

Cavan keeper Alan O'Mara's book tells how he battled against severe depression



Michael Foley

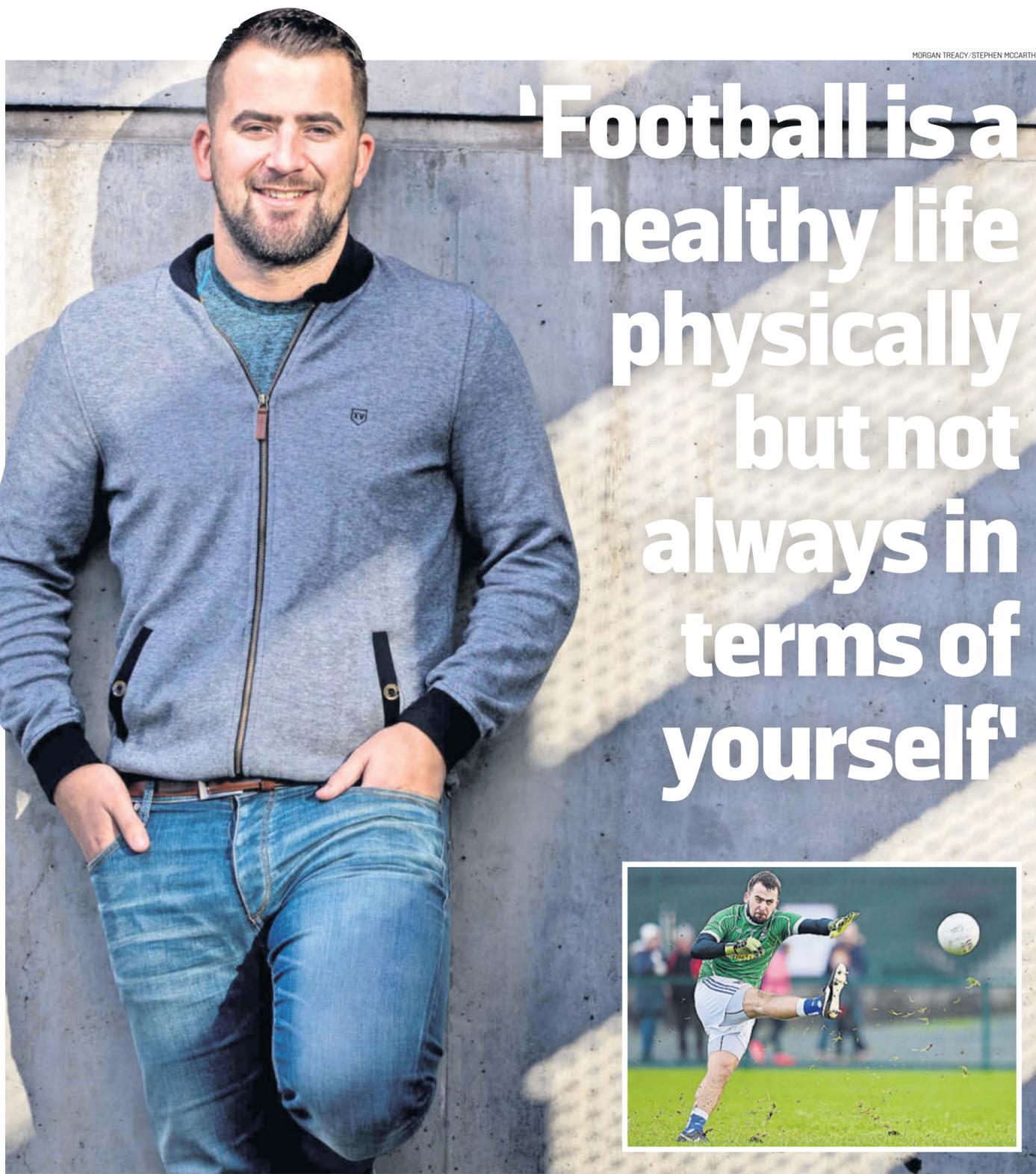
When Alan O'Mara talks about depression, he sketches his story as a u-shaped valley that swoops suddenly down like a ravine from the normalities of his old life, plummeting to the basin below from where the sky above is almost invisible. Down there is loneliness and confusion and tears and sacrifice and loss, the guilt and helplessness that brings him close to death before the solitary, relentless climb back up the sheer face.

"I've seen myself in a crashed car. I've seen myself hanged. I've seen myself jump off Level Six in Croke Park when I worked there. I've seen myself drive a car into a lake. I've seen myself overdose. But four of those were never. . . it was a thought but never a feeling. It only becomes a feeling if I let it. If it's not a feeling it can never even get close to becoming an action."

He was 21 and driving home from a football game in 2011 when he imagined his car drift off the motorway into the walls supporting a flyover. Having that thought invade his head terrified him. Reaching an All-Ireland under-21 final with Cavan that year had lifted him above the clouds, now football left him empty. Everything did. He told his mother he didn't feel right and began a journey that introduced him to counselling, support from the GPA and amplified the whispered conversation about mental wellbeing to reach a national audience.

