



Holding on: David Lynch keeps Kildare's Fergal Conway at bay

## Westmeath face storm head-on

Underdogs will be far more adventurous than in last year's final, writes Christy O'Connor

THE week before last year's Leinster final, the Westmeath squad went to Delphi Adventure Centre in Connemara for a training weekend. Set on 300 acres of woodland, the resort is renowned for land and water activities but the players were there for two reasons: to relax before the impending storm, and to road-test the machine they were taking into the Eye of the Tempest.

On the Saturday night in Midale Park, Westmeath played Mayo behind closed doors. They hadn't been a defensive team on Tom Cribbin's watch but they rolled out a blanket defensive system on the hoof to try and stay alive for as long as they could against Dublin. Ultimately, though, the Westmeath players knew it was only a matter of time before they were blown away.

From the word go, it was a damage-limitation exercise. "Deep down, the lads didn't believe we were going to win," says Gary Connaughton, sub-goalkeeper and selector last year. "It was their first Leinster final and there

## THEY'RE NOT GOING UP TO MAKE UP THE NUMBERS THIS TIME. THEY MIGHT SURPRISE A FEW PEOPLE

wasn't enough belief there. Dublin were after absolutely annihilating Longford and Kildare. Even before the parade beforehand was a big thing. Lads weren't used to that kind of a big day. They weren't ready for it."

Connaughton played in the subsequent nine-point qualifier defeat by Fermanagh before retiring. John Gilligan, Denis Glennon and Kieran Gavin, who all played in that 2015 Leinster final, didn't come back either. Another couple of players who featured in last year's championship went to the US for the summer.

The spring was another write-off. Relegation to Division Four seemed to check whatever progress Westmeath made last year. There was talk during the spring of letting Cribbin go. Westmeath's season hinged on the Leinster quarter-final against Offaly. Once they were comfortable with the terrain again.

It is a landscape controlled by Dublin's domineering presence, Westmeath have found their footing. The backdrop of the side which delivered the county's only Leinster senior title in 2004 was formed from a couple of excellent underage teams, which included maiden All-Ireland minor and under-21 titles.

Westmeath were Leinster minor and under-21 champions in 2010 but they haven't won a title in either grade since. They have only contested one minor and one under-21 provincial final since but a county with Westmeath's resources

## Paddy Christie's dedication to coaching transformed the lives of dozens of Ballymun players

Paddy Christie walked everywhere as a kid with his minto town. Up to the Ballymun shopping centre. Across the deathly roundabout in the middle of Ballymun to avoid the dangerously dark underpass beneath. One evening in 1986 she took him to hurling training on a patch of grass within the flat complex. This was the Ballymun of U2 songs and news reports, heroin and giant towers, crime and no way out.

"They called it the San Siro because it was encircled totally by flats. It was amazing. I remember we were getting lost, but we ended up at this pitch. It was a real eye-opener. It was the concrete and the graffiti, the broken glass around the place. It was something that always stuck with me. If I was having a school match or training session over the years, I'd nearly always walk the pitch, just looking for glass bottles, syringes, things like that."

The Christies lived at the Glasnevin end of Ballymun, where tidy rows of terraced houses looked across to the tower blocks. Two sides of one parish looked and felt different. In time he made good friends with some of those living in the houses in old Ballymun. His ma told him to be careful, but football helped keep them safe and brought them all together.

Ballymun Kickhams were still winning county titles when Christie was young. Good teachers in the schools kept a steady flow of players into the club and the senior team was full of Dubs with All-Ireland medals. By the time he was two years playing with Dublin by then, barely turned 21 and lost in a physics and maths degree.

"There was no one in charge of anything. A couple of teachers would send lads up on a Saturday morning, but there was no one to give out footballs or lay out cones. Someone would say there was a football in yer man's house. Lads didn't even have gear. Guys were turning up in Bermud shorts."

They didn't want to be humiliated in Croke Park," says Cribbin. "We wanted to give a performance without getting demoralised. Maybe they didn't feel they were entitled to have a go. They felt they were slowly turning towards teaching and coaching, so he offered to help out. He was in



Michael Foley

something about Philly. Christie finagled a few pounds from his father's racing syndicate for socks and shorts. It took him six months to raise the money to buy kilbags. The odd voucher from a newspaper for winning team of the week got them T-shirts and other bits. Then, as Christie picked up the phone as a Dublin footballer, things flowed quicker. Once they got it, the gear had to be immaculate. So did their discipline and style of play.

