



PAUL
GALVIN

IN MY OWN WORDS

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ABOUT THE BOOK

One of the greatest GAA footballers of the modern era, Paul Galvin has enjoyed a brilliant and at times controversial career.

Winning four senior All Ireland medals with Kerry and eight Munster championships, he was also a three-time All Star and 2009 Footballer of the Year. His inter-county career took off in the late 1990s, when he picked up a Munster minor championship medal in 1997 and another at under-21 level in 1999. But it was in the senior team throughout the 2000s that Paul came into his own. In a period defined by great rivalry with Tyrone, he became a key playmaker for Kerry, never failing to give his all in pursuit of victory.

Over the course of a career marked by courage, physicality and an intense passion for the Green and Gold, there were many glorious days. There were other days too, with controversial incidents that led to a number of suspensions, most notably in 2008, the year in which Paul also had the honour of being the Kerry captain. 2009 brought redemption. But 2010 presented new challenges.

In this fiercely honest autobiography, Paul offers - in his own words - a compelling, unflinching account of a career that has fascinated football fans for over a decade.

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IN MY OWN WORDS
The Autobiography

Paul Galvin

To my parents, who raised me to be the man I am.

To Louise, who makes me better than the man I am.

Foreword

What Are You Doing with Yourself?

I GET ASKED a lot of questions. Nothing but questions. Some I can answer, some I can't. Of all the questions I get asked there's one that stumps me every time. 'What are you doing with yourself?' A lot of people ask me this. The tone of the question varies but is always telling. Some people are interested, some are ignorant, and others are genuinely confused. Sometimes the tone is actually plaintive. It might come with a furrowed brow, a shake of the head or a shallow sigh. Like I'm not doing enough somehow. I presume each time someone asks me, what am I doing with myself, they mean generally on a day-to-day basis, occupationally, and not what am I doing right at that particular moment in time. It is a question that somehow implies that because I'm not teaching any more, or not on the regular nine-to-five in an office with a job title, then everyone thinks I'm maybe ... I don't know ... at home doing nothing all day. 'What are you doing with yourself?' How do you answer that? Occasionally I wonder if there has been a story doing the rounds. That maybe I have done something outrageous and scandalous that I don't know about yet. I catch myself sometimes when I find I'm about to justify my existence to a stranger or even someone I vaguely know. Perhaps I should explain to them that I'm an existentialist. That I exist as an individual, a free agent, defined only by my own free will, by the whims of every action I decide to take. That would be fun.

So, what am I doing with myself? Well, I played football for Kerry for a while. Eleven years, that's one-third of my life. Fifty odd games, that's not enough of my life. Thousands of training sessions, that's way too much of my life. One football career that somehow was my whole life. Four red cards, that's not bad; three of them on the same weekend for three successive years, that is bad. A shop load of yellow cards, that's not bad either. No black cards, that's just great. Eight months of inter-county suspensions. Is that bad? Back-pats and brickbats, love and hate, Green and Gold. Heroes and have-a-go-heroes, real deals and unreal feelings. Great men and fake friends. Tough guys who said little, weak guys who said a lot, and results that said it all. The climb from the bottom, the fall from the top, the defiance to start again. A lot said, a lot done, but not all is said and done. Not yet. This is my story, these are my words, this is what I think. You are free to take these words any way you want, they'll still be mine after you're done with them. Yes, I have done some mad things. That doesn't make me a mad thing, though. Yes, I have strengths. That doesn't make me strong. Yes, I have weaknesses. Accepting them makes me strong. Yes, I am my own man. I've been my own man since the day my father told me to be. For that reason I am myself full-time. Yes I have faith. I pray to God every day to keep me. That was Mom's advice.

To those who take, or mistake, silence for weakness and take that weakness for opportunity, know this. Sometimes silence is strong. Sometimes silence is just patience, waiting for the right time to come. That time has come. Here's a little of what I've been doing with myself. I wrote this book.

What are you doing with yourself?

Prologue

‘WHAT IS IT, Paul?’

‘What’s driving you?’

I was sitting in the back of Liam O’Flaherty’s pub in Listowel having presented medals to some underage kids. We were deep in 2006 and Kerry had won our second All Ireland in three years that September. We had lost two championship games in that period and a handful of league games. We were winning for fun. Stephen Stack, the former Kerry defender, had just asked me the questions above. I sat there, 26 years old, and I had no answer. Plenty of questions, but no answer. What Stephen was getting at, I think, was the source of my motivation, and maybe our motivation as a team. From where sprung the intensity that fired me on the field of play? What was it that stoked this all-consuming aggression within me, that brought out the best and worst in me? There had to be some root to it. Didn’t there?

