

## No Place For Hide As League Begins



Michael 'Brick' Walsh looks set for an offensive role for the Deise throughout the League and Championship campaign.  
| Photo: Noel Browne

### **National Hurling League Division 1B (Limerick v Waterford, Gaelic Grounds, Saturday, 7pm)**

Waterford hurlers will begin their National Hurling League campaign in Division 1B away to Limerick this Saturday night at 7pm at the Gaelic Grounds.

All subterfuge, mind games and the like will have to be put aside as no hiding places will exist in this crucial opening round game.

The structure of the League is such that only the top team will gain promotion while a top four position will secure a League quarter-final place.

Waterford completed their preparations with a 'behind closed doors' game last Saturday night against Clare at Sixmilebridge.

Reports confirmed that after a spikey affair honours were even with the game ending in a draw. As is fairly usual at these kind of games both sides used an inordinate number of substitutes over the seventy minutes making any conclusion meaningless.

A notable absentee was Austin Gleeson with a groin injury while both Michael Walsh and Captain Kevin Moran continue their forward experiment.

It's a pity this defining game comes so early in the campaign. It would certainly be preferable to have a couple of victories under the belt before taking on last years' beaten All-Ireland semi-finalists.

Limerick will no doubt carry the favourites tag into this game despite being without their Croke Park-bound Kilmallock contingent. Gavin O'Mahony, Graeme Mulcahy, Paudie O'Brien and Barry Hennessy are all unavailable to Limerick manager T.J. Ryan until after their St. Patrick's date with Kilkenny's Ballyhale Shamrocks.

Ryan is likely to hand debuts to the impressive Cian Lynch and Tom Morrissey to augment a fairly settled side. Players like Richie McCarthy, Wayne McNamara, Donal O'Grady and Shane Dowling are all household names and sure to feature for the Treaty men.

Derek McGrath may well introduce the likes of Shane Bennett and Mickey Kearney to league action based on recent performances.

Stephen O'Keeffe is favoured to get the nod on goal with Noel Connors, Shane Fives and Darragh Fives/Barry Coughlan making up the full-back line. Philip Mahony, Austin Gleeson (if fit) and Tadhg Burke could complete the backline. Shane O'Sullivan looks certain to anchor the mid-field with Jamie Barron or Martin O'Neill likely for company.

Up front Pauric Mahony, Michael Walsh, Kevin Moran, Jake Dillon, Mickey Kearney, Shane Bennett, Thomas Connors, Donie Breathnach and Cormac Curran are all vying for a starting place.

The availability of Steven Daniels, Maurice Shanahan, Colin Dunford, Stephen Bennett and Ryan Donnelly remains unclear as they continue their recovery from injury.

The game is being broadcast live on Setanta 1 while you can also tune into live coverage from WLRfm which can boast expert analysis and commentary from an experienced line-up!

It really is very difficult to know where exactly Waterford sits among hurling's top teams. Victory next weekend is sure to be hard won but what is certain is that by 9pm on Saturday night we'll have a much clearer picture of what 2015 may bring.

All teams are hopeful and positive at the start of the year and Waterford should be no different. A difficult 2014 is in the record books but right now everything is possible.

Games against Laois, Offaly and Antrim makes a quarter-final berth a certainty, victory against Limerick on Valentine's night will score big for our promotion prospects.

A night at the Gaelic Grounds can produce the perfect romantic excursion for you and your significant other. For the more generous Déise lovers an overnight stay Treaty side is a sure fire winner. Unfortunately I'll have to settle for a date with Kieran O'Connor in the commentary booth – some guys have all the luck eh?

Each time I attend O'Connor Park in Tullamore, I come away wishing we could put it up on wheels and transport the venue to Waterford. It really is a great venue with a fantastic main stand and excellent media facilities; Wi-Fi with tae and brack beats the hell out of most provincial venues.

The game itself went according to pre-match predictions with Offaly comfortable winners but the scoreline does little justice to a fine effort by Waterford for 50 minutes or so; the numerical disadvantage told particularly in those closing 20 minutes. This 'black card' crack really favours the teams with stronger panels.

It was good to see JJ Hutchinson return to action and if Tom McGlinchey can add a few more, such as Conor Gleeson and Shane Walsh over the coming weeks, they can still push for promotion. Looking at all the Division Four results to date you realise how evenly matched all the teams are with only Offaly having a 100 per cent record after two rounds.

It is never good when the referee is the main subject of conversation after a game. Sean Joy from Kerry left way too large an impression on this game. Those that attend games regularly will know that Shane Ahearne is not a violent player and he was the subject of some player simulation here. The sight of a GAA player throwing themselves to the ground with their hands covering their face is a sickening feature that's creeping into our games and needs to be routed out.

This particular Oscar nominee was wearing an Offaly jersey and immediately after Ahearne had been sent off he was back to his feet as right as rain.

Have these type of players no shame? They should be embarrassed, I'm embarrassed for them, their manager and team mates should be similarly embarrassed.

Manliness is one of the defining qualities of our games and players. Referees must use common sense and with two linesmen and four umpires to consult, this type of play acting should readily be identified and punished.

You would hope that the Midland Tribune or other local Offaly newspapers would be willing to 'call out' their own players for such reprehensible behaviour but I'm not certain this is common practice.

Needless to say, without fear or favour and irrespective of the colour of their jersey this title won't shy from calling it as it is. Hopefully this is the last time I have to refer to such a matter for a very, very long time.