

The Boys from the County Mayo -->

-->All-Ireland Club Football Final Reaction/In the Dressing Room

Interviews by Mike Finnerty

NOISE and colour. Colour and noise. They fused together on the final whistle. So did smiles and tears. And hugs and handshakes too. Laying history to one side and stepping across the threshold to immortality was Crossmolina's destiny all along. We should have known.

Fifty years of hurt, disappointment, pain and defeat all eased with a performance carved from a fusion of sources. Heart. Courage. Fitness. Football. And sheer, raw ability. All woven together and epitomised by the man of the match, Kieran McDonald who gunned 0-7.

The journey from the Cusack Stand to the dressing rooms was brisk. The concrete seemed warmer than usual below the ground. Warmer than it did at least in '93 (Mayo v Cork); '94 (Castlebar v Nemo Rangers); '96 (Mayo v Meath); '97 (Mayo v Kerry); '99 (Mayo v Cork). If you want to be precise about it then we could go on all day. Defeats one. Defeats all. From this moment forth, nothing will ever be the same again for Mayo and its football.

CLUSTERS of reporters huddle together and await the arrival of Kieran McDonald. Out on the field, Crossmolina are warming down as Jarlath Cunningham draws a line under his stewardship. They may have just won the All-Ireland but habit is habit. A warm-down it is then.

Barry Heffernan is lifted onto the crossbar in front of Hill 16. He clutches the post with one hand and punches the air with the Andy Merrigan Cup with the other. Below him marks the spot where three superb saves denied Nemo Rangers in the first half. His red cheeks are joined by a beaming smile.

Eventually, in scraps, Crossmolina's players drift in from the field. All are smiling, some are hollering and others like Damien Mulligan and Paul McGuinness are wearing looks of quiet satisfaction. Winning comes naturally to guys like these.

Aidan Heffernan and Brendan Lavelle immediately start the celebrations rolling and Crossmolina's dressing-room vibrates to the sound of an inspiring chant. Origin unknown but sentiments clear. The door swings open. "Who de ye want?" says Jarlath Cunningham.

SITTING in the corner, separat-ing his foot from a bandage, is Johnny Leonard. Thirty-three years young and caught in a whirlwind of emotions.

"When I came off I couldn't watch the last few minutes," he explains. "I was up and down the sideline, especially when they got the goal. I thought we were going to throw it away. But Gerry O'Malley came in, got a last touch on the ball and it was all over. I couldn't believe that we'd won."

Around the room floats an enchanting ballad. Enda Lavelle sings with gusto as 'The Boys from the County Mayo' fills the air. It echos with pride and feeling. This is foreign territory for Mayo. Johnny Leonard admits that things were much different at half-time.

"It was very quiet, very subdued." he says. "But Jimmy Nallen made a great speech and he said that the talking had to stop. We went out and got all the breaking balls in the second half whereas they did in the first. Enda [Lavelle] came into it brilliantly, so did Joe Keane and Kieran Mac. That was the big difference. Everybody dug down deep and the points came. Kieran was very good. He's only reaching his best years now."

Knockmore's Club Chairman, Paddy O'Hora is speaking from the centre of the floor and congratulates his neighbours. Johnny continues to go about his business and it all seems so unreal.

“I’m so long at it. This is the cream on the cake now. I remember talking to you earlier on this year and I was talking about retiring, maybe. At least if I do I’m going out on a high note and with an All-Ireland medal. I never thought that I’d see the day. This is unbelievable.”

When Crossmolina limped out of Pearse Park, Longford last year, Johnny Leonard’s head was bowed. Na Fianna had ended their run and Johnny’s son had implored his Daddy to intervene. Changed times.

“Ah, he came into me there a few minutes ago, bawling crying,” says Johnny quietly. “There was tears out there yeah. I saw a lot of guys crying. It’s best day of my sporting live. This is what it’s all about.”

STRIDING across the floor is Liam Moffatt. The full-back who became a full-forward. The man whose body seemed destined to break up at one stage or another in his career. Not this time it didn’t.

“I went to National School with Damien Mulligan, same class as him,” he chuckles. “Same in secondary school. All the boys, we went to school together and we know each other for years. To come all the way with them — from underage and all the way through to this, the biggest stage and to become the finest Mayo team since 1970 — it doesn’t get any better.”

Moffatt is a thinking man’s footballer. Always has been. As minutes evolved into seconds before the game he sat in his own world. Then Eugene Cloonan plundered a goal for Athenry and the whole day was turned upside down. Forty minutes to kill and an All-Ireland waiting.

“It didn’t help but it was as hard for them as it was for us,” he offers. “We were piping and ready to go out on the field. Tom Nallen had just finished his speech and then Sean McCague walked in and said: Extra-time in the hurling final’. You just had to start all over again. We just chilled out, totally forgot about, lied down, had a few kicks and a chat. We had a few drinks and a few smokes as well,” he adds mischievously.

