

Ballyhale Shamrocks take senior hurling crown

Ballyhale Shamrocks . . . 1-20; St. Martin's . . . 1-10

Being forced to line out without such household names as Henry Shefflin and 'Cha' Fitzpatrick and the lesser known, but very accomplished hurler, Keith Nolan, was something akin to producing 'Hamlet' without the prince, or indeed Ireland playing in another code without Brian O'Driscoll and Ronan O'Gara. However the 'boys from Dixie' stood up to the plate and showed a strength of character which is a feature of their club for many years. Led by T.J. Reid who played a proverbial 'blinder', Eoin and team captain Patrick Reid also made valuable contributions. Michael Fennelly and Colin Fennelly had a great start, faded a bit but then came back to put in a storming finish. Aidan Cummins, Paul Shefflin and Bobby Aylward played well in defence, despite Aylward carrying a leg injury for most of the game, and he was replaced by Keith Nolan with two minutes to go, Eamon Walsh also played well and blotted out his opposite number for the entire game. Goalkeeper James Connolly did not get a lot to do but dealt capably with anything that came his way.

St. Martin's (Muckalee/Coon/Ballyfoyle) were a tough, rural team, well able to hurl and hungry for success, but the 'mountainy' men lacked a most important ingredient in any county final and that is experience!! Five of the 'Martin's players, namely John Mulhall, Colin McGrath, James Dowling, Thomas Breen and Paddy Nolan were members of the team beaten by city side Dicksboro in last year's minor final, while other regulars such as Brian Mulhall, Shane Cardigan, Ronan Maher and Eoin McGrath were also on the losing minor team of 2003, when they fell to another Kilkenny city side, James Stephens. Their lack of experience became apparent as the second half progressed.

The goal scored by corner forward Eoin Reid on the resumption of play in the second half was probably the turning point in the game, after this score the losers lost whatever confidence they had and heads went down. For the Muckalee men John Maher was back to form with his free taking and did well from play as well, but it was Eoin McGrath at corner forward that did best in the St. Martin's forward line. Neither John Mulhall or full-forward Brian Mulhall was as effective as they were in previous games and will want to forget this game.

The Muckalee defence was dour and determined and played well until they ran out of steam in the closing minutes of the game, in particular Shane Cardigan and Niall Moran were conspicuous. Colin McGrath played well on goal but was unfortunate with the early goal scored on him at the beginning of the second half. This goal was of the nightmare variety for any goalkeeper; it dropped short and was being followed up by the Shamrocks pack, falling eventually to Eoin Reid who slammed to the net.

The scoring opened with a Eoin McGrath point for Muckalee and shortly afterwards T.J. Reid equalised for the Shamrocks. It was tit for tat up to half time with all the Shamrock's scores coming from the stick of T.J. Reid, with the exception of a point from Eoin Reid. True, St. Martin's had lived a charmed life in the first half with the sliothar being taken off the line on two occasions and it seemed at this point as if luck was on the Muckalee men's side. At half time it was anybody's game with the score standing at 1-5 to 0-7 with the Northerners in the lead by a single point.

On the resumption of play Eoin Reid rifled the ball into the net early in the second half and as already stated, that was the turning point of the game. Midway through the second period of play Ballyhale began to dominate with T.J. Reid, Patrick Reid and Colin Fennelly popping over points almost at will and they ran out easy winners in the end with ten points to spare.

In the semi-final Shamrocks had a tough enough game with city side, James Stephens, but one always felt that the Ballyhale men could have gone up another gear if that were required. In the other semi-final St. Martin's matched the teak-tough Johnstown men from the Tipperary/Kilkenny border in fitness, physical hurling and skill. But perhaps having to play on three consecutive weekends took its toll, coupled with the lack of experience. But it was a learning experience and these lads from North Kilkenny can hopefully build on this and will be a force to be reckoned with next year.

Teams

Shamrocks: James Connolly, Paul Shefflin, Eamon Walsh, Pádraig Holden, Michael Dermody, Aidan Cummins, Bob Aylward, Coin Fennelly, Michael Fennelly, Eamon Fitzpatrick, T. J. Reid, Bendán Contelloe, Eoin Reid, Patrick Reid (captain), Mark Aylward. Sub: Keith Nolan replaced the injured Bob Aylward in the dying minutes of the game.

St. Martin's: Colin McGrath, Shane Cadogan, Brendan Maher, Alan Murphy, Niall Moran (capt.), James Dowling, Ronan Maher, Paul Maher, Shane Coonan, Damien Maher, John Maher, John Mulhall, Eoin McGrath, Brian Mulhall, Joe Maher. Mark Murphy, James Maher. Subs: Thomas Breen and Don Callanan replaced Joe Maher and Shane Coonan.

Referee: Domo Connolly.

Some snippets from the County Final:

Kerryman trains St Martin's:

It was somewhat unusual for a Kilkenny senior hurling team contesting the county final to have been trained by a Kerry hurler of another era - Christy Walsh. Imagine having a Kerry senior football team playing in their county final having been trained by a Kilkenny footballer? But in fairness to Walsh he did a very good job with the Glensmen and it has to be admitted that when Christy lined out for Bennetts bridge in the autumn of his career, he did have all the necessary skills on the hurling field.

'Take a bow' Dixie:

The backbone of the GAA has been the unsung volunteers who unselfishly give their time to promoting Gaelic games. One such person who came to notice on Sunday was Carrickshock's Dixie Burke. During the junior and intermediate finals plus the replay of the Muckalee and Fenians games this man rose manfully to his task for the entire evening in a biting wind. On Sunday last he was there again, wearing the official Maor vest. During the shower he never left his post, standing bare-headed and uncomplaining. This quiet spoken official is an example to all of us who love our native games. Incidentally, in his younger days Dixie was a superb hurler both with his club and county.

Football honours for Kilkenny ladies:

At the half-time break during the minor final the Kilkenny ladies' football team, who recently captured the Junior All-Ireland were introduced to the attendance and got a well deserved round of applause. On leaving Nowlan Park the ladies were heading off to the airport for a well-deserved holiday.

Tullaroan 'old boys' are feted:

The Tullaroan senior hurling team who won the 1958 county final were guests of honour and were introduced individually to supporters at half time during the senior game. They were all applauded loudly with the biggest cheer for the last man to be introduced – selector on the Tullaroan team that day, Dick Walsh, whose 90th birthday was on Sunday. Dick is still hale and hearty with a bounce still in his step.

Popular winner of Toyota car:

It was also a lucky day for Jimmy Bergin who is groundsman at Nowlan since 1948. Jimmy's name was drawn out of the drum by President of the GAA, Nicky Brennan. The groundsman won the Toyota car in the raffle in aid of the Kilkenny player's fund. He has been doing a wonderful job over the years and it was indeed poetic justice when he won.