"At the start we were all over the shop, discipline-wise. Some clubs loved that, seeing a fella from Ballymun thump a fella. "Typical, that's where he's from". It was horrible, and it's around to this day. Often they start with these fellas, which is a massive mistake to make."

Christie thinks of where all those players came from, where they ended up going and the fine lines that were mixed from two distinct areas (Glasnevin and Ballymun). I've seen Davey and Philly quoted saying it had a huge effect on them. Guys like Alan Hubbard had big ideas about doing well. Suddenly these fellas who weren't interested in a lot of education, when they came to training were hearing fellas talking about points and courses. This was normal."

One crowd opened the others' minds. One crowd toughened the other as footballers. They grew close, but some still drifted and disappeared. Three kids still stick in his head. Christie remembers hearing fellas talking about points and courses. This was normal."

# I feel more proud of having influenced people. Football is great but degrees last longer!



The future in his hands: Paddy Christie, with his daughter Abby, 4, and one-year-old son Conor.

transferred to the senior team, he started again in 2008 with another group of under-10s. This time Christie knew where to call and businesses fell over them. Christie was giving them the floor. They set the standards and did the talking.

"They'd become men. They didn't want to let their own men down. They didn't want anyone to leave. If one did, there was someone calling round to their house. It was a positive kind of peer pressure. They were doing it because they cared an awful lot about each other."

Once they were successfully



Christie, a former Dublin player, has devoted his time to coaching Ballymun's youngsters, such as Philly McMahon, inset, who went on to be part of the 2013 side who reached an All-Ireland club final

Total	County	Games	Score	Play	Free
22	Down	9	1-19	1-13	0-6
20	Monaghan	7	0-20	0-16	0-4
18	Armagh	9	1-15	1-9	0-6
14	Dublin	5	1-11	1-9	0-3
13	Meath	3	1-10	1-4	0-6
12	Derry	7	1-9	1-9	0-0
11	Roscommon	3	2-5	2-3	0-2
10	Antrim	2	1-7	1-5	0-2
10	Louth	4	0-10	0-6	0-4
9	Donegal	5	0-9	0-4	0-5
7	Fermanagh	3	1-4	1-4	0-0
6	Kerry	4	0-6	0-6	0-0
6	Mayo	3	0-6	0-4	0-2
6	Offaly	1	0-6	0-1	0-5
4	Cavan	4	0-4	0-4	0-0
4	Wexford	2	0-4	0-2	0-2
4	Laois	2	0-4	0-4	0-0
4	Kildare	2	0-4	0-1	0-3
3	Sligo	1	0-3	0-3	0-0
3	Galway	1	0-3	0-3	0-0
3	Tipperary	1	0-3	0-3	0-0
2	Longford	1	0-2	0-1	0-1
2	Litlick	1	0-2	0-1	0-1
1	Louth	1	0-1	0-1	0-0
0	Cork	1	0-1	0-1	0-0
0	Westmeath	1	0-0	0-0	0-0

Odd ones out: Apart from his own team Tyrone, and Kilkenny, who don't compete at senior level, the only counties Cavanagh has not played against are Carlow, Clare and Waterford

## THEY BECAME MEN. THEY DIDN'T WANT TO LET THEIR OWN MEN DOWN. IT WAS A POSITIVE KIND OF PEER PRESSURE

## Dublin will not be rattled for long

Champions are too strong in all areas for Westmeath to upset them today. By Michael Foley

IT'S AN odd thing about the Leinster championship just now that if Dublin were snipped out, the competition behind them is flatter than a glass pane. Eight of the teams there will reside below Divisions One and Two next spring. Meath and Kildare are the only Leinster teams in Division Two and haven't entirely looked the part for a long time. Take Dublin out, and Leinster could even stake a fair argument as the most competitive province of them all.

It's somehow in keeping with that peculiarity that Westmeath made history as the first team to tumble from Division One to Four without

stopping, while also making a second successive Leinster final for the first time. For last year's final they put together in a few weeks one of those stifling, short-sighted defensive systems designed to test Dublin's patience. But they received a degree of credit for keeping the half-time gap down to double figures and only losing by 13 points in the end. Even though it was drab and quacked like a walking, it translated to honourable defeat.

