

Stockwell, Frank (Francis)

by Terry Clavin

Stockwell, Frank (Francis) (1928–2009), Gaelic footballer, was born on 7 December 1928 in the family home at Waterslade, Tuam, Co. Galway, the son of Jim Stockwell, painter and decorator, and his wife Sara (née Kenny). He was educated locally in the Presentation Convent and in Tuam CBS, and excelled at sports, being a member of the Tuam swimming club and an accomplished boxer, winning the Connacht lightweight boxing title in 1946. However, it was in Gaelic football, which he played from primary school, that he won renown. A relatively small and slight corner-forward, he relied on pace, skill and clinical finishing; capable of soloing spectacularly through defences, he also knew when to make the simple pass. After winning a county minor medal with his club, Tuam Stars, in 1945, he was selected for the Galway minors in 1945/6 and for the Connacht Colleges team, scoring a goal as Connacht won the 1946 inter-provincial final.

Brought on to the Galway senior team in late 1946, he made his championship debut the next year, performing well enough to win a place on Connacht's Railway Cup teams for 1948 and 1949. His inter-county career began brightly, before stalling as Mayo overshadowed Galway in Connacht. In 1949 he moved to Dundalk to work in a drapers' shop and played for the Young Irelands club, winning a county medal, and for the Louth county team who were only defeated in the Leinster championship by the eventual all-Ireland winners Meath after two replays.

Stockwell was selected for the Leinster Railway Cup team in 1950 but never played because he moved to London where he lost interest in football and had to be cajoled into lining out for the Tara club. Nonetheless, his initially indifferent form improved as GAA connections secured him a good job with London Transport and a spacious apartment at a discounted rent. He won the 1950 British championship with London, and was easily London's best player when they lost that year's all-Ireland junior final. While in London he married Pauline Lynn from Ballinasloe, Co. Galway, in February 1950.

In March 1951 he returned to Tuam, living first in Bishop Street and later at Tullinadaly Hill, and joined the family decorating business, which was entering its fourth generation. He resumed playing for Tuam Stars and the Galway senior team, but both were in the doldrums and he withdrew from football, preoccupied by work and family commitments. In 1952, however, determined and successful efforts were made to revive the Tuam Stars team and he was persuaded back after only three months. His play for Galway that year earned him a recall to the Connacht Railway Cup side. There were flashes of brilliance such as his three goals against Mayo in the national league in 1953, but he suffered a succession of injuries, the effects of which were compounded by his willingness to play in defiance of medical advice,

and he missed Galway's run to the all-Ireland semi-final in 1954. By 1955 his place on the county team was in doubt and he struck some as a declining, unfulfilled talent.

He had long agitated to play as a full-forward, convinced that the lumbering full-backs would be unable to cope with his pace, but convention held that he was too small for that position. From early 1955, he played occasionally as Tuam's full-forward before a late injury to another player gave him his chance for Galway in the autumn. His tactic of roaming out the field, in imitation of Dublin's Kevin Heffernan (1929–2013), was an immediate success and allowed him to link up with Sean Purcell (qv), the outstanding Gaelic footballer of his generation. As children, Stockwell and Purcell were near neighbours and primary-school classmates and had played street football together most evenings before becoming adult teammates for Tuam and Galway. However, until 1955 they had never played together as full-forward and centre half-forward, though Stockwell was more like an auxiliary centre half-forward.

By 1956 they had perfected their combination play, based on an uncanny understanding derived from long familiarity. Typically, Purcell fielded the ball, drew the defence and released to Stockwell who finished. Stockwell also thrived off running on to low balls kicked in from midfield. Accustomed to the traditional 'catch and kick' strategy, whereby static players engaged in one-to-one contests for lofted balls, defences were baffled by the fluid positional play, imaginative use of space and quick interchanges of the Purcell–Stockwell axis, which swept all before it as Galway easily won the 1956 Connacht championship.

