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MICHAEL FOLEY

Old stories, long journeys and the whiff of my father's pipe

Michael Foley remembers the people and times that put the Cork-Tipperary rivalry at the centre of his world

Michael Foley

May 17 2017, 12:01am, The Times



When I was ten years old, my season began and ended with the Munster hurling championship, and 1987 was the summer of draws.

My father and I saw them all: Cork-Limerick at Thurles; Tipperary-Clare on a dull day at Killarney. Then back to Thurles for John Fenton to whip a ball from a million yards out to the net for Cork and down again to Killarney for Tipp to lose the rag altogether against Clare and make ribbons of them.

It all brought Cork and Tipperary back to Thurles for the Munster final. Cork were All-Ireland champions. Tipp hadn't beaten Cork since 1968 or won any serious kind of argument against anyone in Munster for 16 years. Even though the margins were closing in on Cork, Tipperary still had a jump to make, but I was worried. Very worried. I had fretted through the previous year's Munster final, Cork saved against Clare by a final few strokes of magic from Jimmy Barry-Murphy. JBM was gone now and although Cork were All-Ireland champions, they were relying too heavily on wondergoals.

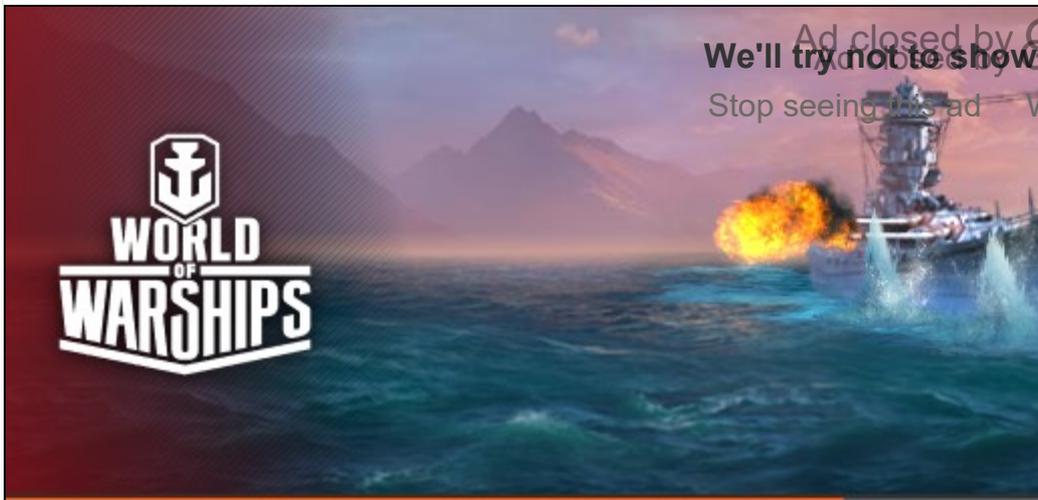
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In my head Cork-Tipp is a forever thing — like the smell of smoke from my father's pipe

My father saw all that, too, but he wouldn't dare believe. Having moved to Mallow for work, my father made his pilgrimages through the 1970s and '80s following Tipp, wishing for miracles like Lourdes but ending up with the cruel penances of Lough Derg.

For years Tipp were nowhere and he heard all about it at home, at work, in the shops and every summer. Now he travelled up

with expectation cautiously overtaking hope. My uncle Jim, a parish priest in Scotland, was staying with us on holidays and came as well. My godfather, Liam, came down from Moate, Westmeath for a day's hurling and ball-hopping. We were in the Tipp end. Jammed in. When the crowd moved, my feet made only passing acquaintance with the ground. In front of me, Uncle Jim had temporarily set aside his priestly demeanour and was exchanging shoulders and elbows with a beery Tipp supporter seeking an extra inch of space.



Way down in front of us as the teams warmed up, three Cork supporters waded through the Tipp crowd, all banter and moustaches like Harry Enfield's Scousers. Once they found a spot they unwrapped a paper package. Three crubeens were shared out and the trotters gnawed down to bone and nail before they fired the remnants behind them up the terrace. Only a life-saving line in wit and the start of the game saved them.

The match caught fire early and never went out. When Nicky English got through one-on-one with Ger Cunningham in the second half with no hurley and sidefooted the ball like Ian Rush to the net at our end, the place went mental. Terrifyingly mental. Then Cork got back and Pat Fox snapped a late point to draw the game for Tipp.

We left the ground heading for my other uncle's house in town. As we walked towards the railway station, Tom Cashman and a few other Cork players slalomed quickly past dressed in their civvies, racing for trains and taxis down to Cork. Behind us the Tipp team, dressed in matching slacks and blazers, were boarding their own team bus. That was the difference. Something was happening with Tipp that wasn't happening any more for Cork.

Kieran Kingston got the goal that got Cork all square that day. This weekend he brings a much drabber Cork team to Thurles seeking something. Anything. I also realised last week that everyone who brought me to Thurles that day are gone now. My father and uncle died within two months of each other last year. Liam passed away two years ago last weekend.

It makes these weeks a lot quieter now, but in my head Cork-Tipp is a forever thing — like the smell of smoke from my father's pipe, Liam's cigars and his gigantic laugh barrelling up from the soles of his shoes; my father reduced to tears of laughter by Liam and the sight of Uncle Jim bouncing off the Tipp supporter beside him.

I can see my dad lying on the bed at home the following Sunday listening to the radio commentary from Killarney as Tipperary finally beat Cork and his own clubman, Michael Doyle from Holycross-Ballycahill, slapping goals in for fun in extra-time. When the final whistle went he let out a cheer of pure delight. I was in tears. "Don't worry," he said. "Ye'll be back again."



Matches between Tipperary and Cork have shaped Michael Foley's sporting life
RAY MCMANUS/SPORTSFILE

When I got older, and realising the gravity of those two weekends for Tipperary, I often felt bad about intruding on his moment of perfect sporting joy. I mentioned it years later as some kind of apology. He hadn't a clue what I was talking about. All he remembered was Michael Doyle and Cork being beaten.

It was a wonderful moment, but sport is only a moment. He often recalled a group of men in Ballycahill when he was young who might attend three hurling matches in one day. They rarely stayed until the end of any of them, he said. They got their day out and had their fill of hurling. The result was never entirely the point.

Cork-Tipp always felt completely the point to us, but like a million different rivalries in a million different sports shared among people, it was really the car journeys, conversations and old stories, and visiting places and people long gone. It was the chance for him to talk to me, and me to talk to him. It was the time spent together. Precious time.

My dad taught me tons. Going to those games taught me tons.
Cork-Tipp might have been at the end of the road, but it was the
road that really counted. Always will.



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Paul Doyle Jun 7, 2017

Great article often went to Tipp matches with my dad .the 1984 Munster final stands out for the emptiness at the final whistle.typical cork finish that day.the atmosphere that day was special.

Recommend

Reply

Terence Ryan May 17, 2017

Loved that, thanks for bringing back the memories of those happy childhood days.

I still go the back road via Tipp town for Cork-Tipp games as it was the way I always went with Dad back then. When I do, I always remember the red-and-white teddy hanging from a tree we passed somewhere outside Dundrum back in 1990!

Recommend Reply

BrendanBelfast May 17, 2017

Super writing. Thank you, it evokes such warm memories.

Recommend Reply

Tadhg Foley May 17, 2017

Brilliant Mick.

2 Recommend Reply



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