Sports Weekend

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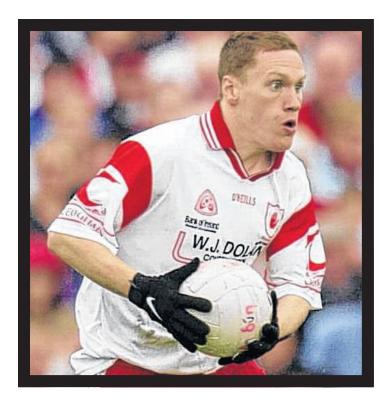
How GAA stars face into the home stretch a permanent one?

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Could O'Shea stint be

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The sudden death and lasting influence of Cormac McAnallen



Gordon **Manning**

Twenty years ago today, Cormac McAnallen's death devastated the entire GAA, but his memory remains a touchstone for his family and Tyrone

ridget McAnallen is making tea in the small kitchen at Páirc Chormaic. Just beyond the door, in the foyer of the pavilion, is a portrait of her son, Cormac. She assigns tea bags to the various cups and waits for the kettle to

It's late afternoon in east Tyrone, crisp but sunny, and somewhere behind the rolling drumlins there is grass being cut around Eglish. At the pitch entrance, a cluster of advance party daffodils have already hoisted their trumpets, searching

Cormac McAnallen was just 24 when he died in his sleep on March 2nd, 2004. He was the Tyrone captain at the time and one of Gaelic football's bona fide stars. His death sparked mourning on a scale rarely seen in Ireland for any sportsperson, before or since. Within hours, it had transcended the world of sport.

The impact of his death crossed all sorts of political and cultural barriers, among the sympathy letters received by the family was one signed by the Republican inmates in Portlaoise Prison and another from the Imperial Grand Black Chapter of the British Commonwealth, an elite society of Orangemen.
His wake and funeral were attended by

thousands. For those few days, the entire country seemed to descend on a small corner of Tyrone.

Páirc Chormaic is a peaceful place, tucked down a narrow tree-lined lane and sitting inside a slow bend on a country road. It was officially opened in 2012. The pavilion was added in the summer of 2023. On the occasion of its inauguration Cormac's brother, Dónal, captained the Tyrone masters against Armagh.

It was Dónal who found Cormac in his bedroom on the night he died. In an instant, everything changed for the family. Bridget and Brendan lost a son, Dónal lost a younger brother, Fergus lost an older one. Then, in August 2022, they lost Brendan too.

"I think we both reacted differently when Cormac died," says Bridget. Brendan grieved more openly than I did, I was numb, I turned my feelings off. The loss of a son ... you are in shock for a while,

In the home dressingroom is a large



image of Cormac playing for Tyrone, ball in hand, cheeks puffed out, eyes scanning forward. Bridget and Dónal sit on the wooden bench. Bridget has her tea while Dónal holds a small gold heart-shaped pin badge in his hand, the symbol of the Cormac Trust, which is drawing to a close on the 20th anniversary of his death.

"Daddy always wore the wee gold pin on his suit lapel," says Dónal. "It was a subtle statement, sort of a way of saying he never

It was on his suit when he was buried.

Seán Cavanagh remembers the shriek of the phone puncturing the stillness early that Tuesday morning in March 2004. His dad brought an end to the racket by answering, but suddenly footsteps were rushing up the stairs. It couldn't be good.

Lying in his bed, Seán braced himself.

'Dad came in. 'Cormac died last night.' His first thought was: "Car accident." Just a week earlier, he and Cormac had sat together on the team bus after Tyrone's McKenna Cup final win over Donegal in Ballybofey. Cormac talked about the driving he had been doing between working as a teacher in St Catherine's, Armagh and going to see his fiancee, Ashlene, in Derry.

"When I heard what happened, I was in

a daze, it didn't make sense.' It seemed like only yesterday that they were carefree high-spirited kids playing basketball outside Seán's house in the Moy. Cormac's grandad, Charlie O'Neill,

lived beside the Cavanagh homestead. If ever the McAnallen crew were visiting and spotted the Cavanagh brothers out front playing basketball, invariably they joined

But nothing could have prepared Seán for seeing his deceased friend and team-mate.

"When they took the lid off the coffin, it was one of those moments. I can still hear those around me, All-Ireland winners, squealing with pain. People were distraught. It's probably the toughest thing I've had to see in my entire life.

