

'Banks' Magic from Billy



Waterford players rush to congratulate goalkeeper Billy Nolan after his sensational injury-time save in Fraher Field in last Wednesday's Munster MHC semi-final.

How did he do it? Seriously, how on Earth did Billy Nolan keep that ball out?

With echoes of Gordon Banks' World Cup wonder save resounding loudly among us 'oldies' present, a 15-year-old talent from Roanmore left hurling fans as agog in Dungarvan on Wednesday last as spectators were in Guadalajara 44 years ago.

Nolan, a prodigious talent at Under-16 level, dusted himself off after sustaining a head injury to produce a last minute wonder stop which ensured the Deise's fifth Munster Minor Hurling Final appearance in six years.

As a drama-soaked semi-final entered the third minute of injury time, and with Clare trailing by two points, the Banner needed a green-flagger to turn the tide of a compelling encounter in their favour.

Clutching the incoming sliothar, midfielder David Fitzgerald rifled a shot from point-blank range to the Roanmore goalkeeper's left.

Yet somehow, and to the equal disbelief of Waterford and Clare fans alike, Nolan flung his body and hurl towards the ball, tipping it away from danger.

And while there was time for one more Banner point via Jason McCarthy, the Deise were not to be denied another provincial final appearance, winning by 2-13 to 2-12.

When he'd eventually found time to exhale, Waterford manager Derek Lyons saluted both his goalkeeper and his team's magnificent resilience in the wake of a nerve-shredding finish.

"I just said to him there he was lucky he got to it, because he made a balls of the first (Clare) goal and he'd be the first to acknowledge it!" he said, with a wry grin.

"The one thing I didn't see coming tonight was Billy making an error like that because he's an absolutely brilliant goalkeeper, and my heart would have went out to him if we'd have lost this game because he'd have been beating himself up over it.

"It was actually ironic in a way that he kept us in the game at the end - I don't think even Donal Óg or Stephen O'Keeffe or the best goalkeepers at that level would have saved that shot.

"And bear in mind he's an outfield player at his own age - he's probably the best outfield Under-16 player in the county and he's done a brilliant job for us in goal - and yeah, the save was just outstanding, out of this world."

Acknowledging that Clare presented a formidable challenge, striking eight points without reply before and after half-time, Derek Lyons saluted his team's steel, particularly evident in the closing minutes of a tense encounter.

"I never thought it was gone because I know the quality of the lads we have. Even five minutes into the second half, and by the time Clare were level, people in the stand might have been wondering where we were going to get this win out of...but the calibre of player we have in this team, and what can I say about supersub Eddie Meaney coming on and making an impact on another game again - that's part and parcel of our set-up here."

And now there's another Munster Final and a guaranteed slot in the All-Ireland Series to look forward to, as the Deise seek to atone for last year's provincial decider reversal, as well as a successful defence of the Irish Press Cup.

"The desire and honesty and commitment of the lads was second to none tonight and they really did their jersey great service," said their proud manager. Too right they did. Roll on July 13th!