

De La Salle deliver historic All-Ireland win

De La Salle College . . . 0-13Kilkenny CBS . . . 1-9

The scenes of jubilation which greeted the last blast of the whistle in last Sunday's All-Ireland Senior 'A' Hurling Colleges Final at Croke Park simply beggars description. Young and old alike, many of them with tears of joy emanating from their eyes, converged on the historic playing pitch, to salute and congratulate the victors on what was a thoroughly deserved victory.

The smallest possible margin separated two gallant teams who had given their all in pursuit of victory from beginning to end, and while neutrals present would have readily settled for a draw, justice was ultimately done, and De La Salle's name is now indelibly linked with this most famous trophy for the first time ever, and as such will always be remembered as the sweetest of success stories.

This triumph was achieved in the dying moments, and it took a truly prodigious pointed free under pressure from the Waterford College's scorer-in-chief Stephen Power to split two fine sporting teams. That defining score came in the second minute of added-on time, and in a heart-stopping further couple of minutes, the losers had a chance of a late equaliser; however, when Mark Bergin's 45-metre free from directly in front of the Hogan Stand struck the Canal goal's upright and was scrambled to safety, this epic contest was all over and De La Salle had finally carried the day and on a final scoreline of 0-13 to 1-9.

Denied goals

Yet, taking everything into consideration, it would surely have been a calamity of enormous dimensions had De La Salle failed to bring home the spoils. Twice during the course of this keenly contested decider, Galway referee Michael Haverty scorned the use of the advantage rule, and in the process denied the winners a brace of goals which would surely have placed a much different complexion on this game and left the losers with a mountain to climb, and denied onlookers the thrilling finale that ensued.

The first of these came early in the match, and shortly after the Kilkenny lads had taken the lead for the second time. A determined De La Salle response, engineered by their brilliant midfielder Michael Grace, and carried on ever so effectively by Thomas Connors, saw the neatest of touches from joint-captain Craig Moloney finished to the CBS net - but the referee called back play for a foul on one of the De La Salle forwards and awarded a somewhat questionable penalty under the circumstances, considering that the breach in rule was committed by the defending side. The victors had to settle for a levelling second point, as Stephen Power's 20-metre pile-driver went a mere inch or two over the crossbar.

The second 'let-off' for the Kilkenny cause came early in the second half, when it looked as if the Waterford lads were about to build on their minimum interval lead - again Stephen Power was involved, as was his Ballygunner club colleague Willie Walsh. With the former standing in isolation less than twenty metres from the CBS goal-line, and a certain goal within his sights, the official deemed it necessary to call back play when Walsh was impeded after delivering a pass to De La Salle's leading scorer.

Well-drilled

Such incidents apart, there was never a great deal between two well-drilled teams over an all-too-fleeting 64 minutes of excellent underage hurling. Fortunes ebbed and flowed during a highly competitive and interesting initial opening half, with the sides all-square on five separate occasions.

It was only fitting that De La Salle, who had enjoyed a significant territorial advantage in the first half, should have the honour

of going into recess leading by 0-6 to 0-5 – the lead point coming in the 28th minute after another 20m free from Stephen Power with goal intent, narrowly greased the cross bar for the eleventh white flag of the opening moiety.

As is the case in all good matches, excitement-wise the second half even surpassed everything that had taken place before the break. By the end of the third quarter the teams were deadlocked for the sixth time at eight points each, prompting thoughts of a possible replay at Thurles next Sunday.

But when the Kilkenny lads struck for the only goal of the match in the 47th minute, it certainly looked as if all the good work of the De La Salle side would be in vain. However, to their eternal credit the Waterford youngsters came back to level for the seventh and last time some six minutes from the end.

As the match moved into injury time, De La Salle – obliged to make late changes in personnel – managed to seal their place in history. With 62 minutes on the clock, a free was awarded around the middle of the field when a CBS player was adjudged to have picked the ball off the ground. Responsibility was entrusted to Stephen Power, and while he had to wait a few agonising moments as an injured player received medical attention, he struck straight and true to split the Kilkenny uprights for what proved to be the winning score.

Still, this intriguing battle wasn't over yet – for no Kilkenny hurling teams will concede defeat until the final whistle – and the CBS students came surging up-field in search of an equaliser. They in turn were awarded a free from a scoreable position but their star full-forward Mark Bergin saw his shot bounce back off the left upright at the Canal End. The Waterford backs, who had been brilliant all through, managed to get the ball partially away from the danger area, and with that the final whistle sounded.

Tit for tat

Ideal hurling weather prevailed as the game got underway, and it was the Kilkenny CBS side who had the perfect start when inside of 45 seconds they took the lead via a splendid Mark Bergin point. Both sides missed chances – De La Salle a little more culpable, recording three wides – before the industrious Willie Walsh came up with the first equalising point in the 4th minute.