Cormac, though young, was Tyrone's leader. Seán recalls a futile effort to dodge a recovery session one evening in 2002, having spent the previous night overindulging after a Tyrone game. When Cormac arrived to pick him up, Seán huddled under the duvet.

"I shouted down to my da, 'Tell McAnallen I'm not going anywhere near Omagh tonight'. But the type of man Cormac was, he got out of the car and came up to my bedroom. 'Seán, come on, we're going'. I told him to leave me alone but he wasn't having it. He literally pulled me out of the bed."

Seán retired in 2017, walking away as Tyrone's most decorated footballer with three All-Ireland senior titles. But it could have been more.

"Cormac was the most natural leader I've ever seen," he says. "People say you can never be sure about anything in life but I know that if Cormac hadn't died our standards would have been even higher in that golden era. And I've no doubt we

■ Cormac McAnallen's brother Donal and his mother Bridget outside Páirc Chormaic: the home of Eglish GAA club was named after the late Tyrone football star in 2012. PHOTOGRAPH: OLIVER MCVEIGH

would have won more than three All-Irelands, 100 per cent."

In 2008, Seán captained Ireland in the International Rules Series in Australia. Ireland won and he got to lift the Cormac McAnallen Cup.

"It was my friend's cup I was lifting, Cormac's cup. It was quite emotional. I still classify that as one of the greatest

things I managed to do in the game.' Seán has regularly taken the short trip out the Gorestown Road from the Moy to Eglish. "I would still go to his grave," he says. "Particularly throughout my Tyrone career before a game, I would have gone. He had that influence on me-when Cormac was present there was calm, order, leadership. I still feel that presence visiting his grave.

Bridget and Brendan were the driving

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forces behind the Cormac Trust, a charity which raised awareness of Sudden Arrhythmic Death Syndrome (Sads), donated or subsidised more than 300 defibrillators, trained approximately 2,500 volunteers to use AEDS and CPR in emergency situations, contributed £180,000 to research projects and helped create the Tyrone and Armagh Communi-

ty First Responders.

"When Cormac died, there was an immediate realisation that something needs to be done," recalls Dónal.

"Other bereaved families were getting in touch with us. Cormac's profile was one that people could channel this issue towards, so it sort of happened almost automatically."

The Trust wasn't just a family initiative: much of the early groundwork was done by the Tyrone County Board and Club Tyrone. But Brendan and Bridget were its

"My parents have been incredibly strong to keep at it for as long as they did," continues Dónal. "There was almost a

character to keep going.' The family don't claim all the credit for the improved awareness around Sads or the increased number of AEDS in the country over the last 20 years, but when you pass a defibrillator in your locality today, directly or indirectly, it's likely at some stage Cormac's death or the Trust had some part to play in it being there.

Brendan was the main point of contact in the office in Benburb and his passing, just two months after a cancer diagnosis, left a void.

He was also a fiercely passionate historian, a committee member of the O'Neill Country Historical Society since the 1980s, and in 2011 he published The Book of Eglish: Where the Oona Flows.

"Daddy was a real doer. You can't underestimate the vacuum he leaves

behind," says Dónal. "Everything he was interested in was hewn out of rock, old buildings, stone walls. He had a deep sense of tradition. You only come to appreciate it all the more now he's gone, but he was a rock to us too.'

Brendan is buried alongside Cormac in the new graveyard in Eglish.

* * * * * Seán Kelly was the GAA president when Cormac died. In November 2023, he had

presented Cormac with his All Star. "It was shocking when the news came through about Cormac. It was the first time I could remember such a thing happening to a GAA player," says the

Kerry native. "I'll never forget Cormac's funeral, and it stuck with me for a long time afterwards, the sheer size of it, and yet there was great dignity shown by the family and appreciation for everybody who attended.

"The scale of it was not lost on us. I was reminded of it again at Dillon Quirke's funeral two years ago, the way both communities rallied around their people.'

Cormac's room hasn't changed much over the years. It's not exactly a time capsule, but so much of his life remains within-swapped jerseys, medals, clothes, schoolbooks, video tapes of basketball matches.

His 2003 All-Ireland SFC final jersey has been framed and now hangs inside the pavilion entrance at Páirc Chormaic. On the opposite wall is a cabinet which houses, among other things, the football he clasped as if his life depended upon it after captaining Tyrone to victory in the 1998 All-Ireland minor final.

