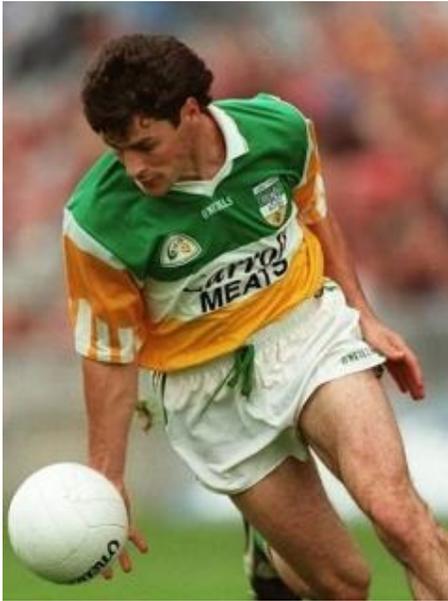


Vinny Claffey Interview
18 November 2009

By David Farrell



Former Offaly and Doon legend Vinny Claffey has backed Pdraig Dunne's claim that Offaly are currently suffering from a lack of leadership on the field stating 'leadership is a huge problem for Offaly at the moment'.

Claffey, a Leinster medal winner with Offaly in 1997 says that apart from a lack of leadership among the players, Offaly have simply forgotten how to win and that had they won the Leinster title in 2006 things could have been very different.

He believes that had Tommy Lyons been given the Offaly job a few years earlier that Offaly would definitely have won an All-Ireland because Lyons was the best manager he worked under with Offaly stating quite simply 'He delivered'.

In this exclusive interview with Vinny Claffey he defends Offaly manager Tom Cribben's decision to hand five players their senior debut against Kildare, how he wouldn't trade any of his medals for an All-Star and how he was not one bit surprised that Clara captured the senior championship this year.

Who were your earliest influences on football?

'The earliest influences would have been a lot of the '82 team. Matt Connor was probably the biggest influence but also lads like Johnny Mooney, Brendan Lowry and Richie Connor. They would all have been big influences'.

Who were your footballing heroes when you were growing up?

'Matt Connor was without a doubt'.

How long did you play for Doon Seniors?

'I started playing with Doon senior when I was 17 so overall about 23 years. It was a very long time!' (laughs)

What was football like in Doon in the 80's and 90's?

'When I started playing with Doon we were a junior team and we found it very tough. We had a lot of good older players but it took younger players coming through to help. Lads like my twin brother David, Kieran Rigney and myself were coming through at that stage and that probably gave the older lads a boost. I think we won the junior in '87 and three years later we got into senior after winning the intermediate and the senior 'B'. When I started we were pretty low but there were always good players in Doon. The junior was probably the hardest to win. I think Tubber beat us in '86 and then in '87 we beat Shannonbridge in a replay. We actually found it easier to win the intermediate and senior 'b' over the junior'.

What did you achieve at club level?

'I won a junior, intermediate, Senior 'b' and a couple of league medals. It wasn't the senior league though. We got to two senior semi finals but got beaten. We won the minor 'b' as well but I didn't play much u14 or u16 football because I was involved with athletics. I only really start taking football serious when I made the Offaly u21 squad'.

Do you feel Doon were good enough to win a senior during them years?

'Yes we were. Rhode beat us in both of them semi finals and I really feel we should have won at least one of them games and with a bit of luck on the day we could have. We had a good team'.

What was your proudest moment with club and county?

'It would probably have been going senior with Doon. We were trying for a long time and I suppose when we won senior 'b' we thought there were better days ahead for us. Looking back on it now for Offaly I would say winning the National league in '98 simply because Offaly had never won it before even with the great teams they had in the 60's, 70's and 80's. It was a huge achievement'.

Do you think Doon will return to the senior ranks soon?

'I would be hoping so and like any country club it's going to be tough but it's going to get even tougher due to emigration. If you are lucky enough not to loose players then we probably have a good chance. Walsh Island beat Doon this year but next year we will be as good as any team in it'.

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

'From Doon I would say my twin brother David and Kieran Rigney. At county level it was Cathal Daly and Peter Brady. From a forward perspective Brady was the best and I played with him a long time. From a backs perspective Cathal Daly was brilliant'.

