



Paul McGinley – The 2014 European Ryder Cup Captain

The intriguing background to Paul McGinley making history by becoming the first Irishman to captain a Ryder Cup team is that somewhere between the playing fields of Gaelic football and the European Commission he might have been lost to the world of golf.

For many observers of the Gaelic game were absolutely convinced that the young McGinley possessed the speed and skill, the tenacity and the talent, to one-day graduate to playing for Dublin in the All-Ireland Final at the iconic Croke Park before an appalling injury that broke his knee-cap terminated a promising career.

Instead he followed an educational path by finishing school then gaining a diploma in marketing and management in his native Dublin before accepting a role on the Year of the Environment project in the European Commission in Brussels where he also studied French.

Then came that “Robert Frost – The Road Not Taken” moment when Eamon Gallagher, then Ireland’s senior E.U. Diplomat, with support from Pdraig O’Huiginn, then Secretary to the Department of the Taoiseach and like McGinley a member at The Grange Golf Club in Dublin, and Frank Fahey, the Minister for Sport, opened the door to a scholarship at the United States International University, San Diego, and McGinley chose the route that would make all the difference to his life.

In truth, McGinley was swayed quite easily because as someone who aspired to making something of himself in sport, as his enthusiasm for playing and watching hurling and the more orthodox form of football emphasised, he was also blessed with the innate ability to hit a golf ball even if he initially courted little desire to make the game a career.

McGinley said: “The idea of me being a pro golfer was like me going to the moon. There was no way. As far as I was concerned Gaelic football was everything that golf was not. It’s a fast, tough, hard-running game whereas golf is much more sedate. I enjoyed the odd game of golf but there was no doubt about which sport I wanted to play. I was going to be a Gaelic footballer because that is what I was best at and loved the most. I wanted to play for Dublin, I also enjoyed my hurling and for work the business world beckoned. The injury to my left knee and then to move on from the European Commission to go study and play golf in San Diego were both blessings in disguise that changed my life.”

His initial contact with golf was as a caddie for his father, Michael, who not only played

Gaelic football himself for Donegal but also struck the golf ball with such authority that he was always considered better than the one handicap he held for several years. The young McGinley, despite being distracted by his addiction to Gaelic football, played to an acceptable five handicap. Such was his application to succeed that once he focused on golf he was able to swiftly reduce his handicap at The Grange Golf Club in the heart of Rathfarnham, a south side suburb of Dublin where he grew up, so that by the time he turned professional he played off plus four.

Desire, dedication and determination decreed that McGinley, born in Dublin on December 16, 1966, would significantly develop his golf game. In San Diego, he successfully studied for his degree in International Business and his strong work ethic on the practice range under the studious eye of coach Gordon Severson, who sadly passed away in 2006, transformed his game.

McGinley said: “I learned more from Gordon than anyone else. He took me from a shabby amateur to a golf professional. Later I worked with Bob Torrance and he

took me from shabby professional to a good professional. But it was with Gordon that I really started to learn how to play the game properly.”



McGinley revelled in the opportunity to practice under the hot Californian sun and in the competitive world of American inter-collegiate golf his self-belief prospered as he became mentally and physically stronger. He took time out to come home and in the 1989 Irish Close – the Blue Riband of the Irish amateur game – at Rosses Point, his perseverance and patience were key as he overcame five opponents to win the match-play title.

On graduating from San Diego he concentrated on the amateur circuit – losing in the 1990 final of the North of Ireland to Darren Clarke while in 1991 beating Pdraig Harrington on the way to winning the South of Ireland match play – before being selected for Great Britain and Ireland for the 1991 Walker Cup which by a lovely coincidence was that year being played at Portmarnock in Dublin. The United States would win but McGinley brought the curtain down on his amateur career with a brilliant second shot to eight feet at the last which set up a famous foursomes win with Liam White against Phil Mickelson and Bob May.

By now McGinley knew that his future would be on The European Tour, to which he has been committed from Day One, and he immediately grasped the nettle by winning the Under-25s European Open in the autumn of 1991 then started 1992 by making his European Tour debut in the Johnnie Walker Asian Classic a few weeks after earning his playing privileges by finishing tied second at the Qualifying School.



