

In the first of a two-part feature, **Neil Loughran** looks back at the rise of **Peter Withnell** from virtual obscurity to forming part of the devastating Down forward line that ended the county's 23-year search for Sam Maguire...



THE men's toilets of any hostelry aren't normally the place you would want to spend too much time of an afternoon, but on Sunday, August 11 1991 the restrooms of the Carrickdale Hotel outside Newry are like a Wall Street trading floor. Amid the sound of running taps and the whirring of hand-dryers, groups of men happily stand and shoot the breeze. Cigarettes are lit, smoked and stubbed before another is swiftly unfurled from the pack. The thronging crowds outside can wait, the pints will still be there when they come back. For now, serious business is under discussion. 'Unbelievable... just unbelievable' 'What about Witherall?' 'Who?' 'Big Witherall... isn't it Witherall?' 'Withnell?' 'Aye, the big lad who got the two goals?' 'That's him' Just hours earlier, 60-odd miles down the road, they had watched in awe as Peter Withnell trod all over Kerry in the All-Ireland semi-final. If some of those Kingdom stars were already seeing the light go out on their careers, they were plunged into near darkness that day. The Down support didn't care. At long last, the red and black were back in an All-Ireland final for the first time since 1968. Then, young men like Brendan Sloan, Mickey Cole, Ray McConville and Colm McAlarney strode fearlessly onto the hallowed turf at Croke Park to secure instant legend status within the county. Now they had another. Just 21 years old, Withnell was the wrecking ball forward Down had been crying out for. Chest puffed out, shoulders as broad as the Mourne Mountains and sporting a crew-cut hairstyle that saw him bear closer resemblance to a US marine than a Gaelic footballer, he didn't like the big stage – he loved it. And once you saw Peter Withnell, you never forgot him. 'I'd never heard tell of him before this year and then he goes and does that' 'Ah, it was unreal. Spillane couldn't handle him, couldn't get near him' 'Witherall had his number from the start' 'Withnell...' 'Aye, that's right...' 'They'll not forget his name down in Kerry any time soon, that's for sure...'

LOOKING out the window of Costa Coffee on a mizzly November afternoon in Newry, Peter Withnell furrows his brow as he pauses for thought. The conversation has turned to the reunions that took place during the summer to mark that momentous All-Ireland success 25 years ago. "The sad thing is," he says, "when we all finished our playing careers, we went our separate ways. I feel we all should have stayed in contact, even if it was only once or twice a year."

They were a band of brothers that summer, no doubt. But Withnell was always different, right from the very start. While the likes of James McCartan, Mickey Linden and Ross Carr were honing their skills in the hot and heavy environs of schools football, Withnell was messing about with his mates on the concrete jungle out the front of Ballynahinch High School. Gaelic football couldn't have been further from his thoughts. A couple of sessions with the Loughinisland U10s weren't enough to reel him in and, besides, he was already receiving admiring glances from Irish League soccer clubs after starring for the underage teams at Drumaness Mills. But when some of his friends started going to the St Colman's GAA club in Drumaness a couple of nights a week for training, Withnell decided to give it another go not long after his 15th birthday. "We used to go out to the local field, Paradise Park. If you'd seen it, it was far from paradise. It was like something from *The Jungle Book*. If you were playing in the forward line, it had a slope like that," he explained, holding his hand at a 45 degree angle, "and then it levelled itself off. "There were two electric poles at either side that went right across the field, the sheep were the grass-cutters, they grazed on the field so you had sheep's s***e all over the place. The changing room was an Ormo bread van. "You might have been able to hear all the action, but you couldn't see it because of the slope. Then all of a sudden you saw this clatter of heads, then the ball, then the shoulders and the chest and the legs would all appear – suddenly there was a stampede coming and you had to get ready for action. "That was Drumaness." Work, or a lack of it, took Withnell to England towards the end of his teenage years. A trial at English league side Reading showed promise, but he wasn't in the mood to wait around at youth level for a chance to prove himself. Homesickness expedited his planned return, and soon Withnell was back out on Paradise Park. Having attended development squad trials in the past and been left frustrated, the county team wasn't on his agenda. Peter Withnell wasn't on Pete McGrath's radar either. The pair were brought together when the Down boss received a phone call out of the blue suggesting he check out the powerhouse midfielder running the show week-in, week-out for Drumaness. "Despite the fact I had been managing the minor team in the county since 1982 prior to all of this, I had never come across Peter Withnell – I knew nothing about him," admitted McGrath (right). "I got a call from a man in Drumaness saying he was worth a look. There was going to be a training session in Newry that

