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## Take it as red -- extra man will continue to be a GAA enigma

By John O'Brien  
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### **John O'Brien ponders that eternal question: why do teams fare so well when they are down to 14 players?**

AS sporting conundrums go, it's up there with the Muhammad Ali phantom-punch and the chronic inability of the English football team to win a penalty shoot-out. What strange spell befalls GAA teams when they are handed the supposed blessing of superior numbers? Into what black hole disappears the hapless 'extra man'?

It's an issue that has been with us for decades, but the vogue for a stricter interpretation of the rules has brought more red cards and more nagging questions. Of the 11 football championship matches played last weekend, for example, six produced dismissals and, if you include Wicklow failing to beat Waterford in regulation time, the team with numerical advantage only emerged on top in half of those games. Are we right to think there is something odd about this?

Is it strange that Wexford had 30 minutes with an extra man against Dublin yet were outscored 1-6 to 0-2 during that time? Or that Waterford shipped a man after 26 minutes yet it was only with virtually the last kick of the game that Wicklow managed to peg them back? Restored to 15 against 15 for extra-time, Wicklow galloped clear. All apparent logic, it seemed, turned completely on its head.

Interviewed after his side lost to Meath, Kieran McGeeney agreed that the 53rd-minute sending-off of Daryl Flynn was a pivotal moment and Kevin McStay highlighted it on The Sunday Game that night. McStay argued quite cogently that the possession game favoured by Kildare made them particularly susceptible to being short a pair of hands. Flynn's sending-off, he said, was "absolutely a critical moment."

Yet, if playing with 14 men negated Kildare's strengths to such a degree, should it not then follow that having the benefit of an extra man would gift them an overwhelming advantage? In the 2011 Leinster final, Kildare had the benefit of an extra man against Dublin for 30 minutes. In the 2009 final, they enjoyed superior numbers for all of 50 minutes. Yet Kildare lost those games. How do you explain that anomaly?

Each game is its own separate entity, of course, following its own distinct path, so finding easy answers is a tricky business. If you talk to those at the coalface, however, it is possible to glean a general consensus that it is a less complicated business playing with 14 men against 15 than the other way round simply on the basis that there are fewer decisions to be made.

"If you're down to 14 you keep your defensive shape, that's the first thing," says Michael McGeehin, a vastly experienced GAA coach and director of Coaching Ireland. "You look at Dublin: they have a very solid defensive shape, they don't allow players to be pulled out of position. They always have numbers back and that's a good base to start from."

"The decision where you play the extra man is critical. A lot of teams play him around the middle but there's a fair chance he's going to get crucified there. Tackles are flying in and he has barely time to get his head up and use the ball. He gets lost in the middle of the pitch. No one can pick him out."

For McGeehin, the failure to make use of the extra man usually comes down to a lack of preparation, although he would be astonished if there was an inter-county manager who, like Liam Griffin memorably with the Wexford hurlers in 1996, hadn't a contingency plan in place for the eventuality of reduced numbers. The fashion remains, though, to use the spare man around the middle, an orthodoxy he'd like to see challenged more often.

It was in the late 1980s when Philip Kerr began to think deeply about the issue of the extra man. One of Ulster GAA's most visionary coaches, Kerr led Castledawson to the 1989 Derry county

championship final where they faced Newbridge. At a key point in the game Castledawson found themselves a man up but it made no material difference to the result. Kerr failed to make use of the extra man and resolved never to let it happen again.

He was in charge of a talented Ballinderry minor team a few years later when a similar situation transpired against Glenullin. This time he knew what to do. "We decided to play the extra man on the wing. Take him completely out of the play. Everybody else knew who they had. You didn't really have the zonal type defences in those days. There was no confusion.

"The fella on the wing gave us an outlet. Width is so much harder to mark than depth. He can come in and out of the game of his own accord. If the opposition decide to pick him up, then the next guy, wherever he is, becomes the extra man. He moves wide the other side of the pitch."

The idea worked yet it doesn't surprise Kerr that few coaches have been tempted to follow. "I still advocate it but I don't see it done too often," he shrugs. "Some managers might prefer to double-team an opposing player or use the free man as a sweeper. I don't know. Maybe their ideas are better than mine."

There is also, of course, the psychological factor. As a player and manager, Tom Carr was always attuned to the possibility of reduced numbers yet, through hard experience, he learned that even the best-laid plans tended to be usurped by mental issues. In nearly any game, he thinks, the flashing of a red card will emerge as a shock that automatically disrupts the flow of a game and not always to the stricken team's disadvantage. "I know it sounds preposterous to suggest it," he says, "but psychologically you might sometimes prefer to be a man down. There's a tendency not to do as much when you've 15 men. That happens. Or a feeling creeps in that you're a man up and we should be winning the game and that just heaps pressure on you. Sometimes too the other team can feel hard done by, especially if the sending-off was harmless enough. It raises the adrenaline and gives them a lift. A lot of factors come into play."

You can argue it both ways. Benny Dunne's sending-off in the 2009 All-Ireland hurling final clearly damaged Tipperary, yet John O'Brien's red card against Cork last month seemed to spur them towards victory. In 2010, Carr watched his 13-man Cavan team overcome Wicklow and the history of the GAA is peppered with such examples: 13-man Dublin beating Galway in 1983, 13-man Tyrone beating Derry in 1995, 13-man Kildare overcoming Laois in 1997.

Even without the capacity for precision, it's easy enough to argue that a red card in GAA matches isn't as much of a punishment as in other sports. Wexford might have blown their winning position against Dublin last week anyway, but they could legitimately claim that Dublin have had so much practice playing with 14 men in recent times that it is almost second nature to them at this stage.

It is at least worth asking the question: if it is truly the case that 14 men enjoy an advantage against 15 more often than not, is it something the GAA should be looking at? It's a big leap to make, though. Maybe we should just accept it as a quirk of games that already have many. An eternal question to be asked. Never resolved.

*- John O'Brien*