In 2017, Dónal wrote The Pursuit of

Perfection, an exceptional book on the Continued on page 2

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On Athletics

Ian O'Riordan



Ingebrigtsen and Kerr gearing up for a rivalry to remember

t is not necessarily a bad thing that one half of the hottest rivalry in track and field right now is marked absent from Glasgow this weekend. Most people will happily let this one simmer away until their three and three-quarter laps inside the Stade de France on Tuesday, August 6th. Live for one night

only.
The jostling for position and gentle bragging between Jakob Ingebrigtsen and Josh Kerr for the claim as the best 1.500m runner in the world also known as the Jakob versus Josh show - has started, and if the trailers are anything to go by, it will make for a hell of a Paris showdown when the blue-riband event

Ingebrigtsen is the one absent from Glasgow, and not by design. The 23-year-old Norwegian would normally be racing at these World Indoor Championships - he's hardly missed any big champi-onships of note since he was 17 – if it wasn't for the Achilles injury he sustained last October, shortly after returning to training following his honeymoon in the Maldives.

Kerr is racing the 3,000m in Glasgow. The 26-year-old Scottish runner only confirmed his presence before his home crowd a couple of weeks ago, moving up a distance after breaking the world indoor two-mile record at the Millrose Games last month.

There, he clocked 8:00.67, breaking the previous mark of 8:03.40 which had stood to Mo Farah since 2015. That sparked the latest exchange of gentle trash talk between the two, which started in Budapest last August, after Kerr outkicked Ingebrigtsen to win the World Championship 1,500m.

Asked about Kerr's performance at the Millrose Games, Ingebrigtsen, who last summer ran an outdoor two-mile world record of 7:54.10, said he "would have beaten him [Kerr] in that race blindfolded ... but it's good that people run better than they have done before"

That in turn prompted this excellent headline on the Runner's World website: "Jakob Ingebrigtsen, who lost to Josh Kerr without a blindfold, says he could beat him with a blindfold."

At the Glasgow media conference on Thursday evening, Kerr was asked by a Norwegian reporter what he thought of Ingebrigtsen's comments, and how he felt about him not being at the championships. Kerr despite being egged on by US sprint hurdler Grant Holloway alongside him - simply replied: "No comment."

Cue all-round laughter, a reflection of the relatively harmless nature of it all, without it descending into some of the more vitriolic trash talk of certain combat sports. Not yet anyway.

Blemish

Around the same time on Thursday evening, Ingebrigts en posted a video on Instagram of him training at his home gym in Sandnes, Norway, with the caption "some good threshold work on the treadmill" and a waving emoji - to the backing rap track of Feel Good DNA.

It was a hint, too, at the double-threshold training sessions which Ingebrigtsen claimed were behind his Olympic 1,500m gold in Tokyo, where he won from the front in an Olympic record of 3:28.32, aged only

It's true that Ingebrigtsen's loss to Kerr in Budapest last August was the only blemish on his otherwise utterly dominant outdoor season. After winning a European Indoor double over 1,500m-3,000m, he ran that world two-mile best (breaking the mark set in 1997), ran a 2,000m world record of 4:43.13 (breaking the mark

set in 1999), twice broke the European 1,500m record (running 3:27.95, after his 3:27.14), twice broke the European 3,000m record (running 7:23.63, after 7:24.00), and set a European

mile record (3:43.73). He also won the Diamond League final mile and 3,000m in Oregon, less than 24 hours apart. After losing to Kerr in Budapest, Ingebrigtsen said afterwards that he'd been sick all week, and "if I hadn't run in the final, he [Kerr] would probably have won. If you stumble or fall, then someone is going to win the race, and he was just the

Kerr called those comments "disrespectful", and later, speaking to various other media outlets, added that Ingebrigtsen has "big weaknesses" arising from his ego, but may not be aware of them as he's surrounded by 'yes men", and has "flaws in the manners realm".

Looking silly After Jake Wightman out-kicked him to win the 2022 World Championship 1,500m in Oregon, Ingebrigtsen said, 'I know that I'm better than silver, so I'm embarrassed being this good, but also this bad." It was a statement any runner other than Ingebrigtsen might be embarrassed about.

Last month, Ingebrigtsen went at it again, telling Norwegian daily Stavanger Aftenblad that Kerr's "desperate attempt" at psychological warfare may look "silly at



If the trailers are anything to go by, it will make for a hell of an Olympic showdown come the blue-riband

some point" as he knows he wins "98 out of 100 times" against Kerr and Wightman. 'I'm pretty sure I'll win next time anyway.

