is a Venn diagram of languages which Pogba is able to straddle. Bailly is his closest confidant and he gravitates towards the Spanish speakers. Edinson Cavani is a good friend since he arrived. Pogba, who is teetotal, will go out on the town with the team but is rarely out otherwise.

As a young father, he spends time at home, where he has installed an indoor two-a-side pitch. Whether he has justified his billing as England's most expensive player is the debating point. His haul of one League Cup and one Europa League is not enough for a player who won the World Cup three years ago.

He had one eye on an exit in the two summers before the pandemic. After the World Cup, Jose Mourinho told him to bring the focus he showed in Russia back to Old Trafford. It was not well received and Pogba would have left if allowed. By 2019, he was talking about looking for a new challenge.

Raiola recently said a toddler could find Pogba a club, but it does not seem straightforward. He will have one year left on his contract this summer and by this stage of the season players are given an indication of plans: a new deal will be sorted, or seek a new club.

Spain is not as easy a move as it looks. Zinedine Zidane has to stay for the 28-year-old to move to Real Madrid and that is not a given. They have also had a bad experience of taking an expensive player of the same age from the Premier League in Eden Hazard.

All La Liga clubs have salary-cap reductions for next season and Barcelona look to be prioritising other players. At Paris Saint-Germain it would be difficult for him to leave his house. Returning to Juve would invite comparisons to his four-in-a-row spell of titles. Bayern Munich look well suited, but the relentless transfer news coming out of Germany clubs never seems to involve Pogba.

United are certainly at a crossroads with Pogba: get the enigma to stay longer or sell. They know about the trouble an expiring contract can bring, from picking off Alexis Sanchez from Arsenal.

Going from most expensive Premier League signing to becoming a free agent seems unthinkable.

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Part of past will always belong to Charlton

Elegy to Jack that becomes a lament for all of our beginnings and all our ends

Tommy Conlon



Italia '90 and all that? Maybe it's time to lock the door and throw away the key. We've been banging on about it long enough.

We don't need to see David O'Leary's penalty again. We don't really need to see John Healy crying again and we definitely don't need to hear another round of *Olé Olé Olé* again. This viewer was thinking all those things as we watched *Finding Jack Charlton* on the box last weekend. But while thinking those things I also noticed I was smiling as those exact scenes were replayed on screen. It is hard to escape nostalgia's siren call.

Those images have become a memory loop so deeply embedded in the mind, it's like the reel of film that first captured them has been implanted in our brains via a silicon chip. We are triggered to respond with a fond smile every time they flicker on the retina. For the last 30 years those scenes have gone round and round and round the national play yard, like a carousel at a funfair that was never switched off.

But someone needs to pull the plug. It is a sign of desperate times in the present when we keep recalling all our yesterdays. It's a cheap anaesthetic in the face of contemporary woes. It keeps saying we'll never have a future like our glorious past.

And, more relevant still, it continually leads to deluded expectations in the here and now because there was a time when once we were kings. In terms of international football we are paupers now. But because we were once a big noise on the world stage we think we're entitled to be a big noise still. While we wallow in that warm, comforting jacuzzi on memory lane, the work doesn't get done and the years are wasted.

So, it was with our defences up

that we sat down last weekend to watch the documentary, made by the veteran television football reporter Gabriel Clarke, among others. The advance publicity had given us some idea of what to expect. It would be a chronicle of Big Jack's life and times but it would also take us on a voyage round the dementia that had afflicted the great man in his final years, before lymphoma claimed him last summer at the age of 85.

It duly delivered on its promise and we were left with a film that started out nostalgic but ended up becoming elegiac. It is an elegy to Jack that becomes, in its way, an elegy for all our beginnings and all our ends.

When it goes back in time we see a man at the peak of his powers, a leader and a doer, a man of fame and achievement, a master of his dominion. When it returns to the present, to his home in Northumberland, we see a man who is gently told by his wife that he can take off his hat and coat, now that he's back in from the cold. He takes off his hat and coat without a word.

In the old footage of Charlton as a player with Leeds United and England, he is ramrod straight in his posture, as if proudly showing off his tallness, his physical command, his pride as a man of iron in a world of hard men. Now in old age he seems docile as a lamb. Still ramrod straight, mind you, not stooped and shrunken by the weight of years.

But the fog has swamped his mind. He takes off his cap and coat and stares at a framed picture on the wall of Alf Ramsey and the boys of '66. Bobby Moore is sitting on their shoulders holding aloft the Jules Rimet; Jack and his younger brother Bobby — "our kid" — are there too. It doesn't seem to register at all.

"Jack was a strange breath of fresh air," says Roddy Doyle in the film. "He was an Englishman that we loved — somehow."

This has become part of the official history of the golden era. It needs a bit of revisionism. It seems to ignore the social history. Jack's Englishness did not matter one whit to a great



“We were once a big noise on the world stage, we think we're entitled to be a big noise still”

majority of Irish people, many of whom, then as now, were steeped in connections to England through kith and kin, through the BBC, through pop music and comedians and TV soaps and English football clubs and newspapers. Morecambe and Wise were loved in Ireland, The Beatles and Cliff Richard too; and not just one Ronnie but The Two Ronnies as well.

The tidal waves of emigration meant that thousands of Englishmen were loved by and married to Irish women, long before Jack supposedly became the first bloke from old Blighty whom we had permission to adore.

Paul Pogba: Time running out on his Old Trafford deal





Jack Charlton after the Republic of Ireland's 1-1 draw with Netherlands in the 1990 World Cup at Stadio La Favorita, Palermo
Picture by Ray McManus

Charlton's nationality was more or less a thing of nothing to the mass of Irish people who followed the national football team. If anything, his reputation as a World Cup winner meant he automatically brought a level of prestige and stature to the Ireland team before a ball was even kicked on his watch.

