

Exclusive interview with Sean Lowry
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By David Farrell

Sean Lowry doesn't rate Richie Connor's objectors as footballers.

Former All-Star player Sean Lowry has lashed the members of the current Offaly side over their rejection of former manager Richie Connor.

"You wouldn't treat a dog like that," charged Lowry.

Stating that while the main four players involved might be 'senior players,' it was only in years, but most certainly not in status and said that as far as Richie Connor was concerned these lads "wouldn't lace his boots".

Speaking from his home in historic Clonmacnoise Sean Lowry said that he doesn't even rate them as footballers adding: "What planet are they living on"?



Who were your earliest influences in football?

"Anyone off the '60 and '61 Offaly team really. I was only eight when we won our first Leinster. But there were some wonderful players on them teams. My Father used to bring me to the matches and it was amazing".

Who were your footballing heroes when you were growing up?

"Well believe it or not it was an Edenderry man, Mickey Brady. I used to love watching him playing because he was a great footballer. He had this little punt kick that you wouldn't see tried today but he was great at it. I never got to see Peter Nolan playing because he went to the states but he was a hero as well. There was also Greg Hughes and the great Mick Casey and my own club men Tony McTague and Sean Grogan who both won the '64 Minor All-Ireland".

What did you achieve at club level?

"I won very little at underage. The way it was back then when you played u12 or u14 you maybe got one match a year and at best three matches. It was knockout. I don't think we trained as such. We would all gather in the field and train once. Then a few days later the team sheet and subs would be put up in the local shop window. If you were on that you went to the matches. I won a vocational schools u16 with Offaly alongside Seamus Darby, Freddie Grehan, Art Lowry of Clogherinkoe (Kildare) and 'Catch' Grennan of Rhode. I won three Senior Championships with Ferbane in '71, '74 and '76". The '71 win was very special because it was our first championship since 1914".

What was football like in Ferbane in the 70's and 80's?

"Football was pretty good in Ferbane in the 70's. We had some great players like McTague and Michael Grogan. We came up against a very strong Walsh Island team towards the end of 70's so the success dried up for a few years".

How long did you play for Ferbane Seniors?

"I played from 1970 until 1984".

Ferbane progressed to the quarter final stage this year. Do you expect them to come good again given that they have some great underage teams?

"I don't think so. I went to their games and if you really want to win a county final there is too many of them not good enough. James Grennan was their best player against Erin Rovers and what age is he? As for the underage teams they may be very strong at u12 and u14 but will they continue to play and remember some of them players are from Shannonbridge as well. I have seen teams win an u16 championship and not one of them went on to play senior football. Minor age group is the cut off point as such and other distractions come into play then whether its drink or just having a good time".

Shane Nally captained Offaly minors this year. Do you expect him to make the breakthrough to Offaly Seniors in the future?

"Yes definitely if he works hard. He comes from good stock as well. His mother is a Flynn from Ferbane and his father Eddie is from Ballymahon. He has the attributes and the ability to make the step up and he has good size about him".

Did you play much underage with Offaly?

"I played all the way up to Senior. There was no underage training so your club would send four or five players in to what was known as a trial match. If you were good enough you made it. I played two years at minor level in '69 and '70. We were beaten in a Leinster semi final and a Leinster Final. I played u21 and we won two Leinsters in '71 and '73".

When did you make your Offaly Senior debut?

"I made it against Galway in 1971 in a cup match. Nicholas Clavin must have been injured!"

What did you achieve at County level?

"I have 6 senior Leinster medals, 2 u21 Leinster medal, 3 All-Ireland medals, a Railway cup and 2 All Stars. It was strange because I had won nothing really until I was 18 or 19 and in the space of about three years I won about 7 medals. 1971 was a very special year because I won a Leinster u21, Senior Leinster, Offaly's first ever All-Ireland and Ferbane's first Senior title in 57 years".

Who was your toughest opponent at club and county level?

"At Club level it was Matt Connor. I remember playing full back marking him and I was doing well on him but within about ten minutes he had racked up a massive score. He was just unbelievable. If you gave him an inch he would take a mile. At county level it would have to be 'Bomber' Liston. He was so hard to play against because of who was around him. You might think you were getting the better of him because you got out in front but when you did get out in front they just gave it to Pat Spillane, John Egan or Mikey Shee. If you didn't get out in front he would punish you."