I tried to answer him but my reply was that of a man who had neither the time nor the maturity nor the self-awareness for that kind of introspection. Since I had eventually established myself in the Kerry team, I knew nothing but success. I drank it in and belched out what didn’t agree with me. Onwards. Next challenge, please. Never mind the challenger. I hadn’t time to stop and ask myself questions.

I didn’t care. Success was all I wanted. Winning was all that mattered. Kerry was all I respected. Even when I was a sub, a spare part with no hope of playing, it mattered more than it should have. I stood on the line in ’03 when Tyrone

tore down the walls of a footballing dynasty and went about using the rubble to build one of their own. I took it personally. I saw great men brought to their knees, and it hurt when it shouldn't have mattered that much. I was a sub. I stood a few yards away from Páidí Ó Sé on the sideline when he got banjoed by an old man and it was all I could do not to banjo the old man back. That was as close as I got. But I found something out about myself that day. I had fight in me. I wanted to be in the middle of it, as bad as it was for us. I learned later on that same fight came a bit too easily to me, and got me in trouble, but what can you do? Without that fight I wouldn't have got to where I wanted to go. You are what you are. You can't change that, right?

Having spent the Tyrone game warming up, I walked to the dressing room heartsick when the final whistle went. I had so much respect for all the lads, Darragh and Seamo and Hassett and Fitzzy and Tomás and the rest that it upset me to see them beaten. I wanted to help. To fight. To be defiant. To protect Kerry. And if defeat was to be our lot, then let us lose, but let us go down fighting and let me go down with the men on the field, with sweat and blood on my jersey, with pride, with honour. Not standing on the line rubbernecking. No honour in that.

The question stayed with me as I drove home that night. 'What is it, Paul? What's driving you?'

*

What drove me? I didn't know. I always just played to win. I wanted medals, achievement, success. I wanted respect. Pure and simple. With me it was always pure but rarely that simple, and once I gave it some thought, the answer, or some kind of answer, was not far away. It was hidden in a recess of my brain. The temporal lobe. That's the part that stores emotion and memory. Emotion has a powerful impact

on memory. Autobiographical memory consists of the episodic and the semantic. A lot of my memories tend to be episodic, linked to experiences, events, people.

I think back to a day when I was around 13 years old. I was standing at Ballinclogher Cross waiting for my drive to arrive. The Cross was a central part of my childhood. Ballinclogher, Baile an Chlochair as Gaeilge, 'the townland of the convent'. It lies on the main Tralee to Ballybunion road in the heart of north Kerry hurling country.

A quarry, on the right-hand side of the road as you head for Lixnaw village, was our playground as kids. We explored every part of it. Tunnels and caves in the quarry base at the back, and the sheer rock face at the front, provided just the right amount of danger necessary for any young lads' adventure. We'd spend some days hiding in the tunnels, burrowing underground like rats, others having races to climb to the top, a good 40 or 50 feet above us.

Years later the same quarry would glow in the fiery light of bonfires as we brought home County Minor Hurling Championships, County Under-21 Hurling Championships, County Senior Hurling Championships and County Football Championships. Sam Maguire has paid a few golden visits too.

This day I had been selected to play for the Kerry Under-14s. Have boots, will travel. Nerves darted around my stomach like bumblebees in a summer kitchen. I was buzzing.

The car arrives. There are four players inside plus a selector, who's driving. I get in, wishing I had a teammate from Lixnaw with me for company. I don't remember which players were there.

But I remember the driver. And his words. And his tone. And the look on his face.

'Oh, are you coming too?' he sneers.

I redden and mumble a reply. He's not finished yet, though.

'Along for the drive, is it?' he scoffs.

I say nothing. No one does. The silence is uncomfortable. The car drives on. The embarrassment I feel in front of the other players soon turns to defiance. This defiance consumes me the whole way to the game. Maybe it has never truly left me. Maybe it was always in me, a part of who I am. Maybe it's what's driving me.

We sit there in silence.

I find myself staring at the driver. I sit and I stare and I make a pledge. A pledge I would go on to make a few more times as I got older.

'F**ck you, old boy, I'll show you.'

1

Penny Lane

THE SUN ALWAYS seemed to shine on Penny Lane. I'm still brown as a berry from it today. All my memories are of long, warm days, the evening sun casting long shadows, the wind at my back and the sound of my own commentary in my ears as I ran home, sidestepping imaginary opponents, scoring last-minute, match-winning goals and celebrating accordingly. But only in those parts of the road where I knew I couldn't be seen from neighbours' windows. From top to bottom, Penny Lane stretches for around half a mile dead straight. My only memory of my grandfather is of his silhouette walking away from me towards the top of Penny Lane one dusky evening. I was standing near the bottom, wondering where he was going. With all the life experience of a silhouette myself, I watched him disappear into the distance. I don't recall ever seeing him again.

