

A lifetime of memories with



Martin Kiely SIDELINE VIEW

At 98, Limerick's Tommy Cooke is the oldest living All Ireland medal holder. I spent an evening in his company last week talking about his memories of that 1940 All Ireland final win

THE scarce sunshine peeped over the hay barn, its rays beamed through the window and danced a jig on the tiled kitchen floor.

The old-style farm house with vacant stables to the rear and thumb latch on the door is home to the oldest living All Ireland medal winner - Tommy Cooke from Knockainey.

Seventy two years ago this month he was part of the Limerick senior team that beat Kilkenny in the All Ireland Final in Croke Park before a crowd of 49,260. The retired farmer, horseman and hurler lives alone and now, at the age of 98, he is still able to look after himself, his brain is as sharp as the mowing bar he edged to cut hay.

Having spent four hours with him last week I will forever remember his clarity, memory and humour. Born in 1914, Tommy Cooke has lived through so much and, while he can recall hurling, I was amazed by his knowledge of Irish history and how our country has been shaped during his long and healthy life. He met me at the door and the welcome was secured by a handshake as firm as a vice. I had barely got inside the door when he showed me freshly cut heads of cabbage and new potatoes.

The centre piece of the kitchen was the white Aga cooker, bought new at Boyd's of Limerick over 60 years ago costing two hundred pounds. The Limerick Leaders of the past few weeks rested to the right of his chair and another small table was packed with sports books covering GAA, horse racing and history. He is a well read man and his knowledge of the area means he is in demand as people call to trace the history of their families.

Before I started to record Tommy he showed me his All Ireland medal and others won over what was a very short career. The medal has been carefully minded and is in mint condition. As he takes each medal from the box it reminds him of the games and what happened before and after each.

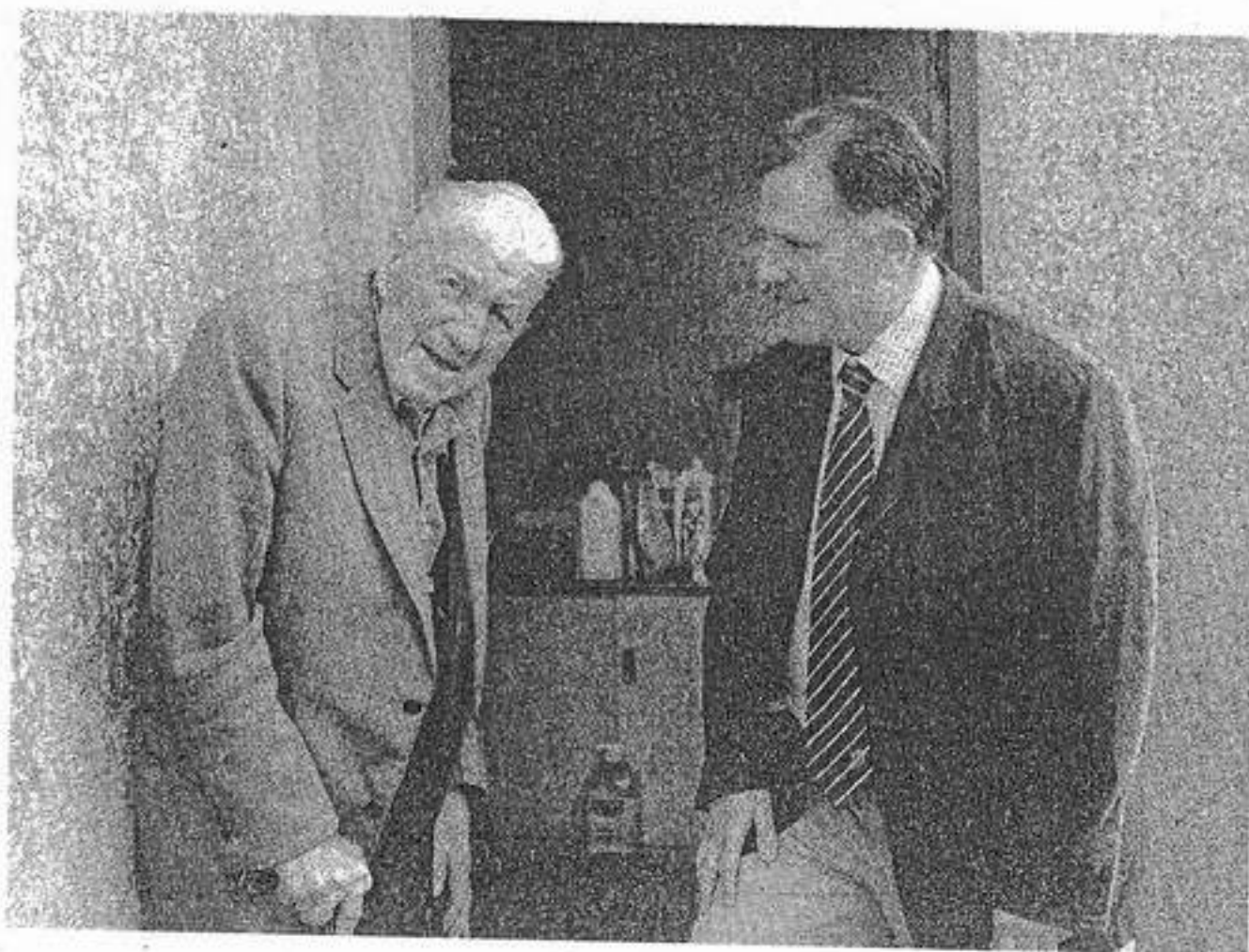
As a young lad growing up in the Ireland of the 1920s life was hard but he remembers the games of hurling played in the field beside the house and how young lads from around Bottomstown would call each evening and play the game with sticks - and those lucky enough had a handmade hurley.

