

## Cantwell, Noel (Eucharía)

by James Quinn

Cantwell, Noel (Eucharía) (1932–2005), footballer and cricketer, was born 28 December 1932 at 2 Illen Villas, Mardyke Walk, Cork, one of five sons and a daughter of Michael Cantwell, a master tailor, and his wife Hannah (née Daly) (d. 1941). He was educated at St Joseph's national school and the Presentation Brothers College in Cork, where he played Gaelic football and hurling. However he preferred soccer, rugby, and cricket, and took them up seriously at the age of 16 after leaving Pres to enter a local technical college. He played cricket for Cork Bohemians, rugby for Cork Constitution, and soccer with the local junior side Western Rovers, representing Ireland twice at schoolboy level before progressing to the League of Ireland side Cork Athletic.

After a tip from two Corkonians who played for West Ham United, Tommy Moroney and Frank O'Farrell, the West Ham manager, Ted Fenton, signed Cantwell in July 1952 from Cork Athletic for a fee of £850 and a salary of £7 a week. By 1954 he had established a regular place in the team, then in Division Two of the Football League, and went on to make 248 league appearances for West Ham, mostly at left full-back, and scored 11 goals. Tall and powerfully built (6 ft tall and over 13 st), he combined strong tackling and heading abilities with good skill on the ball and was always eager to venture forward for a shot at goal. An astute marshal of the West Ham defence, in the 1957/8 season he captained the team to win the Division Two championship and return to Division One for the first time since 1932. In May 1958 he played for a London XI side in the away leg of the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup final against a Barcelona XI, losing 6–0 after a 2–2 draw in the home leg at Stamford Bridge. That year he was voted the inaugural Texaco Soccer Sportstar of the Year.

A gregarious and affable character, Cantwell made good friends wherever he went. At West Ham he was a central figure in a group of articulate players such as O'Farrell, Malcolm Allison, Dave Sexton, and John Bond, who met regularly in Cassettari's café after training to talk about football and improve their knowledge of the game. Influenced by developments abroad (especially by the skilful play and tactical innovations of the great Hungarian team of the mid 1950s), they challenged the conservatism of the English game and shook up West Ham's coaching regime, with increased emphasis on skills, ball work, and weight training. The club adopted the lightweight boots and kit used by continental sides and worked on new tactics and formations, developing an incisive passing style of football with Cantwell and Bond attacking as overlapping full-backs. Allison and Cantwell were responsible for coaching West Ham's youth teams and taught young players such as Bobby Moore, Geoff Hurst, and Martin Peters the importance of intelligent positioning and accurate distribution, helping to lay the foundations for the West Ham 'academy' of the 1960s. Cantwell recommended that Moore be given his first-team debut against Manchester

United in September 1958, and the two became close friends with Cantwell acting as best man at Moore's wedding in 1962.

In their first season in Division One (1958/9) West Ham finished in a respectable sixth place with Cantwell an ever-present captain with 42 league appearances. His impressive blend of skill, toughness, and composure attracted the attention of bigger clubs, and in November 1960 Matt Busby paid £29,500 (then a record for a full-back) to bring him to Manchester United to help rebuild the team after the 1958 Munich air crash. On arrival at Old Trafford, Cantwell was appalled by the fact that the club seemed so rooted in the pre-Munich era, with little desire to change. Busby, who believed in gathering together good players and allowing them to play instinctively, was rarely seen on the training ground, and training routines were dated and unimaginative. Cantwell raised his concerns with Busby, who responded by making him team captain in 1963, much to the delight of talented young players like Bobby Charlton. Charlton admired Cantwell as a man and a footballer and believed that his assurance and authority gave United's players a new self-belief and confidence: 'he was a United type # when he led us out for the 1963 cup final, I thought, "This is good – we have a real captain"' (Charlton, 178). Cantwell captained United to win the FA Cup final, beating Leicester City 3–1 at Wembley on 25 May 1963, with a team that also featured the Irish players John Giles and Tony Dunne. It was United's first cup win since Johnny Carey (qv) had captained them to victory in 1948, and the first trophy the club had won since the Munich disaster. Cantwell regarded the day as the highlight of his career.

The cup win salvaged something from a season in which United had played poorly, finishing in 19th place in Division One and only narrowly avoiding relegation. The next season saw an improvement as new players such as Denis Law, Paddy Crerand, and George Best (1946–2005) settled in, and the club finished runners-up to Liverpool in the league. They went on to win league titles in 1965 and 1967, but although Cantwell was still club captain he missed most of these two seasons through injury; he did however make 29 league appearances in the 1965/6 season, when United finished fourth in the league and reached the semi-final of the European Cup. He retired from playing in 1967, having made 123 league and 14 FA Cup appearances for United and scoring 8 goals.