Who was the toughest player you ever played with?

'Cathal Daly'.

Who was your toughest opponent?

'The toughest I played on was Thomas Mannion of Galway. He had everything going for him, he was very fast, very strong and a good footballer'.

What were the best grounds you played in?

'Croke Park'.



Did you play any other sports growing up?

'No just athletics and football. There was very little soccer and no rugby around here'.

Did you play much underage with Offaly?

'No I didn't. I cant remember exactly but I don't think I went for minor trials. I played u21 in '85 and in '86 when we reached the All-Ireland final. Peter Brady was immense in that final at midfield but he had been doing it all year. In our first game we played Wicklow who had Kevin O'Brien who had just come on the senior scene. We had Donal O'Neill from Edenderry in goals and he would lorry the ball out about 70 yards, Brady would catch it, turn and kick it straight over the bar. That happened on more than one occasion I can tell you! (laughs) They made a great combination'.

When did you make your senior debut and how long did you play for?

'My debut was in 1986 at league level and in '87 at championship level. I played 17 years with Offaly'.

What did you achieve at county level?

'I won 3 O'Byrne cups, The Leinster in '97 and the National League in '98'.

In '97 Offaly won the Leinster. How special was that for you?

'It was very special because before Tommy Lyons came in I would have been thinking that I wasn't going to win a Leinster. Maybe not the younger lads but for me personally it didn't look like we would even get into a Leinster final never mind win one'.

Peter Brady, Roy Malone and yourself played in the full forward line that day. What was it like to play with them lads?

'It was very easy to play with them lads. Tommy Lyons had us playing the way he wanted us to play but it was a very easy way to play. They were both exceptional footballers and when you play with two good footballers it obviously makes it that much easier on you. We knew one another very well and I think we played well together'.

It's been said Brady was one of if not Edenderry's best player ever. How did you rate him?

'I would look at Peter and Finbar on a par. They were both great footballers but Peter was simply an exceptional footballer. He made his senior debut in '85 I think it was which showed at that age to make an Offaly senior team just how good he was. In his first match I think he scored two points, one off his left and one off his right. In the u21 All-Ireland final I think he scored around ten points from midfield!'

What was Tommy Lyons like as a manager?

'He was excellent. It was very simple really, you do things Tommy's way or you didn't do them at all. The first thing he brought in was discipline which was badly lacking at the time. The second thing he did was get us fitter than any team in Ireland. Any manager that can do them two things is definitely going in the right direction

What can you remember about the Neutron diet?

'I remember a bit about it alright. Number one on my list was coffee which I didn't mind given up really. The Neutron diet was more for lads trying to loose weight. We all tried to stick to it as much as we could and it was supposed to give you more energy but I think it was more for lads who needed to loose weight'.

You were hard done by in '98 by not receiving an All-Star. How did you feel about that?

'That year I think Declan Browne got an All-Star in that position. Back then you could only get it for your position unlike now where they just pick 6 lads. I would have no problem what so ever about Declan getting one. I think the year before I had a better chance. Joe Brolly had gotten one and they had been beaten early on in the championship. Of course you are disappointed at the time but the important thing is to have a Leinster medal and a National league medal at the end of the day. I remember at the '97 All-Stars some of the Kildare lads who had gotten All-Stars saying to me that they would swap them for Leinster medals any day. I think it was more disappointing for Offaly in general that we only got one All-Star which Cathal thoroughly deserved'.

Lyons apparently claimed had he taken over the Offaly team earlier he could have delivered an All-Ireland such was the talent? Do you agree with that?

'I would definitely. What went against us in '97 was that we had come from division four and I think we were ranked about 26th or 27th in the country. When we won a Leinster the whole place went mad! We probably hadn't the experience because we went from playing division four matches one year to an All-Ireland semi final the next year. We certainly didn't do ourselves justice against Mayo that day. Maybe if we had played a few more big matches in the previous years we might have known how to handle ourselves on the big occasions. We went from no hoppers to been given a real good chance going into games. I am still very disappointed we didn't beat Mayo that day.'

What do you remember about the night of the Leinster final?

'I remember we went to the 'Hole in the wall' first and I remember finishing up in 'Spiders' now the Phoenix Arms watching a video of the match at about 2 'clock in the morning! That was the last thing I remember about that night but that's not saying the night ended at 2am'!