In Ingebrigtsen's case, the mood can't be helped by the fact he hasn't raced in almost six months, after "an unbearably tough" year, in the words of his older brother Henrik, due to the increasingly bitter split from their father and former coach Gjert Ingebrigts-

In another interview with the BBC before Glasgow, Kerr was asked what he believed would happen on that August 6th night. "Josh Kerr gets crowned as the Olympic 1,500m champion," he replied, utterly unwavering in his conviction.

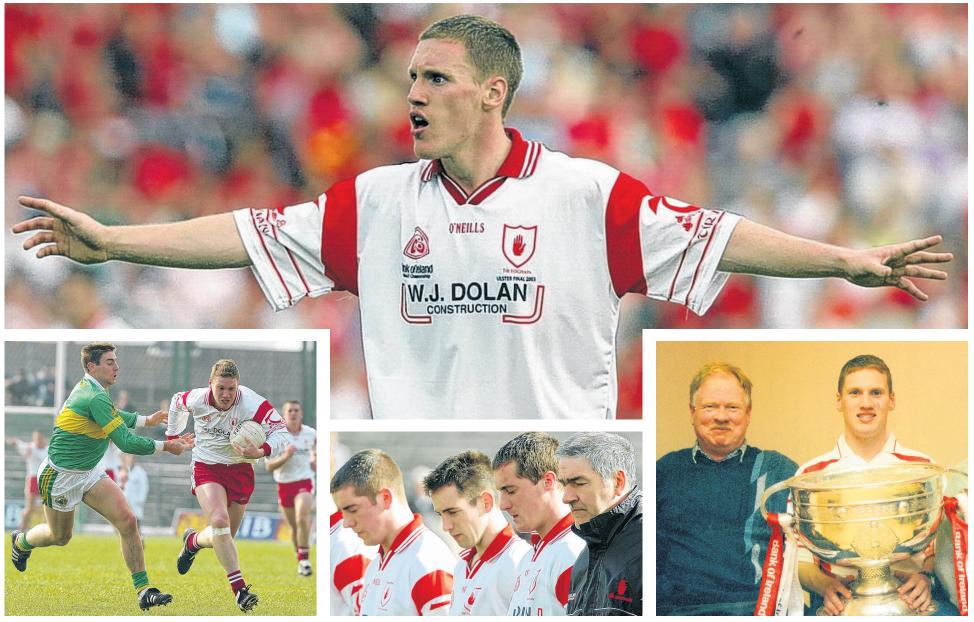
Kerr also told the Guardian that Ingebrigtsen "is very dedicated and he's amazing at our sport" but "wants to be the best in the world and so do I, and that's going to make us clash 10 times out of 10".

But a rivalry like that is amazing for any sport - not that the blue-riband showdown will be a two-athlete race. Wightman, assuming he qualifies, will also be gunning for gold, as will the American Yared Nuguse, the other Norwegian Narve Nordas, and whichever Kenyan shows up at their best on the night. And don't rule out either of the two rising teenage stars, the Dutch runner Niels Laros and the Australian Cameron Myers.

As for any further exchanges between Ingebrigtsen and Kerr before Paris, only one of them can ultimately aspire to Muhammad Ali's old claim that "it ain't bragging if you can back it up'

Once again, live for one

→ Unlucky Healy comes a cropper in her quest to make women's 1,500m final in **Glasgow:** Ian O'Riordan, page 9



The sudden death and lasting influence of Cormac McAnallen

Continued from page 1

life, death and legacy of his brother. It is a meticulously researched, powerful and at times harrowing account.

Within its pages he describes the night of Cormac's passing: how he left St Catherine's at about 5pm that Monday and made his way to the gym before arriving home at approximately 7.30pm. An hour later he was watching University Challenge, keeping scores and playing against his mam. Afterwards, he went off to prepare PowerPoint slides for school.

Dónal stayed up late to work and, around 3am, he heard a loud noise upstairs. With the din increasing, he went to check. In the book, he writes: "Now I realise that the noise was the 'death

Nothing would ever be the same again. Over the years it must have been tempting for the family to gravitate towards anger, but instead they put their energies into trying to mine something positive from the tragedy.

"On the theme of thinking why this has happened to us, there are a number of things I would say," suggests Bridget. "It was good that he seemingly had a

painless death, he died in his bed, it wasn't a horrible accident, he wasn't murdered, he didn't commit suicide. And those things happen to other families.