It's funny the things we remember, out of all the life experiences we have. Why do we remember some things and not others? Why do we remember something as forgettable as an old man walking up a lane and not something as important as that same man talking to you or him being laid to rest?

I wonder about this. I think it's because memories have reasons. There are reasons we remember certain events or people, somewhere deep in our subconscious, and life reveals these reasons to us as we grow. For me, in writing this chapter, I can now relate my feelings for Penny Lane back to that sole memory of my grandfather walking away

from me on that evening many years ago. I was maybe four or five. I can still see him clearly walking away but I find it hard to recall his face at the same time. I have many memories of my grandmother Nora. I was close to her. Everything seems smaller on Penny Lane now. The road isn't so long any more. I sit on walls I once had to climb. I see over ditches I once had to cut back with my hurley to see into. I know every hump and pothole along it. It still moves me to walk it.

How could it not? My laugh echoed so loudly around it when I was young that my best friend Trevor's mother, Mary, always knew when I was calling. It was that kind of place.

I lived at the end of Penny Lane, or the 'Boraheen' as we called it, on the edge of a forest which separates the parish of Lixnaw, where I lived, from Causeway, where I went to school. Between the last house, my uncle Martin's, and the forest, lay a bog. A bog right on our doorstep. Jesus.

If God had given me every natural amenity a young fella could wish for to occupy himself, then placing a blanket bog outside my door was his way of balancing the books. I learned quickly that the elders, folk like my dad, loved the bog. If they weren't talking about it at home, they were knee-deep in it, firing heavy, black sods with hairy heads at me.

My dad and Johnny Ryan, a local turf connoisseur, drank tea from Lucozade bottles, ate bacon sandwiches with brown sauce, swapped stories and cut turf. I listened and did what I was told until the day was down. I grew up on a bog and spent so much of my youth at the bog that I can safely be considered a 'bogger'. Being called a bogger was seen as an insult when I was in school, and even when I was in college. I never saw it as an insult. I call myself a bogger.

Dad was born and raised on a small farm halfway down Penny Lane. He is one of nine siblings and, like many

others, left home at a young age to work. He spent years in Birmingham and stood on the Holte End every second week in support of Aston Villa before moving back home. He met my mother and they lived in Curraheen on the Tralee to Dingle road for a while before moving into a house at the bottom of Penny Lane. From there he worked for CIE for years. If he had stayed in Birmingham I'd have ended up playing for Aston Villa if he could have helped it. He is the only Villa supporter I know. The Kerry Branch of the Aston Villa Supporters' Club is still looking for members to join him. He was a dark, swarthy man when I was young. There was more sunshine in Ireland back then. Everyone seemed dark-skinned. I share his dark complexion now and some of his personality too. My first memory of being conscious of clothes is of looking at my dad's work uniform every day. It wasn't that I loved fashion from a young age or spoke about it or wanted a career in it. I didn't dream about it or speak about it at all. I dreamt about football and sport and playing for Man United, but I was always interested in fashion - the detail, the brands, the imagery - yet I didn't really know what it was. I had an eye for the detail of clothing, the names, reading the tags, the composition of the clothes, how the grey trim of my dad's V-neck matched the grey of his shirt. He wore a navy work uniform, navy slacks, a navy V-neck jumper with a grey trim and light grey shirt, with black or brown shoes. The thing I remember most is the tag on his trousers. It was orange with the letter 'F' written on it in stylized form. Later on I learned that this symbol represented the Farah clothing brand after finding a pair of trousers in a vintage clothes store in Dublin. I have three pairs of Farah trousers myself today.

My mother's family, the Moriartys, from Curraheen on the Tralee to Dingle road, are football mad. Her brother, my uncle John, is one of my favourite people. He is unique. He likes visitors but you only get a certain amount of time

in his company. You must be able to read him to know when he has had enough of you. If you can't he might let you know, in his own way, that he has better things to be doing. I called to see him one day as I was passing. We spoke at the front gate for twenty minutes. That's a long time for John. I didn't read the signs this day anyway. I think that was because he was standing. When he was sitting you could read him better. He would start rubbing his knees as he sat. That was the first sign that he was getting sick of you. Then he would start moving his feet under the seat. That was the second sign. If he resorted to saying, 'Oh, cripes,' in response to your ramblings it was all over. He had switched off from you completely at that stage. I liked observing his mannerisms. This day he eventually took his leave from me. 'I better go from you, I've an egg boiling inside,' he said. I drove off laughing, thinking, 'I hope he likes hard-boiled eggs.'

