

**Still Pucking With A Huge Grin**  
16 December 2009

By David Farrell



HE won everything the game had to offer in a career that spanned more than sixteen years.

Every team has its character but none more than Offaly's Johnny Pilkington whose 'off the cuff' comments left many an interviewer in stitches of laughter.

In this exclusive interview Johnny, who runs a pub cum grocery in his native Birr talks about his career, the ups and downs, the excitement and the heartbreaks.

He talks about former managers Eamon Cregan, Michael bond and yes, the controversial 'Babs' Keating.

Johnny also tell how he was completely unaware that his colleagues gave the Antrim team a Guard of Honour after the Ulster champions defeated Offaly in 1989 because he was in the dressing room having fag.

**Who was your earliest influence in hurling?**

"Well for my generation here in Birr the main man was Brother Vincent. He had a major affect on all the young players here. It was just all hurling. Of course the national school itself had always done well it wasn't like we just came along and started to win. Brother Vincent spent time with us and thought us the basics".

**Who were your hurling heroes when you were growing up?**

"I suppose John Fenton (Cork) and Steve Mahon (Galway) probably really stood out for their style in the middle of the field".

**What did you achieve at underage level?**

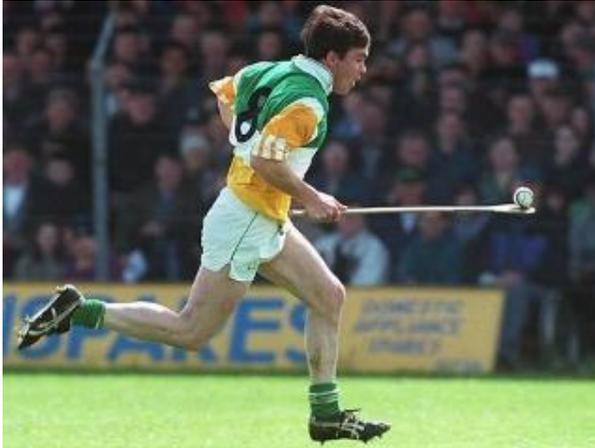
"Well to cut it short basically everything. (laughs) We won Bord Na Scoil u11 and a couple of feile's, u16 and minor. I won a colleges All-Ireland in '86 I think it was. I won an All-Ireland minor with Offaly in '87 and lost two u21 finals in '89 and '91".

**When did you feel you were good enough to play for Offaly seniors?**

"I started in '89 and I was just out of Offaly minors. We had a bad year in '88 we weren't very good despite winning the All-Ireland the year before. I never really thought about playing with the seniors to be honest. Pad Joe Whelahan was over the minors and then the seniors in '89 and Offaly had a string of injuries at the time so he asked me a few times but I didn't feel like it. I didn't think I was strong enough or big enough to go. But about two weeks before we played Laois I was asked to play a challenge against Cork in Cork. I went down and played well on Cathal Casey and then I started against Laois".

**How long did you play for Birr seniors?**

"I started in '87 and I finish in '03 so 16 years".



**What did you achieve at club and county level?**

"The easy answer again is everything! (laughs) I won 4 All-Ireland club titles, 6 Leinster club titles and I have 8 county medals. It sounds very flippant but what people have to realise is I was caught with a very special bunch of players. Im not just talking about your Brian Whelahan or the Johnny Pilkington's, there was a guy with us by the name of Paul Murphy who played centre forward and he played a major role within that team. We also had Liam Power who was a real die hard club player. It was handy for us to go and get all the plaudits because we played for Offaly but it was guys like Paul Murphy and Liam Power who didn't

quite have the skill to make it at the next level but by God were they very important at club level.

For Offaly I won two All-Ireland medals and four Leinsters and beaten in two All-Ireland finals. I was very fortunate to have a lot of success because Offaly is a small county. The further you get away from it the more you appreciate what you won. We didn't win things easily but you didn't win these things unless you have special hurlers like Brian Whelahan and Johnny Dooley".

**Who was the best player you played with at club and county level?**

"Ah sure Brian is probably the obvious choice. He was a fabulous hurler and it's hard to beat him but if John Troy just had a little bit more pace. John Troy was a genius. It is very hard to compare a back to a forward even though Brian could do both, but Troy was a very special hurler".

**Who was your toughest opponent?**

"I would probably say Adrian Fenlon of Wexford because I played on him regularly. Offaly always clashed with Wexford. Joe Cooney rarely had a bad day and if you could break even with him you weren't doing bad".