"As somebody once said to me, 'Why not us?' Why do we imagine nothing bad will ever happen to us? You have to be realistic. So, I didn't get angry. Instead, I try to be reasonably grateful for the time we did have with Cormac.'

Such resilience runs through the family. "It would have occurred to me at

different times that it did seem a bitter irony that Cormac, having been so careful and meticulous, that this fate should happen him," says Dónal. "But no matter how you try to rationalise it, life and death doesn't always make perfect sense. What good would anger do?

"The thing that would upset me, if I dwell on it, is could I have done more to save him? When you see other people who have been revived by defibrillators and CPR, they are good stories, but they make me think, 'What if I had known what to do

"Had I known how to press down correctly, with the right rhythm, the right force, but I didn't know what I was doing, I

was fumbling.
"It probably wouldn't have made any difference but there are always those nagging questions. That's the sort of thing

you could let get to you if you dwell on it too long, but I try not to."

His death resonated. The Cormac

McAnallen's GAA club was founded in Sydney in January 2005. This year, they will wear a black and white strip - the

Eglish colours. The Campa Chormaic summer camps have been two decades on the go now, while the Queen's GAA club present a Cormac McAnallen Medal annually. Some of Cormac's former Eglish team-mates donated a trophy to the club a few years back for an under-12 tournament.

But he was, of course, so much more than just a footballer. Ultra-competitive by nature, one of his other passions was quizzes and he led St Patrick's Grammar School to win RTÉ quiz show Blackboard Jungle in 1997, earning the school a new minibus. Seven years later, that same minibus was among the fleet ferrying mourners to the house for his wake.

"Cormac was very healthy," says Bridget. "But having spoken with so many other bereaved parents over the years, it does seem sometimes as if it is just paradoxically the best people who die young. It's just one of life's nasty paradoxes.'

* * * * * Brendan Devenney was the last player Cormac marked while playing for Tyrone. It was the Dr McKenna Cup final in Ballybofey, February 22nd, 2004. Tyrone comfortably won that McKenna

Cup final, 1-22 to 0-7, with Cormac as

captain. Brendan scored 0-3, two from frees – one of which he admits winning by somewhat Machiavellian means. "That incident actually says a lot about him," recalls Brendan. "The way I ran

across him, I knew he had to take me out, I kind of bought a free. "Most defenders would have been in

your face: 'You f**kin' b***ocks.' But he just looked at the referee, looked down at me, refused to get frustrated, he was too cool for that. He just ran back to his

There was no swapping of jerseys



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afterwards as Cormac needed his to lift the cup, but the McAnallen family recall Brendan later presenting them with his Donegal geansai.

"On all my time on this island, I have never seen a bigger outpouring for anybody than there was for Cormac. It was extraordinary," recalls Brendan.

"He was one of those boys you knew anything was possible for him. We only got to see a glimpse of what he was going to be. I wouldn't have been surprised to see him go down a similar route to Jarlath Burns.'

Cormac McAnallen was born in October 2021. Pauline arrives to Páirc

Clockwise from main image: Cormac McAnallen in action for Tyrone in the early 2000s; holding the Sam Maguire Cup with his father Brendan in 2003; Tyrone's players and manager Mickey Harte observe a minute's silence following his death in 2004; bursting past Darragh Ó Sé of Kerry in a league game in 2003. PHOTOGRAPHS: ANDREW PATON/

Chormaic with him in tow. Dónal's wife has also been a pillar for the family over

INPHO; INPHO; LORRAINE O'SULLIVAN/INPHO

Their two-year-old boy has a mop of curly fair hair, just as his namesake did around the same age.

"You are very conscious of making that decision of naming him Cormac. It's something we did weigh up," says Dónal.
"But we just thought it would be a nice way

of keeping the name in the family. Watching his daughters play camogie, Dónal has occasionally noticed folk pointing towards the pitch and uttering, That's Cormac McAnallen's niece there.

"I suppose sometimes you find yourself having to explain to them who their uncle Cormac is," he says. Baby Cormac arrived 17 days before

Dónal played for Tyrone in the 2021 All-Ireland Masters final. Brendan was there to see it. Dónal has since added a further two All-Ireland Masters titles.

As Bridget and Dónal prepare to leave Páirc Chormaic, there is a boy playing at the ball wall adjacent to the pitch. It's both nothing and everything.

Because whatever happens in relation to the Cormac McAnallen Cup or the club in Sydney, this is the place where Cormac's memory and legacy will endure more than anywhere. Kids will come and play here for ever more.