His first introduction to hurling was

at Bulgaden National School but as he said, "I swung a 'Spoc' in Bottomstown School for a while before graduating to Bulgaden". In Bottomstown he was taught by Vere Foster Ryan, the father of Frank, the famous Republican who died in Germany. He played a key part in starting the Knockainey club in 1937 and it didn't take long for Tommy to establish himself as player of some quality in both hurling and football. He played junior hurling and football with Limerick in 1939 and won both

and five of us from the junior team were played. Clohessy told me going out into the field, 'keep those lads out from you and give them plenty of the hurley'. We played Kilkenny who were the All Ireland champions and beat them."

The medals were later presented at the Mansion House and Tommy takes it from here. "There was a mighty Ceile and Mick Mackey was called upon to collect the medals but, fearing he would be asked to speak in Irish,



Munster titles but that same year was to prove crucial as it built the foundation for his All Ireland medal that was to follow a year later.

He was part of the Limerick team that won the Oireachtas Final in 1939; it was played in the first Sunday in October. Tommy recalls, "I was surprised to get the call but I had to milk the cows and take the milk to the creamery.

Others were ahead of me but they knew I was in a hurry to go to Dublin and they let me go on. I brought home the separated milk, went to mass in Knockainey and a car took me to Dublin for the game.

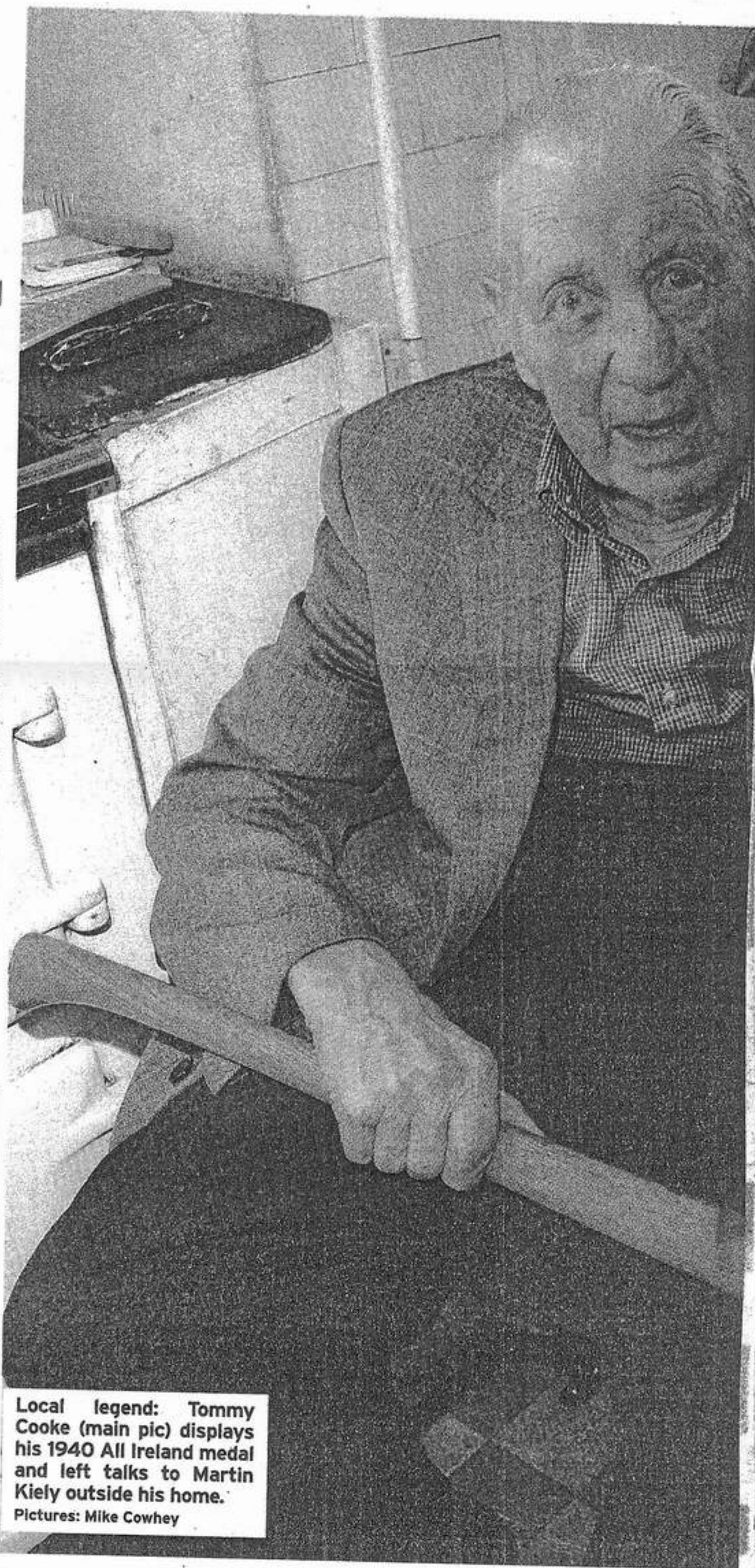
"Paddy Clohessy and Baker Malone were also in the car. We went to Barry's Hotel and I had a drop of tea and a bit of brown bread and jam before the game and toggled out there. Limerick were short a few players