**What was your proudest moment in hurling?**

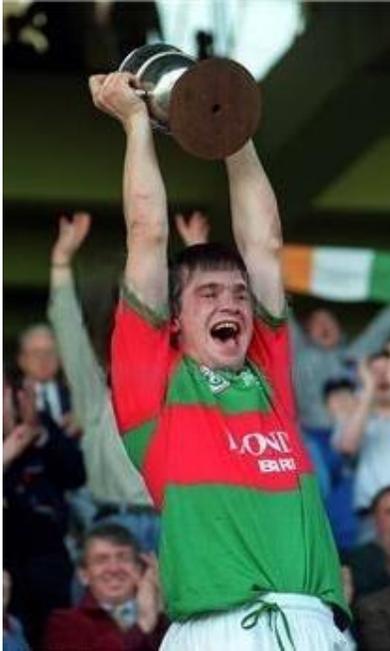
"I suppose Captaining the '95 club All-Ireland with Birr".

**How did it feel been the first man from Birr to lift the Tommy Moore cup?**

"It doesn't matter if you're the first or the one hundred and first if you can lift the cup its great. It's a great honour of course but the best captain I played with was Martin Hanamy. Martin didn't do a whole lot of talking off the field. He's a very quiet man. But when he was on the field he drove on a team by how he hurled. To me that is all a captain is, the lads that do it on the field. A captain can talk as much as he wants but at the end of the day he's only collecting a cup on behalf of 30 lads. But don't get me wrong it is a great honour".

**And your proudest moment with Offaly?**

"Well the 2 All-Irelands, but '98 was probably the best because of the supporters. They had a major part in us winning that All-Ireland".



**What were your favourite grounds to play in?**

"Croke Park".

**Did you play any other sports growing up?**

"I played a bit of rugby and Gaelic football. The football always took a back seat though here in Birr. The rugby was at a low level but I enjoyed it. It was a great way of getting away from talking about hurling and the pressures of hurling. Just for that hour it means an awful lot".

**You won an All-Ireland minor in 1987. How important is it to have underage success in order to build for senior success?**

"It's important in the way it gives players confidence too not be afraid of teams. Although it's not vital. Just because you don't win a minor doesn't mean you can't go on to win at senior".

**Antrim caused a major upset in 1989. Who had the idea to organise the 'Guard of honour' after the game?**

"Jasus I don't know. I was sitting in the dressing room having a fag! (laughs) The final whistle went, I shook hands with your man and I troddled off down the tunnel. I was sitting in there having a bit of a smoke and I said "Jasus where are the lads gone". I went out to the hall way and looked straight across the field and couldn't see anyone but sure they were standing either side of the tunnel! I don't think I even found out about it until the next day that they done a guard of honour".

**You won an All-Star in 1990. How special was that for you?**

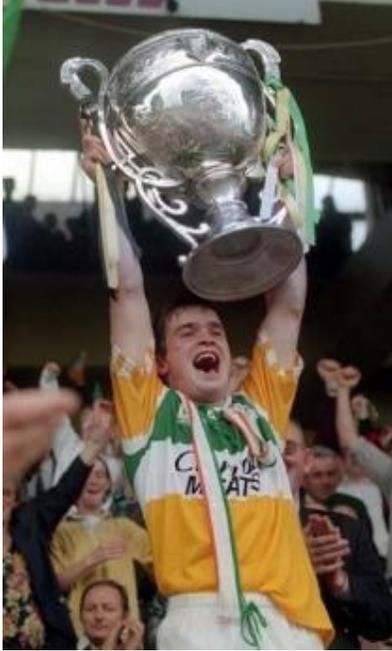
"It wasn't very special at all to be honest. Cork won the All-Ireland and Michael Coleman got a nomination on his own for one side of midfield. Joachim Kelly, Declan Carroll and I were the nominations for the other side. Declan Carroll was taken off twice in both the Munster semi final and the Munster final so that was him gone anyway. Joachim I think only played about 10 minutes in midfield that year and the Cork lads who won the All-Ireland didn't even get a mention. Look, it was grand to get it an all but it wouldn't be that high up on my list".

**In 1991 Offaly won their first and only ever national league. Could you see signs of things to come?**

"No I don't think so. We didn't look that far ahead. We just took games as they came and we won the league with relatively little training. I certainly don't remember training that hard for it. (laughs) I was in college in UCD and I didn't come home to train with Offaly. We didn't train that particularly hard for the league but things just came together and we won".