They will learn of Cormac McAnallen's accomplishments. And how his passing was not in vain. While the Trust might be ending on his 20th anniversary, its work will continue to save lives for years to

A ball thuds off the wall at Páirc Chormaic. Life going on. Spring has come again.

Motor sports Formula 1

Verstappen ignores drama to claim pole in Bahrain

World champion makes perfect start as controversy dogs team chief Horner

GILES RICHARDS

Christian Horner was last night still fighting for his future in Formula One but remained insistent he was going nowhere as the furore around his exoneration unknown sources," he said. after a complaint about his behaviour from a female Red Bull employee continued to dominate the agenda at the Bahrain Grand Prix.

Notably after qualifying however, his world champion driver, Max -Verstappen, who had claimed pole for the opening race of the season, first declined to express his confidence in Horner and, when pushed on the subject, stated he had faith in Horner's role from a "performance" perspective and suggested he was "probably a bit distracted"

Only 24 hours after the Red Bull team principal had been and also throughout the weekcleared of the allegations end here, he's fully committed against him following an independent investigation, an email was leaked to the media, F1, the he's probably a -littlebit distract-FIA and teams of images purporting to show messages between Horner and the employee who made the complaint al- Dramaticemail leging inappropriate, control-

ling behaviour against him.

investigation, but the impact on the sport has been immense.

When asked about it yesterday, Horner stuck to his guns. "I am not going to comment on -anonymous speculation from When asked what would happen next he replied: "We go rac-

Verstappen twice declined to express his confidence in Horner at a press conference on Wednesday.

When asked again after qualifying he once more sidestepped the question. When pushed, he responded: "When I look at how Christian operates within the team, he has been an incredible team boss, so absolutely, from the performance side of things, you can't even question

"I speak to Christian a lot, to the team, he's also here for the performance. Of course ed. But we just focus on the performance side of things.

is understood to still have the backing of the Thai wing of Red $\,$ Bull led by Chalerm Yoovidhya, the son of the company's founder, Chaleo, who owns a 51% share of the company. He is set to attend the race on Saturday as is Horner's wife, former Spice Girl Geri Halliwell-

The investigation by an exter-Horner, however, has made it nal barrister ended with the clear he does not intend to step complaint being dismissed by Its veracity has not been condown as principal of the team Red Bull Racing's parent comfirmed, nor has whether the he has led since it was formed in pany, Red Bull GmbH, who an--messages were included in the 2005, given that he has been nounced Horner had been em were expected to meet yes- and their sporting code which comment. - Guardian

cleared by the investigation. He cleared of the allegations on Wednesday. However, following Thursday's dramatic email, the 50-year-old held talks in person with the head of the FIA, Mohammed Ben Sulayem, as the governing body considers how to respond to the develop-

The FIA and F1 are understood to be in close discussions to assess the impact of the furore on the sport as they face increasing calls to act.

The F1 chief executive, Stefa-

Max Verstappen of Red Bull in jovial mood after securing pole position at Bahrain International Circuit yesterday. PHOTOGRAPH: CLIVE MASON/GETTY IMAGES

terday in Bahrain to consider further action.

The FIA is understood to be set to formally request a copy of the investigation from Red Bull GmbH and is believed to be conno Domenicali, and Ben Sulay- given their regulatory position yet to respond to a request for

specifically addresses -bringing the sport into disrepute.

Article 12.2.1 f states: "Any words, deeds or writings that have caused moral injury or loss to the FIA, its bodies, its members or its executive officers, and more generally on the interest of motor sport and on the values defended by the FIA.'

Clarity sought

Neither the FIA nor F1 have made any official comment on the investigation or its aftermath as they have not seen the report, which Red Bull GmbH have said they will not release to protect the confidentiality of those involved.

F1 is understood to be -seeking clarity from Red Bull Racing and Red Bull GmbH amid disquiet at the negative impact the process is having on

the sport. On Thursday the McLaren team principal, Zak Brown, and the -Mercedes team principal, Toto Wolff, called for the FIA

from Red Bull. There is concern, too, that events are reflecting badly on Red Bull's commercial partners, who are also expected to

and F1 to insist on transparency

seek clarification and resolution from the team. Ford, who are set to join Red Bull as an engine partner in 2026, have made clear their displeasure at the lack of transparency and the public perception sidering the impact on the sport of what has transpired but have