

---

# SundayTribune

## ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

17 February 2008 from the Sunday Tribune



TODAY'S feature at Semple Stadium throwing Tipperary and Limerick together yet again ("What do you call what comes after a trilogy?" as Liam Sheedy joked last Sunday), the obvious temptation is to rewind to last summer and start off there. You may nod in sympathy, for instance, at the thought of Eoin Kelly turning around after the home side went three points up at the end of the final installment at the Gaelic Grounds, expecting to see Stephen Lucey and being confronted instead with the sight of 200 Limerick lads with flags careering towards him. You'll hardly be surprised, moreover, to hear that Eamon Corcoran's reaction on hearing the last whistle of the saga was not so much devastation as a desire to get himself off the pitch immediately if not sooner. But no, forget it; at this stage we're all Tipp-and-Limericked out.

Fresher and more relevant, therefore, to look instead at what's become of Tipperary in the meantime. How they remounted, took to the chicken-and chips circuit with gusto, beat Cork for the first time in 16 championship years, blew a winning position in the All Ireland quarter-final, lost their manager, found a new one, captured a second successive All Ireland minor title, won the Waterford Crystal Cup and sewed 2-25 into Offaly last Sunday. Maybe we didn't give them enough credit last summer for the way in which they got back on the horse and cleared so many hurdles in such a compressed and hectic timeframe. Maybe Babs did the statelet more service than was acknowledged by his bleeding, whether through desire or through necessity of circumstance, of a string of youngsters. And maybe Tipp folk have concluded on mature reflection that their championship exit was less traumatic than it might have been. Infuriating as the manner of their quarterfinal defeat was, being bruised by Wexford was rather preferable to the possibility of being battered by the holders a week later.

All of which begs two questions. Now that the county's cycle appears to have bottomed out and entered the upswing again, how long before Tipperary win their next All Ireland? Less esoterically and more pressingly, how firmly grounded is the wave of optimism that has seized the county of late?

For genuine optimism exists, no argument there. "There's a good air of expectancy among the people who post on the site, " Conor Ryan of Premierview acknowledges. "They're happy with the management, who seem well organised and strict on discipline, and Loughmore–Castleiney winning the Munster club title was a boost as well. There's a number of factors at work. But I don't think anyone is expecting an All Ireland as an instant result of the minor victories."

The mood in the county is upbeat, Len Gaynor agrees. Too upbeat? "No, I don't think people are expecting too much at one go. If anything, people in Tipperary have become accustomed to having their expectations not realised.

What they're looking for is a team that will compete well in the Munster championship. After that they'll take it from there. Above all, people are ready to enjoy the team this year. That hasn't happened for a few years. There's a spark there now, definitely."

The man himself . . . the new man himself . . . is predictably anxious to apply a douche of cold water to the hype. Sheedy talks of handicap steeplechases and horses and fences, as in how Tipp have merely cleared the first couple of obstacles and have "far bigger ones" in front of them. He talks of Limerick and Galway and the difficulties they endured in harnessing proven under-age talent.

He talks of the length of time that has elapsed since Tipperary reached finals and semi-finals, never mind won them (2003 marked their last appearance in both the league decider and the All Ireland semi-finals). He even talks of the department in which his team will struggle if they do struggle: winning enough ball at midfield and in the half-forward line.

"I think people are getting a bit carried away around the two minor victories, " Sheedy asserts. "They are what they are: two minor victories. They don't give us a divine right to become serious All Ireland contenders overnight.

Supporters have to be patient and realise where we're coming from. The target for this year is to try and get back to Munster finals and All Ireland semi-finals."

There's an obvious gap in the southern market for Tipp to fill, what with Clare digging new foundations, Waterford arguably treading water and Cork emerging from the battlefield smoke and needing to rebuild anyway. Reaching an All Ireland semi-final via the front door this summer would constitute an eminently negotiable step forward rather than a great leap forward.

The make-up of the new backroom team provides abundant grounds for hope. Unlike his predecessor, Cian O'Neill, their physical trainer, comes from a GAA background and was involved with the Limerick footballers under Mickey Ned O'Sullivan. Jamesie O'Connor will happily spend time singing the praises of the coach Eamon O'Shea, his mentor at NUIG. Off the field, meanwhile, Tipp won't lack

for statistical guidance, the county board having invested in the Avenir Digital Analysis company's SportsCode analysis software, leading-edge technology used by Manchester United, the IRFU and the FAI. That shot of Warren Gatland in his seat in the Millennium Stadium last Saturday surrounded by guys with laptops? That was SportsCode software with its live-review, minute-by-minute output. Twiddle the settings and it'll tell you not only how many of your own puckouts you lost but in what areas of the field and why. The Tipperary operation will be overseen by the county's former sub-goalie Damien Young, who's doing his master's degree on the physiological demands of hurling.

Knowing where you're going wrong is one thing, of course. For all O'Shea's coaching nous, the chronic problems in the half-forward line, where Darragh Egan has yet to do more than decorate the frame of the picture or Ryan O'Dwyer to manage even that, will not be solved short term. For all Sheedy's excitement about its fast-twitch potential, does a full-forward line of Eoin Kelly, Lar Corbett and Pa Bourke have enough of the dog in it to win dirty ball in tight games? Will Corbett succeed in staying fit throughout the season, indeed? Of the gang that captured successive All Ireland minor titles . . . one of them via the back door . . . only Bourke, Seamus Callinan and Thomas Stapleton have graduated to senior ranks thus far. Brendan Maher is unlikely to be seen there for another year or two and Noel McGrath, the most dazzling prospect of the group, for longer. In short, let us not expect too much too soon from Tipp.

Eoin Kelly, who's zeroing in on his fighting weight of 13 stone, maintains that the biggest lesson they have to take from 2007 is the avoidance of complacency. "Every dog is due its day, whether it's the first round of the championship or an All Ireland quarter-final. We have to treat every game like it's the FA Cup final." Eamon Corcoran, who claims in passing that Tipp's packed schedule last summer "had no negative impact whatsoever on us . . . if anything, the opposite, " believes they have to learn to hurl consistently for the full 70 minutes. "The first half of the second game against Limerick, the second half of the Cork match . . . that was the best we hurled all year. But we didn't hurl that way often enough."

New manager, new coach, new technology, the old Eoin Kelly, a chunk of crystal already on the sideboard, the shorter straw in Munster and the realistic prospect of circumventing the accursed All Ireland quarter-final stage.

To repeat, every reason for optimism and every reason to believe that Tipp will punch their weight this year. For the moment, that'll do them.