**You played in the "5 minute final" of '94. What can you remember about that game?**

"We had our patches in that game. I don't think Limerick dominated that game or should have won. We started the first ten minutes of that game and we dominated it. We got a penalty and then bang we were up by about 1-2. The goals that Limerick got were a bit on the soft side as well. We were down by 5 and we battled it back



to 2 points early in the second half. We didn't really hurl as well as we could in that game but with 5 minutes to go we were still plugging away and sure then Johnny's free came about. It wasn't the biggest thunderbolt you'll ever see! Just that bit of luck at the time. We played better against Kilkenny who had won the All-Ireland the year before. Wexford weren't much of opposition that year and Galway were put aside as well. We definitely played better in '95".

**Do you think '95 was a case of one left behind?**

"Yeah as much as '95 was left behind and '94 was got. They balance themselves out. We got a goal half way through the second half and it's the little things then after that. We hit a wide straight after the goal and if I remember correctly there was a period of about 10 minutes were neither team could score. Whoever got the next score was going to win. A perfect example is against Limerick with 5 minutes to go a ball came out to the wing under the Hogan Stand. I got it and I gave it to John Troy and he put it just inside the bar by about 3 inches. The exact same thing against Clare except this time it just goes 3 inches wide".

**How was your relationship with Eamon Cregan?**

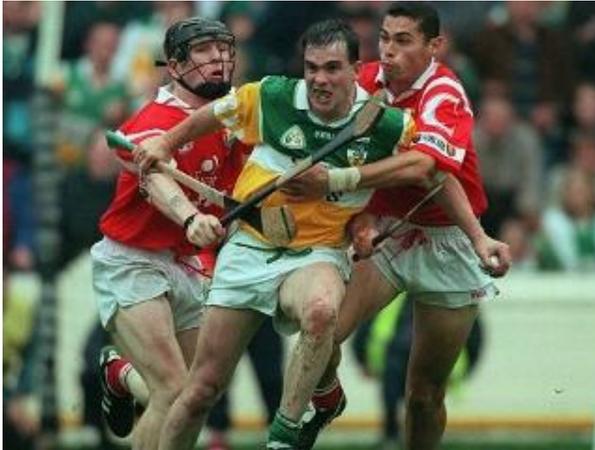
"I have a great respect for Eamon Cregan. He is a very good manager. When you deliver an All-Ireland he obviously brought something to it. There was nothing to suggest that '94 was going to be any different than any other year really. We just showed up on the day against Kilkenny and everything clicks from the very moment. Whether that's down to the manager I don't know. Now we did have our moments as well! He had to call me aside a couple of times too. Or a couple of times you got dropped and you got dropped unfairly but in general he was a fine manager and I would probably have to put him down as the best. He managed to bring in the old and new. Timing is everything to and he was probably the right man to be over that bunch of players. I looked at the '73 final on TG4 one night and Eamon was centre back that day and I could see the resemblance between that Limerick team and the '94 Offaly team in the way we hurled".

**After losing the Leinster final in 1998 how did the players feel about entering the All-Ireland via the back door?**

"We probably shouldn't have lost that final. I think DJ Carey scored two goals in the last 5 or 10 minutes and we hit a lot of wides so we knew we were good enough. I think what happened after the final with all the controversy it kind of took our mind off the feeling "ah were after loosing the Leinster final how are we going to get back up". Had it happened in '97 in the first year of the back door system then I don't know".

**Babs Keating described Offaly as "sheep in a heap". What was the player's reaction when he resigned?**

"In fairness to Babs every manager has their own style. He brought Tipperary out of the doldrums to win a Munster and then on to win All-Ireland in '91. His style though was a typical Tipperary style of hurling which in a way didn't suit us at all. Again you go back to the right man for the right job? Tipperary's way of hurling was to get your half forward line to hold up the ball where ours was to move it quickly because we didn't have big physical men as such. We were using John Troy at centre forward. John is about 5'8. You know maybe Michael Duignan would have been the biggest but again maybe his hurling ability would have been questionable! (laughs) Don't get me wrong he would tell you himself that his level of hurling was different from the Johnny Dooley's and the John Troy's. He brought a huge physical thing to the game. Anyway Babs was probably a different man than we wanted at the time. He ran into trouble in several counties. We have a different attitude to hurling here in Offaly than they do in Tipperary and Kilkenny. We seemed to just take or leave it but in Tipp it's more like a religion. Our training could have been better for the Leinster final but at the same time the players have to take responsibility too. It was us that pucked all the wides in the final! It happened very quickly. The row happened on Sunday, the papers on a Monday and it was over on the Tuesday. Babs didn't meet the players and we didn't meet him. It was a county board decision".