Losing by nine points to Fermanagh in the qualifiers shortly afterwards was far less ambiguous and dropping into Division Four this year appeared to confirm the

reality of their situation. Two good wins in the last six weeks gives them a better chance to turn themselves around. Pulling a six-point deficit back against Kildare in the Leinster semi-final was a brave feat. Westmeath often looked uncomfortable curling up to a ball during the League, too. Trying to strike a better balance against Dublin is possible to measure just yet. If they go on ahead and win a couple more All-Irelands in time, this Dublin team, and some of the players, will be placed among the greatest ever seen. Sometimes it's useful to absorb that possibility, and our good fortune to see how it all unfolds.

Dean Rock and James McCarthy come down and present medals when they can. John Small takes juvenile sessions when time allows him. Philly McMahon will take a team himself in time.

The staff that makes him proud? Guys with jobs and happy families, still playing football for Ballymun.

One evening last autumn Christie saw McMahon on the Late Late Show talking about his brother, who died after a lifetime of addiction. He thought of the journey McMahon had made from the under-8s now. Davey Byrne,



Dominant: Brian Teahan in possession in Dublin's win over Meath

The general nuts and bolts of their game have stayed secure so far, but then they haven't been rattled long enough to check that fully. They've been scoring at the time and in the manner of their own choosing, all in something lower than a cruising gear. The most visible goal stuff is all familiar: Michael Dara Macauley's directness and pure aggression around the middle; Cian O'Sullivan dictating the shape of the game almost by himself in defence. Cian Kilkenny's development into a complete footballer.



Dragged down: Damien Comer wrestles with Sean Mullooly

## Rossies must handle pressure

Fear ruined last week's game but Galway can be beaten in replay today. By Michael Foley

THE way last weekend's Connacht final smashed into the nation's living room like a brick through the window was a pity for the championship. Things had been too good to be true, reasonably well. Tipperary and Galway had lived their lives up with a couple of surprises before Longford trumped them all against Monaghan last weekend. Donegal and Monaghan had delivered something close to a classic and the Ulster championship itself had been pulled around by Tyrone and Donegal in particular after a dopey opening start. The football hasn't been great, but it's been a long way from dead.

Then the public deemed last Sunday's game an abandonment. Too much handpassing. Too many bad decisions. Way too much fear. Today there'll be no live TV coverage and no expectation of anything. Classic conditions.

Given the circumstances last Sunday, there was always the outside possibility of a total meltdown when the rain pours down and the wind rises up, few places are less conducive to any outdoor activity than that patch of grass in the replay that was key to winning an All-Ireland.

Back in 1998 Galway met Roscommon in a Connacht final carrying similar expectations to Roscommon now. Galway were a

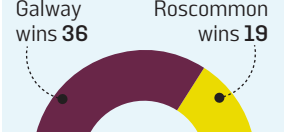


promising team, a single win away from an All-Ireland semi-final in a wide-open championship. They assumed Roscommon would be polished off by the four goals scored down on Tuam. Galway kicked 17 wides and the game finished 0-1 each.

The time to the replay was filled with exhortations by John O'Mahony for Galway to grab this chance like champions. He shook the Galway to a single point that proclaimed Galway as purveyors of 'fancy dan' football, unable to produce a hard-edged championship performance with the best of lines and conceded kickouts to Galway. It was designed to reduce risk, but rebelled against everything Roscommon do well.

Everything good about Roscommon this year has been based on fast, aggressive defence yielding Tyrone to a single point in transition between defence and attack. Their best bet against Galway was to play at Division One pace: push and use the wind as a weapon in the first half, make Galway's legs burn like they hadn't done all day. Get their defence running towards their own goal and allow Conroy no room at all, but the confidence to attack Galway that has been drained down in the last few minutes. Last Sunday continued a slow decline that started around mid-March, just as every other Division One team was picking up speed.

## Head-to-head



Westmeath Wins 1931 2-4 to 1-4, Tullamore 1967 1-6 to 0-8, Tullamore 2004 0-14 to 0-12, Croke Park

**ON TV TODAY**  
**Roscommon vs Galway**  
 9.30pm highlights, RTE2  
 Live on RTE Player, 3.25pm