

Deise dig deep in dogfight



Waterford's Pauric Mahony looks on as his shot hits the back of the Dublin net as the hurley of Dublin's Liam Rushe flies through the air. | Photos: Noel Browne

"A dogfight". That's how Anthony Daly described last Sunday's Division 1A clash between Waterford and Dublin, in which the hosts came out on top after another wholly committed and uplifting Deise performance. And how right 'Dalo' was.

Played on an unforgiving surface, one which the ever-effective Seamus Prendergast prospered on, a second home win now leaves Waterford within touching distance of a quarter-final berth.

However, with two testing trips to Ennis and Kilkenny on the horizon, it's clear that there's much hard work still ahead if the white and blue is to progress to the business end of the competition.

While Waterford boss Derek McGrath wastes no time in saluting the hard work extolled by both his defensive and offensive divisions, his full-back line particularly glistened under a grey Walsh Park sky. They were magnificent.

Shane Fives has warmed to the number three shirt which it would now appear will have to be wrestled from him come the Munster Championship.

Despite Conal Keaney's late, late goal, which wasn't down to the Carrigtwohill man whatsoever, Fives shackled the bounding Dublin full-forward superbly throughout the match.

Either side of him, Noel Connors tackled, hooked and hurled with the ferocity of the form that won him a 2010 All-Star, while the burden of senior-inter county action is resting welcomingly lightly on the 20-year-old shoulders of Tadgh de Burca.

Before 4363 spectators, a welcome increase on the attendance recorded for the Deise's clash with Galway, Dublin were quicker to rise from the blocks on an incredibly heavy sod.

Alan McCrabbe opened the scoring for the visitors, with Keaney and David O'Callaghan also finding the range in the fourth and sixth minutes, before Pauric Mahony opened Waterford's account.

Mahony's first free of the afternoon in the 10th minute further reduced the arrears before David O'Callaghan eventually pointed for Dublin following Shane Fives' superb block down of Alan McCrabbe's shot.

Kevin Moran, who would prove so instrumental when redeployed to centre-back in the second half, struck a fine 12th minute point, followed by two successive points by Pauric Mahony to leave sides tied on 0-5 each.

Dublin captain John McCaffrey was played in by McCrabbe to edge the visitors back in front only for Mahony to convert another free in the 19th minute as Waterford began to develop some momentum.

Seamus Prendergast, who tortured Dubs full-back Peter Kelly in the opening half, pulled instinctively on the turn to score a terrific 20th minute point from an acute angle on the right flank. The home crowd were warming to their side's efforts, and as the volume levels grew, so too did Waterford's purpose and application.

Prendergast pointed again in the 21st minute only for Joey Boland to reply from Dublin's very next attack, but what ultimately proved to be the game's decisive score soon followed.

Capitalising on some indecision at the heart of the Dublin defence in the 24th minute, again catalysed by the marauding Prendergast, Pauric Mahony gathered the loose ball and slammed it past Gary Maguire to register Waterford's first goal of the League campaign.

Ryan Donnelly bisected the posts from the Deise's next attack, but controversy reigned just six minutes from the break when Michael 'Brick' Walsh was sent off following a coming together with Alan McCrabbe.

Mahony and Colm Cronin then traded points to leave the hosts 1-10 to 0-8 up at the break but, or so it then appeared, facing an uphill battle after losing their captain and talisman.

The second half was, as Anthony Daly put it afterwards, "real war of attrition stuff during which Dublin, remarkably, didn't score for 28 minutes.

Another Mahoney free in the opening moments of the second half sent Waterford six points clear, and in a match of many rucks and scrums as we've come to know them, there'd be no score at either end for another 21 minutes.

But that's not to say that there wasn't much to admire in the interim, as Waterford, with Moran majestic at centre-back, and aided and abetted by Jamie Nagle and Philip Mahoney, limited Dublin's half-forward line to just one point all afternoon.

Dublin had plenty of decent territory, but sent too many efforts into the waiting grip of Stephen O'Keeffe in the Waterford goal as they failed to make their numerical advantage count.

And in the 55th minute, the Ballygunner netminder made a magnificent save from point-blank range to deny substitute Eamon Dillon a certain goal.

Two minutes later, Tadgh de Burca superbly fielded one of the overabundance of long balls Dublin deployed during the match, clearing downfield to substitute Brian O'Sullivan who effortlessly bisected the uprights.

As the clock wore down, Dublin continued to attack, only to find the Waterford defence in the meanest of mean moods.

Ten minutes from time, Eamon Dillon released Keaney just yards from goal only for Noel Connors to marvellously hook the sliothar away just as the full-forward prepared to strike. The Walsh Park faithful greeted Connors' block with the relish of a score at the opposite end but even when Dublin finally broke their scoring duck through McCrabbe in the 63rd minute,

the writing already appeared to be on the wall.

And that was exacerbated by Mahony's sixth free of the afternoon two minutes later, which felt like the insurance score Waterford required to claim the two points.

However, Conal Keaney capitalised on a misplaced Jamie Nagle pass to steer the ball beneath Stephen O'Keeffe and into the net just a minute from time to place even the smallest seed of doubt into Waterfordian minds. But given how well Waterford defended all afternoon, there was no way on earth this superbly drilled unit was going to cough up another cheap score between then and half-time.

And while Dillon pointed again two minutes into stoppage time, it was all too late for the Leinster champions, as Waterford took the spoils, and can look forward to the high-profile clashes with Clare and Kilkenny with no little confidence.

Dublin were also reduced to 14 men after substitute Conor McCormack was dismissed for a silly pull across Jamie Nagle four minutes from time.

In three League matches, Waterford have produced five excellent halves of hurling, and with a little more accuracy against Tipperary would now be sitting on top of Division 1A with three wins.

But what's also been proven once more is how foolish it is to discount Waterford within the bigger hurling debate. Derek McGrath's side of emerging and established talents is blending well, but there's much work yet to be done.

Dermot Keyes.