

NEVER GIVE UP!

At 3pm on Saturday 30th November in Stamford Bridge, David Martin made his long-awaited Premier League debut for his boyhood club West Ham United at the age of thirty-three. After sixteen years plying his trade as a professional, the Hammers third choice goalkeeper finally got his moment in the spotlight against fellow London rivals Chelsea, which they eventually won one goal to nil. Martin's performance in that game was paramount to gaining all three points as he made a handful of crucial saves as well as offering some stability in a position that had previously been lacking in recent games. After the final whistle Martin broke down into tears while his teammates consoled him on his performance. He also spent a lovely moment in the stands with his father, Hammers legend and former captain Alvin Martin, who was quoted as saying 'watching his son make his debut felt better than when he won the FA Cup.'

On a personal level, I was able to empathise with David Martin in regard to the emotions he felt at the final whistle and what it must have been like to finally make his Premier League debut. I was able to empathise with him because I myself had made my own All Ireland Championship debut at the age of thirty-three. From under sixteen, through Minor and then onto Senior football I played at midfield for my club, Armagh Harps. I played at this position until I was twenty-four. At this time my game time was limited, and I was not getting on as much as I thought should be, so, I decided to call time on my football career and focused on work and enjoying the social aspects of life. I had absolutely no intentions of going back to football at all.

Then, in the late summer of 2013, I received a phone call from the then Harps manager, Aidan Breen, to see if I would be interested in coming back to help the club for the upcoming Championship. Aidan ask me to come back as the substitute goalkeeper as they only had one on the team and if he was to be injured, they had no replacement. He explained he was happy if I was just there for matches and didn't expect me at training. I laughed at this and explained to Aidan that if I was ever called upon, I would be no good to him unless I did train. So, I took his offer and trained with the team for the rest of the season as a goalkeeper.

In that short period, I regained my love of the game and decided to really push myself in 2014. I really threw myself into the position and researched how I could improve myself as a goalkeeper. We had a very good year for the Harps that year which culminated by reaching our first County Final since 2009. Unfortunately, we were comprehensively beaten by Crossmaglen, but I had performed very well all year which warranted a call up to the Armagh Senior team for 2015. I got the call from Geezer the morning after the County Final and as you could imagine I was nursing a very strong hangover. Kieran rang and said he would like for me to come and play for Armagh and asked if I would be interested. At first, I thought it was Harps teammate, Decky McKenna taking the piss and nearly hanging up, I played along just in case. I agreed and that was the start of my County career.



Fast forward to July 2016, Armagh were playing Laois in a re-fixed Qualifier match in Portlaoise after the first game had been voided due to Laois using seven substitutes. Although I had played for Armagh before in other competitions (McKenna Cup/National League and friendly games) this was my official All Ireland Championship debut at the age of thirty-three years and five months. A stat I was later informed made me the oldest ever Championship debutant in the history of the GAA. We lost the game and as it happens, I never played for Armagh in the Championship again.

At the end of 2016, I had earmarked 2017 for my breakout year. A year that I would work as hard as I could and let nothing stand in my way to have as best a year as I possibly could. On 27th January 2017 I was struck down with a life-threatening bowel obstruction, which with some divine intervention and pig headedness on my part, I pulled through with the aid of some emergency surgery. The doctors told me that my season was definitely done before it had even started and due to my age and the nature of both my injury and the position that I played, there was the possibility that I may not play ever again.

After four hard months of intensive rehab, hard-work and sheer determination I was cleared for full participation. My recovery was inspired by reading an article whereby tennis star Pat Cash returned from a similar surgery to play in the US Open within just four short weeks. Geezer came to visit me in hospital with some strong advice, "Get yourself better for your own Family, before you even think about coming back to your football family." It was the strength and support of my own family that ensured I returned to football within a short space of time. Without my wife, Phillippa and my three adorable children's support I simply would not have been motivated to continue on.

For the rest of 2017, we had a good Championship run with Armagh ending with a Croke Park defeat to Tyrone in the quarter final. For my club, Armagh Harps, after thirteen years of playing I finally won my first County Championship title, something very much like West Ham custodian, David Martin, I got to savour with my father before his untimely passing. He himself missed out on a Championship medal after the Harps won the title in 1988, the year after Daddy decided to retire from football, so to see two of his sons win medals made him extremely proud.

It's important for any goalkeeper to have their own personal dreams whenever they are growing up. Never be afraid to have or set yourself lofty ambitions for you are truly the master of your own destiny. When goals are made always remember to work hard to attain your dreams. Do not fear failure, but instead embrace it. Learn from it! Use failure as a tool to restart fresh but with the experience gained to ensure you do better this time around.

I have a quote stuck up on my wardrobe door and it reads: "Dealing with adversity is part of the learning curve for anyone who is truly committed to their goals." Both myself and David Martin faced adversity, on many occasions, but eventually after many years of hard work we finally made our dreams a reality. Whenever you find yourself on the path of highest resistance, that's when you know you are on the right path. The important thing to remember though, is to **'Never Give Up!'**