

The Captain on his crew

Catherine O'Brien got John Mullane's unique take on the entire De La Salle squad and backroom team

De La Salle's marvellous season has been built on determination, commitment, and hard work. Those qualities combined with a never-say-die attitude and a will to win has seen the club deliver on its potential of previous years by claiming the county senior hurling championship for the first time, followed by a Munster crown, and now De La Salle stand on the brink of All-Ireland glory.

John Mullane, Bryan Phelan and Kevin Moran may be household names but De La Salle's success this year cannot just be attributed to their inter-county stars. Every member of the club plays a vital role, from the 15 starters on the pitch to the remaining 18 players on the panel, and most especially the backroom team and supporters.

According to team captain John Mullane no player epitomises the incredible De La Salle team spirit more than veteran goalkeeper Stevie Brenner. Nicknamed 'Billy' by his team-mates, Brenner brings experience and leadership to the team while his commitment to the club is second to none.

"Stevie is an absolute gentleman; he's very easy-going and never has a bad word to say about anyone. He was manager of our [county championship-winning] Under 21 team last year and plays a massive role for De La Salle both on and off the pitch".

Defender Alan Kelly, 33, is described by his skipper as a strong, determined hurler and does his best to avoid him on the training field. "Alan, or Kit-Kat as we call him, is a tough, tenacious competitor who's certainly not to be messed with either on or off the field. He also brings a huge amount of experience to the team and even though it's fair to say he's 'matured' with age, Alan is definitely one to have on your side."

Ian Flynn, known as 'Flynn', enjoyed his fair share of underage success with De La Salle and, now 23, has developed into a very reliable defender. "Flynn is another really easy-going lad who gets on with everyone. At times he can get a little bit worked up but in general he has a fairly carefree approach."

Michael 'Dots' Doherty also made his way to the senior team through the juvenile ranks and is an extremely talented hurler, according to his captain. "I hate marking 'Dots' at training. He's a tight-marking corner back who gives little away. I think 'Dots' could have a very big future in the game. He's certainly got the talent."

"Another player who has come through the under-age set up and has an abundance of talent is Darren Russell. Nicknamed 'Rusty', Darren in my opinion is a hugely

underestimated hurler. He's an excellent, tight-marking defender and very strong under the ball. Not content with displaying his skill on the pitch, Darren is a real ladies man!"

Marvellous leader

Mullane is not surprised with the impact Kevin Moran has made on the Waterford senior team and has nothing but praise for the multi-talented 21-year-old. "It's hard to believe Kevin has achieved so much when he's still so young. He's an extremely talented hurler and can turn his hand to anything and make a success out of it."

"Kevin is also a marvellous leader. We saw that when he captained the WIT Fitzgibbon team and our own Under 21 side. He plays a key role on this panel. Although keenly focused on training for the final Kevin will no doubt be keeping an eye on Cheltenham this week, trying to find a few winners for us!"

Aged 21, UL student David Greene captained De La Salle to county minor hurling honours in 2005 and has quickly established himself on the senior team. "Greener won absolutely everything coming through with the underage teams. He's a fine hurler but also a lovely fella to work with and a key player in the club's success," John attests.

"This man is a legend," Mullane's summation of Bryan 'Bull' Phelan, says it all and emphasises the player's impact not only on the De La Salle panel but also on the Waterford senior set-up. "Bull is an unbelievable character. You couldn't but admire him; he's extremely funny and gets on so well with everyone."

"Bull is well known for enjoying a flutter or two so we can expect him to have his mind or more than training this week

with Cheltenham underway. He got his nickname about eight years ago when a sub on the Waterford U21 team. We were losing against Cork and a supporter shouted to management to let 'Bull' have a go. The name certainly stuck and he's known by it now wherever he goes."

Phelan's central sidekick Conan Watt is interestingly named 'Smirnoff' "which probably doesn't need explanation," John smiles. "This is his fifth year with De La Salle and he gives it absolutely everything all the time. He's brilliant to work with and himself and 'Bull' have built a formidable midfield partnership."

Paidi Nevin is the type of player any team would love to have but deserves far more credit for what he does, says his captain. "Paidi is the unsung hero on this team. In my opinion he doesn't get half enough credit for what he manages to achieve. He's quiet within himself but not a man to be crossed on the field. He has great strength and is full of energy, a player you'd definitely love to have with you and not against you."

"Lee Hayes is another character on the team," he adds, "Known as



Family occasion: the County Final pre-match parade at Fraher Field last November.

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'Blackie', Lee puts the 'm' into mad. People think I'm mad but I'm very much on the mild side in comparison to Lee. He's also come up through the ranks and is adept at celebrating De La Salle wins!"

