



life but it isn't all that I am'

"For anyone to try and balance a semi-professional soccer with a full-blown inter-county career was just impossible, despite the fact he was a very fit fella. He was missing out on other things – maybe working harder on Gaelic football to bring other dimensions to his game. "For a player to become an even better player, like the way Eoin Liston did for Kerry, you have to be focused exclusively on what is a very demanding sport.

"Peter was being pulled in different directions and it did set him on a collision course with his inter-county career."

Withnell's attempts to play down his extra-curricular activity didn't help.

Team-mates recall him being asked outright by McGrath if he had been playing soccer at the weekend. Withnell would answer no. McGrath would ask again.

"Are you sure Peter?"

"No, definitely not Pete."

Then McGrath would refer to a newspaper cutting showing Withnell playing for whatever club he happened to be featuring for that weekend. Eventually he could offer up no more denials, as the other players sniggered like schoolboys in the background.

"I was in the public eye because of soccer and I couldn't hide it," he says with a rueful smile.

"I did try but then somebody would show Pete my picture in the *Sunday World* or the *Sunday Life*. When you're in and out of work and somebody offers you a nice pay packet every week, you know..."

Withnell was still an automatic pick for most of 1992 when Down lost to Derry in the Ulster semi-final, but the years that followed saw him fall down the pecking order.

By the start of the 1994 campaign,

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Peter Withnell

which would end in a second All-Ireland title in the space of four years, Rostrevor's Aidan Farrell was the man wearing number 14 while Withnell stewed on the sidelines.

"When me and Pete locked horns, it was probably the beginning of the end," he admits.

"Pete's rule was 'no soccer'. He's a true Gael and that's the way he wanted to run his team, and he was quite entitled to do that.

"Maybe I thought I was bigger than Pete. Players have to be handled in different ways, some like an arm put around them, some need a few f***** thrown at them. I think I needed an arm around me.

"I can see now that he did it for the best of the team. But I don't have any regrets over what I did on Saturdays."

But surely there are regrets that, when the Mourne county silenced the Hill by beating Dublin in the 1994, he was on the periphery? That, but for his self-inflicted wounds, he would have been out there enjoying a second All-Ireland title?

Withnell came and went for a couple of years after 1994 but as some of the old guard fell away, so too did he, pulling on the red and black jersey for the last time in 1997.

Soccer became the priority yet, no matter what he went on to achieve elsewhere, there was always a sense of regret about how his Down career had petered out so prematurely.

"I could've done more – I quit too early.

"It's a regret on my behalf but I think it's also a mistake on Pete's behalf. I had a great relationship with Pete – I still have a great relationship with Pete – but I think, because I was equally good at soccer, that heavy hand came down and I was punished for it."

In the midst of it all, McGrath insists, the pair always remained on amicable terms.

"Eventually it meant his Down career came to a premature end because he could have played for a number of years longer than he did. "There would've been issues, we would've had differences of opinions, but in the middle of it all I never fell out with Peter Withnell."

FORTY-SIX years of age. Where did the time go? Sat amongst former comrades as they waited to be paraded before the All-Ireland final meeting between Dublin and Mayo, it was a strange feeling returning at Croke Park. Standing in the middle of the field he once graced to such devastating

effect, receiving polite applause and offering up a wave every now and again, Withnell couldn't escape the nagging feeling that he didn't belong.

This pomp and ceremony wasn't really for him and, besides, did any of those people even know who he was?

The years after the sun goes down on a sporting career can be hard. Until recently, Withnell was still lining out for the Down masters side, and played home and away games for a Northern Ireland over-40 select in soccer.

If there was a charity game going, a fundraiser or just a kickabout, just give Peter Withnell a call and he'll be there in a flash. He never fell out of love with sport, with the buzz of competition.

Now, working away from home most of the week, he simply doesn't have the time. He goes out for the odd run to keep himself in check, but the buzz has gone.

How do you go about replacing it? You don't, his simple response.

"The hype's gone, you're out of the bubble and you're on your own.

"It is what is. That was a part of your life but it comes to an end. Football's short-lived and it's hard to leave behind, but you've no

choice. You put your energy into other things – your family, your work. It's that simple.

"Don't get me wrong, it's nice when somebody recognises you or comes up and talks about Down, or your days at Dundalk or whatever.

"But you don't hang on to that stuff forever. Sport was a big part of my life but it isn't all that I am."

Not that anybody who was stood on the Hill those momentous days in 1991 could ever forget Peter Withnell, no matter how hard they tried.

Neither will Tom Spillane, Mick Lyons or the many full-backs, midfielders or centre-backs he came up against during a long and distinguished career.

"I played with a great bunch of players from one to 30. It wasn't one to 15 that won that All-Ireland, it was all of us.

"We all have that respect for each other, that bond. I have the utmost respect for all the guys I played with and more than anything, you miss the craic and the banter. That's why it was great to see everybody again during the summer.

"Some people might look back and think you were good, others that you weren't fit to wear the Down shirt, and there's others who'll say you were in the right place at the right time.

"I just think I was lucky to play in a great team with a great manager at a great time."

"The fact is he reached the very top in Gaelic football," says Pete McGrath.

"When Peter Withnell was in his heyday, he blazed a trail and made a massive impression on people not only in Down, but on people who saw Down play in those years – he was like a meteorite going across the sky."