The winners might have done better from a couple of frees before Mark Kelly, with a neat stroke, put the Kilkenny side back in front inside eight minutes. The De La Salle defence, having settled quickly, kept a tight grip on the CBS forwards and the good work looked set to reap a deserved dividend at the opposite end of the field in the 11th minute. However, Moloney's finish to the net was disallowed and Stephen Power pointed the resultant placed ball to level matters for a second time.

Points were swapped by Shane Maher and Peter McCarthy before Power put over a '65' to give the Harty Cup winners a 17th-minute lead. But midfielder Mark Kelly produced a leveller soon after and the Marble City outfit went ahead through a superlative Adrian Stapleton point in the 21st minute.

Stephen Power struck again for De La Salle five minutes later and notched another point to give them an internal advantage.

Interval lead

The change of ends saw De La Salle edge two points clear after Power converted a free within a minute of the turnaround. Kilkenny CBS replied with an equally fine score from their top marksman Mark Bergin in the 34th minute, but good work from midfielder Frank McGrath enabled Craig Moloney to put two between the teams five minutes later.

However, the improving Noresiders responded with delightful points from Bergin and Stapleton to get back on level terms again at the three-quarter stage.

With the outcome very much in the melting pot, the Suirsiders regained the lead. But the De La Salle cheers had scarcely receded when CBS struck for what had all the hallmarks of a decisive goal.

Courageously the Munster champions hit back immediately with a superb Peter McCarthy point, followed by another from a free by Stephen Power to restore parity with just under eleven minutes remaining.

The teams traded points soon after but the last six minutes of normal time saw no change on the scoreboard, and a replay loomed large. However, Stephen Power came up trumps to signal scenes of unrestrained joy among the De La Salle contingent.

Heroes All

This was a splendid all-round performance by the Decies' standard bearers. They had stars in so many sectors of the field that it might seem somewhat ungracious to single out any one player for special mention. The winners boasted a well marshalled defence in which all played their part in bringing this historic trophy to De La Salle and the Deise County for the very first time.

None stood out more than corner-backs Patrick Kennedy and Noel Connors, while in a rock-solid half-back sector, co-captain David O'Sullivan and Philip Mahoney really excelled and in the middle of the field Michael Grace gave a real tour-de-force. He was in the thick of everything and forged a tremendous link between defence and attack, while his partner Frank McGrath also got in an enormous amount of solid work to complement the Mooncoin lad's brilliance.

Not for the first time, match-winner Stephen Power was talismanic in attack, ably assisted by all his colleagues, most notably Craig Moloney, Willie Walsh and Thomas Connors, whose collective contribution was exceptional.

The vanquished too had their outstanding players and we're certain to hear a lot more of individuals such as Mark Bergin, who was gutted at the final whistle after his last-gasp attempt so narrowly failed. Others to shine for Kilkenny CBS included David Langton, Adrian Stapleton, Shane Maher, John Traynor, Daniel Kenny and Stephen Murphy.

A game to remember for all time, and proof positive that hurling remains the greatest game on earth.

* Footnote: Yet, as this thrilling spectacle unfolded, one could not help reflecting that the powers that be erred substantially by allowing this thriller to be played in front of a sparse attendance at 12.45pm.

This classic would surely have raised the roof in Semple Stadium as curtain raiser to next Sunday's National League final, though that would deny these two fine teams their big day out at GAA headquarters.

Scorers

De La Salle: Stephen Power 0-9 (0-6 frees, 0-2 '65s'), Craig Moloney 0-2, Peter McCarthy and Willie Walsh, 0-1 each.

Kilkenny CBS: Adrian Stapleton 1-2, Mark Bergin 0-5 (0-3 frees), Mark Kelly 0-2.

Teams

De La Salle College: Stephen O'Keeffe, Patrick Kennedy, Alan O'Neill, Noel Connors, Philip Mahoney, David O'Sullivan, Stephen Daniels, Michael Grace, Frank McGrath, Willie Walsh, Thomas Connors, Peter McCarthy, Stephen Power, Craig Moloney, Neil Kelly. Subs: Adam Brophy for P. McCarthy, K Gahan for A. O'Neill (injured), E. Casey for N. Kelly.

Kilkenny CBS: Stephen Murphy, John Traynor, Daniel Kenny, Richard Doyle, Peter Nolan, David Langton, Enda Malone, Mark Kelly, John Fitzpatrick, Shane Maher, Oisin Walsh, Adrian Stapleton, Pat Guinan, Mark Bergin, Mark Bergin, Martin Gaffney. Subs: T. Langton for E. Malone, M. Bambrick for O. Walsh.

Referee: Michael Haverty (Galway).