Lots of my cousins on that side of the family played football with St Pats Blennerville. Séamus O'Sullivan, a master butcher in Tralee, played in the 1986 All Ireland minor final for Kerry. His brothers, Tommy and Derek, also played to a high level. My other cousins, Kevin and Declan Moriarty, played too. Their dad, Muiris, won a county championship with Kerins O'Rahillys in 1955. A first cousin of my mother's, Jack Falvey, played on the Kerry team of 1946 that beat Roscommon in the All Ireland final. He played wing-forward too.

I speak Irish fluently and I got that from my mother, who grew up close to an Irish-speaking area in West Kerry. The first time I heard the Irish language being spoken was out of her mouth at home. Mom grew up with Kerry football. I vaguely remember her watching the 1986 All Ireland final between Kerry and Tyrone. All her side of my family are football people. She instilled in me the importance of God and prayer in my life. I'm not sure what I was like as a child. When I was still in primary school I remember going

to a dentist in Causeway for a check-up. For some reason I missed an initial appointment and had to re-schedule. This time was for real and I had two of my back teeth pulled. When I say pulled what I actually mean is they were slowly drawn from my jawline, creaking and cracking like an old tree stump being uprooted by rope from the back of a tractor. I lay there shocked that I could have teeth so big in my mouth. When the second one was withdrawn it must have been half an hour later. I sat there afterwards, pissed off at how sore it was but delighted because I knew there and then I would never sit through that again. Twenty-two years later I still haven't sat in a dentist's chair. I think I had my own ideas on life from a young age. I may have been a little bold, without being bad.

I laughed a lot when I was young, that's what I remember most.

Sport was the thing I was most serious about. Which begs the question, should sport be serious or fun? Growing up in the early '90s it was serious fun. We played everything we could: hurling, soccer, football, rounders, American football, rugby, sprinting, cycling, slow-bicycle races. Anything we could compete at. Penny Lane was our pitch and our world and all we knew. We walked it and talked, ran it and screamed, cycled it and hurled on it; we hid in its ditches and climbed its trees. We chased each other on it and laughed, we fell on it and cried, we fought on it and somehow grew up that bit quicker than if we'd never fought. We'd lie on it at night and watch for shooting stars. If they didn't light up we'd pretend we had seen them and then pretend the others had missed them and laugh some more. 'Look, look, look. Over there. See? See? See now? ... Ah, too late. It's gone.' We'd look for the constellations and make up new names for them. Orion's Belt became Johnny Ryan's Belt and the Big Dipper became the Saucepan instead of the Plough, then we'd swear we saw spaceships and run home half-laughing, half-scared. We learned the

ways of the world on the flat of our backs, looking up at the night sky. Trevor, Patrick, Alan and I lived on the road. They were my best friends. The O'Mahony boys, Thomas, James, Noel and Vinny, lived next door to me. Half a team of us.

Later we grew up and the world became a more serious place. We shouldered coffins into hearses and watched them carry our people on their final journeys up Penny Lane. Young and old passed on. Carried out of their own front doors, doors we knocked on as youngsters with enquiries sent from our mothers or fathers or brothers or sisters because that was how we communicated back then. We didn't have mobiles or email. I was about 14 before we got landline telephones. We knocked on front doors and left the message with the relevant neighbour. 'Mom said this, Dad wants to know that ...' If we weren't carrying messages door to door we were standing in the same door jambs waiting for friends to gather themselves so we could be gone up the road to Kirby's field or further over to the Cross.

Because there were so many of us it was easy to organize games. Mostly soccer games. The O'Mahonys had a big back lawn which was the perfect pitch for us. There were plenty of other young lads living nearby, so we sometimes had to relocate to Kirby's field at the top of the road for more space. Every game was competitive. There were days when I went off home steaming, having lost, but I always came back for more the following day. And I wasn't alone. Éamonn Fitzmaurice was very competitive back then and still is. We all were.

We often had enough for two teams. Us lads on Penny Lane, the McKennas, O'Mahonys and I, were often joined by the boys over the road, the Fitzmaurices, Éamonn and Ciaran, and Mossie Kelliher. Further back down the road in Killahan, Abbeydorney, lived more McKennas, Mark and Brian, who would often join us for games. We were full-time sportsmen.

