



■ **CODE BREAKER:** Peter Withnell takes a shot against Armagh in the Ulster Championship; Withnell (back row, fourth from left) with the rest of the Down 1991 All-Ireland winning team at Croke Park before September's final between Dublin and Mayo; Withnell in action for Cliftonville in the Irish League

Main picture: **Seamus Loughran**



'Sport was a big part of my

“WRITE away by all means, you're the journalist, but please just don't make it about religion.” It's no wonder Peter Withnell is still wary 25 years on.

In the months after his All-Ireland winning exploits with Down the public, particularly inside the county, wanted to know more about the man who had come from nowhere to the steps of the Hogan Stand on the third Sunday in September.

First things first – Withnell, where was the name from? Someone had heard he was a Protestant. Another rumour doing the rounds suggested he was in the RUC.

In the pre-ceasefire era, this wasn't the kind of talk you wanted flying about the terraces.

As if sinking Kerry in the All-Ireland semi-final with strikes off his left and right shouldn't have been enough to end talk about what foot he kicked with, such talk refused to die.

“I'll be quite honest – I did not know, and still don't know, what Peter's persuasion is. I've no idea,” says Pete McGrath, the man who master-minded Down's All-Ireland wins in 1991 and 1994.

“I couldn't have cared less if he had been a Quaker, a Mormon, a Free Presbyterian or whatever. Inter-county footballers heading into an All-Ireland campaign, the last thing on their mind is religion, apart from the prayers they say at night.” Inevitably, the matter infiltrated Withnell's life on the field, with opponents giving him plenty in the hope of drawing a reaction. Even in the Irish League soccer career that intersected and eventually superseded his Gaelic



In the second of our two-part feature on **Peter Withnell**, the former Down forward tells **Neil Loughran** how he batted away senseless sectarian barbs, and reflects on a premature end to his days wearing red and black...

football days, sectarian barbs became a common occurrence. The name-calling often brought the best out in him, he says, though Withnell admits he found it bewildering at the time – and still does to this day – that people took such an interest in his background. “To be honest, the talk about religion, I hate that s***. That isn't me, it never has been me. “My mum used to say ‘clean the dirt around your door, then you can look at somebody else's’. A lot of those people are the ones who go to matches week-in, week-out and want to tar some young fella... sport shouldn't be that way, and thankfully now it doesn't seem to be.

“I come from a mixed marriage but religion was never mentioned in our house, all my parents wanted was a peaceful life.

“My attitude was always ‘call me what you want, next minute you'll be on your ass’. I just waited on that 50-50 challenge to burst that guy. “I didn't give off or cry if somebody rattled into me and hit me a dig or whatever. That's not me trying to sound like the big lad, because I never saw it like that.

“No matter what happened on the field, I would always have shaken hands with my opponent after the game. It just went with the territory I suppose.

“But once the game was over, it was

over, history.” He may dismiss it as “sticks and stones”, but occasionally Withnell would rise to the bait. The kind of player he was – standing six foot tall and built like a brick outhouse – meant he often found himself at the epicentre of any physical tussles taking place.

That confidence, that swagger, that attitude, it must be in his DNA, right? Wrong.

His off-field persona is at odds with the perception held by most people who have followed Withnell's sporting career.

Quiet and extremely private, being in the public eye never sat comfortably. He viewed football, like soccer later on, as a job.

Once he crossed the white line, regardless of code, his only concern was doing the best he possibly could for himself and his teammates but when the big stage arrived, you could always rely on Withnell to deliver.

Stevie Small played alongside him at Cliftonville in the late 1990s, the latest stop on a nomadic but goal-laden Irish League career that

also took him to the Reds' north Belfast rivals Crusaders, Ballymena United, Newry City and Glenavon before drawing to a close at Lisburn Distillery in 2006.

Reds boss Marty Quinn had been keen to bring Withnell to Solitude for years and, after two failed attempts to prise him away from League of Ireland side Dundalk, finally landed his man in January 1999.

Cliftonville had won the league the previous April but when Withnell arrived midway through the following season they were struggling badly and ended up finishing second bottom of the table and facing a relegation play-off with Ards.

Cometh the hour though, cometh the man as Withnell came off the bench to score the winning goal in the away leg before bagging a hat-trick at Solitude to help secure the club's top-flight status. “That was his moment, those two legs, and he'll always be remembered fondly at Cliftonville because of that,” says defender Small. “One thing that sticks with me about Peter was his confidence on the big stage. When some others were nervous, Peter was like ‘this is

brilliant’. He lived for that kind of pressure.

“When Marty Quinn was trying to sign him, he says, ‘I want to put crosses into the box, in Tim McCann we've got the quickest player in the Irish League’, and Peter turned round and said ‘you haven't seen me yet’.

“Tim was lightning quick, but Peter didn't lack for confidence. He just had that belief in himself, and it stood to him.”

WHEN you're standing on the top of the mountain, the only way to go is down.

After the highs of 1991 Withnell was one of Pete McGrath's blue-eyed boys, but cracks were starting to appear in their relationship.

Soccer had always been in his blood – McGrath knew this. Often, Withnell would show up at training wearing the jersey of one English club or another.

On other occasions he would infuriate the Down boss by heading the ball into the back of the net before wheeling away in celebration.

His team-mates laughed and, so long as he was dedicating himself exclusively to Gaelic football at weekends, McGrath could see the funny side too.

The lines became blurred, however, when he started playing at a semi-professional level for Dundalk. Out of work and offered a few quid to kick a bit of ball, Withnell didn't see the issue.

McGrath did. Playing soccer one day, Gaelic football the next was simply not an option under his regime.

“His soccer career was becoming a factor that was taking away from what he could contribute to the Down senior squad,” says McGrath.