During his career Cantwell played 36 times for the Republic of Ireland (1953–67), captaining the team on 23 occasions. He played mostly at left full-back but was also pressed into service at centre-half and even centre-forward to beef up the Irish attack. He scored a creditable 14 goals for Ireland and was the team's all-time top scorer until overtaken by Don Givens in 1976. Cantwell was often captain in the years when Johnny Carey managed the team and he adopted a semi-managerial role under the easy-going Carey, doing his best to organise and motivate the team. Just as he had fought at his clubs to improve training and tactics, so he tried to do the same at international level, but this was an uphill struggle with a side so badly hampered by poor preparation and erratic selection (the team was chosen by a five-

man committee rather than the manager). Despite the frustrations of dealing with conservative and penny-pinching officials, Cantwell always gave his all on the pitch and was one of Ireland's most consistent performers throughout his international career. Among the highlights were scoring the first goal to beat world champions Germany 3–0 in a home friendly on 25 November 1956; captaining the team and scoring in a 2–0 win over a highly-fancied Czechoslovakia team in a European Nations' Cup preliminary qualifier on 5 April 1959; and scoring twice in a 3–2 victory over Austria on 13 October 1963 to take Ireland to the quarter-finals of the same competition. There were also crushing disappointments, such as captaining the team in a World Cup qualifier against England at Dalymount on 19 May 1957 when a last-minute goal gave England a 1–1 draw and eliminated Ireland from the competition. He was captain when Ireland were beaten 7–1 by Czechoslovakia in a World Cup qualifier in Prague on 29 October 1961, and when they were beaten 1–0 by Spain in Paris on 10 November 1965 in a play-off for a place in the 1966 World Cup tournament. After Carey's retirement as manager of the Irish team, Cantwell and his teammate Charlie Hurley became joint managers in October 1967, but club commitments forced Cantwell to quit in May 1968 after only three games.

Cantwell also played cricket for Cork Bohemians and Cork County as a left-handed batsman and a right-arm medium-paced bowler. He represented Ireland five times at cricket (1956–9) – a matter of great pride to him – making his debut in his only first-class match, against Scotland at Edinburgh on 30 June 1956, scoring 31 and 17 runs in a drawn game. After making 40 runs in an innings against New Zealand in July 1958, he was offered professional forms by Essex, but declined. He played his last game for Ireland against Lancashire in July 1959. But for West Ham's reluctance to release him for games, he would have made many more cricketing appearances for Ireland. He also played interprovincial cricket with Munster, scoring a century in a match against Leinster in June 1956; two of his brothers, Frank (b. 1927) and Gerry (b. 1931), also played cricket with Munster.

Throughout his career Cantwell stood out as a leader. He became chairman of the Professional Footballers' Association in September 1966 and was instrumental in founding its benevolent and education funds. During long spells of injury, he concentrated on coaching and earned his FA coaching badge. Busby described him as 'one of the best-informed theorists and thinkers in the game' (Cantwell, 11). Cantwell's influence in the Old Trafford dressing room was such that many regarded him as Busby's likely successor, but in 1967 he left Manchester United to become manager of newly promoted Coventry City. He put together a team of talented players who played entertaining and attacking football, finishing sixth in Division One in 1970 and qualifying for the Inter-Cities Fairs Cup. After a run of bad results, he was dismissed by Coventry in March 1972 and became manager of Peterborough United (1972–7), then at the bottom of the fourth division. His confidence, professionalism and astute signings transformed the team and in 1974 he led them to the Division Four title. In May 1974 he turned down an offer to manage the Spanish side Athletic Bilbao and reputedly became the highest-paid

manager in England outside the first division. He became head coach in 1978 of the New England Tea Men in the North American Soccer League; based in the Boston suburb of Foxboro, in their first season they won the Eastern Division of the American Conference. The team moved to Jacksonville, Florida, in 1980, becoming the Jacksonville Tea Men, but were plagued by financial difficulties and disbanded in 1982.

In November 1986 Cantwell again became manager of Peterborough, who were back in Division Four, and was appointed general manager of the club in July 1988. Administrative duties were not to his liking and he quit to concentrate on managing the New Inn pub in Peterborough, which he had bought earlier. The sale of his medals, international caps, and other mementos made £17,000 at a football memorabilia auction in Glasgow in November 1995. He kept up his interest in football by reporting on potential England players to Sven-Goran Eriksson, the England manager. A charming and witty man as well as a keen student of the game, he was a popular after-dinner speaker at sporting functions. He died 8 September 2005 from cancer at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge, not far from his home in Peterborough, and was survived by his wife Maggie (a native of Belfast who before her marriage in 1961 was the resident singer and compère with the Dorchester Hotel orchestra in London) and two daughters, Liz and Kate; a 22-year-old son, John Robert, was killed in a car crash thirteen years earlier.

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GRO (birth cert.); *Ir. Times*, 4 June 1956; 26 Sept. 1966; 9 Nov., 13 Dec. 1995; 9, 10 Sept. 2005; Noel Cantwell, *United we stand* (1965); Charles Korr, *West Ham United: the making of a football club* (1986); Eamon Dunphy, *A strange kind of glory* (1991); Peter Byrne, *Football Association of Ireland: 75 years* (1996); Stephen McGarrigle, *The complete who's who of Irish international football 1945–96* (1996); Sean Ryan, *The boys in green: the FAI international story* (1997); Brian Belton, *Days of iron: the story of West Ham United in the fifties* (1999); *Guardian*, 9, 20 Sept. 2005; *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Sept. 2005; Bobby Charlton, *My Manchester United years: the autobiography* (2007); Trevor Keane, *Gaffers: 50 Years of Irish football managers* (2010)