

Interview

Kitman Charlie at 100: 'You'd have to say, what did I do to deserve this?'



Gordon Manning

The much-loved member of Jack Charlton's backroom team during the glory days is still sharp as a tack as he gets set to celebrate his 100th birthday

Charlie O'Leary is not long back in the door from his morning walk. It is the same door he pulled behind him on his way to Stuttgart and Rome and New Jersey, when an entire country joined along for the expedition.

O'Leary strolls around the block every day and it would be rare for him to return home without having stopped for at least one chat on his loop. There might be a few extra folk greeting him next week though, because on Thursday the most famous kitman in Irish sport will celebrate his 100th birthday.

Back in his livingroom, the walls talk. All the usual suspects are present – Jack and Ray and Paul and Mick and Roy, and of course John Paul.

Over the years he has kept in touch with many of those within the framed photographs. Paul McGrath occasionally drops over to the house in Harmonstown on Dublin's northside, while it would not be unusual for Mick McCarthy to ring on a random Wednesday.

O'Leary was at a family christening recently, and in the hotel afterwards he noticed Ray Houghton strolling through the lobby. Houghton, the hero of Euro '88 and USA '94, was there for a different function later that night, so he joined the christening reception.

On the mantelpiece above the fireplace is a card from Pat Charlton, Jack Charlton's wife.

"Charlie was in the middle of it all through what would have been considered the good times," says John Charlton, Jack's son.

"He wasn't the biggest person in the world but he made such a big impact on the group. I know my mam and dad couldn't speak highly enough of him. We still keep in touch and my mam made sure to send him a card on behalf of the family for his 100th birthday."

O'Leary was born on February 1st, 1924. By the time the second World War started, the O'Leary family lived in East Wall, having moved from Townsend Street. On the night German planes bombed the nearby North Strand in May 1941, O'Leary slept soundly through the raid.

"I was going to the shop to get the paper for my father the next morning and I met this fellow who goes to me, 'I hear the Strand is gone up.' 'Gone up where?' I didn't know what he meant," O'Leary recalls.

"A gang of us went to the Strand Cinema that night even though part of the roof had been blown off. There was tarpaulin covering the hole."

O'Leary can even tell you what movie was on that night: Love Finds Andy Hardy, starring Mickey Rooney.

His mind is as sharp as a Mach 3, his ability to recount dates and names is extraordinary, he remains sprightly, quick-witted and curious about both football and life. O'Leary lives on his own, his independence made possible thanks to a strong family support network.

Liaison officer

And while he does not pretend to know the secret to a long life, he always enjoyed staying fit and active, never touched alcohol, and believed it was important to stay social and interact with others. He also likes to stay well informed; a bundle of newspapers sits on the table.

O'Leary worked as a wood machinist for 42 years but when the sawmill in East Wall closed, he started working in a government department job.

The story of how he became Ireland kitman has been recounted often. O'Leary was heavily involved in the game here – first as a player and then as a referee and administrator. In the mid-1980s, he was asked to look after visiting international teams – part fixer, part liaison officer.

O'Leary's last time doing that gig was Charlton's first game as Ireland manager, a 1-0 defeat to Wales. Charlton popped over to Ireland physio Mick Byrne to borrow a pump for the Welsh. He did a double



take, recognising "the little fellow" from when O'Leary officiated a match in which he was involved.

"Jack asked Mick what I was doing. Mick told him I looked after all sorts of stuff for the away teams," O'Leary says.

"Who does that for us?" asked Jack. "Nobody, I do everything," said Mick. "That makes no sense, ask him to come in."

For Charlton's second game as Ireland manager, against Uruguay in April 1986, O'Leary was the kitman, a role he filled until 2000. Just like that, he had been handed a front-row ticket to one of the greatest shows in Irish sport.

"I suppose I ended up being more of a coordinator, I never looked on myself just as a kitman," says O'Leary.

The players involved in those Ireland camps will vouch for his contribution – from dragging lads out of bed for training to safely getting them in the leaba after a late night out, whatever needed to be done, O'Leary looked out for them.