McGinley’s first significant European Tour performance arrived at the Mont Agel course later that summer when four successive rounds in the 60s enabled him to finish tied sixth behind Ian Woosnam in the European Monte Carlo Golf Open. There can be few more spectacular courses than the Monte Carlo Golf Club at Mont Agel, perched high above the principality of Monaco, to kick-start a career but the quintessential Dubliner remained grounded.

McGinley had at 25 arrived relatively late to the professional ranks but he did so with a mature sense of balance and outlook on life. He said: “I don’t want to make myself achieve what I want to achieve in a given amount of time. I’ve got an awful lot to learn about myself and my golf. Steady improvement, even if it’s slow, will mean that my time will come.”

Not that he was anything other than ambitious. So he correctly celebrated as he ticked all the boxes with his first European Tour win in the Hohe Brücke Open in Austria in 1996, storming from out of the pack from eight behind with 11 birdies in a superb 62, and the champagne flowed again later that year when he married Allison Shapcott, then a professional on the ladies tour.

A family would follow – Niamh, born in 1999, Killian (2000) and Maia (2002) – and further individual success highlighted by his win in the 2005 Volvo Masters at Club de Golf Valderrama. It had been McGinley’s finest season but also his most frustrating. He had lost a play-off to Paul Casey in the TCL Classic in China then finished runner-up to Angel Cabrera in the flagship BMW PGA Championship where both had closed with 67s at Wentworth Club and narrowly lost 2 and 1 to Michael Campbell in the HSBC Match Play Championship back at Wentworth Club.

Now at the season-ending tournament in the south of Spain, McGinley would post a third round 65 – by two shots the best round of the day – to be four behind joint leaders Sergio Garcia and Colin Montgomerie and with a closing 67 he climbed to the top of the pack with which he would finish third in the then Order of Merit. They say that when McGinley took a stranglehold on the title with a wonderful wedge over water to the treacherous 17th green and a ten foot birdie putt that the cheers in The Grange clubhouse could be heard all the way across Rathfarnham to the Yellow House pub where McGinley enjoyed his first glass of Guinness.

By then, of course, McGinley had also established his international career – representing Ireland 13 times in the World Cup, famously winning the prestigious title with Pdraig Harrington at Kiawah Island in 1997 and so emulating the triumph of Christy O’Connor and Harry Bradshaw 39 years previously, and seven times in the Alfred Dunhill Cup; playing in the Royal Trophy three times and playing a significant role in helping Great Britain and Ireland win The Seve Trophy in 2002 and 2005 – winning his singles on both occasions and losing only twice in eight matches alongside Harrington.

McGinley’s almost uncanny knack of

claiming team success continued when he captained Great Britain and Ireland to further victories in The Seve Trophy against Continental Europe in 2009 and 2011 although what remains the pièce de résistance in his international playing career is The Ryder Cup.

That began with that time-stopping moment on the 18th green at The Belfry in 2002 when McGinley gloriously holed the ten foot putt that secured Europe’s success and he was bear-hugged by captain Sam Torrance. It continued at Oakland Hills in Michigan in 2004 when he went unbeaten as Europe won 18 ½ - 9 ½ on American soil and he kept his unbeaten singles record intact two years later at The K Club little more than 20 miles from where he grew-up as Europe again won 18 ½ - 9 ½. Moreover, his unbeaten run has continued as a Vice Captain to Colin Montgomerie in 2010 and José María Olazábal in 2012.



McGinley’s love affair with The Ryder Cup is driven by passion. He says: “I love the whole atmosphere of The Ryder Cup. I love everything that goes with it, the pomp and the pageantry. I get a real buzz out of being in the same room where everyone is pulling for the team. It’s inspirational, you can touch the camaraderie, and I do reach for another level when involved in team golf. My heart ticks a bit faster, my adrenalin flows more.”

So Gaelic football’s loss has been golf’s gain and the land that bred the likes of Bradshaw and Daly, O’Connor and O’Connor jnr, Clarke and Harrington, McDowell and McIlroy, to play Ryder Cup golf now has in Paul McGinley the most consummate of professionals as their first European Ryder Cup Captain.

