

Higgins, Mick (Michael Joseph)

by Terry Clavin

Higgins, Mick (Michael Joseph) (1922–2010), Gaelic footballer, was born on 19 August 1922 in the Bronx, New York city, USA, the eldest of five sons and one daughter of John Higgins, a bus driver, originally of Kiltimagh, Co. Mayo, and his wife Mary (née Farrelly), originally of Kilnaleck, Co. Cavan. The family returned to Ireland in 1924 and spent three years in Kiltimagh before settling in Kilnaleck, where his father farmed, ran a public house, and built a row of houses for leasing.

Higgins developed as a Gaelic footballer after being sent to board at St Mary's (Marist) College in Dundalk, Co. Louth, winning the MacRory Cup with his college in 1938 as a wing-forward. For his final year, he attended school in Celbridge, Co. Kildare, and impressed in midfield with the Kildare minors during the 1940 championship. On his returning home, his free-scoring displays for the Kilnaleck junior football club earned him a place on the Cavan junior team in 1941 and selection for the Cavan seniors in 1942.

Flitting initially between midfield and centre half-forward, he settled at the latter in his mid 20s. Fast and elusive, with an uncanny sense of anticipation, he was a clever playmaker, capable of penetrative passing, swerving solo runs and scoring off either foot. At 5 ft 10 in tall (1.76 m), he was good in the air, but better at gathering low passes and kicking seamlessly on the turn, while his sturdy build and exquisite balance enabled him to shrug off heavy tackles. Always keenly plotting victory and outwitting more muscular opponents, he regularly sustained physical punishment, but neither shirked nor retaliated, and clinically appraised even the most charged match circumstances. When asked in retirement how he would like to be remembered, he replied: 'That I never hit anyone, I played the game clean and I was never put off.'

In 1943 the Kilnaleck club dissolved and he joined Mountnugent, with whom he won that year's Cavan junior championship. Joining the Garda Síochána in October 1944, he was stationed in George's Cross, Co. Meath, allowing him to continue with Mountnugent and win the Cavan senior championship with them in 1946. Transferred to Drogheda, Co. Louth, in 1947, he played for the local Oliver Plunkett and St Magdalene clubs, before another transfer, to Bailieborough, Co. Cavan, in 1951, marked his return to the Cavan club scene. He won a second Cavan senior medal in 1952, giving a superlative exhibition for Bailieborough in the county final.

He established his place on the Cavan senior team in 1943, but a promising championship campaign ended disappointingly when he squandered a critical goal chance as Cavan lost the all-Ireland final replay to Roscommon. Following an uncertain start to his inter-county career, his improving form during 1944 won

the first of many selections for Ulster's Railway Cup team. He relished the sporting manner in which Railway Cup matches were contested and reserved some of his finest performances for that competition. Emerging as his county's most potent player during the 1945 championship, his ability to solo past and away from defenders injected a dynamic element into Cavan's laboured, hand-pass-dominated attacks. The training injury that ruled him out of the 1945 all-Ireland final effectively ordained Cavan's ensuing defeat.

Spurred by the decision to stage the 1947 all-Ireland final in New York, Cavan regained the Ulster title they had lost sensationally to Antrim in 1946 and overcame Roscommon in a thrilling all-Ireland semi-final as Higgins's second-half move back into midfield facilitated his solo raids and swung the match. Similarly, Kerry enjoyed an eight-point lead in the Polo Grounds final in New York when Higgins switched to midfield and led a rousing first-half rally, first by setting up a goal with a weaving run and half-blocked shot, and then by side-stepping two defenders and firing to the net from 25 yards. Late on, he notched two crucial points, as Cavan triumphed in the city of his birth.

He continued this form into 1948, as Cavan claimed the National League and retained the all-Ireland title. After a subdued first half against Mayo in the all-Ireland final, he scored a spectacular breakaway goal before dropping back to help the faltering Cavan defence. In a controversial finish, Padraic Carney's attempt to level the match by pointing a 35-yard free was thwarted when Higgins surreptitiously encroached to within 10 yards of the ball and blocked the kick without incurring punishment. He missed most of the 1949 championship through injury, returning for the all-Ireland final in which an overconfident Cavan lost to Meath. Hampered by his injury, he had a quiet match, yet managed a fine goal for the third successive all-Ireland final.

As Cavan's quiet-spoken, tactically shrewd captain from 1950, he led mainly by setting an example in training and on the pitch and by successfully assuming the role of designated free-taker. Although he adapted to changes to the hand-pass rule in 1950, his teammates struggled and Cavan failed to get out of Ulster in 1950 and 1951. By 1952 Cavan were in transition and Higgins was slowing down. Drawing on all his nous, he dragged a mediocre team to that year's Ulster title and an all-Ireland semi-final against a hotly fancied Cork, in which, with Cavan trailing by four points with six minutes left, he calmly orchestrated the five points needed for victory. In the drawn final against Meath, he sporadically showcased his attacking verve while perpetrating some uncharacteristically wretched place-kicking in the appalling weather. Having spent most of the previous week bedridden with a heavy cold, he failed to shine in the replay, but was chaired off the pitch for unerringly contributing seven pointed frees to Cavan's nine-point total. He had made his task easier by identifying his teammate Seamus Hetherington as the likely match-winner and instructing him to head for the middle when in possession and draw fouls.