Double act

O'Leary and Byrne became something of a double act, enhancing and embodying the spirit and culture of the group.

"Dad would have said Charlie and Mick grew to be nearly as important to the group as the players," remembers John Charlton.

On presenting them with a special merit award in 2020, Niall Quinn said of the pair: "If Jack Charlton was the father figure for the Ireland squad from 1986 to 1995, then Charlie O'Leary and Mick Byrne were the two Irish mummies who looked out for and looked after us all."

The big tournaments were great, but it is some of the simpler, more wholesome stuff O'Leary remembers most fondly. Nights at the team hotel in Dublin when he would put on the chef's apron and toque before pushing a trolley of freshly brewed tea and trays of sandwiches down the length of the corridor to bring the players their supper.

And there was always some scheme or other afoot. John Aldridge and Houghton had a fondness for a particular type of Cadbury's chocolate biscuit and O'Leary had a family contact working for the confectionery company out in Coolock.

"I used to get a bag of the biscuits and hide them for the lads. I'd be trying to tell Ray and Aldo I'd bring them back later, but then Mick McCarthy found out and wanted some," O'Leary says.

Soon, he was slipping chocolate biscuits under doors all along the hallway. Supply could not keep up with demand.

"And if things were ever going sour or we felt the atmosphere could do with a bit of a jolt, Mick Byrne and I would start a row. We'd call each other every name under the sun, knowing the lads would be out-



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side the door listening going, 'Jeez, the pair of them are at it again!'

One of the photos over O'Leary's shoulder is of Houghton tightly embracing him on the pitch just moments after Ireland had beaten England 1-0 in Stuttgart. Two small men standing 10ft tall.

"I suppose that game will always stick out for me," O'Leary says. "Because I watched grown men cry that day, tears streaming down their face. That win over England meant so much to so many people."

As did the penalty shoot-out victory over Romania two years later, though O'Leary's view of the match-winning penalty was almost blocked by the Ireland manager.

World Cup. Just as the pope approached the group, a leading FAI official and a team doctor stepped in front of O'Leary. Charlton had a low tolerance for the suit and tie brigade at the best of times.

"I couldn't see anything. Jack tapped the two of them, they looked around, and then he pushed me forward. Suddenly I'm standing right next to the pope, I nearly froze," O'Leary says.

"When you consider he's a saint now, not many people can say a saint had their arm on your shoulder!"

USA '94 brought its own challenges for Ireland's kitman, not least the panic of a last-minute strip change before facing Italy at Giants Stadium. The Italians took to the field wearing white, but Ireland had been informed Italy would be in blue so Charlton's side were toggled out in white. Fortunately, O'Leary had brought along a spare green kit, which Ireland wore for what would become a famous victory.

'Stroke of luck'

Without Charlton, O'Leary does not believe any of it – those glory years – would have been possible.

They stayed in touch right until the end, though it was difficult watching Charlton's health fail. The extent of his dementia was apparent in 2018 when a reunion of the Euro '88 crew took place at the K Club.

"That was a lovely occasion with everybody around, but it was also very sad to see Jack like that," O'Leary says.

The doorbell rings mid-sentence and up he pops, 99 years young, to accept his daily Meals on Wheels delivery.

O'Leary is thankful for what life has, and continues, to give him. He has four children, eight grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, plus another on the way. All that and he got to travel the world kitting out the Ireland team.

"You'd have to say to yourself, what did I do to deserve this? With Ireland, how did I get to be in among all that? Like anything, it's a stroke of luck," O'Leary says.

But he is just as proud of having set up the East Wall street leagues as he is anything else, the same goes for his refereeing career of more than 20 years during which he took charge of a Youth Cup final, Junior Cup final, Intermediate Cup final and, in 1972, the FAI Senior Cup final.

O'Leary also played in a Miller Shield hurling decider for O'Toole's in Parnell Park, using a hurl he carved himself from a plank of ash. "I absolutely loved hurling, loved it," he says.