Mitchell Platts

The winning 2012 European Ryder Cup Team



Tom Watson – The 2014 United States Ryder Cup Captain

The young American was met early in the morning at the Ballyunion Golf Club by Ted Higgins, the professional, and Sean Walsh, the secretary/manager, not to mention 2,000 local enthusiasts eager to witness with their own eyes the Number One Golfer in the World.

Tom Watson had chosen to hone his game ahead of his 1981 defence of The Open Championship on the revered links set by the Shannon estuary in Co. Kerry on the west coast of Ireland. He teed-up with his good friends Sandy Tatum and Harry Easterly, both former Presidents of the United States Golf Association, and they played a convivial round with Walsh before enjoying what Watson, on his first visit, described as a “cheerful lunch” before retiring to the Marine Links Hotel.

 That should have been that except that Watson and Tatum could not resist returning to the course - “After playing Ballyunion for the first time a man would think that the game of golf originated here,” Watson later said - but their attempt to enjoy a quiet 18 holes was foiled as word quickly spread that they were back on the course and the crowd which Watson warmly embraced swiftly grew again in numbers.

All of which goes some of the way to explaining why Thomas Sturges Watson is held in the highest respect in the world of sport. Quite simply, he has always understood the importance of entertaining the public even if he never courted the fame which inevitably disrupts private life.

Watson said: “Fame’s not important to me. Doing what I do for a living well is important to me. I am there to play golf, to entertain, to compete, to play my absolute best. That was always the dream from the age of 14.”

Ray Watson, his late father, an insurance broker, and at one time a scratch golfer, introduced Tom, born the second of three sons in Kansas City, Missouri, on September 4, 1949, to golf at the country

club where he was a member and his influence extended beyond teaching the fundamentals to passing on a love for the game. Meanwhile his mother, Sally, chauffeured her son to compete in junior events on a variety of courses as he developed the swing initially shaped by first teacher Stan Thirsk.

Watson, naturally talented and massively determined, sensibly did not allow golf to become an obsession. He put down the clubs to play quarterback on the High School football team, winning the conference championship, and was an outstanding shooting guard when the basketball season began. He won trophies for sportsmanship but also did not escape punishment when once suspended for smoking at a dance.

Watson moved to Stanford University - the Harvard of the West - to prepare for a career in the insurance business, graduated with a degree in psychology and confessed: “Four years at Stanford didn’t prepare me for the business world. I made the decision that my only talent was golf!”

Watson had won four Missouri State Amateur Championships in five years. He had the game, the skill, the heart and the desire. Blessed with powerful arms and hands, strong legs and wide shoulders, he developed a brisk, business-like swing and earned in High School from his



football coach Leon Flappan the nickname Huckleberry Dillinger.

The Dillinger evolved from his gangster-like nerve - his putting touch was lethal - and Jim Murray, the legendary Los Angeles Times sportswriter, later wrote: “Once upon a time there was this young golfer who looked as if he had just arrived by raft from the Mississippi River.

 “He had this red hair and freckled face and a gap-toothed smile that made him look as if he had just slipped off the pages of Mark Twain. He looked out of place with shoes on. You wanted to sift his pockets for live lizards or balls of string, and ask him where he put his fishing pole. You wanted to ask him if his name was ‘Huckleberry.’”

Pretty soon Murray and the world’s leading sports writers were capturing Watson’s deeds in words. He turned professional, very nearly won in his rookie season in 1972, losing the Quad Cities event by one stroke to Deane Beman, who eventually became US PGA Tour Commissioner. Then, after some

frustrating results, two men entered his life and helped transform his career.

First, he took on Bruce Edwards as his caddie in 1973. They formed arguably the most formidable of fairway partnerships, winning titles with a smile and with grace. Sadly, Edwards passed away in 2004 after a courageous battle with Lou Gehrig’s disease (ALS).

Then after being the 54-hole leader in the 1974 US Open, faltering only in the final round, Watson was approached by Byron Nelson, who was commentating having retired following an outstanding career, and welcomed the words of encouragement so much so that Nelson would become teacher, mentor and friend.

