

DEISE 'UNLAOIS' A MAJOR TALLY



Pauric Mahony, arguably in the form of his life, leaves Laois captain Matthew Whelan trailing in his wake at Fraher Field on Saturday last. | Photos: Sean Byrne

National Hurling League Division 1B

Waterford 3-21
Laois 0-12

A 18-point victory, three welcome goals, seven different scorers in addition to the eight who registered in Limerick the previous Saturday, several excellent performances and two welcome points. Waterford have warmed well to life in Division 1B of the National Hurling League.

Holding a three-point advantage at half-time on a raw Saturday evening in Dungarvan (0-11 to 0-8), Derek McGrath's men moved excellently through the gears to blitz Laois by 3-10 to 0-4 in what was a commanding second half display.

And as proved the case in Limerick, the high level of fitness, the quality of Waterford's support play and the sublime finishing of talisman Pauric Mahony were once again impressively evident. This is a group of hurlers with a lean and hungry look, heartily illustrated by the 3-44 tally recorded over the past two weekends.

But it was not all one way traffic, as a tactical first half produced a duel of two outstanding free takers in Mahony and Laois' Zane Keenan whom, along with goalkeeper Enda Rowland, are names worth jotting into your hurling ledger.

Mahony and Keenan exchanged the opening points inside the first three minutes of a match which, like Kelly Proper in Athlone last weekend, exploded out of the blocks. Mahony clocked in his first free following a foul on Shane Bennett in the sixth minute, only for Willie Hyland's long-range shot (judged to have 'crossed' over the crossbar despite Stephen O'Keeffe's batted intervention) to level matters come the eighth.

From the next attack, Brian O'Halloran, a welcome picture of hurling health, bisected the uprights with a sublime strike 30 metres from goal down the left flank. But wing-forward Willie Hyland, supplied by Ross King, restored parity in the 10th minute.

Zane Keenan found his range with a 14th minute free before Mahony converted a superb placed ball from 50 metres, wide on the right. He repeated the feat moments later to leave Waterford 0-5 to 0-4 up after 20 minutes.

Two minutes later, Keenan picked off another free before Philip Mahony brilliantly picked out the redeployed Michael 'Brick' Walsh, who made no mistake from 35 metres.

The Mahony and Keenan free-taking exhibition continued in the 27th and 28th minutes before a Keenan pass set Paddy Purcell free, and the Laois midfielder fired over a terrific white flagger from halfway.

In the 29th minute, Austin Gleeson struck over a point which wasn't initially flagged by the umpire or registered on the scoreboard; indeed almost six minutes would pass before referee Diarmuid Kirwan asked for the scoreboard to be amended. Cue confusion in the press box, but a Tweet from Setanta, who screened the match, allayed our concerns come half-time.

On the half-hour, Shane Bennett burst through on goal when a three-pointer looked at his mercy, but his kicked effort zipped wide of Enda Rowland's right hand post, much to the frustration of the 1200-strong attendance (I thought the gate would be bigger, to be honest).

Three minutes from the break, inside his own 45-metre line, Zane Keenan scored an outlandish free to bring the sides level, but a brace of Mahony points, with an Austin Gleeson effort sandwiched in between, gave Waterford a three-point advantage come the interval. Thereafter, Waterford dominated, putting Laois to the sword thanks to their greater fitness and offensive capabilities. While Keenan's free was the first score of the second half two minutes after the restart, Waterford were to tag on 2-8 before the visitors scored next, some 25 minutes later. Mahony struck four successive points between the 37th and 51st minute, the last of those a glorious effort in full stride off his left from 30 metres.

Moments later, his cross-field pass picked out substitute Jake Dillon who in turn landed a superb diagonal ball into the path of Shane Bennett, who smashed the ball high into the top left hand corner of Enda Rowland's net. That much sought goal, coupled with the dismissal of Laois's Charles Dwyer for a second bookable offence in the 49th minute, effectively ended the game as a contest. Bennett and Mahony (2) added further points in the 53rd, 56th and 57th minutes.

Just shy of the hour mark, substitute Shane O'Sullivan picked out 'Brick' Walsh in front of goal; the Stradbally man sucked in a couple of backs to release Pauric Mahony who struck the ball into the net to send the hosts 15 points clear. Two minutes later, Mahony completed his scoring for the night (bringing his total in three matches for Waterford and WIT to 2-44) before Zane Keenan ended the visitors' wait for their 10th point of the night.

Thomas Connors, who had literally replaced Pauric Mahony only seconds previously, smashed in a third Deise goal six minutes from time, before two further Keenan frees in the 65th and 67th minutes completed the scoring for Cheddar Plunkett's men.

But Waterford were not done yet, with Shane O'Sullivan and fellow substitute Donie Breathnach finding their ranges

respectively in the 67th and 68th minutes.

This was impressive stuff from Waterford, who clearly raised their game and added a few lengthier passes to their plan after the half-time break.

And while our scorers, Mahony in particular, largely grabbed the limelight, the cohesion of our young, talented half-back line of Tadhg Bourke, Austin Gleeson and the outstanding Tadhg de Burca, did not go unnoticed.

Next up? A trip to O'Connor Park on March 8th to take on Offaly, knowing that a win against the Faithful will leave Derek McGrath's side well positioned with promotion in mind, despite the manager's stoical protestations.

* See Sport 9 for Brian Flannery's two cents on a good night's work for Port Láirge.

Waterford: Stephen O'Keeffe; Shane Fives, Barry Coughlan, Noel Connors; Tadhg de Burca, Austin Gleeson, (0-2) Philip Mahony; Jamie Barron, Tom Devine; Kevin Moran, Pauric Mahony, Shane Bennett; Brian O'Halloran, Michael Walsh, Michael Kearney.

Substitutes: Jake Dillon for Michael Kearney (HT), Shane O'Sullivan for Tom Devine (45 mins), Paudie Prendergast for Shane Fives (50), Donie Breathnach for Shane Bennett (59) and Thomas Connors for Pauric Mahony (64).

Scorers: Pauric Mahony (1-14; 0-9f), Shane Bennett (1-1), Thomas Connors (1-0), Austin Gleeson (0-2), Brian O'Halloran, Michael Walsh, Shane O'Sullivan and Donie Breathnach (0-1 each).

Laois: Enda Rowland; John A Delaney, Cahir Healy, Brian Stapleton; Joe Fitzpatrick, Matthew Whelan, Dwane Palmer; Joe Campion, Paddy Purcell; Willie Hyland, Tommy Fitzgerald (John Purcell, 64), Charles Dwyer; Stephen Maher (Colm Stapleton, 26; Conor Dunne 52), Zane Keenan, Ross King ; Ben Conroy.

Substitutes: Colm Stapleton for Stephen Maher (26 mins), PJ Scully for Joe Campion and Ben Conroy for Ross King (both HT), Conor Dunne for Colm Stapleton (52) and John Purcell for Tommy Fitzgerald (64).

Scorers: Zane Keenan (0-9f), Paddy Purcell, Willie Hyland and Ross King (0-1).

Referee: Diarmuid Kirwan (Cork)