

# JUST DO IT

Monday morning 5 January 2004, it's cold and dank and you can almost feel the gloom of depression hanging in the air as people head back to work after the Christmas break. At 6.01am, Donal Óg Cusack's alarm goes off in his house in Cloyne. He knows what's ahead of him so he has already prepared the night before. His gear is laid out across a chair in the corner of the room and his work clothes are already packed away in his bag. At 6.15am, he's out the door. Time to purge the guilt.

He heads off for work in De Puy Johnson and Johnson in Ringaskiddy. It takes him forty minutes to get there and when he arrives, he heads straight to the gym, already suited up and ready for action. He works in the facilities department of the plant and looks after the company gym, so he lets himself in. There's rarely anyone ever there at that hour of the morning and there certainly isn't anybody present this morning. He likes the silence of working alone and he goes about his business for an hour before he starts work.

Cusack begins with a run, then some stretching before concentrating on core exercises. It's not easy this morning but he banishes any thoughts of neglect and punishes his muscles until they threaten to desert him. He completed this routine every day for six weeks before Christmas before he took a break. It's time to deposit more fuel in the tank now before the Cork panel heads off to Vietnam for their team holiday on Thursday. After that, this is a ritual he's determined not to break.

Even now, with over six weeks of hard work behind him, which was only briefly punctuated by some mild Christmas excess, Cusack doesn't feel that fit. The rest of the Cork panel, especially Timmy McCarthy, are always taking the piss out of him about his bowlegs that are always hopping off one another. The only response he has for them is that if he had Seán Óg Ó hAilpín's gazelle-type limbs, or if he didn't have that

dragging, consistent pain inside his right knee all the way up through his groin, he'd leave them all for dust in his vapour trail.

Cusack probably does that bit extra, not because he has to, but because of who he is. He is a goalkeeper. A hurling goalkeeper. Although nearly all players train on their own at one stage or another, goalkeepers do it more often than most others because they have to get accustomed to being alone when it matters. Of course they train with the team but they do more training, specific to their needs, alone. They can work and work on the technicalities they need to master, and they do, but no amount of training can prepare you to be alone at the death. Or to learn how to take the blame. Goalkeepers learn to be lone-minded and are familiar with such a frame of mind. They have to be because of the position they play in. Disappointment is one of the most fundamental emotions in sport and goalkeepers are the natural focus for it because they walk a tightrope between triumph and disaster. In Cusack's position, calmness is the only means of survival and he has depended on it plenty of times in the past. Especially in the last year and a half.



On the night after Cork beat Wexford in the previous year's All-Ireland semi-final replay, Cusack got a taxi home to Cloyne after a night's drinking with the squad in Cork city.

Before long, the talk drifted to hurling and that day's other All-Ireland semi-final between Kilkenny and Tipperary. The taxi-driver honed in on Brendan Cummins' outstanding display, and without knowing who his passenger was, used it as a stick to beat Cusack with. He told him that if Cork had a keeper half as good as Cummins, they wouldn't have needed a replay to beat Wexford. Cusack agreed with him, and let him continue with his stream of invective.

The vitriol rolled off his tongue for nearly twenty minutes. Cusack urged him on, agreeing with everything he said about how poor the Cork keeper was in an attempt to see how much poison he could extract. By the time they got to Cloyne, the air was septic with it. Cusack paid

him, got out and then spotted a friend across the road who was locking his car. 'What's my name, Jamesie?' he asked his friend. 'Donal Óg,' his friend replied with a bemused look. 'Donal Óg who?' 'Donal Óg Cusack.' The Cork hurling goalkeeper just turned to the taxi-driver and introduced himself. He left it at that and walked in home.

He knows the knives are out for him. A lot of people in the county blame him for losing the 2003 All-Ireland final against Kilkenny. Martin Comerford's goal with five minutes to go plunged a dagger into Cork's hearts and most of the public felt it was a ball that should have been stopped. Even though Comerford was inside the 14-metre line, Cusack was still beaten at his near post.

Comerford didn't strike it well, but there was plenty of deception concealed in the shot. It hopped off the ground and spun past Cusack. It was one of those balls that a keeper almost watches going past him in slow motion. Every keeper feels a shot like that should be saved, but it's extremely difficult to judge the flight of the ball when it kicks off the turf. Especially with the new sliotar on that Croke Park sod that's like concrete. Everyone might blame him, but he doesn't blame himself. He firmly believes that but he's standing up for himself because nobody else will.