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

"Paddy McCormack was the best at county level. He had this presence or aura about him. I played at centre back and he was at full back and I always knew or just felt safe that if it was kicked in over me that he would come out with it. Some people think he was dirty but he was just hard. Then again I am glad I was playing with him rather than against him! At club level there was obviously Tony McTague and our '71 captain Michael Grogan. I will always remember his speech after we won the county final. It was brilliant".

What was the best ground you ever played in?

"It was easily Croke Park. I remember my father taking me there for the first time and when I was walking up the steps of the Hogan stand I seen the green grass oasis if you like. The hair literally stood up on the back of my neck. But as a player I have to say it didn't faze me. If you go out to play in Croke Park and start worrying about people watching you or making mistakes then you can forget about it. I always just went out to play my game and that was it. It never got to me".

You were involved with Offaly's first ever All-Ireland glory which must have been special. What was the homecoming like?

"What was the homecoming like? Well it truly was something special. I remember seen grown men and women crying tears of joy. It was very emotional and it meant so much to everyone. For people like my Father and my Uncles who had watched Offaly all there lives but never even dreamt of seen Sam Maguire coming to Offaly it was great. There were tears in everyone's eyes. I wasn't on the team and I was only 19 but I savoured the moment. I will bring those memories to the grave with me".

In '72 Offaly put back to back titles. Was it easy to motivate players having won the year previous?

"Yes absolutely. This group of players had been knocking on the door for years. They had lost the 1969 final and once they tasted All Ireland success they wanted more. I used to sit in the dressing room just looking around at these legends and heroes. I didn't say much but it felt really good being in their company".

Were you surprised that the success dried up for so long and that it was 10 years before Offaly won their next All-Ireland?

"We won three Leinsters and lost an All-Ireland final to Kerry in that space of time so we weren't exactly that far away. I remember we lost to Dublin in our first game one year but it was actually their third game because they had played through the qualifiers. But when you have two All-Irelands in a row and the Leinster the following year you do expect to be competing. But the team was changing. The '71/72 was breaking up and new guys were emerging".

From them three All Irelands we had 18 recipients of All Star awards. Is that a fair reflection of how good those teams were?

"I think so yes. In fact I think we could have had more. I think Pat Fitzgerald was very unlucky not to get one".

You won two All Stars yourself in '79 and '82. What did they mean to you?

"They are very important to me. I was the only Offaly player in '79 to win one. It is very nice to get an All Star. It is a lot easier to be passed up for one than it is to win one. It's a great awards night and don't believe people who say it's just another night out. It is recognition of your hard work and ability and it really is very special".



You have won an Offaly record 3 All Ireland medals, how much does that mean to you?

"It means a lot and I really consider myself very lucky to have been around when we had such good teams. 1971 was obviously special because it was Offaly's first ever All Ireland title. 1972 meant a lot to me because my father was alive to see it and I was actually playing at centre back. I think if I am been honest then '82 meant the most to me because I was playing alongside my brothers Brendan and Mick. I mentioned Croke Park as my favourite ground but there really is something magic about it. I remember that day when we came out onto the field I looked up at the clock. I said to myself at 5.35pm it will all be over. The match went on anyway and Darby scored the goal. I actually thought we had scored too early because I knew Kerry would get a chance at some stage. I think Gerry Carroll had the ball and maybe Johnny Mooney for a bit. Kerry's chance came and Furlong ended up out of the goals trying to clear it but he lost it. I ran in to cover him and the ball came in. I think there was snow on it because it went that high and just seemed to stay in the air. I just remember hearing this shout "there's nobody behind you Lowry!" I caught it in my chest instead of over my head after that shout in case I dropped it. I looked up at the clock for that split second and it was 5.35pm. Well I mean if I had

to run from there to Hill 16 or through Hill 16 for that matter I would have because no way on earth was that ball leaving my hands. I think I faked a pass to one of my team mates twice but even they weren't getting it. Kerry had had their chance and I finished with the ball in my hands. Even when the supporters rushed the field I couldn't let it go out of my hands. I always said good teams get a goal when it's most crucial and we got ours that day. I looked at the video afterwards and the 'Bomber' was literally rooted to the 14 yard line and never moved. He just seemed to be caught in the headlights so to speak because he had plenty of time to do what I thought he could have done. It was only when I looked at the video I realised it was Padraig Dunne who had shouted at me. He had tracked from Midfield when he saw Furlong leave his goal and it showed great commitment and great talent I suppose as well. He was only a young lad and it really epitomised the team to be honest".