he refused to go to the stage. After a while the medals were presented to Mick in the middle of the dance floor, he then dished them out to the rest of the team."

Tommy Cooke had made a lasting impression that day and those over the team knew the man from Knockainey was a player for the future.

The following year he was very much a part of the senior team and he can remember coming to Limerick for training at the Gaelic Grounds. Stephen Gleeson would collect him and they would call to collect Paddy Clohessy in Fedamore on the way.

"I remember one time we called, Paddy was working at hay and I joined in and piked seven or eight wynds before travelling onto training. We worked hard and the trainer Robby



Local legend: Tommy Cooke (main pic) displays his 1940 All Ireland medal and left talks to Martin Kiely outside his home.
Pictures: Mike Cowhey

Lawlor understood that and never had anything to say to us."

Limerick played Cork in the Munster semi final in 1940 and Tommy played on Jack Lynch. "We weren't long into the game when a big row broke out and the crowd didn't help it as they kept on throwing stuff at Paddy Scanlon's goal - the same day he stopped bullets.

"The Limerick lads were devils that time; they would hit first and ask questions later".

The match finished a draw and Limerick won the replay 3-3 to 2-4. Limerick were now in the All Ireland

Final and would play Kilkenny. The people of the area must have been very proud of what the local lad had done.

"They might have been but they didn't say too much. I never got too excited about it and I often thought that would it be grand if I could have shared the medal with the man I was marking". The build up to the final was great and Limerick travelled to Dublin the night before the final. The Limerick half back has found memories of this, "Robby Lawlor was our trainer and he also trained greyhounds. He was a very nice man. He took a greyhound

Limerick legend Tommy Cooke



to Shelbourne Park, which was owned by Jack Sheehy, to run him on the Saturday night - we got 2 to 1 on him and he won and that made our night."

Kilkenny were the champions of the year before in 1939 but, according to Tommy, Limerick had no fear of playing them, "I can remember the senior members of the team and how they had no fear of playing them. They told us to go out and play our best, shove it on to them and keep the ball moving". Tommy got four tickets for the final and his father John and mother Nan were at the game. He gave his other two tickets to Dr McDonald

in Limerick who had looked after him well.

"I got four tickets for the final for one pound. I remember playing a game against Bruff and I got my nose broken and Dr McDonald was very good to me as he tried to fix it for me". His mother and father didn't express their thoughts but they were very happy to be in Croke Park for what was a very special day.

As the Limerick team came out on the field that day Tommy remembers the crowd and the noise, "It was deafening and to see the huge crowd along the sideline was unreal. I saw

lads calling me but you could not hear anyone. Kilkenny were more or less on top in the first half and Leahy, one of the Kilkenny forwards, scored the first goal. That was the last goal he scored and Limerick scored two goals in the second half.

"I can remember letting the ball go on the ground in that game and at the time that was how the game was played. It saddens me to see how little ground hurling is played now. I remember also Robby Lawlor coming into the pitch to give lads a drink from the bottle and I can tell you there was some hot stuff in that bottle!"

