

Maurice Shanahan felt a weight was lifted when he spoke out on his depression



Denis Walsh

Austin Gleeson launched the ball from right-half back to nobody in particular, like a message in a bottle. When Maurice Shanahan caught it over Damien Cahalane he was outside the D with two covering defenders between him and the Cork goal. Waterford were three behind, struggling to impose themselves. A point would have been handy.

Shanahan took a dozen steps, performing just the zig of a zig-zag movement. Then from outside the 14-metre line he fired the ball into the roof of the Cork net. Anthony Nash dived full length and in a final act of desperation threw his hurley in the air like a major-ette's baton.

"The minute I got the goal," says Shanahan, "I thought I was Dan [his brother] — the way he got goals. That went through my head running out. I ran out to wing-forward and Derek [McGrath, Waterford manager] was on the line. 'Your time is now,' he said. 'You've arrived.' There was nearly tears in my eyes and I was thinking, 'Yeah, definitely. It was definitely my time.'"

"I remember saying to myself, from what I went through the year before I can make this a special year. I said, it can be a good year for me."

November 6, 2015. Afternoon of the All-Stars banquet.

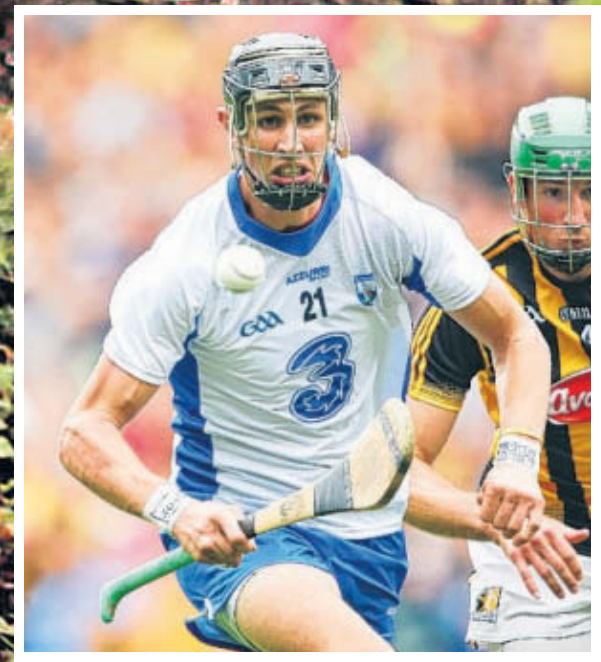
Shanahan was in his hotel room when he took a call from RTE Radio's Drivetime programme; they wondered if he would do an interview. No agenda was discussed. Without dwelling on it Shanahan agreed to go on air 20 minutes later.

He had not spoken publicly about his battle with depression and his suicide attempts but he knew that people knew. The subject lurked between the lines of a thousand conversations. It occurred to him that this was his chance to take control of the awkwardness. The only person he called was Dan. His nod was the final push.

"Once you come out and talk about it it's a weight off your shoulders. It was just a great relief to get it out there. When I woke up the following morning I was after taking over the papers. I wasn't expecting that but that's the way it took off. I didn't do it for the publicity but I thought if I could help anyone it would be worthwhile. And I do think I'm after helping people."

On an issue like this you don't break your silence; it is smashed to smithereens. Shanahan was flooded with text

'In the bad days I would not want to be training. But I look forward to it every night now'



In a better place: Waterford's Maurice Shanahan broke his silence about his illness on RTE Radio in late 2015 and was back as a sub in the All-Ireland semi-final against Kilkenny last summer, inset

messages and letters, the arc of love and support stretching to people that he barely knew. By lowering the drawbridge he had laid himself open.

A few weeks later, when he was approached to do an interview by the late Kevin Casey in WLR, Shanahan had a clearer idea of what he wanted to share and how he would say it. For that period in his life he was a witness to somebody he didn't know. He wasn't afraid to paint that self-portrait.

"It came on me over a short period, three or four months. I can't really put my finger on why. When it came on me first I just kind of knocked it off. I would always go into bed early or when I finished work I might just go to my room and stay in my room. Then I started pushing away my friends. I wouldn't go out with them. I'd

be a fella for the crack, I love the crack, I'd be a bit of a gouter. I had no interest in that. When you push all those things away you're on your own. That's the way I wanted it but it wasn't helping me.

"My mother and father definitely knew that I was under pressure. They were asking questions. They weren't getting much back. I might bite the head off them. I wouldn't have been nice to them. I owe them a lot.

"My father was fighting his own battle [with cancer] at the time but he nearly gave up his own battle to fight my one. He wanted me to be OK rather than him to be OK. He was down and out over me."