Because I lived at the bottom of the road the lads would sometimes have to wait for me halfway up if we were going over to Ballinclogher Cross to catch a bus to a game or just to go to the shop. If I was ever late they might walk on a bit so I'd be further behind them. To keep myself entertained and involved I'd pucker stones at them from behind, maybe 40 or 50 yards away, to slow them down. They would have to duck and take cover so then I could catch up. Eventually they cottoned on and just kept walking. They knew the chances of being hit were slim so they'd continue walking just to best me. They'd each raise the bas of their hurley to the back of their heads for protection when they heard the smack of a stone on my hurley, and keep walking. If a stone whizzed by particularly close to someone's head they would stop and roar back, laughing. 'Hi, that was close, boy!!' and a volley of stones would come flying back in retaliation. If you were daring enough and could see one early enough you'd stand there and try to meet it on the volley. When we weren't playing we were always up to something.

Ballinclogher Cross became a meeting point for kids in our area. We would head over looking for something to do to give us a laugh. When we got a little older we went further afield to the sports field in Lixnaw. Hermitage Park lies on the banks of the River Brick as you drive towards Listowel. At the top of the pitch stands Hermitage Castle. We'd cycle the three miles over on our racers with our hurleys in tow and spend the day hurling on the field and climbing the castle. Hermitage Park was the place we all started out playing hurling with Lixnaw. But we came from Ballinclogher Cross. The Cross was our first port of call.

When winter came, and the excavated limestone at the base of the quarry filled with water, we'd sail on large slabs of aeroboard that we took from Trevor's house. His dad, Moss, is a builder. The rock face was high and sheer and at one point near the top it forced us out and around a rock projection that we really had to cling to so as not to fall.

The fall would have been 30 feet or so to the bottom. No one ever fell. The tunnels at the base were narrow and full of old shoes for some reason. Locals told us the shoes belonged to Black and Tan soldiers who used the quarry as a base during the English occupation. They were forced out and left the shoes behind them. I'm not sure I'd go into them now as an adult, but as kids you do these things in the name of adventure.

The sailing was the one hobby that got us in trouble - the water was quite deep and there were a few days when we fell off the aeroboard and got drenched. The game was to see how many of us could get on the aeroboard at the same time and set sail. There might be four or five of us trying to fit on. The lake, or turlough, was quite big and would take you a few minutes to travel from one side to the other. We'd all be on the same team as we sailed out towards the middle, talking to each other and making sure everyone was in the right position to balance the aeroboard out so we wouldn't capsize. Because we never really knew how deep it was around the middle we would steady up and begin to concentrate. Patrick was usually first officer and sailed it with a paling stick we'd picked up in a field nearby. So he'd be in the middle guiding us and Trevor, Alan and I, and sometimes Mark and Brian, would be strategically placed around him so as to balance the weight and steady the ship. The craic would start once we neared dry land again on the other side. Then it became every man for himself. The talking stopped. Anything said would betray the speaker who was thinking of only one thing. Getting off without getting dipped. When everyone went quiet you knew you were getting close to tipping point. The first to go was always the safest bet to reach dry land. He had the weight of the others behind him to give him leverage. The rest were hostages to fortune. The laughing would start when the first man jumped ship. We'd all roar and shout and laugh and grab each other for safety or leverage but

mostly just so if we did have to take a dip we wouldn't be going in alone. Between the laughing and the wrestling and the giddiness of trying to save ourselves we all went home with wet shoes and socks, if not drenched from head to toe. If the day was sunny we'd hang around the quarry for a while and welt our socks off rocks and leave them to dry.

Boating wasn't our only adventure sport. The Cross, located on the busy main Tralee to Ballybunion road, sees a high volume of traffic pass daily at high speed. We would take fistfuls of calf nuts from cattle troughs nearby and wait for nightfall. Then we'd assume our positions behind walls, trees, hedges, ditches - anything that would conceal us - and wait for oncoming cars. As they passed, we'd unleash a flurry of calf nuts from all angles and wait in hope for the brake lights to swallow up the darkness, reverse lights to follow suit and the driver to begin the search.

With that we were off and the chase was on. Young boys' greatest thrill. We knew our terrain, the only clue our pursuers might have as to our whereabouts would be our laughs piercing the air. Sometimes we'd laugh on purpose. The closer they got, the giddier we became. Later on we were a bit more daring and did it by day.

It was a Saturday and Trevor, Patrick, Alan and I were ducked behind a wall at the Cross. We bought our weapons in Betty's shop down the road. You could get twenty golf-ball chewing gums for 20 pence back then. They were hard enough to make a driver stop, but not so hard as to do any damage to a car. Golf-ball throwing gums I called them. We'd buy twenty each and head back up to the Cross. Patrick was the oldest. He had mastered the art of lying down with his ear to the ground, listening to the road for oncoming traffic. We stood over him waiting for news. The rumble of an oncoming car, he reckoned. We ran for cover and waited. It was time.