**Can you remember what you said to Marty Morrissey about the "sheep in a heap" remark?**

"Yeah. (laughs) Marty asked me if Babs walked into the dressing room after us winning the All-Ireland what would we say to him. I said "ah I suppose were not a bad aul flock after all"! (laughs) The thing about Babs departure is afterwards he was writing an article every week for the 'Sunday Times' and every week he was criticising Offaly saying we were no good. There was always that stinging report. But sure like a fella said to me one time "If our going to pick up a paper to read about GAA it wouldn't be the 'Sunday Times' ". (laughs) It was the British 'Sunday Times' you know".

**How did the players feel when Michael Bond arrived on the scene?**

"At the time we were very much aware that we were after digging a big hole for ourselves. We were at the bottom of the barrel because Offaly were now known for been really difficult to handle for a number of reasons. Our team manager had walked out on us so we knew what we created we had to get out of it. The thing that Michael Bond brought was a huge amount of confidence to both the players and himself. Again the right man at the right time. Another man could have come in and said "you know what lads you're a right shower of 'hoors' here I'm going to do yez," but Michael wasn't like that. He also had the benefit of coming into a team that had won an All-Ireland and lost a final. Eamon Cregan had set us in motion and Michael bond greased the wheels".

**Offaly played out 3 classic games with Clare. Did that stand to them against Kilkenny?**

"Yes it did. In all fairness to Babs Keating we done an awful amount of physical training in May and June that year. That was one of our gripes that we were doing so much running but that probably carried us through. We weren't going to be beaten after we beat Clare and the same could have been said if Clare beat us".

**Did you realise when Jimmy Cooney blew the final whistle that he had actually blown it 2 minutes early?**

"No I didn't and my own feelings towards it were that we were well beaten. We were out hurled and in the first half we were 10 points down. We didn't deserve to draw that day never mind win. But what people didn't know that day was we only arrived in Croke Park at ten minutes to 3 o'clock and throw in was at 3.30. We were stuck in traffic for about an hour. These things all upset us on the day".

**What did you make of the fans protest on the field?**

"It was great to see it because it was totally unusual and they were a shower of bright sparks! You have to hand it to them because there would never have been a replay had they not done it. It was so unique and so simple of a protest. Maybe if the Irish had of done it in Paris you'd never know! Although I would say they have riot police rather than your local Gardai! We were already showered and we were standing out on the balcony looking at it all. We had a team meeting back in the hotel and one section thought we would get a replay and another section thought we wouldn't and it nearly ended up in a row".



**Given that Kilkenny had beaten Offaly already were you nervous going into the final?**

"Well your nervous going into any big game but no not because they had beaten us. We had been there before. We were a newer team than what Kilkenny had beaten earlier and this was September, not June or July. We also had the three games with Clare which were an added bonus".

**Despite winning two All-Irelands in that decade, given the talent did Offaly under achieve?**

"Well when you go through it in 1990 we lost to Galway in the semi final, in '91 fair enough we lost to Dublin, in '92 and '93 we lost to Kilkenny who won the All-Ireland, in '94 we won it and '95 we lost the final to Clare. In 1996 we lost to Wexford who won the All-Ireland, '97 we had a quite year! In 1998 we won it again and in '99 and 2000 Cork beat us in a semi final and Kilkenny beat us in the final. So in that ten year period whoever beat us won the All-Ireland. It's easy to say we underachieved but look at the teams we lost to. Clare had some unbelievable players, lads like Seanie McMahon and the Lohans. Wexford has Liam Dunne and Martin Story".

**What prompted you to retire from the county scene?**

"Ah the aul legs were gone. Appetite wasn't there and a bigger work rate was required. I would have retired the year before only I said if we can get Kilkenny in the first round I will stay on. We got them in the first round so I did stay on and unfortunately I had a car accident two days before it and I probably shouldn't have played. It wasn't the best way to go out. After every training session I was sore and it was hurting to even bend down to tie my shoe laces the next day. But above all reasons I suppose it was just pure laziness"! (laughs)

**Were you surprised that Tullamore won the championship this year?**

"Well I am disappointed more than anything! (laughs) I suppose nobody would have backed Tullamore at the start of the year to even get to the semi final. Apart from Kilcormac the team I feel most sorry for is St. Rynagh's. They played very well against Tullamore and I think Aidan Fogarty was bringing them on. Tullamore was a major surprise but thoroughly deserved their win in the final and probably should have beaten Birr by even more in the semi final".