Who was the best manager you ever played under?

"To be honest I can't say any managers ever done much for me. I don't believe managers ever won anything for me. Eugene McGee had some great points but also had some bad ones. Fr Gilooley was a great motivator. He was way ahead of his time in that sense but he was a poor tactician. Fr Gilooley would always think of the wives or girlfriends and used to send us home with little presents for them. My wife Nuala still has tea pots and sugar bowls he gave her. He might have only done it once or twice a year but it was a lovely gesture".

How did you end up playing for Crossmolina and Mayo?

"I was working for the ESB and a job came up in Mayo. It was a way of moving up in the company so to speak. We went for it because my two daughters Rachel and Sarah were young at the time, six and eight. I was 32 at the time and I had no intention of playing football. But the thing is the GAA family is a huge family all over Ireland no matter where you go. When you walked into the bank in Ballina or Roscommon lads would recognise you and want to talk to you. You were never on your own. I ended up playing with Crossmolina and we reached their first ever county final but we were beaten. Mayo just came out of the blue. I was sitting at home one day and the manager Liam O'Neill rang me to see would I play. I wasn't really keen at first but he said to me "this is Mayo so its going to be a short year". There was no back door back then. I actually trained Crossmolina to a county final as well but we lost. We just couldn't seem to get over the finish line".

What did winning a Connacht championship in '85 mean to you?

"Look when you're with a team, any team, its great to win. It was great to see their faces so happy. A lot of articles were written down there afterwards praising me and my contribution so that was nice. I think because I had won an All-Ireland they looked up to me because they weren't aiming that high and that was Mayo's biggest problem. They were thinking too small. I got a sense of satisfaction from been part of it and I was glad I helped. But I am an Offaly man and that's all I will ever be".

So you didn't have split Loyalties in the '97 All-Ireland semi final?

"No definitely not but I was so disappointed in Offaly's performance that day. My two daughters cheer for Mayo because that's were they grew up. One of them is married to a Mayo man. Nuala actually knitted a jersey for them that day, Mayo on the front and Offaly on the back. We were fourteen years in Mayo. I did tell the Mayo management in '85 that if Offaly won Leinster and Mayo won Connacht that I wouldn't play against Offaly. Things have changed since then and maybe people do it now but no way would I have done it then and I don't think I'd be much use to them these days"! (laughs)

You were involved this year in selecting Richie Connor as the new Offaly manager. Looking back now was it the right appointment?

"At the time we sat down and we interviewed four different people. It was a decision I made personally and that we made as a group and I stick by it. I felt we wanted someone with a presence and that people could look up too. He was our last All-Ireland winning captain and I really didn't think we needed an outsider and I am still of the same opinion. I suppose it was unfortunate what happened with Richie in his personal life but I thought it was outrageous what they done to him".

So you feel he was treated harshly?

"Oh yes absolutely. It was just outrageous. You wouldn't treat a dog like that. Time will tell because bottom line is them players just aren't good enough. The same players that were given out about him were the ring leaders and they are not good enough and if you are not good enough it doesn't matter what manager you have. I would have no hesitation in telling them four lads that if I met them. It was just ridiculous. He only got about five weeks of training and one game. If Eugene McGee was treated the same way as Richie Connor he wouldn't have stayed as long as he did. Players have a job to do and managers have a job to do and the players have no business trying to do the managers job. We had rows with McGee but there was never such thing as removing him. I was a senior player at the time and a lot of younger lads were given out about Eugene then and that's not a big secret but a manager is never going to get on with a panel of thirty-five. There is always going to be fringe lads who want to be playing. Sometimes he might get onto lads if he thought they weren't putting it in at training but there was never a question of removing him. When the lads gave out about him I would say to them "look lads, we are not playing for Eugene McGee, we are playing for Offaly". That's the hand you were dealt with so deal with it. If they had a problem with Richie Connor they should have sat down with him, just 3 or 4 of the more senior players. Tell him what they think is going wrong. But to do what they done was disgraceful".

