

Well-Placed Insults Alter Course of Irish Sporting History

Contributed by Knowledgeable Noel
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Sunday night, just as Nancy won yet another bouquet with customary swagger, yet another Liam Sheedy text landed. His 24th of the evening. "Cnt tk u nuf Nole u pt steel n dem?" he wrote.

I have always been fond of Liam since the fortnight he spent with us on the Sceim na Nollaig scholarship. He wasn't exactly Adrian Fenlon going home, but he wasn't forking and baling either.

When he asked me to speak to the Tipperary team, I couldn't say no. I am held in high esteem in the county, ever since I ventured on my own into Hell's Kitchen.

They called it temerity. I merely called it good corner-forward play.*

The Horse & Jockey was the venue, as always. "Lads," I said, upon confronting the squad in the Effin Eddie Suite, "if there's a man here who believes you can't beat Kilkenny on Sunday, let him leave now."

A sea of knowing smirks greeted me: they sat low in their chairs, some stroking their hair, some stroking others hair, others tapping nonchalantly on the table, and every last one feigning an indifference that I knew to be, well, feigned.

For a full five minutes, I remained silent, save for the heavy, deliberate breathing in through the right nostril, and out the left, thirty seconds a time, and then vice-versa. When the moment was right, I pounced.

"Lads," I said, "it looks like I will be the only one leaving so, because I don't think you have a chance.

"Oh you have the touches alright, and the typical bit of Tipp arrogance, but you're not man enough for them. You haven't the Jack O'Connor carriageens."

They were shaken. Liam's head started to dart from left to right, and his rounded eyes puffed up with tears. "N-n-n," he started, anxiously, but I waved him way. It was no time for niceties.

"There isn't one among you here able to look Tommy Walsh in the eye, down the barrel of your nose, and say 'Tomeeen, old stock, too far east is west.'"

"You're no Donie O'Connell's. I saw you last year in Croke Park. A mean act to let Waterford in for that hammering.

"You weren't man enough to face Kilkenny then — and, from where I'm sitting {technically, I was standing as I said it}, nothing much has changed since."

I stopped, for dramatic effect.

Fifteen dramatic minutes passed without a sound.

And, then, I changed tack.

"Right so," I continued, slower now, "tell me I'm wrong. If any one of you thinks he has what it takes to beat Kilkenny on Sunday stand up now and tell me.

"For the purposes of the exercise, let's presume there will be no ref in Thurles Sunday**. How far are you willing to put on the line for the blue and gold?

"Men or mice? Live or die? Beef or salmon?"

It was a powerful moment. Noel McGrath (they named him after me) stood up and said he'd run rings around anyone Kilkenny put on him.

Every man vowed timber. From the word go.

The more they protested, the more I laughed in their faces. "Yeah, right," I said, over and over again, "I believe it when I see it."

Nancy, too, made it known how little she thought of their promises.

"Talk to the hand, lads," she said.

We continued in that studiously dismissive vein for four hours. We were forced to beat our way out of the room, an unexpected bonus at the end of a bracing evening.

Even Sheedy was frothing at the mouth.

"Motivational talking is a man's game," laughed Nancy, with the audio version of Pat O'Shea's book on Gaelic football drills playing over and over on the car tape deck.

Sunday, you saw what happened yourself. It was a powerful league final. They didn't win, thank God, and now they're poised.

That night at the "afters", word began to leak out.

I smiled wryly. "Ah, sure, maybe I gave them a bit of a hand," I said to anyone who enquired. Jonathan Mullin from RTE rang for the scoop.

I told him nothing, apart from "maybe you're looking in the wrong direction." He sounded confused, so I sought to enlighten him.

"Forget Tipp for a second. That's old news," I thundered.

"Who insulted Leinster into the right state for yesterday? Who was O'Driscoll getting at in the post-match interviews? Who questioned their integrity, their passion, their manliness?"

"Who told them to their faces they shouldn't be let into Jury's Croke Park hotel, never mind Croke Park itself?"

The line stayed irredeemably silent.

"Hardly Neil Francis," I continued, cryptically, "he wouldn't have the carraigeens to go in and insult them an hour before the kick-off, would he?"

I left it all hanging there for Mullin. He still didn't get it.

And so the real secret of the sporting week that was has remained safe until this morning. I wouldn't even want it known, but I'm afraid the penny will eventually drop with Mullin and it's better I control the news than leaving it to him.

* I was actually playing centre-forward at the time, but I hadn't much help inside.

** Had I inside information? That'd be telling.

Noel lowers the blade real low. But only when he has to. Play ball with him, and you'll be sound. Email him at knowledgeablenoel@examiner.ie; visit www.knowledgeablenoel.com; or go man-to-man on Twitter (KnowledgeNoel.)