



DALLO

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ANTHONY DALY

ABOUT THE BOOK

Anthony Daly was the most successful captain in the history of Clare hurling, leading the county to two All-Irelands and three Munster titles. Regarded as an inspirational figure by his fellow players, Daly's innate leadership and character prompted the Clare players, just three years after he had finished his playing career, to pursue him as manager at the age of just 34. During his time in charge, he took Clare to the cusp of two All-Ireland finals, agonizingly losing the 2005 and 2006 semi-finals to the eventual winners, Cork and Kilkenny. It was that kind of ambition and drive to succeed which attracted Dublin hurling to Daly. Taking over the county in 2009, he led Dublin, in 2011, to their first National League title in 72 years and, in 2013, their first Leinster title in 52 years, before he retired as manager in September 2014.

Dalo takes us from his childhood in Clarecastle and the early wilderness years with Clare, through the golden era of the 1990s and into the highs and lows of his management career. Interlaced with drama, tragedy, his love of other pursuits and his immense wit, and punctuated with intense and revealing stories from the dressing-room, Anthony Daly's autobiography offers a compelling insight into a unique personality in modern Irish sport.

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DALO
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ANTHONY DALY
with
Christy O'Connor

To my mother, for giving
me a great upbringing.

Prologue

The Pain and the Shame

‘Dalo, coming from Clare, we know that days like today descend from nowhere when least expected. Good interview afterwards. If they are worth persisting with, they will do themselves justice the next day. Never give up!’

THE TEXT MESSAGE from Ger Loughnane dropped in my phone the night of the 2014 Leinster final. Loughnane understands how dog-days like that can creep up on you and steal everything you believed in, everything you thought you and your team stood for. Like myself, Loughnane had experienced enough of those days as a player, the ones that make you question your very existence and sense of worth as a hurler. He had suffered the wounds to be able to recognize the scars.

On the Monday night after the game, I asked Loughnane to consider talking to the players prior to the All-Ireland quarter-final, provided we weren't meeting Clare. He agreed, but I texted him back a week before we were due to play Tipperary and called it off. In the meantime I felt I had extracted the same rawness out of myself, transmitted the same messages Loughnane would have delivered anyway.

This was my sixth year talking to these Dublin players, a lot of whom had been around for those six seasons. I probably gave two years of Loughnanesque management, of hounding and roaring at guys in trying to extract big

performances from them from pure raw, savage intensity and ferocity on the training ground. You have to reinvent yourself at times, and I learned over the years from leadership development experts like sports psychologists Declan Coyle and Gary Keegan that that approach will only take you so far.

I have always had a strong belief in who I am and what I'm about, but the hammering we got from Kilkenny in that Leinster final had a destabilizing effect on everything. Just when you think your management style and the management apparatus you've constructed around you is built on concrete, it can appear like matchsticks sitting in wet sand. And then the Kilkenny tide comes along and washes away everything, the scattered debris, the flotsam and jetsam from the wreck, floating into the deepest caverns of your mind.

The questions come at you like a relentless barrage on your senses, like waves hammering against a coastal wall, the wall eroding with every one, every question, every doubt. Why did we collapse again? Why did it happen the year after another good season?

There have been plenty of bad days, but the hardest defeat during my time with Dublin was against Kilkenny in Portlaoise in 2012. We were pistol-whipped all over the pitch, dismembered by seventeen points. The 2014 Leinster final was even worse. It was another no-show. Another capitulation.

In lots of ways, I just cannot understand these no-shows. Then in other ways, I completely can. I've been there. I've played on Clare teams that have collapsed and crumbled in the same manner. As Loughnane said in his text, these days descend from nowhere. They blindside and cripple you when you least expect it.

Our defeat to Kilkenny was so bad that it had shades of the 1993 Munster final hammering to Tipperary all over it. In 1993, Clare got caught up in the hype. In 2014, Dublin

got hung up on winning successive Leinster titles. The big difference between the two teams is that Dublin were Leinster champions while that Clare team was still scrabbling around the badlands of Munster hurling. Yet the two teams are almost intertwined in their circumstances, both days intrinsically connected by a lack of belief and conviction. All that was really different was the colour of the jersey.

You try and understand why these days keep happening, why we just cannot permanently change the DNA in Dublin hurling. Winning successive Leinster titles for the first time in seventy-two years would have been a huge part of that process. When we lost our footing with the summit in sight, we tumbled all the way to the bottom and landed in a heap.

It was as if altitude sickness gripped our minds and took us down. It's even more demoralizing given that we didn't even mention that target of winning back-to-back Leinster titles. When Gary Keegan came to meet the management in Parnell Park the Wednesday night before the game, he told us not to be giving any of our energy to Kilkenny. To keep our focus and concentration for ourselves. I had my notebook in my hand and I wrote that down straight away. Usually you'd be so attentive to Gary that you wouldn't take your eyes off him, but I scribbled that point on my pad as soon as the words left his mouth.