He has to be big now because there is a chasing pack on his tail. Paul Morrissey has been playing well with Newtownshandrum while Martin Coleman was solid last season with the Under-21s. All summer the public had been building a case against Cusack, but after the All-Ireland they didn't have to look too far for hard evidence to corroborate their view that he wasn't good enough to play for Cork anymore.

He was captain of Cloyne last year and they reached the semi-final of the Cork championship for the first time in their history. Even though they were facing the champions, Blackrock, they felt their time had come. They trained like US Navy Seals and Cusack became the focal point for that fanatical ambition. Before the quarter-final, seven of the panel announced their plans to take a sun holiday. They would be home in time for the match but Cusack told them he didn't want them to go. A few home truths were spelled out. In the end, six cancelled the holiday

and the guy who did go came home on the Thursday before the game.

On the night before the semi-final, Cusack got nailed with a job at work. It had been scheduled for three months in advance, he had committed himself to it and he wasn't going to break his word. He would still be in bed early and focussed for the game the following day.

On the night, the job consisted of closing 2,500 amp circuit breakers that feed the power into the Johnson and Johnson plant. It involved more hand movement than he anticipated but he still thought nothing of it. He went home, got a good night's sleep and got up ready the next morning to lead his team into history.

Out on the pitch beforehand, he did a full half an hour warm-up with the rest of the squad. He had worn a tracksuit in the warm-up but he took it off just before the game began. He was wearing a short-sleeved jersey and his hands began getting cold and stiff as the sweat was cooling off his body. Ten minutes into the game, he called Seán Motherway, the Cloyne subkeeper, and instructed him to go to the corner-flag and drop a few balls into him. He wanted to check if it was just the cold or whether it was the effects from the previous evening's toil. Cloyne were facing into a stiff breeze and he wanted his handling to be spot-on.

A couple of minutes later, a ball was launched from the Blackrock half-back line and it carried in the breeze. In an instant, it was dropping down on top of Cusack.

Bodies were gathering around him, he should have batted it away, but instinct took over. He tried to grab it, the ball broke off his hand and sneaked inside the far post. Cloyne lost by two points.

If they'd won, they felt they would have rattled Newtownshandrum in the final. A Munster club title could possibly have been bagged and Cusack would have been nominated Cork captain this season. If you thought his head was wrecked before, it felt ten times worse after that incident.

'There still isn't a day that goes by that I don't think about those two games,' said Cusack. 'When I think of those two goals, it's like pure torture for me. Even now, it just rips me apart thinking about it. That Kilkenny goal still constantly flashes into my mind but it's not as bad

now as what it was. It only comes into my mind now about once a day. It just breaks my heart and you'd wonder about packing it all in. But I'm after deciding now to go hell for leather and do my best again this year. And after that, I'll think about it again.'



On Thursday 8 January, the Cork squad flew to Vietnam for their holiday. When they arrived in Ho Chi Minh City, Donal O'Grady left Cusack, Seán Óg Ó hAilpín and Joe Deane in charge of organising collective training. On their first day out there, Cusack and Ó hAilpín went off looking for a field for thirty guys to train in. Tom Kenny, Paul Tierney and Adrian Coughlan joined them.

Just one hundred metres down the road from their own hotel in the centre of Saigon, they spotted a field adjacent to another hotel that looked perfect for their requirements. They asked security in the hotel about the possibility of using the field, but the request wasn't even entertained. So they set off in search of another training facility. The heat was savage and the humidity was a killer but the five of them walked roughly ten miles in their pursuit of a piece of green grass. It was torture but they never relented.

They checked out every backwater and hick piece of territory around the town but nothing materialised. At one stage they ran into a group of English guys who wondered were they looking for some crowd to take them on in a five-a-side soccer match. In the end, they failed to find something suitable and decided to take their chances with the first field. They weighed up their options and reckoned that they'd only need it for forty minutes before anyone would cop it. After half an hour of shuttle runs the following evening, the security personnel from the hotel arrived out and cleared them. The field had served its purpose.

