

The Littlestown Crokes

‘I’ll be over in a minute!’ shouted Danny Wilde, captain of the Littlestown Crokes under-13s, to his dad.

Danny’s dad, Mick, was the coach of the GAA football team, which was named after Littlestown Lawns, the estate where Danny and Mick lived.

Mick Wilde had finally managed to gather all the other players in the dressing rooms, but Danny always had his own little routine before he joined his team mates for a home game. Just one moment alone, pitch side, to clear his head of absolutely everything except football and the match ahead.

Danny just loved home games. The smell of

the freshly-cut grass, along with the sight of the chalky straight lines that he and his dad had worked so hard on that morning, really got the butterflies going in his stomach.

Summer had passed so quickly and already September was nearing its end. It was over half-way through the season and it was the second league game since the June break-up. Danny's team had fought and battled their way to the top of the league, just one point ahead of the other title contenders, Barnfield GFC.

Only four more games after this one, and we could be league winners, thought Danny. Like a true captain, he was confident that his team could go all the way, but deep down inside, he knew that the final game on 8 November at home against Barnfield would be the under-13's Judgement Day.

Danny turned and took one more quick glance at the pitch that his dad called the 'Little Croker', then he swiftly headed for the dressing rooms to join his team mates for his

dad's pre-match talk.

Danny's Jack Russell, Heffo, the team mascot, was sniffing around the door of the opposition's dressing room. He was kitted out in his all-blue custom-made jersey, and to look at him, one would think he was earwigging for any kind of opposition tactics that might help the home team.

Danny called him as he opened the dressing room door, and backed it up with a familiar two-tone whistle.

'About time!' complained Mick.

'Sorry, Dad. It was Heffo. He was heading into the other dressing room, again!'

All the other players burst out laughing.

'Go on, Heffo!' cheered Little John Watson. 'Here, Mr Wilde, is Heffo playing today?'

'He'd get his game before you would!' answered a voice down the back.

The banter was getting out of hand now and even Heffo was barking his brains out.

'Shut up, Doyler,' muttered Little John.

Suddenly Mick blew as hard as he could on his whistle, and everyone froze, except poor Heffo, who scampered down the back of the dressing room and hid behind Paddy Timmons' training bag.

'Can I speak now?' asked Mick.

'Come on lads, settle down,' said Jimmy Murphy, the assistant coach, just to give a little bit of back up, even though Mick Wilde never needed back up when it came to managing the team.

'I'm making two changes from the last game,' began Mick. The word 'change' was probably the most feared word that a coach could throw out in a dressing room before a match.

All the lads – even Danny, who never took his place for granted – shivered a little, and looked anywhere rather than at their coach, just in case it might influence him to leave them off the team. That is, if he hadn't already.

'Kevin,' continued Mick, 'you're coming in at left full.'

Mick could hear Anto Farrell huff, but he didn't say anything. He'd have a word with him on the way over to the pitch. Anto hadn't played well in the last two games and Kevin Kinsella was putting in extra efforts in training. Mick always thought that a coach should explain to a player why he was dropping him, in private, one to one.

'Now, the other change I'm making is ...' Mick paused and glanced around the dressing room. Every single player in the room, except Anto and Kevin, waited in nervous anticipation to hear their name and join Anto on the bench.

It was almost like a scene from *X-FACTOR!*

Mick stared at Doyler for a few seconds, saying nothing.

Poor Doyler tried his best not to make eye contact with the coach. *I should have kept my big gob shut*, he thought. *He's going to drop me for slagging off Little Johnner.*

Mick switched his eyes over towards Barry Sweeney, their centre full forward.

‘Nice one!’ thought Doyler. ‘Safe!’

‘Barry,’ said Mick. ‘I want you to switch with Doyler today and go into centre half forward.’

Doyler perked up. Now he was trying his very best to make eye contact with the coach.

‘Doyler, you’re going to full forward today. Their centre full back is nearly as tall as our big Johnner. You might have a better chance with him in the air than Barry.’

‘Nice one, thanks Coach’ said Doyler.

‘Thank me on the pitch with scores,’ replied Mick, ‘and by the way, if I hear you picking on Little Johnner again, *he’ll* be the one wearing the number fourteen shirt.’

Jimmy, the assistant coach, grabbed hold of the zip of the kit bag and ripped it open.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘You know your numbers. Let’s get ready.’

Mick filled in his team card while all the lads dived into the kit bag in search of their jerseys. You could tell who was playing and who

wasn't – the players who were starting were attacking the kit bag like a pack of wolves. The subs, on the other hand, were sitting back from the frenzy waiting until the end to pick up their jerseys. Anto Farrell wasn't used to this, but this time, just like the other subs, he sat still, in absolutely no hurry to collect his jersey.

Mick handed the team card to Jimmy.

'In your capable hands, Jimmy,' said Mick.

Jimmy nodded at Mick and gave him a *You can count on me* look.

Even though everyone knew that Jimmy was no Mick Wilde when it came to GAA, he had been Mick's assistant for a long time and had Mick's trust and admiration. As soon as Jimmy noticed the boys lacing up their boots he blew on his whistle to try and muffle the pre-match banter and buzz that was customary in a home team dressing room.

'Right lads,' said Mick, 'listen up.'

'Come on, lads, quiet down there,' added Jimmy.

It was time for Mick's final words of encouragement.

'Lads, I want you to get stuck in there from the whistle,' he began. 'Midfield, chase every loose ball,' he instructed as he glanced over to Danny and Sean Dempsey, 'and defence, get in good blocks. Remember the best way to block is to dive at their feet. And Doyler, if you can't shake that full back and turn and shoot, feed it back to Barry and give him a shot.'

There was a knock at the door. It was the referee.

'Right, home team!' said the referee.

'Okay lads, on your feet!' said Mick. Then he finished with the final familiar words before every home game, 'When you go out onto that pitch lads, where are you playing?' asked Mick.

'The Little Croker!' replied all the lads.

'And how do we play every game?' asked Mick.

'*Like the all-Ireland final!*' cheered the whole dressing room.

Then, with a clatter of studs, the team raced out like an army going into battle.