I made it all about us. 'Remember,' I said to the lads on the Friday night before the game, 'we're the Leinster champions. They're coming into our own field to try and take it off us. How proud was Jimmy Gray [former Dublin hurler] presenting that cup to Johnny [McCaffrey] last year? Are we going to watch a Kilkenny substitute go up again and collect that cup this year?' (Michael Fennelly had collected the trophy as a sub in 2009.)

And then we go out and don't fight the fight.

When we trained again for the first time on the Wednesday after the game, Ross Dunphy had a hard

running session planned. We met in St Anne's Park but my gut instinct was that we needed to purge some of the pain and hurt through dialogue as opposed to throwing sweat at the problem. In any case, it was a really warm evening and the small dressing-rooms were like saunas. We could sweat out the toxins there rather than pound the hard ground.

Anybody who wanted to talk had an open forum. The sweat was flowing down my brow as the discussion broadened. The gameplan was inevitably one of the main topics of debate until Mikey Carton intervened. 'Lads,' he said, 'that was the gameplan which won us the Leinster title last year.'

Guys were looking for scapegoats and reasons to bitch but there was no hiding from the real, hard truth. 'If it was a boxing match,' I said, 'Kilkenny would have pucked us up and down Croke Park. And if I had a towel, I'd have thrown it in. As far as I'm concerned, we didn't fight the fight. That had nothing to do with the gameplan. I can take a certain share of blame for the gameplan last year against Cork, that if we had started with it, we might have been out of sight. That's the regret I have last year - that I didn't go with it from the start - but I have no regrets about gameplans or tactics this time round. My regret is that I hadn't ye ready for war.

'That's what I take responsibility for. I take absolute responsibility for that, so don't go blaming gameplans for you dropping the ball, or you going up for a fifty-fifty ball with a Kilkenny fella and you having your eyes closed. Maybe your eyes weren't closed but he was coming down with the ball. So don't give me that.'

Nobody held back. Everybody's approach was dissected. Alan Nolan - 'Noley' - who had been our best player against Kilkenny, suggested at one stage that I had become too nice, that the players needed to see more of the madness they had first become accustomed to from me. I smiled to myself as I wound up the meeting.

‘By God, it’s in my nature to be that chap,’ I said to the group. ‘Don’t worry, I can change to become that chap again. Let’s also remember that the other chap was the one who won the Leinster title last year; he was the nice, cool, calculated guy. OK, if ye want the other chap, ye’ll get him.’

And by Jesus, they have got him since.

Friday, 18 July 2014

Over a week later, we played Limerick in a challenge game in the Gaelic Grounds. We were reasonably happy with the performance. We scored 2-27 and won by five points.

Limerick only started with four of the side which lost the previous Sunday’s Munster final to Cork but we gave everybody a run and the lads who came on played well against a Limerick side which finished with a far stronger team than they had started with.

As we strolled back to the dressing-room after the game, I tipped off the management. ‘Lads, I’m going to go off the rails in here now.’

Shane Martin, one of the selectors, stared at me with a quizzical look. We had played well. We’d put up a big score. There were huge positives. David Treacy scored 1-5. Conor McCormack played really well. Ryan O’Dwyer looked back to himself. Danny Sutcliffe caused rack at centre-forward. Still, I didn’t care. At one stage of the second half I’d heard one of the subs behind me saying to Ross Dunphy that playing the match had been a great call by management. That we really needed a game like this.

It didn’t sit well with me.

Conor McCormack and Ryan O’Dwyer were already in the showers by the time we got to the dressing-rooms so I told them to come straight back out. ‘Get out. Now.’

The dressing-rooms in Limerick are designed in such a way that there are corners everywhere so I got everyone to pull in tight together, all along the middle benches. I stood

behind a table loaded with water and hurleys and picked up one of Noley's goalkeeper sticks, a big yoke, from the pile sprawled across the floor.

'IS EVERYTHING FUCKING OK NOW?' I roared as I swung the stick on the table with the force of an executioner. Bottles of water and hurleys, and the table itself which crumpled on its fold-up legs, were the victims. Everyone was in shock. Paul Ryan nearly recoiled three feet.

I spoke about our brand, about who we are and what we stand for, and how we had been unfaithful to our promise as a group. I was in the middle of the fifth sentence when emotion got the better of me.

'To go out and do what we did against Kilkenny was just unbelievable. Give me days like last year's All-Ireland semi-final against Cork any time. I cried for nearly two days with the pain of not being in that final. It took me a month to get over it, but by God, give me the pain, but don't give me the shame. The absolute shame in all of us facing our families that evening was just heartbreaking.'