They were brought down to earth in the all-Ireland semi-final, when Galway struggled to beat an unfancied Tyrone side as Jim Devlin dominated Stockwell. He more than redeemed himself in the final v. Cork, when, despite giving six inches in height to his marker, he accumulated 2–5: a record for a sixty-minute final. All his scores were from play, and he was unlucky not to plunder another two goals. Stockwell and Purcell completely overran the highly rated Cork defence in the first half and, when Cork closed to a point late in the game, Stockwell eased Galway to victory by winning a free which Purcell pointed, and then by kicking a final point.

Galway's run continued into the next year when they defeated Kerry in the National Football League final with Stockwell clinching the match by fisting Purcell's clever cross to the net. Such exploits led the *Irish Press* journalist Mick Dunne (qv) to dub the duo 'the Terrible Twins of Tuam', a reference to their being born within ten days of each other. Their partnership, arguably the most storied in GAA history, was at its peak during 1955–7. Over time, opposing defences worked out how to nullify the Twins, in the case of Stockwell by shadowing him wherever he went and fouling him repeatedly. He bore this stoically, never losing his cool on the pitch, and was also a very unassuming man off it. Recurring injuries eventually robbed him of his pace

and in some instances prevented him from working for many weeks when he had to provide for a young family.

He retired at the end of the 1958 season before relenting the next summer following repeated entreaties, not least from Purcell, and scored a goal three minutes into his Galway comeback in the 1959 Connacht final. However, he went off with a bad knee injury and was only half fit for the all-Ireland final, in which he performed ineffectually as Kerry easily defeated Galway. He played one more year with Galway and retired from club football in 1962, ending his career with one all-Ireland (1956), a National Football League (1957), and six Connacht medals (1954, 1956–60) with Galway; 10 county medals with Tuam (1947, 1952, 1954–60 and 1962); and two Railway Cups with Connacht (1957–8).

Thereafter, he was coach and selector for Tuam Stars throughout the 1960s and 1970s, and was joint trainer of the Galway team along with John Dunne (qv) and Brendan Nestor from 1962 to 1971. Stockwell was close to the players and sympathised with their grievances against the county board for failing to provide adequate training gear, accommodation and expenses. His ameliorative influence kept the tensions between the players and management under control as Galway won three all-Irelands in a row (1964–6), though the side then broke up acrimoniously.

He returned to the Galway backroom in 1980 when he helped mediate an end to a threatened strike by the footballers over the county board's refusal to allow the Galway manager more control over the selection process. As part of a compromise settlement, he was appointed assistant to a new manager, Mattie McDonagh (qv), as such helping Galway to a National Football League title in 1981. He stepped down due to pressure of business in 1982, returning as county selector for the 1983/4 season.

Latterly he suffered from a heart ailment and a chronic back condition, which confined him to his house. He died after an illness in his home in Tullinadaly Hill on 9 March 2009 and was buried in Tuam cemetery. With his wife, he had a son and two daughters. He had a road named after him in Tuam in 1999, and also a terrace in Tuam Stadium in 2007. Fittingly, Stockwell Street and Purcell Street form a link road.

---

GRO (birth cert); *Ir. Times*, 5, 10 Oct. 1956; 2 Jan., 7 Aug. 1959; 14 Mar. 2009; *Ir. Independent*, 8 Oct. 1956; 26 Sept. 1959; 26 Feb. 1988; *Ir. Press*, 21 Nov. 1956; 7–10, 14–18 Jan., 26 Aug. 1958; 25, 31 Oct. 1980; *Connacht Sentinel*, 13 Aug. 1957; 19 Aug. 1958; 11 Aug. 1959; *Connacht Tribune*, 6 Sept. 1958; 6 Oct. 2000; 13 Apr. 2007; 13 Mar. 2009; Eugene McGee, *Classic football matches* (1993); *Tuam Herald*, 12, 19 March 2009; Colm Keane, *Gaelic football's top 20* (2003); Seamus

McRory, *The all-Ireland dream* (2005); John Scally, *The best of the west: GAA greats of Connacht* (2008); Daire Whelan, *The managers: the tactics and thinkers that transformed Gaelic football* (2013)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Mon Nov 30 17:59:47 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.