Sure enough a car passed by. We'd fire a volley of chewing gums. The familiar sounds, 'rat-a-tat-tat', followed by the screech of brakes. This day the driver was local. He knew his terrain as well as we did. He got out. I stayed put right behind the wall.

Trevor took off back over the fields for home. The car followed, watching him from the road. The laughing quickly turned to that sick feeling you got when you knew you were in trouble. Trevor had to give up the chase. Caught. Voices were raised and all sorts of threats were made. Mothers, fathers, guards, teachers and the parish priest would all be told. We'd do well to be left up the altar for our confirmation. We stayed hidden. 'Who is with you?' demanded the driver. 'I know there are more with you. Where are they?'

Trevor toughed it out. He said nothing until the driver gave up and drove off. He walked home. We all came out of hiding and walked home too, feeling sorry for ourselves, looking over our shoulders and hiding from any cars we heard coming in the distance. We gave up that game of chase pretty quickly.

2

School Days

MY FIRST TIME running on to Croke Park for a game was thanks to my primary school. Lixnaw Boys won the Primary Game hurling tournament in Kerry and I went on to be picked to represent Kerry as part of the Mini-7s Primary Game initiative. A player from the winning school in each county was picked to play a 7-a-side hurling game in Croke Park at half-time in the senior game. In 1992 we got the All Ireland hurling semi-final between Cork and Down. I was around 12 years old and selected as a midfielder for Down. I still have the Down number 4 jersey at home that I wore on the day. Raymond, my brother, went on to play for Clare in the Mini-7s a few years later. We were given strict instructions as to the protocol once we walked out on the field. I forgot myself and ended up walking off on my own before I realized and got back in line. I was mesmerized by the place and started looking around me: the crowd, the size of the stands, the noise, the grass, the lines on the field, the divots dug up by the players. There were humps and hollows on the playing surface back then. It was a very enjoyable experience, although it was over quickly. We had less than ten minutes to play. On the train on the way home I got Tony O'Sullivan's autograph. He was a class wing-forward for Cork at the time. He signed my programme, and I still have it somewhere at home. It was a lesson for me later in life in how to deal with kids who look for photos or autographs. You would hate to let anyone down.

Growing up in Lixnaw and going to Lixnaw Boys National School was a great start to life for me in a sporting and educational sense. It is a learned place. There are an amazing number of teachers in the parish, for some reason. I can think of about fifteen off the top of my head. I was immersed in sport and surrounded by peers who were talented but also ambitious academically. That's a great advantage to have in life, growing up. John McAuliffe, my teacher all through primary school, left a lasting impression on every boy who passed through the school, particularly in a sporting sense. He is a very popular figure in Lixnaw and Finuge. A tall, rangy man with a larger than life character and great pride in his school and students. He took an interest in everyone and is now principal, taking over from John Joe Cantillon who was principal when I was there. When I started off in Lixnaw the senior boys played soccer in the schoolyard with a plastic bottle or a small rock. As junior students we'd watch on until someone would hit the deck roaring after the rock flew off a boot and cracked them on the shin. That was a great laugh for us younger lads, watching an older lad on the ground roaring in pain. We'd have to turn away and pretend to be wrestling or play-fighting so the older boys wouldn't see us laughing. Really we'd be hoping to get on for a game. I'd ask to play with whatever team might be losing to see if I might turn it around. The older boys were moody. Some days I got on, some days I didn't.

At one end the goals were chalked on the red-brick gable of the school building; we used the bike shed at the other. When I got to sixth class we had a full grass pitch at the back of the school and John Mac had organized mini-league GAA competitions. Peter Lenihan, a local man who played for Kerry, joined the school as a trainee teacher and continued them for the year he was there. John's passion for sport was infectious. He was competitive and that rubbed off on all of us. You would always try to impress him

as a result. He loved to try to chip a dead ball up off the ground into his hands if it came near him. That was his trick and he liked to show us his skill any chance he got. Every Friday we got to walk to the local community centre to play 5-a-side indoor soccer. That was the highlight of our week. Firstly we were out of class, secondly we were playing soccer and thirdly we got to walk right past the convent where all the local girls went to school. Twice. Those were the good days. The bad days came whenever rain started to fall on a Friday lunchtime and the soccer was cancelled. More class, no soccer and no walk past the convent.

Quizzes were John's other speciality. We had regular class quizzes. As good a way as any to teach and learn. He also coached us at underage level in Finuge. His passion on the sideline was obvious but he was also big on discipline, both in the class and on the field. He always pushed me to be a writer because of the English essays I wrote for him in class. You really should listen to your teachers.