The shame has brought the animal back out in me. Tommy Dunne, our coach, said it to Ross that he saw the same guy he knew on the hurling pitch during those savage battles we had in Clare with Tipp, the guy with the primal desire who would do anything to win. Tommy never saw that rawness in me before as a manager because he'd only been with us for the last year, but it has always been a huge part of my character and DNA, and the wounds Kilkenny inflicted drew it back to the surface now, like pus oozing out of a sore.

When we trained again two days later on the Sunday, a week before our All-Ireland quarter-final against Tipp, I asked Tommy about the session he had planned. I suggested a couple of drills, both contested and uncontested ones, which Tommy ran brilliantly and the lads executed superbly.

‘The hurling I’ve seen this morning is first class,’ I said to the group as we gathered in our huddle afterwards. ‘So don’t give me the excuse next Sunday evening that your touch wasn’t right or your eye was out. Yere touch and yere shooting is excellent. So this is all about the fight now. And fighting the fight.’

I’ve been on a war footing because I feel it’s the approach we need now. If it works and we win on Sunday, I might even change tack for the semi-final because that’s the kind of group they are. They’re a brilliant bunch of fellas but you need to have something fresh to throw at them the whole time to keep them on edge.

They would have climbed the Sugar Loaf barefoot in the morning for me. They’d have run to Clare if I asked them to. But you need to be a bunch of wild animals to survive in this jungle. Some lads are just too lax and too laid back. That was evident in the dressing-room before the Leinster final – lads sitting down motionless, nobody talking, no energy. The mood was dead. You look at rugby players strolling down the tunnel before big games, all smiles as they hold a mascot’s hand. It would be easy to think, ‘How are those guys ready for war?’ They’re ready because they’ve mentally built themselves up for war and are ready to kill anything that moves.

The lads know what is expected of them against Tipp. Mentally, they need to be ready for war and ready to nail anything that moves. They know it too, but whether or not there has been enough damage done since the Leinster final, I don’t know.

Friday, 25 July 2014

Bere Island –

One task at a time

Next ball

Next game

- Be an active member
- Make a difference
- Intensity, intensity, intensity, be aggressive
- Never, never assume
- Never just happens
- Believe and achieve
- Ready for challenge
- YOUR POINTS

On the Friday night before we played Tipperary, that poster was taped to the wall in dressing-room G in Parnell Park, the last door on the left at the bottom of the long corridor. We'd gone to Bere Island for a weekend training camp the week before the 2013 league semi-final, Ross had kept all the sheets from our feedback discussions while we were there, and he stuck up some of them on the wall before training to mentally transport the lads back to that weekend.

It was savage and brutal. I had gotten ill on the way down to the camp and had to turn back, but the management graphically informed me that any exercise or form of torture the army rangers threw at our boys, at any hour of the day or night, they ate it up. We were mentally and physically prepared for any battle that weekend. So why would we go into battle again on Sunday and not remind ourselves of what we are capable of under extreme pressure and hardship?

The Leinster final was a write-off, but we are seventy minutes away from where we were last year, an All-Ireland semi-final. There is no real pressure on us. All the pressure is on Tipp. While I would have fought with the county board to try and get the game moved from Thurles, I don't really care now that we have to face them down in their backyard. If we're up for it, we'll have a right cut off them. If we are, we can take them down.

It was a beautiful evening, one of those idyllic summer evenings on the edge of a championship weekend when you feel as alive as alive can be. I was there from 5.45 for a seven p.m. start and a couple of lads were already getting ready to rock. Alan Nolan was taking a forest of hurleys from the boot of his car. Ryan O'Dwyer and Eamonn O'Reilly, our physio, were kicking a football on the Parnell Park pitch.

By the time Ross started lining the pitch with cones, the field was flooded with bodies - guys limbering up, fellas pucking balls across the pitch, more taking pot shots at the Donnycarney church goals. When the church bells struck seven, I blew the whistle and called everyone back up to the top of the field, before leading the group to the main meeting room upstairs, above the dressing-rooms in Parnell Park.

Part of our brand is that we always believe we are the hunters, much more so than the hunted. It fits with our personality as a team. The critics and the hurling connoisseurs say that we don't have the skill and class of other teams but we have a brand of working hard together, of hunting the opposition down, of being hard to beat. That's how we want to portray ourselves. It's how we want to perceive ourselves. It forms a central plank of our identity.

In the Leinster final we were completely unfaithful to that belief, to that identity. That day we were the hunted. And Kilkenny devoured us like wolves.

