

# All-Ireland Club Final/Paul McGuinness Interview -->

-->All-Ireland Club Football Championship Final

By Stephen O'Grady

With an almost unassuming air, Kieran McDonald arrives. Time and space are limited. Inevitably he is prompt. He seldom hangs around. He drifts in, drives over immaculately, drifts away again.

At 5'7" Paul McGuinness is hardly the most physically imposing gladiator on the Crossmolina team. However, if Kieran McDonald should heap accolades on anyone for the simultaneous creation of a split second and a purple patch in which to parade his wears, McGuinness would be head of the queue. The Lecarrow Wizard is the Dr. Who of Crossmolina, an instigator who eschews the limelight for the greater cause.

Consider his role. Bobbing and weaving, number fourteen on his back, anything but a conventional full-forward. Darting into corridors and dishing out passes. Passes for McDonald to dine out on.

When the Crossmolina squad visited Croke Park two weeks ago, McGuinness had one primary concern. During the players' twenty minutes on the still hallowed turf, he attempted to familiarise himself with his surroundings, in a fashion that would enhance the timing and execution of his passes.

"I don't care about the crowds or the stands, but just to judge the pass. It's a different perspective."

The thinking man's footballer. In fact, everyman's footballer. In Crossmolina, McGuinness is the man. If you eavesdrop on a local post mortem, you will find the informed being that is the Crossmolina G.A.A. fan appreciates unreservedly the contribution of the 26-year-old to any Crossmolina victory. The industrious, selfless and enormously creative contribution which unhinges the most rigid of defences through a magical creation of time and space.

"If I was the Ballina manager, McGuinness would be the man I would pinpoint if I wanted to stop Crossmolina scoring," commented Castlebar Mitchels' Declan O'Reilly in a preview to the 1999 Mayo Senior Football Final. "He is on the ball the whole time, he never stops running. He does a lot of the talking and organising in the Crossmolina attack. In the semi-final, we switched three players onto him. But he moved from corner forward to wing forward to the other wing and our players ran out of pace. He is the key man."

McGuinness is a wonderful contradiction to the physical prowess that embodies modern Gaelic football where, it appears, only the fittest, the strongest, the hardest strive. His subtle, cerebral, busy style of football bucks the trend, rendering lame juxtapositions of 'pint-sized' with 'McGuinness'. Size doesn't matter.

"I've never adapted. It's just the way I play. I never think about adapting to someone else that's marking me. It is a physical game but I don't think it's changed that much, it always was a physical game," says McGuinness, an employee with Swan/O'Sullivan Accountancy Group in Dublin.

"My natural game is trying to link up with the players, get other players into the game, that's my strongest point, I think, when I'm playing well, to link other players into the game.

"It's a team game basically and sometimes you have to spur other lads on and get them going, and once that happens everything else falls naturally.

"Basically, I've good footballers around me and if you've good footballers, they'll nearly always try and pick the right option. So you'll get the ball in a good majority of cases if you make the right run. The way we play, it does suit me at the moment. Still, you need good footballers around you to play that kind of game.

"I'm not classified as a scorer, and I know that, but I wouldn't classify myself as a greedy player. There are certain

players on every team who have the natural instinct to go for the score which you need in a team, but you always need one or two backs and forwards that have to link up with those players in order for them to get the ball in the first place.

“You have to have a certain balance. You do have to have certain people who link up with players, and then you need certain players who have the killer instinct once they get the ball.”

It is almost fitting that anonymous linkman McGuinness favours a low profile off the field, happily removed from the build-up in his home town, ensconced in Dublin where he has been training recently with the Mayo players in the capital under the stewardship of Séamus Rodgers.

“When you’re up in Dublin you’re away from things, which is a help in one sense, so I’ll worry about the game when I go down home on Friday again. When you’re up here it’s not the same hype as down home, especially coming up to the big games, especially once you get to the All-Ireland series, the semi-final, the final. You’re working five days a week and there’s not too many people who mention the game to you. It’s nice doing it that way.”

McGuinness might have been even further removed from his native club if the Foot and Mouth scare had escalated, and the associated restrictions reinforced. His only concern regarding this issue focused on his home place in Lecarrow where his parents’ livelihood is the modest family farm. “If foot and mouth came, football wouldn’t be that important.”

The importance of football was tested most acutely in February 2000, following Crossmolina’s All-Ireland semi-final defeat to Dublin and Leinster champions, Na Fianna. The subsequent meeting of Tommy Jordan, Jarlath Cunningham and the Crossmolina team, and their resulting decision to relaunch their bid for club football’s greatest prize, is now a thing of near legend. In the mind of McGuinness, however, it was never an issue.

“It wasn’t a hard decision because like any footballer, no matter what code you play, if you lose you want to come back again and do better. We always had a goal, especially this year, and it was, naturally enough, to try and get out of county, then Connacht, and if you’re lucky enough to get that far, you look for the final step which is the All-Ireland Final. Not just getting there, to win it.”

McGuinness has matured on a winning team. Since the Mayo Minor Championship wins of 1992 and 1993, victory and silverware have taken up residence in an attractive ‘semi-d’ on the Ballina Road in Crossmolina. Victory has played an integral part in keeping the team together, in warding off any instincts for adventure elsewhere, in subduing ambitions for success in another field. Hills have never been green far away.

“It helped to be winning,” admits the winner of two Connacht club senior medals, three Mayo senior championship medals and countless underage medals. “You’ll see with other clubs that if they’re not winning, they’re not really successful. Players might move to other clubs if they’re working in Dublin or Cork or anywhere. The likes of Jimmy (James Nallen) is a perfect example. I’d say he got numerous offers to work up here [Dublin]. You always like to stay with a team that’s successful.”

Now on the cusp of the ultimate success in terms of club football, McGuinness is adamant that the wealth of experience built up in winning three Mayo senior titles in recent years, built up through the involvement of team members with a variety of county teams at various levels and, perhaps most crucially, built up through the agony of last year’s semi-final defeat, can underpin the final assault.

“Last year I thought in the second half we were very inexperienced against Na Fianna. I thought we lost it. We did think we’d win it, we had the wind behind us in the second half. Subconsciously we were saying that ‘we won’t win the game without the wind’ but I’d say an awful lot of us thought ‘okay we’d have the game nearly wrapped up if we just do the simple things’. And that was just lack of experience. Na Fianna tightened the game up. That was what disappointed me personally last year, I thought we’d more experience at that level to cope with it but we didn’t.”

If indeed time is charged with all the properties we are led to believe it is imbued with, McGuinness and Crossmolina should be better equipped this time round.