When the game was over Limerick had beaten the champions on a score line of 3-7 to 1-7. There was no reception for the teams like nowadays for the winning team but Limerick were staying in the Central Hotel. Later on in the evening the Limerick team finished up in the Dolphin Hotel and the Knockainey man says they had a great time. "I really enjoyed meeting the Kilkenny lads after the game. They gave us a great time."

The following day Limerick called to another pub, "For some reason All Ireland winning teams called to Tommy Moore's pub in Dublin and pictures were taken and you signed the book. I could see pictures of past All Ireland winning teams on the wall".

The team travelled back by train to Limerick on the Monday and a big crowd had arrived at the station, unknown to Tommy, then Knockainey man, Bob Cotter, had tried his best to get Madam O'Grady to send her coachman to Limerick to collect the local hero with his medal. His efforts failed, despite his many attempts to persuade her and Tommy takes it from here, "Cotter was a gas man, he wouldn't give up and he hired a man called Joe Farrell to drive to collect me.

"Ned Kane and Tom English were with him along with Bob Cotter's wife. We travelled by truck through the streets of Limerick and finished up in Cruise's Hotel for a meal. After that we made the journey to Knockainey. We left Limerick and got to Knockainey around twelve and people had gathered at the crossroads, there was a guard of honour at Barren's Cross and that was very special. The lads I had grown up with were there and I would have loved to have had something for them but I had nothing to give them. I can remember calling to houses late into the night. We called to a Mrs Cooke who was about 80 and a Mrs Connors and they stayed up until around three a clock waiting

for us".

With Cooke winning the All Ireland it was a big help to the club he had founded in Knockainey and he speaks so well of his neighbours Jackie Keane and Jackie Walsh who were two great hurlers. Walsh won a minor title with Hospital and was later captain of Knockainey. Tommy Cooke had established himself as a good halfback and Canon Punch, the then Chairman of the County Board, advised him to concentrate on hurling.

"He told me to forget horses and concentrate on hurling and I said, 'Canon, if you are pushing me to forget horses then hurling will be the loser'. That love of horses had come from his father who had trained horses and Tommy would later enjoy much success at various

Point to Points around Munster. The horse shoes of many of his winners are still nailed to the stable doors, he was still riding out horses at the age of 95 but he regrets having to sell his final horse.

It took Limerick 33 years to win their next All Ireland in 1973 and Tommy Cooke was so happy to see that team win, "They had many great players and Kilkenny was the team they beat again. Limerick didn't fear Kilkenny. I would love to be alive to see us win again. I watched Limerick play on the TV this year and I would like to see them move the ball faster and be more direct, they need to be harder in the tackle and play a small bit of ground hurling".

The rays of the sun had long since dropped as we chatted at the kitchen table; I looked on at a man who had witnessed so much in his life. He showed no sign of tiredness, his vigour to keep telling stories as strong as ever and I felt privileged to be in his company. His desire is to live to a hundred.

"I want to collect the cheque from the President of Ireland - sure wouldn't that be mighty!"

Tommy Cooke's views on ...

Tommy on Sunday's game

"I think Kilkenny will win the game, they blew Tipperary away the last day but sure they had no interest in playing hurling.

"I like the way this Kilkenny team play but I hope we have a good game because hurling needs it. My grand-nephews have won a minor and U-21 medals with Galway and I would like to see them produce a big game and push Kilkenny close."

Tommy on JP McManus

"HE is a great Limerick man who has done so much. He loves hurling and, like me, he was bitten by the bug of horses very young. We have no idea how much good he does and Limerick are very lucky to have such a man supporting them. He never lost where he came from and for me that is a great sign of a man."

Tommy on Mick Mackey

"I think Mick Mackey was the greatest hurler I ever saw. The power of the man was unreal and he could take on three or four men and come out with the ball.

"He was the man who started the solo run and

teams didn't know what to do with him. He had a great understanding with his John. Mackey was respected all over Ireland. I would have to say that Nicky Rackard was a very special hurler and could make the ball talk from the twenty one".

Tommy on Michael Collins

"HE has to be the greatest ever Irish man. When he was setting up the first government in 1921 the farmers were asked to support him. My father gave £30 and that was a huge amount of money at that time. I remember the morning the postman came into our yard and told us Michael Collins was dead. It was so sad. I remember listening to my father at the kitchen table talking about all he had done".

Tommy on Brian Cody

"HE is a very cool man and he will go down as the greatest hurling manager. He has kept these lads together over such a long time and that shows he is very much in control. He has taken hurling to a new level and most of all you won't see him blowing. Kilkenny do their talking on the field and others could learn from that".