We showed the players video footage of the kill. It was embarrassing to watch, like gazelles being stalked by deadly predators. One of the clips showed three Kilkenny fellas coming in to block Colm Cronin at one stage, and no other Dublin player coming to his assistance. When Colm chased valiantly to try and get possession back, there was still no other Dublin player in sight.

Another clip showed Stephen Hiney catching a puckout and storming past T. J. Reid before Eoin Larkin came from nowhere and flicked the ball away. Hiney won it back and, hemmed in by two Kilkenny guys, got a handpass away, hoping a Dublin team-mate was nearby to assist. But there was no Dub in sight and Kilkenny came away with the ball.

‘Go away and watch last year’s All-Ireland semi-final tomorrow if ye want,’ I said to the players. ‘Feel the pain. But by God, there was no shame.’

There was nowhere to hide for any player while they were watching the screen. We always show positive images before a championship game but we could have shown positive footage this evening and only been coddling ourselves. This evening was raw for a reason. ‘We were the hunted against Kilkenny,’ I said to the group. ‘On Sunday, we need to go hunting again. To hunt down every ball as if our lives depended on it.’

We have picked our first fifteen. We’re going with a dummy team for the first time in years. Tipp have enough advantages playing in Thurles so why should we give them any more? A Tipp fella mentally prepped for Dotsy O’Callaghan might be thrown when he sees David Treacy in his corner.

Shane Martin went through our tactics, none of which were complicated. We had three match-ups in our defence, with the other three to try and hold their shape as much as possible. Colm Cronin was named at corner-forward but was to play in a more withdrawn role, with the two other lads to hold inside. The half-forward line was encouraged to engage in the middle-third battle, like half-forward lines always have done.

Since the Leinster final anyway, we have gone away from focusing on tactics and gameplans. This has to be rawer now, more primal. ‘Did the gameplan win last year’s Leinster title?’ I asked the group again.

A few said yes, with no real conviction in their voices. 'No it didn't,' replied somebody else.

I wasn't fully sure who it was but it sounded like Gary Maguire. 'He's right,' I said. 'We won it because we fought on our backs for every ball. The plan did help, but are ye telling me that what we're after watching had anything to do with gameplans?'

Even though we were less than forty-eight hours away from the game, I wanted there to be a high energy level to the session. This evening was our first training session since the Leinster final that we didn't play a match, but the intensity level was still so evident that Conal Keaney broke Hiney's nose in a tackling drill. Hiney has already broken his nose about six times and the bridge was pushed right across to the right side of his face. Hiney's such a warrior that it won't have any effect on him. It's a sign that Keaney is well up for Sunday too.

They're bound to be more pumped by the time the session ends. Before it began, I called Johnny McCaffrey over.

'Do you remember Ed Holland?'

'Ed Holland ... Ed Holland ... no ... no, I don't, Dalo.'

'The beardy fella who ran the camp in Bere Island,' I replied.

'Oh Jesus, will I ever forget him.'

'Well, he's going to be over in that corner when you're finished training.'

As soon as Johnny led the lads to the bottom corner of the field, just in front of the seated stand, Ed Holland jumped over the front wall of the stand and joined them.

I hadn't a clue what he was saying to them. I was talking to Shane Martin, Tommy Dunne and Ross Dunphy in the middle of the field, the sun glaring down on the crowns of our heads. Any time there was a break in the conversation, I would glare at the huddle, my antennae raised to try and

pick up snatches of the talk, to observe the body language of the group.

At one stage I saw Ed with his head down. He was reading something from the palm of his hand and I instantly knew what it was because Ross had mentioned it to me. The lads had written letters in Bere Island; they were given certain words which they had to include in the writing. Ed was reading out one of their letters.

When they broke from the group, they all made their way back up along the sideline just in front of the stand to the 65-metre line where an ice box was perched on the edge of the field, stacked with Magnum ice-creams. It's our treat box, which the lads regularly fill before championship games, paid for with small player fines for indiscretions throughout the year. We hadn't filled the treat box before the Leinster final and Noley reminded me of it, as if it was a superstitious oversight.

As the lads made their way across the pitch to the dressing-rooms, munching ice-cream as they went, Shane Durkin approached and patted me on the shoulder.

'Some stunt, Dalo.'

'It was no stunt, Shane,' I replied. 'Ed said ye were the best guys the army ever came across down there. Ye did that camp. Ye faced whatever hardship was put in front of ye. I just wanted to remind ye of that this evening. Because we're going to war again on Sunday.'

As I pointed the car out the gates of Parnell and hit for home, the thought was on my mind: 'Is this my last time heading down the long road from training as Dublin manager?'

How do I feel? Apprehensive. Slightly on edge but full of hope and expectation too because I know how great these lads can be when they bring the fight to the battle. All I'm hoping is that we do bring that fight to the battle and then let everything else look after itself. The last thing I said to

Richie Stakelum before I left was we just need to get the calls right on the sideline now because I don't think we could have done any more.

