

The Kevin McStay Column -->

-->Mayo enjoys its Easter Rising

READERS of this column will remember the McStay Philosophy on Patience from an article some time ago. I reproduce it again as we reflect in the joy of the long awaited breakout.

‘My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.’

Perseverance is the single most important trait in any athlete. When you stay at something long enough and continue to return to the scene of your failure chances are that the ball will hop a little more kindly. Of course, one presumes that the same, if not greater, effort is maintained and that a slight improvement is not out of the question.

The weekend in my rear view mirror confirms this tenet. Good Friday? Great Friday actually, as finally, the county Under 21s made it back to the winner’s arena. We had, at last, some believers. It is Monday night as I type this week’s effort — and by now the small group of believers has become a Movement. Crossmolina have been crowned Champions of Ireland and the long-awaited dam burst has been executed.

A few truths about this club final: if Cross’ had won at this level before they would surely have cantered home such was the gulf by times; the fitness differential was unholy, with a serious slant in favour of the winners: did Nemo have any physical base in place?

Of course there was a period when things looked black (there is in most finals) but crucially the Mayo champions played themselves out of the rut. For this they have Kieran McDonald to thank and it is only right that one aspect of this player is acknowledged: he has proven himself on a big stage when the Honours questions were being asked and he will be an even better player for that. If all he attempted had borne fruit he would truly have engineered a master class in Croke Park. He was the only candidate for Man of the Match.

Not far behind though was that super character Barry Heffernan. Continuing a long line of outlandish goalkeeping dress sense, he had a great day out. He made a few critical saves and a couple more that were business like. His first stop from Colin Corkery, at the expense of a point, was top-drawer and his late touch to a Nemo effort for a 45’let some ball watching defenders off the hook.

When Cross’ were flying in the second period both James Nallen and Michael Moyles had announced their arrival. The winning captain, Tom Nallen was to the fore also and the defence got mean for those thirty minutes when every break and interception had a maroon jersey swarming.

Elsewhere, the remainder of the team had settled well and all were contributing. This is the effort required if you are to secure this type of prize.

The throat got a little dry and the old rope that attends most Mayo necks as the minutes tick down, got a little tighter. But Crossmolina held their nerve and overcame some daft plays to win the championship. It is no more than they deserve. Indeed, the maroon colours won the day; earlier Athenry, in a similar garb, took a third title. In their goal was one Michael Crimmins — our respective mothers are sisters. He was winning his third medal: you can never have enough of them.

It was the first time ever that the two titles went West in the same year — they also serve those that stand and wait. The wonder of this club day in Croke Park is how they took so long to be wonderful in the first place. The colour and excitement cannot really be matched for these battles are for the club and the parish. Crossmolina have the single honour of being the first to bring the Andy Merrigan Cup to Mayo and

thus, have pipped the two great traditionalists, both Castlebar Mitchels and Ballina Stephenites.

And the reason why? Essentially they were the best team to go up yet; better balanced and having five forwards, a midfielder and a half-back contributing made for a winning combination.

When one considers the situation they found themselves in (both teams actually) with the hurling extra time, it only adds to their performance. I made it a 45 minute delay and with teams ready to start at approximately 3.30 pm it begs a simple question: why did the authorities not plan for extra time in the first game?

In the end it mattered little and some interesting numbers arose: the number of scorers: seven in all, has been mentioned; their season average of 1-11 was surpassed with a 16 point haul; the defence squeezed but they conceded more than normal. And still they carried the day.

Some of the Crossmolina wides threatened to derail the train but it is an indication of their desire that they overcame them. I counted seven 'sitters' going astray and a Paul McGuinness point that was a certain goal if he had popped the ball to the unmarked Liam Moffatt. But, perhaps the most interesting numbers can be found in history.

Nemo had already won six titles and won them handsomely. Their margins were as follows: 1973-8 points; 1979-8 points; 1982-18 points; 1984-11 points; 1989-10 points and 1994-12 points. Two of those games were against Mayo opponents but a pattern emerges.

It is a question I often pose to some of the teams I train. I recall mentioning it during extra time of our League win against a star studded Tyrone — what if you actually went ahead of a team that does not expect to find itself in a trailing position? Very often they turn out to be human and react just as one thought the underdog might. It is another real test of a champion. In the year 2001 Nemo did not react well at all. So, Cross, are champions and aspiration has eventually been turned into historic achievement.

It has taken this county thirty years to get it right and a competition that started out as a fringe gig, only to grow into the only show in town, now finds the Cup, at last, in peaceful repose in Mayo. I cannot speak highly enough of their magnificent physical and above all, psychological, breakthrough. True champions and done the hard way!