Drifting into retirement from inter-county football in late 1953, he finished with three all-Irelands (1947–8, 1952), six Ulster titles (1943–5, 1947–8, 1952), one National League (1948), one 'home' National League (1950), and two Railway Cups with Ulster (1947, 1950). He continued at club level with Bailieborough until his promotion to sergeant and attendant transfer in 1955 to Tullyvin, Co. Cavan, after which he lined out with the local junior club Kil for another four years. Although well regarded for his refereeing of club and inter-county matches from the mid 1950s until 1968, he confessed to favouring forwards and becoming too absorbed in the play.

Involved in training the Cavan senior team from 1956, he coached the Cavan minors to the 1959 Ulster title and became manager of the Cavan seniors in 1960. He excelled tactically and at coaching forwards, but his amiably reticent manner proved insufficiently authoritative, as Cavan won four Ulster titles (1962, 1964, 1967 and 1969) before losing each time in the all-Ireland semi-final, to the mounting exasperation of supporters and officials. Wearying of the meddlesome Cavan selectors, he resigned acrimoniously in February 1970 after unavailingly demanding full control over team selection.

Aside from guiding Ulster to six Railway Cup triumphs (1964–6, 1968, 1970–71), he found respite from the recriminatory Cavan setup in simultaneously managing the Longford football team (1965–9). Often frustrated by the Cavan players' reluctance to heed him, he led a more receptive and previously success-starved Longford squad to victory over a storied Galway team in the 1966 National Football League final and to the 1968 Leinster championship. Disregarding pleas to return as Cavan manager, he preferred latterly to assist rather than supervise training, and was as such involved with Donegal (1972–3) and Monaghan (1975), helping Donegal to their first Ulster title in 1972. Thereafter, he made a brief return as Longford manager (1979) and was involved in coaching club teams in Cavan and further afield.

A fixture at greyhound tracks and coursing meetings across Ireland as a respected trainer and breeder of greyhounds from the mid 1940s, he sold his best dog, Snub Nose, for £1,000 in 1959. Retiring from the Garda Síochána in 1985, he moved from Tullyvin to Virginia, Co. Cavan, and kept active until several months before his death by having about five or six dogs in training. While stationed in George's Cross, he met Margaret O'Connell from nearby Carlanstown, Co. Meath, and married her in 1951. They had one son and three daughters. He died in his home in Virginia, Co. Cavan, on 28 January 2010, and was buried in the local graveyard.

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*Anglo-Celt*, *passim*, esp.: 26 Oct. 1940; 26 Apr. 1941; 16 Oct. 1943; 2 Sept. 1944; 16 Dec. 1950; 5 May 1951; 27 Aug., 17 Sept., 15 Oct. 1955; 2 May 1959; 14 Mar. 1964; 20 Feb. 1970; 16 Feb. 1973; 22 Aug. 1985; 21 May 1987; 4 Feb. 2010; 22 Nov. 2012; 9 Apr. 2015; *Ir. Times*, 26 Sept. 1945; 24, 29 Sept. 1948; 27 Sept. 1949;

30 Dec. 1952; 29 Jan. 2004; 29 Jan. 2009; 20 Feb., 12 May 2010; *Ir. Independent*, 4 Aug. 1947; 22 Sept. 1948; 1 July 1972; 14 Aug. 1982; *Sunday Press*, 25 Sept. 1949; 22 June 1952; *Ir. Press*, 16 June, 9, 24, 29 Sept. 1952; 21 Aug. 1969; *Cork Examiner*, 15, 18 Aug. 1952; 4 Aug. 1967; *Kerryman*, 13 Sept. 1952; 19 Aug. 1961; 3 Aug. 1968; *Longford Leader*, 23 Apr. 1966; *Sunday Independent*, 26 Feb. 1967; 17 Dec. 1989; Raymond Smith, *The football immortals* (1968), 146, 171–9, 184; Daniel Gallogly, *Cavan's football story* (1979); Brian Carthy, *Football captains: the all-Ireland winners* (1993); Jack Mahon, *The game of my life* (1993), 74–84; Mick Dunne, *The star-spangled final* (1997), 31, 40; Seán Óg Ó Ceallacháin, *Tall tales and banter* (1998), 79–81; Jim Gammons, *Virginia: then and now* (2004), 31; Seamus Maloney, *The sons of Sam: Ulster's Gaelic football greats* (2004), 31–59; Seamus McRory, *The all-Ireland dream: over 25 interviews with GAA greats* (2005), 154–67; James Laffey, *The road to '51: the making of Mayo football* (2011), 229–34; George Cartwright, *Breifne Abú!: Cavan GAA records 1886–2011* (2011); Daire Whelan, *The managers: the tactics and thinkers that transformed Gaelic football* (2013), 188; Paul Fitzpatrick, *The fairytale in New York: the story of Cavan's finest hour* (2013), 113–18, 156, 162, 168–9, 205; Eugene McGee, *The GAA in my time* (2014); 'Mick Higgins, 1922–2010', GAA oral history project, Boston College, [www.bc.edu/centers/irish/gaahistory/Previous\\_Themes/Interviews/Mick\\_Higgins.html](http://www.bc.edu/centers/irish/gaahistory/Previous_Themes/Interviews/Mick_Higgins.html) (accessed Apr. 2016)