If I'm being honest, though, I'm also trying not to think of the consequences if we fail to show up again on Sunday, if we don't perform again. I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that the ramifications of defeat are not on my mind. I can already picture the press pack around me in those circumstances, the inevitable question someone will fire at me. Is this it? Is this the end of the road?

If it is, if we do lose, what is my next move? Will I miss this? I certainly won't miss the long road and the monotony of the long winter evenings, when I'm driving in pitch darkness and cold and I still have the air conditioning turned up to the max to try and keep myself sharp and awake.

On beautiful summer evenings before the championship it is easy to forget about those black winter slogs, where the loneliness and drudgery can often hang over you like a pall of dead air. It can weigh you down and beat you down but you have to endure that part of the journey if you want to picture the road stretching out to July, and hopefully into August and September.

Even on beautiful summer evenings, though, the doubts can do a number on your head. I have doubts about myself and my future, but I'm not looking beyond Sunday because I can't. It's to my detriment at times that I don't look far enough ahead in life. Others would see that as a strength, that it's important to live for Sunday, the day ahead, the next battle. To suppress any dark thoughts. To believe that we will fight our way out of this, that we will win.

Even when the questions and the doubts keep returning, I just have to bate them back, to keep believing in myself. If you don't, you just walk away from it all and say to yourself, 'That's just not for me.' That's where most of my emotion, which was smeared all across my face, came from after we

won the 2013 Leinster final. There were so many times when I hadn't believed in myself, so many occasions when I had doubted myself so much.

You just have to keep believing in yourself and the group. If we pull off a big win against Tipp on Sunday, we'll have our momentum back again. We'll be playing Cork in an All-Ireland semi-final and we'll be in the same position they were last year: heading into an All-Ireland semi-final with the huge momentum of a big quarter-final win against a side which won't have played for five weeks. If we win that game, we'll more than likely square up to Kilkenny again in an All-Ireland. We certainly wouldn't lack motivation for that rematch. If you said that to anyone else outside the group, lads would be saying, 'Will you go away and get yourself checked out. Have you gone completely mad?' But what other way can you think? What's the point in all of this if you don't think that?

I often think of Ian McGeechan's famous speech on the landmark 1997 Lions tour of South Africa, words and sentiments I often refer to. McGeechan spoke about not fearing defeat. He had known it, lived it. Defeat had been part of his life, all his life. I have regurgitated and reheated those words in so many forms to the Dublin players over the years.

'Where do ye think I'm from, lads? I have no nine All-Irelands. I was lucky to experience the golden era of Clare hurling but defeat has belted me up and down the country. Every place I have gone, I've been hammered by defeat. I hate it, but I can handle it. I can live with defeat, but I cannot live with shame.'

I don't even know if a win on Sunday will put my chin back in place. I'm still that low. I'm not even greedy enough to say that we have to win for my head to lift again. As I said, I can live with the pain of defeat. But I struggle to deal with the shame that often goes with it.

1

On the Road Again

Ballykelly, Laois, Thursday, 16 January 2014

Dublin 6-27

University of Limerick 0-17

I HAD JUST passed Newmarket-on-Fergus when the phone rang. It was Brian Lohan's number flashing on the screen. Lohan, who has been managing UL for the last couple of seasons, said he would have rung sooner only he had the Clare hurlers Conor Ryan and Podge Collins in the car with him. As soon as he'd dropped them home, Lohan almost couldn't contain himself.

'Holy Jesus, ye are gone on to a whole new level. Ye made bits of us. The clinical way ye scored yere goals was something else. How the hell did ye not beat Cork last year?'

Two years earlier, UL had hammered the shit out of us in the same field. We picked a stronger team because they had beaten Waterford in the Waterford Crystal Cup three days earlier. We were more pumped up than normal for a midweek challenge game in the middle of nowhere in January, but Lohan's comments still threw me. In my own mind, I was saying, 'Get lost, Lohan, this is a new year.'

When I landed home in Tullycrine at 11.48 p.m., I thought more about his comments. Lohan was comparing the quality he had just seen to the previous year's All-Ireland semi-final against Cork. That game was still fresh in his mind. I had been over it a thousand times but Lohan

flicked the switch in my head again. 'How the hell did we not beat Cork?'

Fifteen minutes into the second half of that game I was absolutely convinced we were going to win. Maybe I was slightly naive by not shoring our defence up more in the first half. That was our game. It was our brand, our signature style. Instead we decided to go toe-to-toe with Cork in a shootout for the first thirty-five minutes. I figured they wouldn't be gone far enough ahead of us that we wouldn't have been able to lasso them back. If they had bucked five or six points clear, we would have changed the formation. We were only down one point at the break. Perfect. Time for Plan B. Time to drive on.

