

# 'We won't underestimate DLS'

■ Dermot Keyes

Johnny Kelly stands on the brink of something pretty special. Back to back club All-Ireland hurling successes have been recorded by only a handful of managers, Pad Joe Whelahan of Birr the last to achieve the feat in 2003.

Ironically, Kelly led his club to their second Tommy Moore Cup in three seasons when seeing off Birr, coached by Whelahan, at Croke Park last year.

One of the few pairings that could have thrown up practically as parochial a deciding face-off as last year's would have been the meeting of De La Salle and Portumna this time around.

"There's only a parish between ourselves and Birr," said Kelly. "Both sets of players know each other by their first names, but that's not an issue this time around between ourselves and De La Salle. So that makes the preparation for this year's final that bit different to 2008 alright."

Unless you've been hiding out in a news-free cave in Afghanistan, you'll know that the Shamrocks were of course seen off in spectacular fashion by Portumna in Thurles on February 22nd.

Their 5-11 to 1-16 victory has been hailed by many hurling commentators as one of the greatest displays in club history. But for Kelly, whose feet are grounded to the point of being subterranean, he believes there's room for improvement from his all-action outfit.

"The team had been written off in some quarters before the semi-final despite being the defending All-Ireland champions so to produce that sort of

performance against Ballyhale was very satisfying. The pre-match talk acted as a great motivation for the team and we really produced on the day.

"But I do feel that there were aspects of our game that day which were, at times, quite average. There was a period in the second half when Ballyhale hit six successive points and that was something none of us were happy about. And that's something we'll be looking to put right next Tuesday."

So what in his view made Ballyhale made such overwhelming favourites in the eyes of so many ahead of that semi-final?

"I can only put it down to how well Kilkenny have been doing in the McCarthy Cup in the past few years and people thinking that that was going to translate into their club teams," he continued. "But it doesn't always work out that way."

"For me, the club scene is completely different; there's less of a gap between the club teams than what there has been between Kilkenny and the rest of the counties over the last few seasons. The Cushendall/De La Salle semi-final backs up the point I'm making."

"And we're under no illusions, despite what's been said and written by some in the build-up to this final that we're in for a major test and a very tight game against De La Salle."

## Favouritism

So what did Kelly make of the white-hot favourites

tag that's been placed on the Portumna men?

"That sort of thing is really just for newspapers and bookmakers," according to Johnny. "At the end of the day all we're concerning ourselves with is being as prepared and as ready as we can be for De La Salle on Saint Patrick's Day."

His forwards hit 5-10 of their 5-11 against Ballyhale, with much of the post-match focus falling on boy wonder Joe Canning, who hit 2-5 at Semple.

Brother Ollie who captains the side, enjoyed a magnificent 60 minutes, spearheading a defence which limited the Shamrocks to just six scores from play. It's clear, not that anyone who

knows their hurling needs it pointed out to them, that Portumna are much more than just a 'Joe Show'.

"You don't win a county championship because of one player, great

and all as Joe is," said his manager.

"One man doing the job isn't enough to get you across the line most days; you only have to go back to Joe getting 2-12 for Galway against Cork last summer and still finishing on the losing side to realise that."

"Every time you send a team out, you're looking for a good, all-round, even performance. If you've Joe Canning at full-forward, or John Mullane or Henry Shefflin for that matter and you can't supply them with ball, it doesn't really matter how talented they are."

"A successful team needs a strong work ethic with everyone putting it in as best they can for as long as they can. And that's what wins you matches."

Kelly is mindful of the fact that De La Salle's county players have a ghost to banish following their last run-out at Croke Park.

"We know that John Mullane, Kevin Moran and Bryan Phelan will be mindful of what happened to Waterford last September against Kilkenny and what it must have felt like to lose so heavily."

"But this is the Club Championship. This is a completely different competition, probably the best we have in hurling outside of the McCarthy Cup and we know that they will be as determined and as focused as we are to come out on top

on the day."

Being on the brink of history, of establishing Portumna as the pre-eminent club of the modern era, isn't something Johnny Kelly is pre-occupying himself with.

"Ah no, I wouldn't be thinking about it like that; we'll save that for 10 years from now when we're sitting up on a bar stool looking back on the good times! But we know that everything goes in cycles and that you can't guarantee success for any team. It's hard earned."

"I remember well when we were an intermediate club and we were struggling to develop a foothold in Galway hurling, probably not helped by us being so close to Tipperary and Offaly."

"But after a lot of hard work, we got there and now that we're here, we're trying to get every last drop out of it and making the most of this time while we have the chance."

Johnny Kelly concluded our chat on a philosophical note ahead of a special day on the GAA calendar.

"It's great to see two clubs from Galway and Waterford making a club final. There's plenty of good hurlers in both counties and I often think that in order for the likes of Galway and Waterford to take things to the next level in the inter-county scene that it all comes down to confidence."

"We're looking forward to the match. We're looking forward to the challenge De La Salle will present us with and we'll give them the greatest of respect. All we can hope for is that our best will be good enough come full-time next Tuesday."



Portumna manager Johnny Kelly

Best of Luck to De La Salle on Tuesday from



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all on the day!!!**