O'Mara is 26 now, talking to schools and other audiences and taking his message beyond his own story. That's why he wanted to write a book. There was stuff beyond him that he wanted out there. Things like the priceless value in counselling; how opening up and being honest with himself had changed relationships with his closest friends and family for good. He wanted people to talk, and see how the simplest question to someone close could save anyone from tumbling blindly into the valley.

Because he knew how quickly the ground could slip beneath him. In 2013, O'Mara had written a newspaper article that drew reaction across the country and beyond. He had played in goals against Kerry in an All-Ireland quarter-final at Croke Park. He was interviewed on prime-time television about promoting more awareness of mental health, but as the world



MORGAN TREACY/STEPHEN MCCARTHY

'Football is a healthy life physically but not always in terms of yourself'

I RECALL BEING AT CROKE PARK AFTER PLAYING KERRY, THINKING 'THERE HAS TO BE A BIT MORE TO IT THAN JUST THIS'

between a few options on a breakfast menu and realised the internal conversation in his head had proceeded without intrusion from a single sinister voice. He joined a local team and started loving football again. It was the uncluttered simplicity of training and regular games. No anxiety, no stress. Just him and the game.

He finished writing last December and looked for a publisher. In the meantime he went back with Cavan and started his own business called Real Talks, giving presentations on mental health and emotional wellbeing. He remembers the first talk he ever did in 2013. His old school. His mother works there. An old schoolmate was now a teacher.

"I was scribbling stuff on pieces of paper the night before, s****git. My legs were shaking. But I did it. Back then I just opened up the door and let everything come out, but I didn't convey the information about looking after yourself and others. My energy levels after that were gone. The first few talks were like that. I was still living it to a certain extent."

Creating the space for people to talk is central to his work now and showing how that can happen in small, almost invisible ways. One evening training with Cavan he noticed a player sitting in the corner, away from all the slugging and noise of the dressing room. It wasn't like him. O'Mara asked if there was anything wrong.

"Nah, I'm grand," he replied, and walked across to a table to get a drink and came back. "His arse hadn't hit the bench for two seconds when he popped back up," says O'Mara.

"You know what? I'm not okay," the player said. "He had a mini-rant for 30 seconds," says O'Mara. "I didn't say one word, just listened."

They arranged to go for coffee after training to talk more. When they were finished training, the player came back to O'Mara. "Know what?" he said. "I don't even need that conversation. I just needed to get that off my chest."

"All I did was shut up," says O'Mara. "It stuck with me afterwards." Small, simple human gestures travel a long way.

"A teacher once told me in school I needed to choose what's more important: my Leaving Cert or football. I'll tell you what's most important: be happy. Everything else is secondary. Do I love playing football? Yes. Do I want to play for Cavan? Yes. Do I want to win an Ulster title? Yes, I do. But I want to be happy. Would winning an Ulster championship make me feel happy? Yes it would, but am I dependent on it to make me happy? No, and I never want to be. I'm absolutely fine with that."

He will always be more than football now. Happily, joyously more.

■ *The Best Is Yet To Come, A Memoir About Football And Finding A Way Through the Dark*, Alan O'Mara, Hachette Ireland



Into the light: Alan O'Mara has faced his illness with unflinching honesty and says he does not want happiness to be solely synonymous with his Cavan role, inset, but part of his life outside football too

assumed his story had reached its redemptive conclusion, he was freefalling back down into the valley.

It was a night out that Christmas when he felt compelled to escape the numbness inside him. He left his friends for the freezing cold outside and walked home. He saw the cars coming along the pitch-black road. The lights invited him to step out. He paused and waited for the next car.

"I was so close to going. I could literally feel my body gravitating towards it. As my body went forward to the left, I pushed off and backed away. Even to recall that, I can feel my weight shuffling over. I just snapped back. Every time I recall the one on the motorway, I get goosebumps on my arm. It's not a nice place to go back to, but in a way it's quite empowering to see how far I've come. That's the thing I'm most grateful and appreciative of."

He returned to counselling and dug deeper. He accepted his depression couldn't be fixed like an engine fault with a block of therapy. He needed to understand it. That meant figuring himself out first. O'Mara talked about how football had kept his life glued together through difficult times and granted him moments and friendships to last forever, but it was also consuming him.

"It's a healthy lifestyle physically, but it's not always healthy in terms of relationships, career, your own personal development. I was so dependent on the game. Ini-

tially when I went into counselling, I remember thinking 'I'm not going to be talking to this fella about family or relationships or work.'

"If you can help me enjoy football again, everything's going to be okay. It actually needs to be the other way round. All the other stuff needs to be in a good place so that when it comes to football, it's just an expression of yourself."