Do you think it was more of the senior members that orchestrated his downfall?

"Senior in year's maybe but certainly not in status. I don't even rate them as footballers. Maybe Richie was too honest with them lads in telling them they were no longer good enough for the position they thought they should be playing. Maybe that was his downfall. What planet are these lads living on and who do they think they are? These are the same lads that got humiliated by a poor Down team by 19 points in Tullamore. The Westmeath game was a disgrace as well. These are not county standard players and there dictating to Richie Connor? They wouldn't lace his boots. I often felt like going to the media after it to make a statement but I think I would rather meet them face to face and tell them what I think".

What did you make of the performance against Kildare this year?

"It was embarrassing to say the least. They obviously weren't prepared very well or they just didn't care. It was one of the worst displays I have seen in recent times".



Do you think there is anyone on the current Offaly panel that would make the '82 team?

"Niall McNamee would be certain of his place on the panel but who would you drop from the team? Johnny Mooney, Brendan Lowry or Matt Connor? Niall McNamee is a class player and is without doubt the best in the county. He would be a huge addition to any team".

Do you think the lifestyle difference you had compared to the current players makes any difference?

"Yes of course. We hadn't much money and we all had bad cars. We did have a few pints but they were different times. There are far too many distractions today. I don't know what has happened to Offaly recently because we were much bigger men than what's playing today. As I said earlier at u12 and u14 we might only have one match a year but were always messing down in the football field. There was no coaching. The only way you learned was if you lost the ball all the time you changed

your style. Brendan Lowry was the only forward less than 6 feet on the '82 team but pound for pound he would beat most of them anyway. These days it's a real case of men against boys".

What is wrong with Offaly?

"I don't know. I have been asked that question many times and I just can't give a proper answer. I suppose the bodies just aren't there anymore. Lads just don't seem to be playing as much as they used to. Anyone I talk to who's working with minors or u16's are all having huge trouble. The players are too busy drinking or smoking or having a good time. Of course you can't reprimand them anymore either. You can't drop anyone anymore or you won't have a team. Their friends will quit with them. They don't want to be told what to do because they know everything. Nobody cares anymore either. How do you change that mindset? By winning an All-Ireland but you have to get lads to play football first in order to win an All-Ireland!"

With u16's and minors these days it seems more of a chore than a privilege to play with Offaly. Do you think that's true?

"I am a bit detached from that scene at the minute but everywhere I go that's the general talk. Seemingly at minor club level the players have become unmanageable. It's a huge problem and they just don't give a damn anymore. Teams are winning championships and then they never kick a ball ever again? Sure that's not right".

Tell us about your nephew Shane and did you attend the Irish open?

"Indeed I did. It was like a bit of déjà vu with the All-Ireland! I think Shane will never fully realise what he did. I have said it to him several times for him to stand up and take that shot with the whole world just waiting for him to collapse, it was brilliant. I think for a young lad like him to say to himself I'm going to win this took something special. The amount of professional players who had tried to win the Irish open, from your Christy O'Connor Jnr to your Philip Walton, Darren Clarke or Paul McGinley. I have played golf with him and I always knew he was going to be something special".

Did you ever think he would achieve what he did?

"I have played golf with good golfers but I have never played with anyone like him. He has beautiful hands and has the technique. He has the confidence but no arrogance. He has it every way. He said to me during the play-off that he knew he was going to get par and he did. He said (Robert) "Rock may have got the money but I got the exemption". I genuinely believe you will see Shane playing Ryder cup he is that good. Nuala and I went to Gleneagles to the Johnny Walker and he missed the cut by one shot. I watched all the golfers that day and Shane was right up there with them all. He is definitely a big day player. I am looking forward to going to Augusta to The Masters and once he gets me three tickets for that everything will be fine". (laughs)

Today the former ESB worker says he is enjoying his retirement at his peaceful residence in Clonmacnoise. Sean's current hobbies involve Gardening, minding his two Grandchildren and playing a few rounds of golf at Esker Hills.

But if Sean's bleak but honest outlook on Offaly football is in anyway accurate the faithful fans may need a Sat Nav in order to find Croke Park in the future.