One Sunday evening, two winters ago, Shanahan took an overdose. About an hour later, before it was too late, he texted



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his sister. "I texted my sister because I didn't really want my parents coming up and finding me. People say it was a cry for help but I don't know if to be honest. I never really thought of it like that."

There was no instant solution. When Shanahan woke in a Waterford hospital on the following day he told his parents that he wished he was dead. He remembers another evening, not long afterwards, sitting in the kitchen at home with family and friends telling them that he "won't be here in two weeks' time". Within a couple of months he had made another attempt on his life.

Help came from all angles. Conor Cusack, the former Cork hurler who had spoken so powerfully about his battles with depression, arrived at Shanahan's door at 6.30 one

morning. Shanahan was up. He wasn't sleeping much. That relationship continued. The Gaelic Players Association arranged counselling; a residential block of three or four days at first and then once a week for months.

Other help was homemade. Sean Prendergast is the principal of the primary school in Lismore and was manager of the club team when Shanahan's battle was at its fiercest. Shanahan says he used to hear the bell for the end of the school day and minutes later he would hear Prendergast's knock on his front door, a bottle of water in each hand. Reaching out.

Slowly, things got better but not in a straight line. Waterford drew with Cork in the first round of the 2014 Munster championship and a few days

later McGrath invited Shanahan to rejoin the panel. "Derek was very, very good to me. When I needed Derek to look after me he did a lot for me. I felt I was after going through the worst of it by then. I kinda said, 'Yeah, I want to come back too.' I went for a couple of weeks but then I pulled out. I'd be driving down to training on my own and I'd be crying in the car. I just wasn't ready to go back."

An hour after Waterford were eliminated by Wexford in the championship that summer Shanahan received a text from McGrath. He was looking forward. That was what he wanted for Shanahan: to look forward.

Dan is 13 years older than Maurice so that when Maurice was a boy he was old enough to know

that on summer Sundays Dan was a matinee idol and a matinee villain and all things in between. To Maurice, though, Dan existed on a shorter spectrum: he was his big brother and his hero.

"Going off to matches as a young fella and going off to Thurles with my mother and father, they were great days, watching Waterford playing in Munster finals. To see Dan scoring the goals the way he did was great.

"Other times, when Dan wasn't going too well, it was a bad place to be because he got a lot of stick in his early days. You'd be sitting in the stand and sometimes it was very hard to take. My brother James would be there and he could snap or my father could snap."

Their relationship took on another dimension when Dan agreed to be one of Derek McGrath's selectors. Maurice wasn't consulted or even informed. Someone told him down the street in Lismore. It was supposed to be a secret. Maurice rang his big brother; Dan denied it at first; after the second wave of waterboarding he cracked.

"I just said to him, 'You're mad... I enjoy Dan being there. I think it's good for both of us. Dan would be tough enough on me because he knows how much potential I have. When you're not playing well and he gives you a bollocking you really know you're not playing well."

"Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. We do a lot together as brothers, we play a lot for Lismore together but if I'm not playing well I won't be on the Waterford team, it doesn't matter that Dan is my brother. You saw last year..."

Shanahan's season was staggered by injury at first. He wasn't fit to start the League final against Clare but with the game in the balance he came on and when there was a long-range, last-minute free to rescue a draw he stood up. "I'd be very confident when I stand over frees," he says. "I'd be 99% that I'd get it." He did.

Shanahan was taken off in the Munster final massacre, though, and was replaced again in the quarter-final against Wexford. By the time Waterford played Kilkenny in the All-Ireland semi-final he was out of favour. "When I came on against Kilkenny [in Croke Park] I thought I did well — I thought I did enough to start in the replay. The second day when I came on I just said to myself 'Let's show these lads, let's try to shove it up their...' — but I was trying to win the match for them as well."

This winter his return to the Waterford panel has been delayed by Lismore. At the end of 2015 they were relegated from the senior ranks in Waterford. So, they regrouped and approached Tony Browne, the former Waterford player, to be their coach. "Tony spends a lot of time fishing and shooting in Lismore," says Shanahan. The hunter was trapped.

They bounced back straightaway with an intermediate title and next weekend they will contest an All-Ireland semi-final as Munster champions. Dan is their 40-year-old full-forward; Maurice is their go-to-guy. Thriving.

"Things have been good. Everyone has bad days — it's just how you deal with them. Thankfully, I know how to deal with them now. This time of the year is nearly the toughest time — the rain and the mucky days and all that. When I was going through the bad times I was going down training and I wouldn't want to be there at all. I was doing it to get through it, get in the car and get home. I look forward to training every night now."