"Of course, football takes over at times. It has to if you want to play at that level, but a word I use quite a lot is balance. I think everyone should have four or five pillars in their life:

Conor McGregor

To find out how the Irish fighting star got on in his UFC205 clash with Eddie Alvarez in New York, go to our tablet editions or visit: www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sport



Tough call in Kilkenny over heir to Nowlan Park throne

Brian Cody enjoys such regal status that succession planning muddled, writes Denis Walsh

BRIAN CODY'S decision to continue as Kilkenny manager is never the outcome of pleading or bartering or emotional blackmail; at least, not insofar as we would ever know. The process is not public in any way until it appears before the Kilkenny club delegates as a done deal. Cody enjoys the kind of transient permanence which only Sean Boylan and Mick O'Dwyer in their pomp had ever commanded. For the greatest manager in the history of the GAA that much is due.

Tomorrow night Cody will be ratified for his 19th season in charge and given the way Kilkenny's year finished,

spread-eagled by Tipperary in Croke Park, the Kilkenny hurling community will take comfort from his reassuring presence. The team needs to evolve again and the recurring triumph of Cody's time in charge has been his capacity to generate renewal quickly. It's like those tyre changes in Formula One: a few seconds in the pit lane, then off again at top speed.

From a playing perspective the culture that Cody has created in Nowlan Park pays close attention to succession. But what about his successor as manager? When that day finally comes, what have Kilkenny in place?

The obvious difficulty is not

knowing when Cody will finish. The health issues that caused him to step away for a few months in the spring of 2013 have not reared up since; in the meantime he has retired from his job as a primary school principal and he's not the kind of character to while away his retirement on the golf course or the race track or fiddling around in the garden. As long as his motivation holds up he could easily carry on until the end of the decade.

All of which complicates Kilkenny's succession planning. When Derek Lyng and James McGarry came on board as selectors for the 2014 season the assumption was that one of them would step up in time. McGarry had already coached Ballyhale Shamrocks to win the 2010 All-Ireland club title, creating an enormously positive impression.

But the speculation around Kilkenny in recent weeks is that McGarry won't be involved for the coming year. It was strange to see an

animated sideline discussion on Cody's watch but that's what happened midway through the second half of the All-Ireland final and, if body language can be trusted, McGarry was the most agitated.

In any case, if McGarry or Lyng were being groomed as Cody's successor how long were they expected to wait, not knowing from year to year if Cody's departure was imminent or not?

But, if not them, who? There are no emerging star coaches on the Kilkenny club scene. The teams in this year's county final were managed by a pair of Tipperary men in the case of Ballyhale Shamrocks (Andy Moloney and Colm Bonnar) and by a naturalised Offaly man, Aidan Fogarty, in the case of O'Loughlin's.

When O'Loughlin Gaels reached the All-Ireland club final in 2011 they were managed by Andy Comerford, who captained Kilkenny to win the 2003 All-Ireland title. Comerford has also had a spin

as the Kildare manager but he has never been mentioned in despatches as a potential Kilkenny manager.

The Fitzgibbon Cup is a fertile breeding ground for inter-county managers but DJ Carey is the only notable Kilkenny player to have made any impression in that sphere. Alongside Mick Dempsey, the Kilkenny trainer and selector, Carey managed Carlow IT to win the Higher Education League last year, beating UCC in the final, and they have an outsider's shot at the Fitzgibbon this year. But if Carey has any aspirations to be the next Kilkenny manager he will need to spend time as a selector with Cody first.

The striking thing is how few of the players who won so much under Cody have made an impression as coaches. Think of the players who were Cody's lieutenants: Peter Barry's passion is triathlons now and has no involvement with his club, Eddie Brennan is finding his feet with the under-21s while Henry

Shefflin has only just retired and having quickly established a lucrative punditry side line it is hard to envisage him being a candidate any time soon.

The O'Connor brothers Eddie and Willie were both All-Ireland winning captains and Willie, in particular, was a huge influence at Nowlan Park but neither of them have graduated beyond the occasional club job. Michael Kavanagh has dipped his toe in club coaching too even though he's still playing and going back to Carey's generation, Adrian Ronan has had a run with the Kilkenny minors without making the kind of impression that marked him as a coming man.

Pat Hoban has delivered minor and intermediate All-Ireland titles for Kilkenny but he's not on anybody's radar. He served at least four years in each of those roles and given them plenty of time to reach a judgement about him. Adrian Finnan was a brilliant influence on Kilkenny



King of hurling: Brian Cody's longevity may cause problems

underage teams during Cody's time but he's the principal of St Kieran's College now and that responsibility may take him out of the picture.

Succession planning is not something that many counties get right. Cork, for example, botched it in the middle of the last decade. Ger Loughnane, to his credit, tried it in Clare with Sean Stack before realising that he wasn't the

man for the job; they tried again with Cyril Lyons to better effect.

This time round Clare had obvious succession candidates in Gerry O'Connor and Donal Moloney and everyone can see likely candidates after they finish.

In Kilkenny, there is no such clarity. Are they worried? Maybe they should be.