



PETER WITHNELL: DOWN'S INSTANT LEGEND

Picture: Bill Smyth

McCartan and Mickey Linden and like-minded fellas like that alongside you, weaving their magic...but he was the perfect match for the players around him."

With Spillane slain, excitement levels went into overdrive, with some Down supporters excitedly getting to work on 'Withnell tames Lyons' banners ahead of the All-Ireland final showdown with Meath.

Mick Lyons is regarded as one of the toughest full-backs ever to lace up boots, and Sean Boylan's Royals team was filled with fearsome opponents, men who – along with Cork – had dominated the All-Ireland scene in the late Eighties.

A daunting prospect for some, but not Withnell.

"That was the good thing.

"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.

"I didn't fear anybody. I didn't fear the Mick Lyonses of this world, and I'm sure Mick Lyons didn't fear me. Tom Spillane, Tony Scullion... it was just a game."

And Pete McGrath wasn't about to start overloading his full-forward with information about the task ahead. Withnell was a

player who acted on instinct – McGrath recognised that and let him at it.

"We had players who would have played Kerry over the years and been very aware of Kerry's pedigree in the '70s and '80s. Peter Withnell wouldn't really have been too impressed by that because he didn't know a lot about it.

"To him, going in to play Kerry in an All-Ireland semi-final was just another game. Coming up against Tom Spillane, he wouldn't have known a lot about the Spillanes, their history or anything else.

"Withnell went in with an adventurous way about him, like a child nearly. He believed he was good enough in any company, and I wasn't going to interfere with that.

"If you start setting out parameters for a player like that you're just going to mess with his head."

SEPTEMBER 15, 1991. Down v Meath, Croke Park stadium, Jones's Road, Dublin.

The instructions issued to Peter Withnell were simple – get out there and be first to as many balls as you can.

Despite being 33 and in the twilight of his inter-county playing days, Lyons remained a fearless competitor.

However, a twisted ankle towards

the end of the first half signalled the end of the Meath veteran's day.

Typically, he soldiered on for 17 minutes after the break – perhaps against his better judgement, in hindsight, as the Mournemen took the game by the scruff in this period.

"I shouldn't have come out at half-time," says the Summerhill man with a laugh

And like Spillane before him, Lyons hadn't spent too much time before the final worrying about Withnell.

"Not really," he says.

"The thing is, Down had a good team, but they had a very, very good full-forward line, right across, so you weren't just worrying about one man.

"They were all dangerous."

Withnell didn't get on the scoresheet that day, but his nuisance factor was enough to destabilise the Meath defence and allow others to flourish. He also provided one of the defining images of the 1991 final. On his knees, hands on the ground in pursuit of the ball, Lyons attempted to walk over the top of Withnell like he wasn't there.

Instead, Withnell lifted his head and shoulders between Lyons's legs like a bull at a rodeo before dumping the Meath man to the ground.

Red and black flags fluttered as one of the loudest roars of the day went up.

Despite a stunning second half comeback from the Royals, Down weren't going to be defeated that day – Sam Maguire was heading back to the Mourn county for the first time in 23 years.

And after years of searching and tinkering, it was Withnell who had provided the final piece of the perfect puzzle for McGrath. "The forward line was maybe the strength of the team," said the former Down boss.

"You can look at each individual player and see a unique role they played and when you put it all together, you're approaching the ideal forward line.

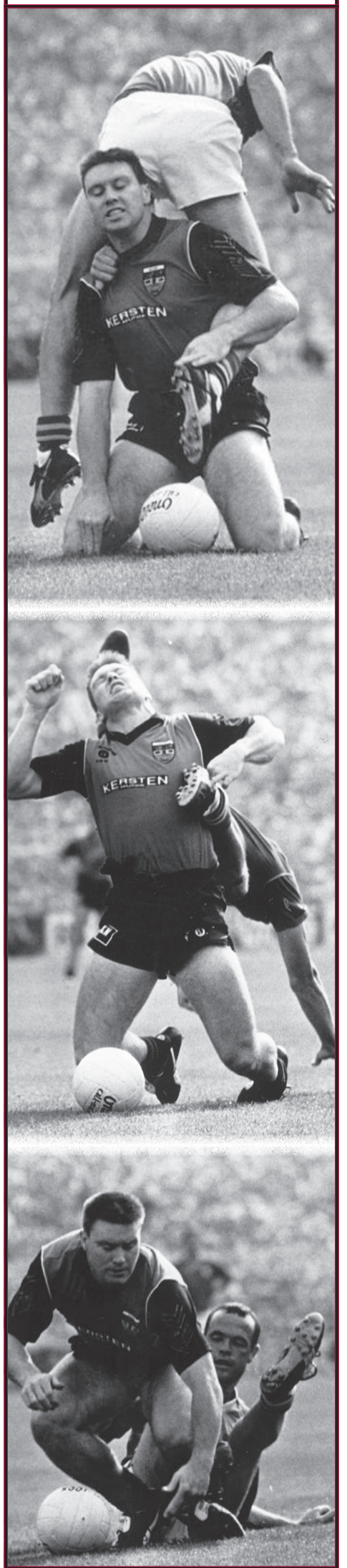
"Take one of them out, and suddenly something's not going to work. In that sense, Peter was vital."

From relative obscurity to hoisting aloft the Sam Maguire Cup in the space of a year, his story was the stuff of scriptwriters' dreams.

It was no longer just the men gathered in the toilets of the Carrickdale Hotel who had his name on their lips – the whole country was now talking about Peter Withnell.

And, as he would discover in the years after that momentous day, it wasn't always for reasons he would have wanted...

■ **HEAD OVER HEELS:** Peter Withnell sends Meath full-back Mick Lyons flying over his shoulders during the 1991 All-Ireland final
Pictures: Ann McManus



"Peter was being pulled in different directions and it did set him on a collision course with his inter-county career" – Pete McGrath
In The Irish News tomorrow, Peter Withnell reflects on the premature end to his Down days as soccer took centre stage