'I wasn't deeply involved in GAA. I didn't know all the top players around the country. Names and players didn't really mean anything to me – it was just a game of football'

weekend and I thought 'there's nothing to be lost', so I asked him along."

By now, the likes of Linden, McCartan and Greg Blaney were household names across the county, but their status meant nothing to Withnell. "I walked into the changing room and I didn't know anybody. They all knew each other but I didn't know anybody. "My path didn't cross with these guys because they were playing division one or division two football, and I was only back from England." Being a fish out of water didn't bother him. McGrath missed the challenge game against Louth with the 'flu' but assistant John Murphy liked what he saw and Withnell was invited back for winter training. At an indoor training session the following week, McGrath recalls his attention being instantly drawn to the new boy. "We were doing circuits and that kind of thing, and I just remember thinking 'this guy, if nothing else, damn it he's athletic' because he was just bouncing off the floor." "I was super-fit," adds Withnell. "Pete used to have us running up the mountain at Kilbroney Forest Park, it was hard going alright, ask any of the boys, but I was well

able for it." By the time the National League hit full flow, Withnell had made the number 14 jersey his own. The Mournemen had an indifferent campaign but, as ever, expectations were high heading into the Ulster Championship. Armagh were cast aside in the quarter-finals, and Down needed a replay before getting past Derry. Defending champions Donegal lay in wait. Withnell missed a gilt-edged goal chance but his bustling, all-action style had given Down something different, something new as his unsettling influence afforded space for the other forwards to run riot. "He brought something that was maybe lacking in Down forward lines for quite a while," said McGrath. "Down always had very talented players who could play over the top of the ground but we were maybe lacking that raw physical strength to allow players to play off that. "Peter brought that and as the season wore on he gained experience, his decision-making became better and better. He had explosive power, strength and fearlessness." Having got their hands on the Anglo-Celt, Down were back at Croke Park – and so too was Withnell. In 1988, as a raw 18-year-old, he was an unused sub when London fell

meekly to Meath in the All-Ireland junior final. Little did he know then the memories he would create at the famous old stadium just three years later. With each win, each surge of momentum, word spread further about Down's new 'bear in the square'. Not that Tom Spillane had taken much notice. Injury meant he hadn't featured for Kerry all year, only to be drafted back in by Mickey Ned O'Sullivan for the semi-final. A four-time All-Ireland winner and three-time Allstar, the veteran full-back was more concerned with getting himself right rather than worrying about Withnell. "Not a bit, not a bit," he said when asked whether he had studied his opponent ahead of that last four clash. Ten minutes in, Spillane might have been regretting that decision. Beneath a baking hot summer sun, Withnell left his vaunted opponent in his wake as he played a clever one-two with Mickey Linden before lashing the ball low past Charlie Nelligan with his left foot. It would get worse for Spillane. With seven minutes left on the clock, and Kerry trailing by three, Withnell beautifully read the bounce from a long Barry Breen ball to find himself in space. Spillane desperately attempted to close the space but, just in the nick of time, Withnell fired home an unstoppable shot, this time with his right foot. "He was a very fine footballer, very aggressive, hard but fair," said Spillane 25 years on. "Of course, that was a fine Down team as well. When you have