At the interval on Monday, Liam Moffatt was calm. Behind by three scores Crossmolina had yet to find their form but serenity reigned inside the dressing-room walls. Moffatt confirms what Johnny Leonard had said. There was only one thing for it.

“In here was a very relaxed place,” he tells you. “Because of different games over the years and, especially, the Na Fianna match last year when we knew we weren’t playing well, we had to stay calm. Tom Jordan said a few things and James Nallen hit it on the head.

He said: ‘All the talk in the world won’t make one bit of difference. You either want it bad enough or you don’t. And if you want it bad enough then you’ll do whatever it takes. I mean, Michael Moyles is a phenomenal athlete and he wasn’t able to walk off the field. That type of effort, that type of intensity is what changed the game around.’”

So what kind of game was it for Liam Moffatt? Restricted by asthma for much of his recent career, the sunshine and hard ground have often been unkind to him. As the finishing line approached it turns out he was like everybody else.

“It was a very hard game because the ground was a lot harder and it was a lot pacier,” he admits. “But, fitness-wise, I felt fairly good. In the second half I felt I wasn’t doing enough because we ran the ball more. Jimmy Nallen, Michael Moyles, Paul McGuinness, Peadar Gardiner, what a game, — they were all ferocious. They kept running through and we had Nemo killed.

“It was a tough game; as tough as we thought it would be,” he continues. “But it just goes to show you that when you have the self-belief, like this bunch of players have, there’s no reason why you can’t do it. I felt before the Corofin game we could do this. We had the pace and we had the forwards. It’s a long time since a Mayo team came to Croke Park and stuck sixteen points. To finally win one is a dream come through. It’s only in time that we’ll appreciate it.”

MICHAEL MOYLES is ap-plying Brylcreem as Stephen Rochford wipes the water from his face. Francis Costello, who missed out because of injury, bears no scars of pity or resentment. He is just one of the panel like everybody

else.

Peadar Gardiner has more reason than most to savour the moment. The 21 year old student at NUI, Galway was named in the half-back line for the first time in the championship and was his usual dynamic self. At times he was a little better. "I did okay," he answers swiftly. "It's twenty-seven lads training for two years for this day. Everyone deserves it. Not just me. My point? I don't know where I came from. I was looking for a quick free from Kieran Mac but never got it and I just kept running. I kept my eye on the ball, got my fist to it but I didn't really know where it was going. Thankfully it went over the bar."

Gardiner talks just as quickly as he moves. Out of his jersey and into his Crossmolina polo-shirt does not mean he has time to stop and talk. Talk on the move maybe. He concurs that attack came easy to him.

"I felt sharp when we were going forward. In the second half when we moved the ball I felt good and there was no problem. Near the end when they ran at us I was dying. Out on my legs. When they got the goal I was out completely. If it went to extra-time I don't think I'd have been able to play.

"But I was just delighted to be playing," he shrugs. "Unfortunately Francis [Costello] just lost out there because of a freak injury and I was just delighted to make the team. We had a great belief. A great team. You don't win an All-Ireland without talent and whoever was called upon to do a job did it."

Peadar Gardiner was a busy man during the first half. As Corkery, Kavanagh, Niblock and Cronin laid siege to the Crossmolina goal, Gardiner's stamina was paramount. Cross' were hanging on by their fingernails.

"In the first half we didn't play at all," agrees the wing-back. "We got no breaks. In the second half we got every one and that, thankfully, turned the game in our favour. Our forwards threw the ball over the bar. Kieran [McDonald] took some great scores. Pressure frees, scores from play...but everyone out there did a massive job. Subs that came on included. It was a great day for all of us."

And so a fairytale year tapers to an end for Peadar Gardiner. Born and raised in the town, his football career stretches out in front of him yet he is the holder of county, Connacht and All-Ireland club medals. The meaning is not lost on him it seems.

"I was in tears after the game. I haven't even had a chance to talk to any of my family yet. This means everything to Crossmolina. We're a small parish and we always knew we had an opportunity to do this but it's a long road. Nemo are an excellent side but this is great, not only for us but for Mayo too."

THE bones of victory have been picked — for the moment — and it is time to leave Crossmolina in peace. Tom Jordan hovers on the edge of the activity, presiding from a distance. The faces of Michael Moore and Padraic Syron are flushed and emotional. PJ Hughes has shed tears and is still wrapped in the moment. Tom McNulty is distributing programmes while Michael O'Malley is his usual amiable self.

The club is 114 years old this year. They now have found a suitable birthday gesture. A club built on the work and industry of men like Fr. Eddie Doherty, Pat Rowland, Canon Willie Davis, Sean Tansey, Peter Munnely, Dr. Mickey Loftus has now evolved into something that will endure forever. The evenings spent trawling the county with underage football teams has been rewarded for one of our own.

"We made one promise to ourselves at half-time," recalls Tom Jordan. "that we would not come back into the dressing-room feeling sorry for ourselves. We vowed we would do better. The boys knew that they hadn't played well in the first half. And they made a promise to set the record straight."

The promise has been kept. Mayo thanks them.