**Did Kilcormac miss their big chance?**

"No definitely not. Nobody actually gave Kilcormac much chance either which is a big insult. It was a major insult. There is some fine hurlers there. Basically we pi\*\*ed through the u21 last year. We have lads like Conor Mahon, Dan Currans and James Gorman to name a few. Then you have the two Healionas as well. We had a very young team. On the day Tullamore were better but I think in 2010 Kilcormac will have turned the corner".



#### **How do you rate the current Offaly Seniors?**

"Very simple. I would rate them as much as I would rate Clare or Wexford. I think the standard is low. Kilkenny may have won 4 in a row but the standard that they are up against is very low. It's not like years ago. We do have some great players though. The likes of Shane Dooley, Joe Bergin, Rory Hannify, David Kenny, Brian Carroll, Kevin Brady and Brian Mullins. There is talent there and they should be doing a hell of a lot better than they are bloody doing. But they are not working hard enough. The opposition isn't wonderful. Wexford are as bad as they have been for 20 years. With a little bit of luck there is no reason why we can't beat Wexford, Galway, Limerick and Clare. But we are a long way off Kilkenny and Tipperary. We have to up our work rate".

#### **Sean Ryan opted out of playing hurling this year in order to play football. Did he make the right decision?**

"Sean did make the right decision to concentrate on one or the other, whether or not he chose the right one that's entirely down to him. You can't do the two because your hurling will suffer. You will lose your touch. You have to be very special to play the two. You have to be exceptional".

#### **Do you think the Offaly teams receive enough backing from the county board?**

"I always felt they have. In my time we didn't have any issues anyway. We got fed and watered. We were looked after injury wise. Maybe expenses could have been handled better. Certainly in individual cases anyway. My brother was a farmer and maybe they could have stepped in and paid farmers relief or something like that. I was involved with Offaly minors over the last two years and anything we looked for we got. We got what we wanted".

#### **What teams have you managed?**

"I managed Mullagh of Galway, Castletown of Laois, Kilcormac and Offaly minors for the last two years".

#### **How did you fair with Offaly minors?**

"It was seen as a bit of disaster. We lost to Carlow last year and Westmeath this year. But what people forget is we went to Kilkenny in Nowlan Park this year and we were down by about 5 points with 5 minutes to go. I turned to one of the selectors at that stage and said this is grand we'll play these again anyway. Unfortunately we let in 3 or 4 soft goals in the last few minutes. When we lost to Carlow we probably underestimated them and there was also other issues. But when I read a certain journalist's column and he is saying that the minors was a disaster it's a pity he didn't look at some of the other bloody results in it. Right we lost to Westmeath but on the day these things can happen but it's totally unfair to be given out about these players. It doesn't help in bringing them on whatsoever".

#### **You always had a reputation of enjoying yourself even during the championship season. Are the stories exaggerated?**

"Ah sure I don't know what you've heard now! Like anything they are exaggerated of course. There was a couple of occasions alright! We had a reputation of being easy going and there was a few smokers on the team but you don't win what we won by pricking around. Ah sure there was always the case at half time when you go into the dressing room and have a smoke in the cubicles, put the lighter in your sock and back out to play the second half. I remember after the game pulling off my sock and my lighter fell out! There are



other exaggerated stories of course. I remember playing in the Fitzgibbon cup final for UCD. I played in the worst semi final the day before the final and the thing is I had promised the girlfriend that I would attend a wedding with her regardless of what was on. So I went to hurl and said I would be back up for the wedding so in one way I prayed we would loose! I honestly can't say I done my best to win and I'm embarrassed to say that but unfortunately Waterford IT were absolutely brutal. If they had of taken everyone off we still would have beat them! I came back up to the wedding and had 2 or 3 pints. I went back down to Waterford the next morning to play UCC in the final and we won it in extra time. It was a great game of hurling but of course the rumours going around were that Johnny Pilkington had to be put into a cold shower and fed coffee before he played but he went out and played a stormer! I really only had 2 or 3"!