Danny Sutcliffe came out to the middle to get on Johnny McCaffrey's man. Johnny was to sit in front of Liam Rushe. No balls were to be hit to the corner-flags to suit our two-man full-forward line. Everyone had to up their workrate. It was obvious that they had. We were clearly more comfortable reverting to that style. We were wiping Cork out in the middle third. We had control of the game. Our system was dictating the tempo. I turned back to the lads. 'We have them,' I said. 'We have them.'

Then Ryan O'Dwyer was sent off on a second yellow card in the 50th minute. Anthony Nash nailed his second intercontinental range point from the free to level the match but they were still struggling to cope with our system. I still thought we had them. Lorcán McLoughlin ran over to Jimmy Barry-Murphy. 'They still have a loose man above.' I thought we might sneak something out of the match but the momentum had switched. It got away from us.

'We'd have won only for the sending-off,' I said to Lohan on the phone. 'We won't be getting carried away with a challenge game in January, but you're right, we are a different animal now. We are stronger. I can guarantee you, this time last year, those older fellas would not have been

driving that on like they were tonight. I can see that difference. Wherever that leads to, I don't know.'

One afternoon in late autumn 2008, the journalist Jackie Cahill rang me. He was calling for the craic, to talk about everything and nothing. 'Jeez, I must meet up with you soon,' he said. It was a half-genuine call because Jackie is never switched off. If there is a line hanging around, he'll swoop like a hawk.

Before long, it was obvious he was soaring above the bait. The eyes were focused, the wings widely spanned, the talons ready to strike.

'Do you fancy taking anyone? What about the Dublin job. Would you go for it?'

'Even if I did, I wasn't asked,' I replied. 'They've asked everyone under the sun at this stage. Sure I'm probably too far away anyway.'

'Jaysus, I'd say they'd be mad keen if you were any way interested.'

Jackie must have thought he was Jorge Mendes, the soccer super-agent. He went on a solo run and called Gerry Harrington, chairman of the Dublin county board. He hopped the ball to Gerry. 'Ring Dalo. He could be the man.' Harrington was on the blower straight away.

The first thing I did was clarify that Jackie wasn't Jorge Mendes. Even if he thought he was, I wasn't on his books. I knew Dublin had been hotly pursuing Nicky English. I told Gerry that Nicky was the obvious choice for the job. He cut me off straight away. 'Jeez, if we thought you were interested, we'd have been on to you sooner.'

I was interested. Big-time. About a month earlier, Declan Ruth had asked me if I was open to an interview with Wexford. I dismissed it straight away. It would be easier to get to New York on a plane than it would be to travel from Wexford to West Clare. I couldn't face that trip, but the road to Dublin was getting shorter all the time. I knew

there was some serious young talent emerging. More than anything, though, it was the methadone I was craving for my habit since I'd finished up as Clare manager.

A couple of days later, I met Harrington, John Costello and Mike Connolly in the Lakeside Inn in Killaloe. Connolly, who had been pivotal in drawing up Dublin's development squads model, showed me the hard data and the positive projections attached to the numbers. Liam Rushe, who I had never heard of, was mentioned as one of many rough diamonds waiting to be polished. Connolly's hard-drive was bursting from the volume of similar potential.

They had reams of talent coming but they needed someone who could stitch it all together. All-Irelands in the immediate future were not a priority. Dublin needed a manager who could bring enough excitement, encouragement and experience to push all their recent and irresistible underage momentum over the hill. To make a progressive hurling culture permanent. At the end of the discussion, they offered me the job.

I was excited. I desperately missed the buzz of being involved at inter-county level, but could that desire justify taking on a job which involved a round trip of 350 miles? Was it overly selfish when I had a shop and a pub to run, and a young family to rear? On the road back to Ennis, I rang my wife Eilís. We went for lunch and discussed the possibility.

'Is it mad?' she asked.

'It probably is. But I'd love to have a go at it.

Expectations wouldn't be that high. It's a building process. Jeez, I'd regret it if I didn't take it.'

Regrets can contaminate your system like a virus so I canvassed solid counsel and highly respected opinion. Tommy Howard, Johnny Callinan and Fergie 'Tuts' Tuohy told me what I already felt in my gut: 'Why not? It's a great job. Go for it.' The only one who wasn't sold on the idea

was Ger 'Sparrow' O'Loughlin who thought I might have lost the plot with the logistics involved.

Deep down, however, I had made my decision. The only stumbling block was the pub I ran, Murty Browne's. With the amount of travel involved, I'd kill myself if I tried to double-job full-time. I decided to put the word out there that I might be interested in leasing the pub. Before long, I was approached by a sound county Monaghan man, Dave Livingstone, who lived in Lissycasey. The deal was made. I was on the road to Dublin.

