

Doyle, John

by Terry Clavin

Doyle, John (1930–2010), hurler, was born on 12 February 1930 in Glenbane, Holycross, Co. Tipperary, the only child of Timothy Doyle, farmer, and his wife Margaret (née Spillane). His mother died forty-six days later from blood poisoning, after which his father struggled with raising a child while also farming 115 acres. Within a year John was sent to live with his maternal aunt in Dungarvan, Co. Waterford, where he began cavorting with a hurley at the age of three. In 1934 he returned to Glenbane and went to the Sacred Heart College for Little Boys in nearby Thurles, which catered for orphans and motherless children.

Enduring an unhappy year in that institution, he was then enrolled in the local national school at Moycarkey, and later attended Thurles CBS. Stubborn, bad tempered and hyperactive, he was obsessed with hurling and at age 12 lined out for the Thurles CBS under-15 team. When his father fell ill, he left school aged 14 to work the farm, and hurl for the Holycross-Ballycahill ('Holycross') juveniles. By then he was six feet tall and built like a man, and the gruelling farm labour made him stronger still. During 1946–8 he played for the Tipperary minors in various defensive positions and latterly in midfield, winning two Munster titles (1946–7) and an all-Ireland (1947). He emerged as the team's star in 1947 and was captain in 1948.

Shuttling between the left corner and left half-back slots, he broke into the Holycross senior team in 1947, muffling one of the best forwards in the county in the Mid-Tipperary final. He inspired Holycross to their first county title in 1948, and made his senior inter-county championship debut the next year in the Munster first round replay against Tipperary's arch-rivals, Cork. Displaying maturity and boldness beyond his years, he earned a reputation as a tenacious, teak-tough defender in a succession of ferociously contested championship encounters with Cork during 1949–54.

Deceptively nimble for such a sturdy and ungainly-looking figure, he contained elusive forwards through close marking and clever positioning. Under the high ball he concentrated on stopping his man from either catching or pulling overhead before using his strength and assured ground hurling to prevail. Capable of clearing lengthily under pressure, he could drive the ball 80 yards off the ground. At club level he was an accurate long-range free-taker and appeared to good effect in midfield and among the forwards.

Disabusing teams that targeted him on account of his inexperience, he was an undervalued member of a fearsome defence, as Tipperary won three consecutive all-Irelands (1949–51). He vigorously restrained forwards from rushing his goalkeeper, most notably in the 1951 all-Ireland final, when he and his fellow full-

backs repeatedly converged with ruthless intent on the hard-charging Wexford colossus, Nicky Rackard (qv). During a frustrating period in the championship for Tipperary from 1952, he was acknowledged as hurling's foremost corner-back and captained his county to a National Hurling League title in 1955. He was fearlessly pugnacious and easily provoked, flinging his hurley into the jeering crowd after being sent off against Waterford in the 1953 Munster semi-final.

Isolated by the deaths in 1953 of his father and his aunt – a surrogate mother – he intensified his courtship of Anne Reidy, marrying her in 1955. The distractions caused by marriage and his mixed dairy and tillage farm undermined his form during 1956–7, and he was harshly criticised after Cork's Paddy Barry scored three goals off him in the 1957 Munster semi-final. Heeding his wife's pleas, he announced his retirement from hurling later that year, but was overborne by Paddy Leahy, his near neighbour, mentor and chairman of the Tipperary selection committee. Anne's willingness to accept this and help with the farm rejuvenated his hurling.

The need to accommodate a promising new corner-back led the Tipperary selectors to experiment with placing an initially sceptical Doyle at left half-back in 1958. There he could routinely risk bursting forward, barging opponents aside while tipping the ball deftly along the ground and ultimately gaining the space to lift and drive extravagantly. He found the perfect foil in Tipperary's centre half-back, Tony Wall, who covered his forays and for his relative lack of pace.

Formerly viewed within his county as a controversial and rather limited player, Doyle attained talismanic status in Tipperary during 1958, as his ability to turn defence into attack powered a relatively average team to all-Ireland victory, the first of five within eight years. He preferred to go through rather than around opponents, performing with an aggressive swagger that roused the Tipperary players and supporters and infuriated everyone else. His provocations and open hurling exposed him to constant punishment, which he bore contemptuously. He rarely went to ground and never missed a championship match despite countless blows that chipped and scarred his shins. Leading by deeds and not by words, he was generally gruff and taciturn around teammates, though gregarious within his clique.