After the training session thirty white bodies crawled up the street suffering from near exhaustion. Some venerable old locals that were sitting out in the street looked on in amazement. Some of them had that stare, that perplexed look on their faces that suggested that perhaps time

had just played a trick on their minds and a batch of US marines were returning from a training camp without their armoury!

When the squad flew east to China Beach a week later, it was like landing in paradise for Cusack and the commando wing of the panel. Their hotel backed right onto the beach so their training ground was in their back yard. On the first day there they decided to go for a three-mile run in the sand. They mapped it out but they didn't know what they were letting themselves in for. The heat was ridiculous and the sand was sticky but the competition was even worse. They all dogged it out.

After that, if they didn't train they played soccer amongst themselves almost every day, picking the teams on the basis of the country lads versus the city boys. The games were never less than ultra-competitive. At one stage, Sean Óg Ó hAilpín called the city fellas into a huddle after getting a hiding. The country lads were sewing it into them, telling them they couldn't win a game unless it was down in Páirc Uí Chaoímh. It was like a red rag to a bull with Ó hAilpín. 'Have ye any pride in Cork city?' he asked them. Thousands of miles from home and Ó hAilpín couldn't let it go.

When they drank, they drank, but Cusack never wanted the holiday to be an alcoholic haze. One morning, Ó hAilpín called for him at 6.55am. They went down to the gym and did an hour and a half session, before heading to the beach for an hour's hurling. When Cusack went on his first holiday with the Cork seniors after they won the 1998 National League title, Brian Corcoran told him that the fellas who didn't bring their hurleys would spend the week asking the fellas that did for a loan of them. Cusack has often quoted him since and most fellas brought their sticks.

After the hurling session, Cusack and Ó hAilpín went to the pool for a dip, had their breakfast and then went for a lie-down. By 11am they were back on the beach again for another soccer game. On the beach that day, Cusack really felt that the bond between the players had cemented even more since the holiday began. Their bond has been made tighter from the hurt of last year. They're all still hurting. Badly.

They had Kilkenny on the ropes during the second half of the 2003 All-Ireland final but they just couldn't land the punch to knock them on

the canvas. Comerford's goal was the sucker punch that flattened them instead and they couldn't recover. Thousands of miles from home, the memory of that loss and the mental inquisitions over the goal are still eating Cusack up. Eating him.

'Every day of the holidays, I thought about the last two games I played last year,' said Cusack. 'I just didn't feel right. Personally I didn't know whether to go drinking or training and I got caught between the two of them. Between training with Seán Óg in the morning and then going drinking with some of the other lads, I nearly fucking killed myself.'

The rest of them are still trying to rid themselves of the bad memories, the missed chances, and the lost opportunity. They're being positive about it all though. A couple of nights after the final, the squad was drinking in a lock-in at a city bar when a card game started up. John Gardiner was at the bar and one of the card players asked him if he wanted to join the game. Gardiner inquired what they were playing when someone said it was a game of 45. Gardiner told him that he didn't play 45, and he hardly had the words out of his mouth when some wisecrack told him that he couldn't hit 45s either. The painful memories of Gardiner's missed frees in the final were washed away momentarily by the laughter.

'Even though we're still fairly young, we're after seeing a lot of shit,' said Cusack. 'I don't think any other group gets on as well as we do, there's no fighting or anything and we all stick up for one another.'

Even though he's still only twenty six, this year is Cusack's eighth year on the panel, and he hopes it will be his sixth season as first choice keeper. He isn't the oldest member on the panel, or the team captain, or the best player, but in the Cork squad there is no influence greater than his. Brian Corcoran, Mark Landers, Fergal Ryan and Kevin Murray have all drifted away in the last couple of years and Cusack's presence has filled the vacuum.

He is one of their chief leaders now. Even though he had just lost an All-Ireland final and had conceded a goal as a result of which most people blamed him for losing the match the previous September, when the Cork players gathered in a huddle after the presentation, one voice

dominated the discussion. Cusack could be spotted in the middle of the huddle, waving his finger and still laying down the law.

‘I just remember the stadium being practically empty. Even though the presentation was just over, the place was deserted. I remember Mickey (*O’Connell*) with his nose bust and it was all just pure misery. I remember being so sad for the boys and saying that whatever we have to do over the winter, we have to get back here. Whatever had to be done, whatever cost it would be to ourselves.’