Looking forward.

Kilkenny able to breed leaders no matter who is captain

O'Loughlin's Mark Bergin given role but is uncertain of place in the team, writes Michael Foley

FOR the first time in forever, there was some loose talk in Kilkenny before Christmas about the county champions, O'Loughlin Gaels, possibly passing on the honour of picking the county captain. O'Loughlin Gaels haven't had a starting player on a Kilkenny team in an All-Ireland final since Brian Hogan in the drawn 2014 final.

The five teams that have made the last two sets of county semi-finals in Kilkenny only provided five players to the starting team for last year's All-Ireland final. The spread of players for Kilkenny has always been

wide and varied in Brian Cody's time. Maybe the captaincy needed to reflect that.

Mark Bergin of O'Loughlin Gaels was among Cody's parachutists landed into the team for last year's All-Ireland semi-final replay against Waterford. He was replaced after an hour having been held scoreless and didn't make the team for the All-Ireland final, but drove O'Loughlins on all winter to a county title. Last week he was confirmed as Kilkenny captain with nothing certain about his place. O'Loughlins also decided to nominally pass the choice of captain to

Danesfort, Paul Murphy and Richie Hogan's club, if Bergin doesn't make the team. A neat solution to a tricky problem.

It's an old rule that's never caused enough ructions in Kilkenny to force its removal, which reflects most of all the strength of the lieutenants alongside the captain. Growing leaders within the team hasn't been a problem in Kilkenny for years. Kerry is now the only other place the rule still applies with no great disruption to their flow of success, but they have known the odd cloudburst of trouble.

Even though Paudie Sheehy was captain and top scorer before the 1953 All-Ireland final, his place was still in jeopardy. His father was a selector and excused himself when the topic arose at the selection meeting. When he returned, his son had been dropped. Armagh won the final.

Worse again, picking a captain for the 1982 championship with five-in-a-

row on the line inflated into a full-blown political row. After South Kerry won the county title in 1981, Jack O'Shea and John Egan were nominated by their clubs, St Mary's Cahirsiveen and Sneem. It wasn't a role O'Shea expected. Egan was a few years older with a longer service record.

Egan thought of the honour it might bring to a small club like Sneem, and the hours he spent travelling from his posts in Cork as a Garda for games and training in Kerry. He waited for the nomination from the South Kerry board as the year began, but it never came.

"I never put influence on anybody to nominate me as captain," he said in 2006. "I assumed the South Kerry board would

nominate a captain, but it became the biggest disappointment to me in relation to the value they had for players." As Sneem and St Mary's both refused to withdraw their nominations, South Kerry board implored the county board to get involved. They stayed away. At one point after a Railway Cup game with Munster, O'Shea and Egan were brought into a hotel room and met by a team of officials from Kerry who asked for their views on the captaincy.

Jimmy Deenihan held onto the captaincy till the end of the National League, but the solution in the end did no one any credit. At a South Kerry board meeting 13 blank pieces of paper

Cody: coach is not sure to pick Bergin

were folded and placed in a hat along with two pieces containing the names of O'Shea and Egan. A local Garda sergeant was asked to draw a piece of paper from the hat. Egan's name came out first. "It was such a joke in the end," said Egan. "I don't know why it happened. I'm still disappointed over it."

Kerry fell short of five-in-a-row and Egan carried the memory of the entire mess for the rest of his life. The affair was the product of ballooning egos among two clubs and a crippling lack of leadership in both boards.

What's kept Kerry and Kilkenny strong is their inbuilt ability to develop strong characters that make good leaders across the team. In 1984 the dropping of Diarmuid O'Donoghue for the Munster final made Ambrose O'Donovan captain whose captaincy generated a fresh surge of energy that set Kerry off to win three-in-a-row. In 2006, Declan



Hot seat: Mark Bergin has driven O'Loughlins to a county title

O'Sullivan took Eoin Brosnan's place for the All-Ireland final, which also removed the captaincy from Colm Cooper and left Dr Crokes hurting in all sorts of ways, but played a central role in destroying Mayo that year.

Whatever about the damage the rule might have done in other counties, Kilkenny and Kerry are strengthened by a tradition of excellence founded mainly on the elements that make good captains and leaders: a

demand for high standards in skills and physical fitness; an iron conviction that no measure of success is beyond them; an appetite for hard work and willingness to go as far as required to win. The departure of so many multi-star generals in the last few years, and Tipperary's notions about two-in-a-row, has Kilkenny seeking new players to promote themselves now.

That's the challenge facing Bergin. Same challenge for all of them.