Our time at Lixnaw Boys was short (though it felt long at the time). After John McAuliffe the next mentor I had was Éamonn Fitzmaurice, father of Éamonn Óg. He trained the Lixnaw under-14 hurling team. Even at a young age he was able to capture me in the dressing room with his words. He was passionate and intelligent. I found him inspirational, and that is a rare quality in my experience. We would have done anything for him on the field. Éamonn was príomhoide in GaelCholáiste Thrá Lí and I was tempted to go there for his influence.

In the end I moved on to Causeway comp. Going from an all-boys school to a co-ed school was a real arrival.

John O'Regan was the principal in my time. (I bump into him now and again. He always has a positive message.) His vice-principal was a man whose importance in the history of the GAA (and Kerry GAA in particular) I didn't fully

appreciate at the time. Gerald McKenna was the Kerry County Board chairman for the duration of the Golden Years and the man who appointed Mick O'Dwyer manager in 1975. You never would have thought it. He never carried himself with the kind of self-importance you might expect from a man whose decision-making led to Kerry's domination of the game for an unprecedented number of years, in the process creating legends who are still the reference points for anyone playing the game today. Gerald lives in the heart of hurling country in Ballyduff village, not far from Lixnaw, and taught mainly English in school when his vice-principal duties allowed. He was more likely to quote Shakespeare than refer to anything he may have said or done with Micko, Jacko or Páidí back in the day. Any time we meet today we always enjoy great chats. Not long ago I was presenting some medals in the national school in Ballyduff and decided to call on him in the village. I put out some feelers first as I hadn't seen him in some time and didn't want to be landing unannounced. His son was present so I asked him to ask Gerald if I could call for tea. The response was typical Gerald McKenna. Firm and resounding. 'Tell that man he doesn't ever have to ask for permission to visit me.' I ended up staying for two hours chatting about everything from school and education to my career and inevitably Kerry football and the great characters we both knew. Gerald is a man of excellent opinion and is still very tuned in to the game on every level. He doesn't suffer fools or curry favour, and would still make an excellent officer or administrator if he so wished. He reminded me lately that I was never inside his door for disciplinary reasons in school. I wasn't either. I was too focused on other things in school to be a trouble maker, plus I had too much respect for Gerald, John O'Regan and the PE teachers in the school to be causing bother. One of the PE teachers was a Lixnaw man called Willie Dowling, father of two of my good friends, Scruff and Red. Gerry

Whyte was head of PE. Another honest man who gave great service to the GAA. On my first day in Causeway Gerry appeared at the door of my classroom. He asked if I was in the room. I put my hand up. Gerry looked down at me, nodded and walked away again. I wondered if I was in trouble but he was just putting a face to the name as it turned out. The head of PE seeking me out on my first day gave me confidence.

John Leahy from Listowel was everyone's favourite teacher. He drove me to a hurling game in Limerick one day and en route stopped off at the newly opened Manchester United superstore in the city. He pulled up outside and went in. When he returned he had the United fanzine and a pen in his hand. He scribbled something on the front of the fanzine and handed it to me. I was a second-year at the time. I looked at the front of the fanzine. 'Bryan Robson' it read by way of autograph. I looked up at him quizzically. John looked back. 'Can't you tell all the lads you met Bryan Robson today?' he said. I did too. He knew I was a big United fan. That was the kind of guy he was. When I left Causeway for UCC he urged me to play Fitzgibbon Cup hurling. I didn't get around to that unfortunately. Although from Listowel, hurling was John's game.

In hurling Causeway competed at a high level. I remember marking Ben O'Connor against Charleville in an under-16 game one day. We hurled against a very strong Killenaule side in a Munster under-16 final in Rathkeale another day. I was only around 14 at the time. Eugene O'Neill and Liam Cahill, who would go on to win All Ireland medals with Tipp in 2000, both played and they beat us on a terrible day. I was part of two All Ireland winning Kerry Techs hurling teams in my time in Causeway. We beat Wexford in an under-16 final back around '93 or '94. That medal counts every bit as much to me as any football medal. In football we won the All Ireland Vocational

Schools in 1997 with Kerry Techs. The previous year four of us from the school were involved in the Kerry Techs team. Liam Boyle, Trevor McKenna, Enda Galvin and myself. The three lads made the panel and I was cut. I put the disappointment to work for the Causeway school team. The defiance in me came out. My instinctive reaction was to prove the selectors wrong and get back on the panel. From when I was young I always reacted well to a challenge or setback, which I am grateful for.