Shrewdly cultivating and exploiting his newfound notoriety, he subjected markers to bone-crushing challenges and verbal menaces, and might reduce a dangerous forward's jersey to shreds. Whereas highly-charged club matches brought the worst out of him, especially after Thurles Sarsfields eclipsed Holycross from the mid 1950s, he eschewed malicious strokes and was not a notably dirty player. He did not have to be, given the leeway then permitted, and his most enjoyable match, the 1960 Munster final with Cork, was more like a running battle and featured a frenzied bout of fisticuffs between him and Paddy Barry.

He was bested by speedy wing-forwards in both the 1960 and 1961 all-Ireland finals, albeit in mitigating circumstances: Tipperary had over-trained for the 1960

final (which was lost to Wexford), while in 1961 their final opponents, Dublin, were rampant through the middle until Tipperary's switching of a fully-fit player to the centre half-back position allowed Doyle to assert himself late on and turn the match with two epic sallies. By 1962 his legs were unable to cope with the demands of the half-back line and he retreated to the right corner where he continued his irrepressible, relieving charges out of defence. He had an aura that heartened teammates and also the experience to know when to leave his post and plug gaps elsewhere.

During 1962–6, he formed a Tipperary full-back line along with Kieran Carey and Mick Maher (his childhood neighbour and playmate) that compensated for its seniority and slowness with unscrupulous physicality. They were seen as Tipperary's potential weakness, but with the half-backs cutting off low passes into open space, the powerfully built trio devoured their markers under the high ball. Fleet-footed forwards might pose early difficulties before yielding to the robust tackling and fiery ground hurling, as the area around the Tipperary goal became known as 'Hell's Kitchen'. With this defensive implacability reinforced by clinical forwards, Tipperary were untouchable during 1964–5.

As hurling became more precise and controlled, traditionalists increasingly extolled Doyle's full-blooded displays, and he capped his career by becoming the Caltex hurler of the year for 1964 and by claiming a joint-record eighth all-Ireland medal in 1965, thereby drawing level with his celebrated contemporary, the Cork half-forward Christy Ring (qv). His sporadic man-to-man clashes with Ring aroused great interest, but proved one-sided and anti-climactic – initially because one of them was out of position, and then because an ageing Ring was in decline upon Doyle's conversion into a half-back. During their 1961 Munster championship encounter, Ring slashed across Doyle's legs and the two fell over each other and brawled on the ground: landing all the punches, Doyle received a faint scar when Ring struck him across the chin with his hurley. The two were friendly off the field, with Doyle hailing Ring as an incomparable hurler.

Defying his age and a heavy smoking habit, Doyle remained a solid defender while belatedly losing some of his bulldozing dynamism, and retired voluntarily following Tipperary's loss to Kilkenny in the 1967 all-Ireland final. He ended his senior inter-county hurling career with 54 championship appearances, a Tipperary record at the time; a joint-record ten Munster medals (1949–51, 1958, 1960–62, 1964–5 and 1967); a then joint-record eight all-Ireland medals (1949–51, 1958, 1961–2 and 1964–5); and a record eleven National Hurling League medals, including one as a non-playing substitute (1949–50, 1952, 1954–5, 1957, 1959–61 and 1964–5). He also won eight Railway Cup medals with Munster, including two as a substitute (1951–3, 1955, 1960–61, 1963 and 1966). Playing with Holycross for another year, he finished his club career with two Tipperary minor medals (1947–8), five Mid-Tipperary senior medals (1947–8, 1951, 1954 and 1966), and three Tipperary senior medals (1948, 1951 and 1954).

He quit hurling to focus on politics, having been approached by, and been receptive to, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael in 1965. A Fianna Fáil representative on the North Tipperary County Council (1967–74), he ran unsuccessfully in the 1969 and 1973 general elections for Tipperary North and served one term in Seanad Éireann upon being elected for the agricultural panel (1969–73). Politics made him more outgoing and he polled strongly in the 1973 general election, when his self-interested canvassing cost Fianna Fáil a seat. His fervent nationalism and attendant support for the sacked finance minister, Charles Haughey (qv), alienated him from the party leadership, and in 1974 he withdrew from the local election in protest after the national executive added a candidate to the North Tipperary ticket. He stayed in Fianna Fáil and mounted a couple of failed political comebacks in the 1980s.