His nationality became politicised by official Ireland through its chattering classes, whenever commentators or politicians wanted to make a point about Anglo-Irish relations or Northern Ireland or the like. It always seemed a tad condescending,

this presumption that the plain people needed to be chivvied along into accepting an Englishman because it would signal a new maturity in relations between the two countries, or some such platitude.

Irish people and English people had been getting along fine together, in the workplace, in the taverns and music halls and football grounds and British military services, for the previous few hundred years. They may have been surprised to hear that they hadn't been getting along well, if they

passed any remarks on this kind of talk, which of course they didn't. Relations generally between peo-



Nationality became politicised by official Ireland through its chattering classes

ple are not conditional on superficial matters such as nationality but on the fundamental human criteria of warmth and decency and humour and likeability. Jack was enormously likeable, at least from a distance. Players who fell out of favour with him would tell you he wasn't a pleasant person to deal with in these situations. He could be ignorant and dismissive of players' feelings. But that was business, he held the power and he wasn't afraid to use it.

Otherwise, his natural star quality, his charisma and indomitable authenticity made him tremendously popular with the nation as a whole, not just the sporting public. The film reminds us just how good he was with people. He was marvellous with people. They followed in his wake like he was a latter day Pied Piper. He had Ireland eating out of the palm of his hand through Germany in '88, Italy in '90 and America in '94.

He liked us and we liked him. We quickly forgot that he was an Englishman, maybe because he was in fact a north of England man, from a coal-mining town and coal-mining people, which meant he had more in common with the ordinary Paddy than with a chap from the Shires who voted Tory and took *The Daily Telegraph* of a morning. It meant, too, that we had more in common with him than, say, the gentlemen who ran the IRFU back in the day. The class divide is a much deeper fissure in human relations than matters of nationality.

"One of the reasons that dementia is such a terrible disorder is that memory defines who we are," says Dr Michael Grey, a neuroscientist, in the film. The memories of those halcyon days under Big Jack define that time and place in Irish life for a lot of people. But the man who birthed them could not himself recall them in his last years.

During filming he sits in front of a laptop and watches in silence those delirious scenes from 30 years ago. Pat, his wife, watches him as he watches the footage. She is standing by his side; she puts her hand on his shoulder.

When it's over he turns to her and says: "I couldn't remember a lot of the memories." "Yeah," she replies tenderly. "But could you remember that night?" It's the night his team are beaten by Italy in Rome in the World Cup quarter-final. Players and staff are having a party al fresco on the terrace of a restaurant. Jack stands up and sings a verse and chorus of 'Blaydon Races', the famous old Geordie folk song that he must have grown up with. "Can you remember getting up and singing?" He shakes his head in defeat. "No," she replies. "Never mind."

Sometimes, says Pat Charlton, glimpses of the old Jack will come flashing through the blanket of fog. In a beautiful touch, the film-makers set a record player down in front of him at the table. They put a vinyl record on it and drop the needle.

It's a band, sounds like a Geordie band, doing a version of 'Blaydon Races'. Again, he sits there blankly. But as they swing into the chorus a shaft of sunlight evidently cuts through the darkness; a connection to some distant memory is sparked. Suddenly he spreads his arms out wide and clenches his fists and starts singing the words.

A fragment of his past is momentarily retrieved. A part of our past will always belong to him. Goodbye to Jack. Goodbye to all that.

Mourinho backs Bruce to battle his way out of relegation

LUKE EDWARDS

The life of a football supporter is full of what-ifs. It is the tortuous sub-plot to every game and every season. All the missed opportunities, sliding door moments and 50-50 calls that did not go your way.

For Newcastle United and Tottenham Hotspur fans, the what-if this season is far more frustrating than that. It is what if they were able to go to games, to shout and scream their anger, to revolt and call for change.

Rarely have they felt so powerless. With games behind closed doors, they have been kept away from their team, the noise they can make on social media and elsewhere too easily ignored. They are effectively silenced. There is no way of showing their displeasure at the men they all seem to blame for it: the manager.

According to a survey by *The Athletic*, Newcastle's Steve Bruce and Tottenham's Jose Mourinho are the two least popular managers in England with their own supporters. They are, if you believe social media and surveys such as this, no longer wanted at the clubs that continue to employ them.

They may be at opposite ends of the table — Newcastle one place above the relegation zone, Spurs just below the Champions League qualification positions — but the emotions are startlingly similar. When they meet at St James' Park today, the stands will again be barren and empty, yet both sides are in desperate need of a win.

If fans were allowed inside grounds, neither manager would have been spared. Despite it all, Bruce was unequivocal in his wish for fans to be back, believing that, in Newcastle's perilous position, the fans would get behind the team.

"Without them, we're just like every other club," he said. "We're in a scrap. Certainly, the supporters would play their part in it, I'm absolutely convinced they would, to try to drag us over the line in certain situations."

In a survival fight, maybe Bruce is right. But would Tottenham fans, even though they play in the EFL Cup final this month, be so forgiving of Mourinho if he fell short of a top-four finish?

"The criticism that Jose receives is, in my opinion, ridiculous, because here is one of the greats," Bruce said. "Over the past 20 years, what he's been and what he's done in the Premier League is there for everybody to see."

It is, but it is the here and now that matters for both of them, not the past. Mourinho, though, is different to the majority of Newcastle supporters. He thinks Bruce will keep them up.

"That's the way many people want it to be," Mourinho replied, when asked if Bruce's job had been made far tougher than it should be by the media, as well as criticism by fans. "So what Bruce is doing, many others are doing, which is to fight for a position outside the three relegation (spots) and in my opinion, at the end of the season he will not be one of these three clubs."