

A Captain's Voice

It was the 21st of June 2022; a day I don't think I'll ever forget. We were playing in an U16 County Club Final: Moville vs Kilcar in Lifford, County Donegal. While pulling on my number 8 jersey, hot salty tears started dripping from my face and a tight knot formed in my stomach.

When the whistle was blown and we were jumping up for the ball, I couldn't shake a feeling of dread. But I was both the free-taker and the leader, so I couldn't possibly show or say how I felt. I stood tall as I took my first free outside the 20 metre line and as it went straight over the bar, the knot in my stomach eased, but not for long. When I took my second free, I stood tall once again and followed through with my kick, but this time it went wide. I told myself to get on with it and that everyone misses. I brushed it off just like I normally do when I miss.

But this time it felt different.

I stood up tall once more for my third free of the match. It was inside the 20-metre line, which would have typically been an easy score. But not on this day. I kicked the ball, followed through and it went wide. I was in shock; I couldn't believe I had missed. I kept telling myself to move on and to keep the head. But then I missed the fourth and the fifth. And I kept on missing. It was at this point that I started to question what was really wrong with me that day.

Half time came and tears sprang to my eyes once more. I wasn't feeling myself in this match. My stance grew smaller and smaller, my shoulders started to drop and I began to feel like a tiny fish in a huge pond.

In the next half I continued to miss more and more frees. I felt sick to the stomach and my legs felt weak, yet unbelievably at this point we were still in the lead. But that didn't last either,

because Kilcar started to make a comeback. Suddenly, or so it seemed they were winning and it felt like it was all my fault.

The last ten minutes came fast, but we couldn't get out from our kickouts. I was exhausted, angry and deeply frustrated. When the whistle went, every muscle in my body dropped and the knot tightened in my stomach. I couldn't believe that it was all over. My mind started filling up with thoughts and feelings I couldn't explain. I had lost the final for our team by letting my negative thoughts take over. I had been thinking of the past and not moving on from it, instead of thinking about the next ball. I showed no leadership that day, when my teammates needed it most. I was selfish and was only thinking about my own performance and how I had missed so many points.

I couldn't look at anyone after the game. I had let down my team, my mum and dad, our supporters and myself. I knew I had played shockingly. It took me days and weeks to get over this loss, but I never really got it off my chest, because I didn't tell anyone how I had felt. I look back to the moment before the game when I felt the most nervous and if I had just said to someone, they might have settled me down and I would not have played how I did.

Fast forward to today and I am a completely different person. I know how to control my thoughts and feelings. I still may not always tell people when I am worried, overwhelmed, angry or sad, but I know am over this and I have learned from the experience. I am now driven to get better and feel better. I now know it's important to get things off your chest rather than keep them to yourself. I am sure that I'm not the only athlete or person who has felt like this after having had a bad game.

Everyone has bad games even the best of the best, you have to push yourself to leave the past in the past and let it be your motivation. We don't always get it right; we can all have struggles or even regret things in our past. but you are not your

mistakes, you are not your struggles and every failure is a lesson.

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