Watson made the 1974 Western Open his first PGA Tour win and his second, perhaps predictably, came in the Byron Nelson Golf Classic in May, 1975.

 Two months later he captured his first Major Championship, holing a 20-foot putt on the last green to tie Australian Jack Newton then winning the 18-hole play-off with a 71 to a 72 in The Open Championship at Carnoustie.

Four of his five Open Championships were won in Scotland and the next in 1977 took him centre stage as for the second time in three months - he had won his first Masters in April - Watson pushed Jack Nicklaus into second place. The “Duel in the Sun” at Turnberry in which Watson and Nicklaus went head for head, Watson prevailing by closing 65-65 to Nicklaus’s 65-66, was an epic encounter that

captured the imagination of the world and, unquestionably, confirmed his emergence as the game’s dominant player of the time. Watson would win eight Majors - another Masters in 1981 when Nicklaus was second again, The Opens of 1980, 1982 and 1983, and the US Open in 1982 - and in all 39 US PGA Tour titles in addition to six PGA Players of the Year Awards.

Watson, regarded as the finest striker of the golf ball since Nicklaus, also possessed the ability to improvise shots and in that 1982 US Open at Pebble Beach one shot was quite breath-taking - a ‘touchy’ chip from knotted rough for a sensational two and for good measure he birdied the last to once more deny Nicklaus.

Nicklaus showed his respect as they walked off the 18th - “You little son of a gun; you’re something else. That was nice going. I’m really proud of you, and I’m pleased for you.” Watson says: “Playing head to head with Jack was what I dreamed it would be. Was Turnberry in 1977 the most exciting career moment of my life? Yes, with the exception maybe of Pebble Beach.”

Arguably there has not been two better losers in golf. Watson’s reverence for the game blended to his intelligence and imagination are distinctive qualities that set him apart as does his loyalty and his charity work. He has been a long-time supporter of the Children’s Mercy Hospital in Kansas City, Missouri. He co-founded the Bruce Edwards Foundation for ALS to raise funds to find a cure for the debilitating disease that claimed the life of his caddie and friend. He has played an enormous role in



Tom Watson (right) and the winning 1981 United States Ryder Cup Team

Clubs for Kids, the precursor to the First Tee in Kansas City for which Watson is the Chairman of the Advisory Board, and he participated in trips to Iraq to “deliver a little bit of home to the troops.”

Then in the sunset of his career Watson arrived at a potential curtain call. He had told his wife Hilary on the eve of The 2009 Open Championship at Turnberry that he had a good chance

of winning. Four days of brilliant play brought him to within one hole of creating a unique piece of history as at the age of 59 he was set to rip-up the record books and in the process equal Harry Vardon’s record of six Opens. The golfing gods, however, decreed otherwise.



Victory would have given Watson the opportunity to ride off into that sunset and retire to his farm on the outskirts of Kansas City. Instead he continued with the day job and in May, 2011, he became at the age of 61 the oldest player to win a Major Championship since the Senior Tour began by winning the Senior PGA Championship for his sixth Senior Major including the three Senior Open Championships (2003, 2005, 2007) he has won in Britain.

Now at the age of 65 years and 22 days on September 26, 2014, he will make history again by becoming the oldest Ryder Cup captain. This is because he is the right man for the job, the last winning American captain (1993) on British soil, an Ambassador to the game he cherishes, a man who commands the respect of all. His most memorable Ryder Cup moment remains the Opening Ceremony at Royal Lytham & St Annes in 1977 which he says was “spine-tingling to listen to Captain Dow Finsterwald’s speech introducing the players and to see the flags go up - I had never done that before and it affected me greatly.”

What transpired to take Watson back to Scotland, scene of four of the Open Championship triumphs, to lead the United States on, coincidentally, a Jack Nicklaus designed course, can be attributed to the foresight of Ted Bishop, the PGA of America President, and the genius essayist Jim Huber who, sadly, is no longer with us. Bishop had read “Four Days in July,” Huber’s emotive account of Watson’s enthralling challenge for Open glory two months short of his 60th birthday, and decided that this was the man he wanted to lead them in 2014. So “Four Days in July” becomes “Three Days in September” and another special milestone in the life of Tom Watson.

Mitchell Platts