A Tipperary hurling selector (1976–8), he also managed Tipperary in 1976. Despite exposing themselves to charges of nepotism and geographic bias, Doyle and his fellow selectors developed a promising young side, but were not given enough time. As Tipperary's representative on the GAA central council (1975/6, 1978/9 and 1983–90), he was broadly progressive and non-doctrinaire. Nonetheless, he bemoaned the imposition of stricter rules for taking the manliness out of hurling, and opposed opening up Croke Park to rugby and soccer, though he enjoyed watching both. His blunt and opinionated manner antagonised elements within Tipperary GAA and he was regularly obliged to campaign hard for his annual election to central council, losing on several occasions.

After being hospitalised in a hit-and-run car accident in 1985, he retired from farming to work as an auctioneer. He died on 29 December 2010 in the Community Hospital of the Assumption, Thurles, Co. Tipperary, and was buried in Holy Cross Abbey. He and his wife had two sons and five daughters. His sons, John and Michael, both played for the Tipperary senior hurling team, and Michael also managed Tipperary. Named the left corner-back on the hurling teams of the century (1984) and the millennium (1999), Doyle was simultaneously immortalised and diminished by his assiduous self-mythologising, as somewhat embellished accounts of 'Hell's Kitchen' and the 'Holycross Hercules' obscured a fine hurler.

---

GRO (birth, marriage certs.); *Tipperary Star*, *passim*, esp.: 13, 20 Sept. 1947; 9, 23 July 1949; 9 Sept. 1950; 4 Aug., 8 Sept. 1951; 25 Apr., 1 Aug. 1953; 7 July 1956; 6 July 1957; 21, 28 June, 12 July, 16 Aug. 1958; 29 July, 9 Sept. 1961; 6 July 1963; 12 Sept. 1964; 9 Sept. 1967; 17 Mar. 1973; 15 June 1974; 20 Apr. 1985; 6 Jan. 2011; *Nenagh Guardian*, *passim*, esp.: 15 Sept. 1951; 19 July 1952; 7 July 1956; 18 July 1959; 12 Sept. 1964; 11 Sept. 1965; 2 July 1977; 12 Aug. 2006; *Cork Examiner*, 11 July 1952; 19 July 1954; 7 July 1958; Tommy Doyle, *A lifetime of hurling* (1955); *Ir. Times*, *passim*, esp.: 28 Aug. 1962; 17 Dec. 1964; 5 Sept. 2009; 22 Jan. 2011 (obit.); *Gaelic Sport*, Sept.–Nov. 1962; June 1964; Feb. 1965; Sept. 1967; *Ir. Press*,

*passim*, esp. 5 Sept. 1962; *Sunday Independent*, 20 Jan., 28 Apr., 5, 12, 19, 26 May 1963; 6 Apr. 1975; 4 July 1993; Tony Wall, *Hurling* (1965), 47, 51, 70–71; *Ir. Farmers' Journal*, 30 Oct. 1965; 19 May 1984; *Ir. Independent*, *passim*, esp.: 13 Jan. 1966; 17 Mar. 1993; 6, 13 Apr. 2004; Seamus O Braonáin, 'That ninth medal', *Our Games* (1967), 107–8; Raymond Smith, *The clash of the ash* (1972), 146–51, 281, 293–4, 298, 321; Breandán Ó hEithir, *Over the bar: a personal relationship with the GAA* (1984), 196; Seamus J. King, *Tipperary's hurling story, 1935–84* (1988); Raymond Smith, *The greatest hurlers of our time* (1990), 54; Brendan Fullam, *Giants of the ash* (1991); Bob Stakelum, *Gaelic games in Holycross and Ballycahill, 1884–1990* (1992), 219–21; Norman Freeman, *Classic hurling matches, 1956–75* (1993); Michael Keating, *Babs: a legend in Irish sport* (1996), 46–51, 61; Colm Keane, *Hurling's top twenty* (2002); *Sunday Tribune*, 18 Aug. 2002; 30 Jan. 2005; Séamus McRory, *The all-Ireland dream: over twenty-five interviews with GAA greats* (2005); Micheál Ó Muircheartaigh, *From Borroloola to Mangerton Mountain* (2006); Tim Horgan, *Christy Ring: hurling's greatest* (2007); Diarmuid O'Flynn, *Hurling: the warrior game* (2008); Ralph Riegel, *Three kings: Cork, Kilkenny, Tipperary: the battle for hurling supremacy* (2008); Conor McMorrow, *Dáil stars: from Croke Park to Leinster House* (2010); John Harrington, *Doyle: the greatest hurling story ever told* (2011); Enda McEvoy, *The godfather of modern hurling: the Father Tommy Maher story* (2012); Ciara Meehan, *A just society for Ireland?: 1964–87* (2013)