I met Vinny Teehan first. I met Richie Stakelum in the Clare Inn a couple of days later. We drank copious amounts of coffee and got lost so deep in hurling talk that we left without paying the bill. I sat down with Richie and Vinny and Ciaran 'Hedgo' Hetherton in the Citywest Hotel a couple of nights later and discussed the potential of this great journey we were all embarking on. A few weeks later, Richie also managed to recruit the highly rated coach Jim Kilty, who had trained Tipp when they won the 2001 All-Ireland.

On the day I was unveiled to the media, I made an ape of myself before I even arrived. I got lost. I knew there was a big church near Parnell Park but I confused Whitehall with Donnycarney church. I was driving around Whitehall like Stevie Wonder. Eventually I had to call Gerry Harrington to come and rescue me.

I was far more tuned in the first time I met the players. I remembered listening to Len Gaynor and Ger Loughnane the first time they addressed the players as Clare manager. Seamus Durack was the same with the Clare U-21s one year. They all absolutely nailed their message. It left a huge impression. I needed to impart mine to the absolute maximum. I needed those Dublin players tuned in to my frequency from day one.

I was honest but as blunt as a spade. I didn't know anyone so I had no loyalty to any of them. I was looking for

thirty fanatics. When I was Clare manager, we played Dublin in the qualifiers in 2005 and 2006 and I couldn't believe how naive they were. They needed to become more streetwise, more hard-headed. The only way they could learn those lessons was to get into the ring and start trading punches, to fake it until they started to make it, to at least let on that they were boxing clever.

It was easy for me to talk to them about Clare. The first half of my career was spent in the same purgatory the players in front of me had become accustomed to. I had no truck with tradition. We had been a laughing stock in Clare. On my debut, in 1990, we lost to Limerick by fourteen points. Five years later, we were All-Ireland champions. 'It can be done,' I told them. 'It can be done.'

I set the dream. Then it was all about chasing it. 'This is a boat that is just after being pushed off a port,' I told the players that night. 'I know the destination I want to reach, the steps of the Hogan Stand. I don't know where we will go in between but that is my ambition. And I will do my utmost to try and get ye there.'

When I took them for my first session, on the Astroturf pitch in Thomas Davis in Tallaght, it was pure basic stuff, lines of threes and fours. I couldn't believe how slow they were. I blew the whistle and savaged them. Then I drove them through the rest of the session like a demented beast. Their tongues were hanging when the drills were wrapped up. 'This is the way it's going to be.'

To finish up, we played a twenty-minute match. I drove it on the way Loughnane used to. Some lads looking to impress started belting each other. Similar to Loughnane, I swallowed the whistle. More of them were looking for frees.

'There will be no fucking frees here!' I roared, the exclamation mark clearly audible. 'Frees my hole!'

It was a licence to kill for some lads. Kevin 'Rasher' Ryan was leathering all around him. He was loving it. I was

loving it even more. 'Aboy, Ryan!' I was roaring. He was one of the few names I knew. I was calling half of them wrong names but I appeared to be best friends with the guys orchestrating what looked like a cull.

When we went for food afterwards, I did some reconnaissance work. I was discreetly checking names and clubs. It was soon obvious that players from the same clubs were sitting together. From that night on, guys weren't encouraged to sit directly beside a clubmate.

We were all starting from base camp, but it was soon obvious that a path had been carved up the first part of the mountain. I saw Rushey for the first time the day we played the 'Blue Stars' game. He was just out of minor and was blowing guys out of his way. David Treacy blinded me the same afternoon with his skill. I could see now what Mike Connolly had been talking about. The talent was obvious. You could smell the ambition off the more experienced players. We were on a high. Then we walked into a Kilkenny haymaker.

It was only the Walsh Cup but Brian Cody put me back in my box before I even got the chance to stick my head out the top of it. Kilkenny were not that strong on paper but Cody had them well riled up. They hit six goals and won by twenty points. I was driving down the road afterwards asking myself, 'What have I let myself in for here?'

We were never going to soar up the mountain. We began by scaling foothills. We won the Walsh Cup Shield, which was something tangible for Dublin hurling. Gradually, we got footholds on higher peaks. After a great league campaign in Division 1, a draw against Clare in our second last game denied us an outside chance of making the final. In June 2009, Dublin reached their first Leinster final in eighteen years.