Willie Dowling was our school team manager and a selector with the Kerry Techs. I'd have to show him my response on the field for the school. We got to the Munster under-16 final against Coachford Community School in Fitzgerald Stadium a few weeks later. That was the first time I can remember going out on the field feeling like I had a point to prove. I heaped pressure on myself to perform. Knowing the Kerry Techs selectors would be watching gave me a lot of motivation. We won the Munster final and I kicked 7 points - 5 from play, 2 from frees. When the final whistle went I felt a weight off my shoulders. A week later I was called back to the Kerry Techs panel for a semi-final against Donegal. That pressure I felt at a young age was good for me. It focused me. It would visit me a few times in my senior career too. I was always sure of my performance when I felt its weight upon me. You can't rely on it every time you play, though. It wears off you as you get older or you begin to achieve things. Motivation then comes from different places. Better to play and train with natural enthusiasm in the name of seeing how much you can win and how good you can become. I could see why I hadn't been selected for the Techs. I was a small corner-forward and they had plenty of those. I didn't do particularly well in trial games. I hadn't done enough to be selected. A year later in 1997 I played all year at corner-forward for the Techs. We won the All Ireland that May, beating Tyrone in the final in Páirc Uí Chaoimh. There were

three of us from Causeway on the team – Trevor McKenna, Enda Galvin and myself – and Tom O’Sullivan was there, who I would go on to play senior with for Kerry.

Later that summer I played Kerry minor football under Charlie Nelligan. I remember the morning he called on my parents’ landline to ask me to join the squad. Charlie’s was one of the names that stuck with you from the Golden Years. Charlie Nelligan. It rolled off Micheál Ó hEithir’s tongue, which meant it rolled off everyone else’s tongue too. We beat Cork in Tralee and Limerick in the Munster final the same day Kerry beat Clare in the senior final. I scored two goals and we went on to Croke Park where we drew with Mickey Harte’s Tyrone, before losing the replay 0-23 to 0-21 in Parnell Park.

I had a goal chance in the first half of the drawn game but hit the post. I waited for another chance. Like the rain it came from the sky. A high ball rebounded off the top of the post at the Hill 16 end in the second half. I fisted it to the net only for it to be disallowed for a square ball. I felt I had let the team, especially Charlie Nelligan, down. Mikey Sheehy was a selector along with Derry Crowley (Johnny’s father), Junior Murphy, and Sean Walsh from Moyvane who went on to become County Board Chairman and served as Chairman of the Munster Council. Sean had a thing for Grenson shoes, which impressed me. Only a cultured man would know anything about Grenson shoes. He is the most stylish man in the GAA. Officially. Charlie was a players’ man. He loved to mix it up with fellas on the training ground. He plays in a trad band these days with the same spirit he brought to football and the Kerry jersey.

Martin Beckett from Dr Crokes was one of our best players on that minor team. He quickly progressed to under-21 level winning an All Ireland the following year. He had all the tools to be a senior All Ireland winner for Kerry until he was sadly killed in a car accident later in 1998.

Attending his funeral was surreal. I had met him in Tralee during the Rose of Tralee festival not long before the accident. I can still remember the conversation. He told me he was going to Spain on holidays soon. It was on his way home that the accident happened. He was ahead of his time in many ways. On the field he was always one step ahead, anticipating everything as a defender. Off the field he was a step ahead too. He wore Air Jordans and bomber jackets and bleached his hair. Of that minor team Noel and Tadhg Kennelly and I went on to win senior All Irelands. Martin Beckett would have made it four I have no doubt.

Playing with the Kerry Techs and Kerry minors was my priority in 1997. Study wasn't a priority. I wanted to repeat the Leaving Cert for a few reasons. One was I hadn't studied much the first year. It was a dry run. Secondly, I had no idea what I wanted to do after school. A job? College? I hadn't even thought about it. All I thought about was sport. Repeating suited me. A gang of us knew we would be repeating so there was no pressure at all on us doing the Leaving in 1997. We set ourselves up the first year and finished the job the second.

One day in my repeat year I was sitting in Irish class. Our teacher, Timmy Leahy, came in. He was in great form as usual, which always put me in good form. He was a very happy man, always telling stories but always getting the message across too. I like languages, particularly grammar. I sat there listening to Timmy dissect the declensions of the noun in Irish. Everyone hated that stuff. I loved it. I liked deconstructing sentences, looking at the origins of verbs and examining the changes in form that happen as you construct the sentence again. I already understood grammar. That was the hardest part of teaching and learning the subject. I could speak it fluently from when I was young. Timmy was a great advert for teaching it. I decided to be an Irish teacher that morning.