

# Tight corner

AIB All-Ireland Club Football Championship Semi-Final – Interview by Mike Finnerty

LAST February, as the dream crumbled at Pearse Park, Longford, Johnny Leonard stood near the end-line with his hands welded to his hips. Na Fianna led by three and the clock ticked down. Crossmolina's adventure was tapering to a close.

From the almost empty terrace behind him, Leonard heard his young son calling to him. A year on, sitting comfortably in his own kitchen, he admits it was a moment that he will never forget.

"He was roaring out at me from behind the wire: 'C'mon Daddy, c'mon' And all I could was just hold my hands up and say 'What can I do'. I'll never forget that moment. It's funny how it goes.... "Football can be ruthless and it took a good few of us a long time to get over it," he explains. "We'd put in a lot of effort for that game and we should have won it. Everyone just seemed to flop during the second half. We didn't click at all."

THE years have meandered by almost unnoticed. Seventeen summers in the jersey. Victories, defeats and friendships soldered to the mind. The famine that preceded the feast. League titles, county championships and Connacht medals. Heady days. It's Thursday lunch-time in the Leonard household and the day rests easily with the man of the house. Johnny is home alone and enjoying a day away from Bellacorrick and the ESB. The All-Ireland semi-final looms on the horizon but he seems unfazed by all the talk. Just another game.

The game has been kind to Crossmolina's Johnny Leonard of late. He is 33 now and contemplating contests he only used to dream of. Little point in succumbing to the spotlights. "I never thought I'd see the day where I'd be getting ready for All-Ireland semi-finals," he admits with a smile. "Back in the 1980s I'd never thought we'd get this far. Ever.

"We had a good team that time but Castlebar and Knockmore would always beat us. Playing now isn't getting any easier but the more you push yourself the more you seem to enjoy it." Johnny Leonard has been pushing himself now since the summer of 1984. It was championship against Ballinrobe and he arrived into the fray as a sixteen year old substitute. All around him were legends of the club. He wasn't too bothered himself.

"Ballinrobe beat us so it wasn't a great start," he recalls. "We'd been blown up out of all proportion but it didn't matter to me as a young fella whether we won or lost. "Hugh Lynn and Jim Timoney were very good that time. Gerry Loftus and Tommy Dolan were there too and we were in three county finals but we could just never win one. We just didn't have that extra forward that could score. We just didn't click on the day," he reflects. Two years later and not one but two trophies arrived. The League and Superleague. At last, the sun had shone on the north Mayo hamlet and, as Leonard remembers, it was something to be savoured. Things would never be the same again.

"It was unbelievable at the time," he grins now. "We celebrated for a few days after winning the league that time. Now, we've won the league for the past four years and it doesn't sink in at all when we win it. Times have changed.

"Football was a lot simpler those times and the bigger you were the better you were," he continues. "It was a lot more physical as well. Seven or eight of us would go down training together that time a few evenings a week but there was no great pressure put on ya. We did our own thing."

THESE DAYS, memories like that seem like the preserve of fantasy. Just now, Crossmolina are a well-oiled machine that prides itself on its efficiency and precision. Tommy Jordan and Jarlath Cunningham pull the strings behind the scenes and the players accept the plaudits. Four league titles, two county and provincial championships. All won in quick succession. Leonard appreciates the framework. "Winning four leagues in a row is phenomenal, especially last year after the run we had in the championship," he confesses. "I found it hard, myself, last year to get motivated for another

season of football. The day we went back to West Mayo in the first round of the championship we nearly were caught.

"We were well tuned in but nothing went right for us. Then, at the very end, K. Mac [McDonald] put the ball into Paul McGuinness and he buried it. We took off with five minutes to go. It was one of those days and was a very good lesson for us. After the Na Fianna we went unbeaten for the year.

"But Jarlath [Cunningham] has put a massive effort into this," concedes Leonard. "His training is totally different from what we were used to. He doesn't believe in this running around the field all night. It's all sharpness with him. Thomas Jordan is the football man and he keeps us all under control. If there's any trouble he sorts it out fairly fast."

It becomes apparent during our conversation that football has its own place in Johnny Leonard's priorities. He is not one for long-winded speeches or empty rhetoric. He plays the game on his own terms and his reasons are simple.

"The motivation is that it's a great social life," he says firstly. "All the boys get together, play on a Sunday and have the craic. I enjoy it. All the time winning an All-Ireland is at the back of your mind and that's what you aim for. Especially when you get to this stage.

You never think about it when you're playing a county semi-final. I know it's going to be very hard to beat Bellaghy but we have the talent to do it. These young lads we have are used to winning. None of them likes losing and you can see that in their faces."

ON Johnny Leonard's face you can no longer see his old trademark; the moustache. He is clean-shaven now and, apart from his black bicycle shorts, prefers to slip around the full-forward line unnoticed. It is where he does his best work on a football field.

"The way Thomas Jordan plays the situation now is that he wants me to hang in around the goal and pick up the points from there," explains Leonard. "Liam Moffatt is a big bonus to us now as a target man and he makes it easier for me. I'd like the low ball and get one-on-one with a corner-back. Thankfully, the mind is going okay at the moment as well.

"I don't like to lose," he elaborates. "I try my best to win every match. I wouldn't be a perfectionist but I'd believe in just throwing the gear in the bag and just going out and doing it. I wouldn't think about things too much because, I think, the more you do the worse they get."

Our interview is winding to a close and we stumble across the remnants of Johnny Leonard's inter-county career. Old National Football League programmes are where his name now resides but he has little regrets about it. "I wouldn't have any regrets," he replies honestly. "I thought the time John O'Mahony was there I was going very well. That was '91 and when Brian McDonald came in the year after I played a few league games under him. But it takes an awful lot of commitment and I kinda drifted away. You have to have hunger for football and when you lose that you won't play your best football."

And what of his own hunger? For how much longer will Johnny Leonard trot into the corner of Mayo football fields and snipe the scores from the end-lines? "Well, I'm starting a house this year and I won't be able to give football the commitment that I gave it for the last two years. I won't be able to give it 100%. When I do eventually walk away from football it'll be sad alright. But when you talk to the older fellas that have retired they say that after a month or so you just get into another routine and that's it. I'm going to see what happens... I won't say anything yet."

BEFORE we part company we take a glance towards Croke Park. That is the reality of next Sunday's All-Ireland semi-final with Bellaghy. A win and Crossmolina will be at Headquarters on St. Patrick's Day. Leonard's eyes dance as he reflects on his last visit.

"I was in Croke Park years ago on a school trip but that was the only time I was out on the field," he laughs. "If we were to get there on St. Patrick's Day it would be the highlight of my career.

"We're hearing that these fellas [Bellaghy] are going to be ruthless. They're fighting a cause but we're fighting one as well. To win that first All-Ireland title for Mayo would be history stuff. It's totally different from last year because fellas know what to expect. We didn't last year. If we're good enough we'll do it.