O'Leary has had some problems with his vision in recent years and regularly goes to the Eye and Ear Hospital for an injection in his right eye to treat macular degeneration. He was sitting in the waiting room ahead of his last appointment when the nervous silence of the room was

snapped. "There was a man coming out after getting his eyes done and he just stopped in front of me and put his hand out to shake mine. 'I followed yis all over the world,' he said. 'I just want to thank you for the years of pleasure you gave me.'"

Turning 100 will not change him.

Last week, he was in Abbotstown attending a Leinster Football League disciplinary hearing for a player who was sent off after abusing a referee.

He recently had a visit from a representative of the President of Ireland's office. The centenarian bounty of €2,450 is gifted from the President to every citizen on their 100th birthday. O'Leary asked if the gift would be sent in cheque form or transferred online, because he would be reluctant to give out his bank details, even to Michael D Higgins.

"Look, if I wake up on the 1st of February then I'll be a happy man, that's the most important thing," O'Leary says.

Today, as he does every weekend, he will go up to visit Kathleen's grave. She died in April 2009 and no more than Charlton having a good woman behind him, O'Leary did too.

"In fairness, she gave me an awful lot of time and freedom to go away with Ireland," he says.

"I suppose there were other times she'd go out with her gang to bingo, for a successful marriage there must be give and take, but probably over the years I was let take more."

"She never objected and she never bothered much about the football either. When I refereed the cup final and it was on television, I don't think she even watched it."

Photos of Kathleen and his kids and his grandkids and his great-grandkids are dotted all around the room, nestled up alongside those of Jack and Ray and Paul and Mick and John Paul. It's a fascinating pictorial storyboard of a full life well lived.

As he bids farewell from the hallway, the phone rings. By the time you reach the gate he can be seen through the front door enthusiastically chatting away to the caller on the other end of the line.

From that doorway, Charlie O'Leary went everywhere. And tomorrow morning he'll be off out around the block again.

News

Scales determined to improve as Celtic kick off second half of the season

Celtic defender Liam Scales is determined to improve in the second half of the season and not let his unexpected breakthrough go to waste.

The 25-year-old from Wicklow has become a regular starter for Celtic and the Republic of Ireland after taking full advantage of several injuries in central defence for Brendan Rodgers' side early in the season.

Scales looked set to leave Celtic in the summer following his loan spell at Aberdeen but he is set to make his 28th consecutive start when the champions host Ross County today as their Scottish Premiership break comes to an end.

The former Shamrock Rovers player said: "It was nice to

get a week off after the hectic schedule and I put football to the back of my mind a bit and relaxed. But there was a chance to reflect. Obviously I am happy with how it has gone personally for me. I didn't really foresee it going this well so it was nice to look back.

"And obviously there were times I could have done better

as a player personally. I have looked at those moments as well and there is room to improve on those sort of things, and that's what I am here to do for the rest of the season.

"A half-season is not going to mean anything if I fall away in the second half of the season. That's where the big games are, the crunch games. Obviously

every game is important here. But I have no intention to fall away and rest on what I have done so far."

Erik ten Hag, meanwhile, has said financial fair play restrictions will prevent Manchester United from acting in the January transfer window to fill the "gap" in attack left by Anthony Martial's extended absence.

This has been a quiet month across the board and United have focused on streamlining the squad rather than bolstering it.

Jadon Sancho, Donny van de Beek and Hannibal Mejbri are among those to have left on loan, with United always expected to do little to nothing in terms of signings. And not even

the fact that Martial has been ruled out until April after undergoing surgery on a groin injury is likely to change things due to Premier League profit and sustainability rules.

"I looked but there is no space," United boss Ten Hag said. "No space on FFP to do something about this lack of quantity in the striker position.

Of course, we have (Marcus) Rashford who can play as a striker, I think also we have some other alternatives, creative.

Ten Hag's immediate focus is on keeping their FA Cup hopes alive tomorrow against Newport, who are managed by Dubliner Graham Coughlan. It is the only competition the Red Devils can win this season.