

Mackey, Michael John ('Mick')

by Marie Coleman

Mackey, Michael John ('Mick') (1912–82), hurler, was born 12 July 1912 in Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, eldest son among four sons and four daughters of John 'Tyler' Mackey, labourer, and Mary Mackey (née Carroll). The Mackey family was very active in the Limerick GAA: his father played senior hurling for Limerick during the 1910s, captaining the county in the 1910 all-Ireland final defeat by Wexford; his grandfather, Michael, played for Castleconnell Emmets, one of the first GAA clubs in Limerick; and his grandfather's cousin, Anthony, represented Limerick on the GAA's central council. Mick Mackey made his senior club debut for the Ahane club in 1928 at the opening of the Limerick Gaelic grounds. In 1929 his brother John joined the Ahane team, and the following year they won county minor and junior titles with the club. Between 1931 and 1948 the Mackey brothers won fifteen senior county hurling championships and five senior county football titles with Ahane. In 1939 they played together at midfield on the Limerick team that won the Munster junior football final. Critics claim that the number of competitive games they played for Ahane was detrimental to their inter-county careers.

His senior county debut took place on 16 November 1930 in a national hurling league game against Kilkenny. Not selected initially, he played because Limerick were short of players. Having lost the 1933 league final to Kilkenny, Limerick dominated the competition during the 1930s, with Mackey winning five consecutive medals between 1934 and 1938, captaining the county in 1937 and 1938. He played in his first all-Ireland final in 1933 when Limerick lost to Kilkenny, their principal rivals throughout the 1930s. When Limerick defeated Dublin in the GAA's golden jubilee all-Ireland final (1934) he won the first of three all-Ireland medals, captaining Limerick in the next two all-Ireland victories against Kilkenny (1936, 1940). In the 1940 final the decision to move him from centre forward to midfield, from where he dominated the game, was considered decisive to Limerick's victory. Limerick lost the 1935 all-Ireland final to Kilkenny, but Mackey's performance in the Munster final defeat of Cork was 'regarded as the finest individual display of hurling ever seen' (King, 94). Among his other honours were six Munster senior hurling medals (1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, 1940, 1944); eight railway cup medals with Munster (1934, 1935, 1937, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1943, 1945); and an all-army hurling title (1943). His strong physique, ability to vary his game, and mastery of the solo-run technique, of which he was one of the greatest exponents, made him among the most celebrated hurlers of all time. He was also capable of amazing scoring displays; in the 1936 Munster final victory over Tipperary he scored 5–3 of Limerick's 8–5.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s Limerick's dominance, in Munster and nationally, was challenged by Cork, and a strong rivalry emerged between Mackey and the Cork star Christy Ring (qv). The argument persists as to which of them was the

greatest hurler ever, but it is difficult to compare them as Ring's career was only beginning at the time Mackey's was ending, and their styles of play also differed: 'Mackey was not a stylist; he would go through a defence rather than around it. Perhaps that is the difference between Ring and himself' (*Ir. Press*, 14 Sept. 1982). In spite of the rivalry he admired Ring greatly and, despite bad health, insisted on attending his funeral in Cork in 1979.

After his retirement from inter-county hurling in the 1940s and from club hurling in 1951, Mackey represented Limerick on the Munster council for twenty-five years, and in 1955 trained the Limerick senior hurling team, known as 'Mick Mackey's greyhounds', which won the Munster final but lost the all-Ireland to Wexford. In retirement he received a number of awards honouring his hurling achievements: he was voted Limerick's greatest hurler of all time (1954); inducted into the Texaco hall of fame (1961) and Limerick hall of fame (1978); voted Bank of Ireland all-time all-star (1980); and selected at centre-half forward on both the hurling team of the century (1984) and the hurling team of the millennium (2000), making him an inductee of the GAA's hall of fame; a commemorative postage stamp was also issued for the occasion.

A driver with the Electricity Supply Board, he served in the Irish army during the second world war. He lived at Ardnacrusha with his wife Kitty (née Kennedy) and their three sons and two daughters. He died 13 September 1982 in Limerick. All his medals and trophies are on display in the GAA museum in Croke Park. A stand in the Limerick Gaelic grounds is named after him.

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*Limerick Leader*, 13, 15, 18 Sept. 1982; Séamus Ó Ceallaigh and Seán Murphy, *The Mackey story* (1982); Brendan Fullam, *Giants of the ash* (1991); Séamus J. King, *A history of hurling* (1996)