Everyone within the squad knows this guy has serious balls anyway. When the Cork hurlers went on strike two years before, Cusack was their leader and their median point. He was the player who went on Cork’s 96FM and claimed that the County Board was being run by a crowd of yes men who were totally oblivious to the needs of the players. The players put their necks on the line with their subsequent strike but the guillotine was always perilously dangling over his head.

He knew he had set himself up but he did it for the good of the Cork players, with no thought of the potential damage it could do to himself. He didn’t get that fanaticism from just anywhere. Eighty-three years ago, Christy Ring was born in a house which used to be two doors up from where Cusack grew up in the middle of Cloyne village. That house is levelled now, its site occupied by a statue of the greatest hurler that ever lived.

When Cusack was buying a house last year, there was only one place he had in mind. Ring’s father and Cusack’s great grandfather were brothers and the gable end of Cusack’s new house is just ten yards from the Ring statue created by the Breton sculptor Yann Goulet. Just behind that is the Cloyne field where Ring’s genius was forged and where the young goalkeeper went about perfecting his game as a child in the crucible of practice.

Home.



The holiday party flew back into Cork on 24 January and four days later they realized the holiday was really over. When they gathered in



Carrigtwohill for training, it was minus 2 degrees. They knew it was freezing because they could see the frost settling on top of the training cones. Cusack normally spends part of every training session with the other keepers but Morrissey and Coleman weren't there tonight so he ground his teeth and dogged it out. He has to dig in because he knows the knives are being sharpened for him around the county.

Over Christmas, he was in town with Diarmuid O'Sullivan and O'Sullivan's girlfriend Gráinne. They were in Reardons' and Cusack was afraid of losing his jacket so he got the keys of Gráinne's car and went out to deposit the jacket. Just a few yards outside the pub, he met a gang of seven fellas coming against him. They recognised him straightaway and, with force of numbers, rounded on him.

'You're fucking useless Cusack!' they roared at him. 'You bollocks, you cost us the All-Ireland!'

It saddened him that people he didn't know could be so callous but he'll always be ready for that type of abuse. He's had plenty of time to condition himself for it. Just as long as he is ready for the fight to hold onto his place.

'It's a big year for Donal Óg and he knows himself now that he's going to come under pressure,' said Ger Cunningham, who Cusack took over from in 1999 after eighteen years as Cork's first-choice keeper. 'I know that the selectors are going to give people chances this year and maybe the test will really come if they give Martin Coleman, Paul Morrissey or Anthony Nash a chance. If that happens, how will he react in that situation? These things kind of go in cycles and if he gets over this period and gets established again, he'll be fine.'

'For now he knows the pressure is there and sometimes that can be a good thing or a bad thing. People buckle under pressure or they react to it. But he certainly won't be doing any less training than what he was doing because he's such a driven goalkeeper. He's so focussed and is so attentive to detail. That won't change but I'd maybe look at some of his training methods. That's just a personal opinion but Ogie will know how he's going. He's very independent. He's his own man.'

## LAST MAN STANDING

In January 2003, Cusack wrote down his three goals for the year ahead on a piece of paper. When he looked at them again a couple of weeks ago, he didn't change any of them because he hadn't met his targets or achieved those goals. He wanted to be as fit as he possibly could and he doesn't think he reached that standard. He had hoped to become the best goalkeeper in the country and he knows he fell a long way short of that target. And he wanted to do everything possible to help Cork win an All-Ireland. That is what's driving him on now.

At 9.30pm after training, Cusack sat into his car and drove home to Cloyne. The pain has returned in his leg, as it does after every hard training session. That dragging pain that crucifies him when he gets into the car. When he arrived in Cloyne, he hauled himself out of the vehicle and went in home. He laid out his gear again across the chair and packed his work clothes into his gearbag. The morning will soon be here and the gym will be calling him. This is it now. This is what lies ahead of him.

'I don't know if you get immune to this thing at all. I don't even know how to describe my motivation for playing or going back training. I was asking myself going down in the car "why am I doing this now and why am I going to go through all this again?" There's no description for it. It's like as if I have to do it. It's like as if it's something that I just have to do.'

He's just going to do it.