What teams have you managed?

'I managed the fresher team and the Sigerson team in Athlone. I managed Clara and Doon'.

Were you surprised to see Clara win the championship this year?

'No I wasn't surprised at all. When I trained Clara I could see how confident Clara were no matter who they were playing and from a Doon perspective it would take you a little by surprise. There are very few teams around at the moment that would play Rhode and be confident and would think they are going to beat them. That is the way Clara would be thinking about it and how they would approach it. That comes from underage

as well because most of them lads would have beaten Rhode at some level so they wouldn't be afraid of them and they also have a lot of good players'.



How do you rate their chances in Leinster?

'I thought they were excellent against Rathvilly up until Ross Brady was sent off. He will be a big loss for them, Ross and Scott were playing very well together and he was a great option to put in full forward as well which showed in the county final. Everyone is talking about Portlaoise at the minute but they have lost Colm Parkinson and Zack Touhy and to lose two players like that they could be caught on the hop. They are probably very confident no matter who they play'.

Did you enjoy your time managing Clara?

'I did yeah. I learned a lot. I learned managing teams is so different than playing. To me it is harder to manage than it is to play. When your playing your just thinking about yourself but as a manager your thinking about 30 players at all times. I did enjoy it though'.

Would you like to manage Offaly someday?

'I am after getting involved with Maryland in Westmeath now and if I stay enjoying it then maybe. But at the moment no I couldn't see myself managing Offaly. Although as a player I could never see myself winning a Leinster so you'd never know. Managing is all about learning. I made mistakes as a player and I will make mistakes as a manager but if you learn from the mistakes you make you will enjoy it more. It's not all about winning but it definitely does make it more enjoyable. I certainly intend to stay involved in football so maybe the u21's or minor is something I could get involved with'.

You were involved with Offaly this year under Tom Cribben. What is your opinion on the season just gone?

'It was a tough year. It was tough on Tom the way Richie went and he couldn't plan his year out. He came in and was straight in to league matches. I think he done well to keep us in division 3. Against Kildare he blooded a lot of younger players which to me was exactly what Offaly needed. Apart from getting to a Leinster in 2006 we are probably like the Offaly team I played on in the '90's in the sense we are going through the motions. We need something to give us that edge and hopefully Tom will do that this year. He has a chance to look at players from now and to be doing a bit of training with them'.

Would you defend his decision to give 5 lads their debut against Kildare?

'Oh yeah definitely without a doubt. Tom, Dermot and myself were all on the same wave length there because at the end of the day you could keep persisting with the same players but it doesn't bring players on for that to happen. It was the same in '97 when Tommy Lyons came in and he didn't care less what your name was or who you were he just looked at it like this, if you were good enough you got a run. Cathal Daly and Roy Malone were two examples of this who came straight in and took their chance. There is nothing wrong with doing that it keeps the older lads on their toes. I personally think it's the only way to go. Niall Darby would also have been a big loss'.

Is there any young player in particular you can see making the breakthrough soon?

You have to look at Anton Sullivan. He is the real obvious one. The minors done well this year and were unlucky not to beat Dublin. There are plenty of lads off that team that could make it. If you look at the likes of Tyrone for example they are all producing good underage teams'.

Why did you step down as a selector?

'A couple of reasons really. Time would be the main one. Dermot and myself went in late last year and it wasn't something we had really thought about. We were part of the interim management team with Tom Coffey so when Tom Cribben came in he wanted someone pretty fast. We really weren't looking at staying in it long term'.

Overall did you enjoy the experience?

'Yes definitely. It was a learning curve and I learned a lot. I would hope players realise this that I never stopped learning as a player and I remember when I was about 35 I went to training and the manager was given out to me over something. On the way home one of the players said to me 'how do you listen to that at your age you're playing 14 or 15 years with Offaly'? I said that's the mistake you'll make if you ever think you know it all then your in trouble. I went through about 9 managers with Offaly and I wouldn't have been successful with a lot of them but I would have learned from them all. A lot of players these days think they know it all at a young age and it's a very dangerous thing if you think you know more than a manager. You should always stay learning and you will always stay learning as long as you're playing'.

