

Two from two is just fine

Brian Flannery Reports

It is kind of surprising the popularity of the National Leagues now being played in January and February. The size of the attendances is taking authorities somewhat by surprise with plenty of stories of not enough gates being open and unexpected traffic congestion.

While RTE have lost the rights to the Six Nations Rugby Championship their coverage of the GAA National Leagues have been an unqualified success.

To have the rights to show high profile league games like Kerry v Dublin in football and Tipp v Cork in hurling have been a sure fire winner for Saturday night viewing.

Given the high viewing figures in excess of 500,000 I'd say Saturday night lights are here to stay. Strong attendances and impressive TV viewing figures will probably result in more evening games in the coming seasons. I must admit that being able to watch top class GAA action on free to air RTE makes for an entertaining Saturday night. Nothing beats being there but still it proves there is an audience out there when the top teams are in action.

The attendance in TEG Cusack Park Mullingar was far more modest however with only a handful of locals bothering to come out and support the Westmeath hurlers.

I have no idea what TEG sell or how much they pay for the naming rights but it would be a surprise if a redeveloped Walsh Park doesn't similarly have a sponsors named attached.

WIT Walsh Park or Bausch and Lomb Walsh Park? Who knows, lets built it first says you!

Driving up the length of the country to Mullingar I couldn't but notice a nicely decked out WD registration car in front of me. It's a while since I saw a car with a Waterford flag hanging out the boot of the car, in February.



portsfile 2 February 2020; Jarlath Daly of Waterford in action against Westmeath players, from left, Niall Mitchell, Joey Boyle, 10, Eoin Price, 9, and Aaron Craig during the Allianz Hurling League Division 1 Group A Round 2 match between Westmeath and Waterford at TEG Cusack Park in Mullingar, Westmeath. Photo by Piaras Ó Midheach/Sportsfile

Waterford's Iarlaith Daly of Waterford up against Westmeath players, from left, Niall Mitchell, Joey Boyle, 10, Eoin Price, 9, and Aaron Craig during the Allianz Hurling League Division 1 Group A Round 2 match between Westmeath and Waterford in Mullingar.

That is the mantra of the manager, it's only February, we're not going to get too excited.

Too true. It's just past St. Brigid's Day and no medals were ever handed out in February.

The signs are positive though. Two wins on successive Sundays gives a team without a championship win in over two years a timely boost and should add confidence to training.

At the moment Waterford are managing without a core of players previously considered mainstays of the team. Last Sunday Waterford began the game without Pauric Mahony, Kevin Moran, Jamie Barron, Austin Gleeson, Stephen O'Keeffe and Conor Gleeson. College kids Callum Lyons and Jack Prendergast were also rested for this game following their midweek Fitzgibbon exertions.

There is nothing like competition for places to drive standards in training.

Billy Nolan who started Waterford's last championship game against Cork last June gave a masterful display between the sticks last Sunday. The Roanmore youngster was steadiness personified fielding many high deliveries in another confident display. Nolan added a one hundred and twenty yard point from play to also make it onto the scoresheet. Reports from the Fitzgibbon Cup confirmed that Billy Nolan was as his brilliant best against DCU with two fabulous saves and 1-1 from placed balls. The battle for the number one jersey is likely to continue with Liam Cahill I'm delighted to have two top class goalkeepers to select from.

Iarlaith Daly is settling in nicely to senior inter-county activity but bigger tests lie ahead. Ferrybank's Mark O'Brien is no doubt cursing his luck having to retire so early with an injury which saw the early introduction of Mikey Kearney.

Both Neil Montgomery and Jack Fagan work tirelessly for the team with Darragh Lyons also not looking out of place at senior level. Fagan, the former Meath hurler, adds a competitive edge to a competitive middle third of the field and has also scored in both his league outings to-date. Dessie Hutchinson has yet to light up the league in the same way he thrilled in the club championship. February in Mullingar and Semple in July are like two different planets. Perhaps so too is the Ballygunner offense and the Waterford attack now under the direction of Liam Cahill. Waterford are certainly playing ball more direct and earlier to the forwards than in previous iterations and Hutchinson's landscape is not as spacious as it is at club level. It is likely to take Dessie Hutchinson some time to adjust to a different attacking pattern and would benefit from playing even closed to the goal than he now often finds himself.

Patrick Curran continues to press his case for a more permanent place in the starting roster. Without setting the world on fire in Mullingar, Curran is still ahead of the youthful Billy Power and Tom Barron. Waterford has Limerick (away), Galway (home) and Tipperary (away) to complete their league schedule over the next few weeks. At the end of these three games we will know much more about Waterford's prospects for a successful season. For the moment though, two wins from two will do just fine.