On the day of the semi-final against Wexford in Nowlan Park, we drove past the Kilkenny exit and continued on down the M7. We had been to the Curragh and the Glen of

Imaal on an army training camp that February and I wanted to forcibly remind the lads of that weekend. That training camp was absolutely animal. The closest I had ever seen to such brutality was Mike McNamara in his prime with Clare. I had previously dealt with Jim Maguire in the army and had requested their toughest regime. An Ulster football panel had tried to get through a similar camp two weeks earlier and Maguire sent them home a day early. He had broken them. Maguire also tried to break us.

One morning, he got the whole squad up for a gear inspection at three a.m. Everyone had been given a list of stuff to bring and Maguire brutally punished every indiscretion. A tin of peas did not pass for a tin of beans. A lighter was no substitute for a box of matches. 'Who is yere captain?' Maguire roared as he instigated the first reprisal.

Stephen Hiney's gear had been immaculately prepared but he was brought outside and put doing press-ups. Everyone else had to start running around Hiney in a circle as Maguire sought answers as to why they had failed the most basic task of the weekend. 'Ye imbeciles, tell me what went wrong!' he shouted.

None of the answers fitted Maguire's demands. 'Are ye fucking stupid? Tell me what went wrong!'

All the while, Hiney was being tortured. Maguire was standing on his back while Hiney's press-up count was extending into big numbers. At this stage, I was getting anxious. Stephen is a diabetic. You will regularly see him sipping Lucozade for a sugar boost. He is always checking his sugar levels with a needle before training, and he hadn't eaten in over eight hours. Hiney was frothing at the mouth but he just would not give in. By the time Maguire eventually let him stop, he collapsed in a puddle of sweat and had to be peeled off the ground like a piece of chewing gum. Then he joined the rest of the group for a six-kilometre punishment hike. When they returned to base, Maguire singled out Hiney for the only line of praise all day.

'I can tell ye one thing anyway,' he said, 'ye have one great captain.'

Most of the tasks the army set are almost impossible to pass, but they are looking for mental fortitude more than physical endurance. On the day of the semi-final against Wexford, I wanted to remind the players of how mentally strong they had proven themselves four months earlier. I marched them up to the top of Donnelly's Hollow at the Athgarvan end of the Curragh, where the boxer Jim Donnelly's second and most famous fight took place against George Cooper in 1814. The last time the players had been there they'd been flogged like slaves.

'Remember this place of pain,' I said. 'By Jesus, we're not going suffering again today.'

Seán Shanley planted a Dublin flag at the hollow and we walked back down to the bus.

As we drove into Kilkenny City, 'The Foggy Dew', the version performed by Sinéad O'Connor and the Chieftains, was blasting out of the radio's speakers.

Right proudly high over Dublin Town they hung out the flag of war;
'Twas better to die 'neath an Irish sky than at Sulva or Sud El Bar.

We were going to war. That day, Wexford were Britannia's Huns.

It was only after that battle I realized how much the win meant to Dublin hurling. Kevin Flynn was crying. The emotional power of the embrace between Flynn and Liam Ryan showed how deep and soulful the victory was. I was so buzzed up and so loud in my praise to the media of the performance of the younger lads that I sounded like David O'Leary praising his 'babies' at Leeds a few years earlier.

We knew we weren't ready to take on Kilkenny man-for-man in the final. We used Johnny McCaffrey as a sweeper. We definitely upset Kilkenny's way of thinking and were in with a chance until their second goal put the game beyond

us. Our season ended three weeks later when Limerick knocked us out in the All-Ireland quarter-final. We were the better team but Limerick just weren't prepared to lose to Dublin that day. Their psyche and soul wouldn't allow it. Their tradition could not countenance it. You could sense it at pitch-side. It was a harsh lesson in our quest to make a hurling culture permanent.

Richie Stakelum and I went to the Horse and Jockey outside Thurles afterwards for a pint. We had massive areas to work on and develop but at least we had set a solid foundation on which to build. If nothing else, it was a good start in year one of a two-year project.

Five years on, the project was still ongoing.

Thursday, 23 January 2014

I was reading an interview with Mick O'Dwyer recently. He has always said that driving is one of his hobbies. The fact that I didn't sit behind a wheel until I was twenty-six means that there is still probably a novelty factor there for me, but I actually like pointing the car east and gobbling up the miles like PacMan. Not to the same extent as Micko, but the long road can grant you the head-space a crammed day too often cannot sanction.

It was tougher in the early days but the roads have got better and the journey shorter. I'm rarely home after midnight. Even when I am, there is still light on in the pub. When I finish up with the hurling, that's where I will be returning. I have been so lucky that Declan Keane, a former Cooraclare footballer, has done such a brilliant job with the pub, but that reality alone makes the long road and the long nights easier to reconcile.

The only time I ever found it a drag was this time last year. I had taken on a role with the Limerick Institute of Technology freshers. My eldest daughter Orlaith was not well. On the night Limerick beat us in the league, I told