Who was the best Offaly manager you worked under?

'Tommy Lyons from a results point of view and fitness point of view. He delivered'.

There have been plenty of rumours going around regarding big changes so should Offaly fans expect a more youthful team next year do you think?

'I would be hoping that Tom has a good chance to put his imprint on the team this year and I would be hoping he goes with who he see's fit to play for Offaly. It's not a case of just going for youth because if that's the case myself and peter probably wouldn't have played in '97. When Tommy came in we were 32 and a lot of people might have said forget about them but if your good enough and the number one thing your doing what your told then age doesn't matter. A manager needs 30 guys pulling in the one direction'.

Padraig Dunne claims an "extreme lack of leadership and commitment" is the problem with the senior team. Did you notice that in your time involved?

'Yeah I have to say leadership wouldn't be great there at the moment. You need to win to bring leaders through. If they had won the Leinster in 2006 then we would have had a few leaders. So he is definitely right you need leaders and we don't have any. As for commitment I thought the panel this year were very good. When Frank Weir made his debut I think he scored around 5 or 6 points against Cork which showed he was a huge talent and it's a pity he didn't stick with it. He was an exceptional footballer and I can tell you now Tommy Lyons didn't chase too many lads, but he chased Frank Weir. But fair play to Frank he didn't mess around because when Frank didn't want to play he just packed it in. Some guys just go in and don't push themselves to make the team. Discipline may have been a bigger issue but it's the same for most counties. Take Kerry for example they won the All-Ireland but late on in the year they had similar issues with lads out drinking. A lot of those guys with Offaly put in huge time but whether or not their doing enough of the right things is a another question. For me I would say leadership is a huge problem for Offaly at the moment'.



What has been the problem and why are we gone back so much?

'It's hard to know. One big problem I do see is that Offaly have forgotten how to win. When I started playing we got to the u21 All-Ireland final which showed you were good enough to win Leinsters and play in All-Irelands. We were also coming from a background of '71, '72 and '82 and winning All-Irelands. I remember Martin Furlong was a selector with Offaly before he went to America and I remember chatting to him one night at training and he said 'Offaly's problem isn't winning finals, it's getting into them'. It showed in '97 we weren't afraid to win Leinster and even in 2006 we were very unlucky not to beat Dublin. I think Stephen Cluxton was very luck to stay on the field and instead Alan McNamee got the line. The match could have gone the other way. Dublin have been the dominant team in Leinster for the last five years and Offaly are good enough to do it but a lot of it is knowing you are good enough. We have lost a lot of minor finals in the last few years and it is so important to win minor and u21 finals because then you know your good enough to compete when you make it to senior'.

Is it a problem that some of the bigger areas like Tullamore, Edenderry and Ferbane are not producing enough good players anymore?

'Well it probably is but you cant dictate where the players are going to come form. You just have to work with what you got. It's hard to know why players aren't coming through from them areas but that's the way football is. When I was grown up Walsh Island and Ferbane were the two dominate teams in Offaly. Then Walsh Island went very low but just look now their back up. I don't think it matters were your from'.

Who do you think will challenge for the Dowling cup next year?

'I can see Walsh Island challenging. I hope so for my wife's sake! (laugh) I saw a lot of their league games this year in division one because my wife is from Walsh Island and even before they won the intermediate you could see they were a senior team. Then obviously Rhode and Clara will compete'.

Would be in favour of parish rule?

'Yes definitely. Without doubt. I remember saying to someone the last time I played under it was in 1986. With very little training and very few matches we got into a senior semi final against Edenderry when Peter Brady scored two goals and they beat us but we had the makings of a great team. I think it would be a huge help in the county but it's hard because there is die hards in every club that just don't want a parish team. But it works and Brosna Gaels is a prime example. They have just gone senior in hurling which proves it can be done. If it's done at underage why cant it be done at adult? It would definitely strengthen teams for our own benefit. Apart from Rhode there is no consistent team in Offaly and whether people like it or not the level of football would be much higher. It would be a huge help. I think there are too many lads making senior teams only because there is nobody else available. The more bodies you have the harder you'll have to train to make the team. I personally would love to see it'.

And so another former Offaly star adds his voice to the call for a return to the parish rule.