As mentor of the De La Salle College Harty and Croke Cup teams, veteran forward Derek McGrath has enjoyed tremendous success over the last few years and is an invaluable asset to the De La Salle team as his brother-in-law explains.

"Derek is the type of person in the club that a lot of the younger lads look up to. He's a great man to have around the dressing-room and when Derek has something to say everyone listens. He was

christened 'Hopper' by Bull Phelan after a former Galway hurler of the same name and build."

Dermot Dooley, who teaches with Derek in De La Salle and was his co-manager with the college's Harty and Croke Cup-winning teams, "blew in from Offaly a few years ago but is now very much part and parcel of De La Salle. He's known as the Parish Priest of the team as he offers the prayer before each game. It's worked a treat up to know so let's hope that continues in the final. Dermot is also a great man in the dressing-room and I would think has a future in management ahead of him," John reckons.

Promising future

Mullane prides himself on being able to identify a young hurler with potential and he's of the opinion that 18-year-old Stephen Daniels has a massive future in the game. "Dano, as Stephen is known to us, has already achieved at a very high level with two Harty and two All-Ireland Colleges titles to his credit, along with much success at underage level with the club."

"I really think he's a hurler with a very big future and I expect great things from 'Dano' in the years ahead. He can be quiet but is definitely the 'joker' on the team and a great character. Thomas Kearney is known as 'Butcher Boy', a reference it should be pointed out to his trade. He is though a strong powerful hurler and a great

club man."

James Quirke is another one of our young hurlers who enjoyed tremendous success as a juvenile. 'Quirky' is currently being put through his paces as a trainee Garda in Templemore. He's a quiet easy-going lad and an excellent hurler, very strong under the ball. Quirky's prowess as a free-taker is an invaluable asset to De La Salle.

"Dean Twomey is yet another young hurler with bags of ability," he continues. "Blessed with good Clare hurling blood thanks to his grandfather Joe, 'Deano' goes quietly about his business and has a very relaxed attitude."

Next up is Alan O'Neill, nicknamed 'Nailor', who has come through the underage set up "and is a great lad to train," the skipper affirms. "He's on the fringes of the team and has a bright future with the seniors. John Coady, who is 21, was a member of the Waterford U21 team last year and was also a successful underage player with the club. Another De La Salle 'Ladies Man'!"

On a roll, he turns to Brian Farrell, "better known as 'Big Bird' after a certain Sesame Street character is another great player to train, who gets on with it and never has a bad word to say about anyone."

"Paddy Kennedy is a tough, tenacious corner-back with a big future. Jason Foran or 'Stilo' as we like to call him, has



Happiness is.... The De La Salle players are mobbed after their County final victory over Abbeyside.

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lightning speed. He's a real flyer and would be faster than myself. He's only 19 and should be another one for the future."

"Kenneth Byrne is a nephew of former Waterford hurler Damien Byrne who is just breaking through onto the team and is another one for the future – as is Oran Keevers, who also won two Harty and two All-Ireland medals with the college team."

"Luke 'Lukey' Lawlor is a fantastic club man. He's been with us quite a while and is De La Salle through and through. We call Eoin Casey 'Stitches' for his ability to burs out laughing for no particular reason and at just 20 years of age there's a bright future ahead for him."

"Paul Farrelly is a very level-headed young lad, as is Chris Sheehan. We'll see plenty of these young players in the years ahead. Seamus 'Sham' Richardson from Ahane is a great player to work with. He made a massive difference when coming on as sub in the Munster Club championship."

"Eddie Barrett and Conor Toole are another two players who came up all the way through underage while Ray 'Razor' Murphy has been with the club a long time and is great to have around."

Brains trust

Behind the De La Salle panel is a strong management team and John is quick to pay tribute to those who work so hard behind the scenes.

"I'm delighted that Owen 'Dumbo' Dunphy is our manager at this time. He's been a tremendous servant to the club. He was a marvellous player and is now a great manager. Owen manages to stay relatively calm and only really gets annoyed when we're playing rubbish!"

"Much credit for our success must also go to selector Brendan Fennelly. He was with us in 2003 and 2004 and returned to us this year. He has a massive influence on the players and is a man you definitely want to keep on your side. Brian Cody speaks very highly of Brendan, which is all you really need to know about him."

"Micko Casey our trainer deserves great credit for the great physical shape we're in, while the other members of our backroom team, Philip Burke, Alan Dillon and Jack Dugga, also deserve acknowledgement for their commitment and hard work. I must also give a mention to our hurley men Barry Murphy, Willie Power and Mark Cooney, while Suts and Jamie Dillon do a great job as our water men. It's very much a team effort here at De La Salle."