

CHAMPIONS FACE EMERGING FORCE IN SOUTH EAST CLASH



That winning feeling: Lismore are aiming to retain the All-Ireland title they won after a replay with Ballyhale in Clonmel last March. | Photo: Lismore Camogie Club

All-Ireland Intermediate Camogie Club Final Lismore v Piltown (Croke Park, Sunday, 1.30pm)

If you're from Lismore, on Sunday morning next you will possibly be up good and early and hitting the M8 or the M9 –and if you're departing Piltown, then the M9 will be taking supporters from both parishes to the same destination: Croke Park.

For the second successive season, Waterford face Kilkenny in the All-Ireland Intermediate Camogie Final, with defending champions Lismore, instead of Ballyhale last year, taking on a Piltown side which has swept all before it in recent months.

A year ago, Lismore emerged from a titanic battle with Ballyhale undefeated but perhaps a little disappointed that they'd not tasted the ultimate glory at Headquarters. And while they were to get the job done in the replay staged in Clonmel, the motivation to win an All-Ireland in Croke Park remains as keen as ever among the champions. But they know that they will not have it easy against a Piltown side that has improved superbly in recent years, and turned into a real winning force in the process.

Last year, Lismore knew that if they could restrict the amount of shots that Ballyhale's Kelly Anne Cottrell had at goal, that they'd be in with a great chance of victory.

This time around could tell a similar story: should Lismore restrict the potency of former Ashbourne Cup winning captain (with WIT) Katie Power can be restricted, then the team led by Shona Curran may have ticked the biggest box of all when it comes to retaining their crown.

The Piltown wing-forward has been in great form in her side's last five competitive games, hitting a total of 4-30 for her side. But of course, to pay too much attention to one attacker could allow others to be the hero for the day.

Example? In the All-Ireland semi-final, Down outfit Clonduff restricted Power to a solitary point, but up stepped Chloe Blackmore who struck 2-3 of her team's total of 3-5.

Piltown have a very settled look to their team of late. In their last five games, starting from their win over Saint Bridget's in the county final, their three Leinster Championship outings and the win over Clonduff, they've used only 18 players, 12 of whom started all five games.

The side is no strangers when it comes to collecting silverware. Of the team that is likely to start on Sunday for Piltown, all are winners of Munster Senior Colleges titles they've claimed in the colours of Carrick-on-Suir colleges.

Corner-back Carol McCarthy, full-back Elaine Kenny, centre-back Karen Duggan, Katie Power and corner forward Georgina Culleton won Munster medals in 2007.

Midfielder and captain Laura Norris and Nicola Culleton, her likely partner 'i lár na páirce', were victorious two years later.

And in 2013, goalkeeper Aoife Norris, corner backs Katelynn Phelan and Jennifer Norris, wing-backs Debbie Phelan and Kelly Anne Norris, centre-forward Edel Lon full-forward Chloe Blackmore, corner-forward Lorraine Long, the versatile Chloe Holden as well as Mairead Power (of Comeragh Rangers LFC) are fellow provincial winners.

Meanwhile, Katie Power, Karen Duggan, Georgina Culleton, Elaine Kenny, Alice Talbot, Jennifer Norris, Lorraine Long, Laura Norris, Carol McCarthy also have won All-Ireland medals at different levels and some have also added third level medals to their collection. Theirs is a winning mentality and they shall not be easily beaten at Croke Park.

Not to be outdone, Lismore also head into this weekend's game with an impressive panel.

Many have also come from successful colleges teams with Blackwater Community College. A great deal of the panel have also come off successful underage Waterford teams winning honours at under 14, under 16 and minor levels, while several have also collected medals for playing with the Waterford Intermediate and Junior sides in recent years.

Lismore are unlikely to make many changes to the side that beat Oranmore-Maree in their semi final.

Tanya Morrissey looks set to start once more between the posts. It will be interesting to see will the selectors go with Sarah Coughlan who missed the win over Oranmore Maree or stick with Niamh Molumphy, while Sarah Prendergast and Marie Russell could well make up the rest of the full-back line.

Aoife Houlihan is cleared to play in this game after her controversial sending off last time out, while Shauna Kiernan and Sarah Fenton are likely to make up the rest of the half-back line.

Grainne Kenneally and captain Shona Curran will start in centrefield, but it would be no surprise to see Grainne Kenneally fall back into the half-back line to keep a close eye on Katie Power as the army official is one of the best 'stoppers' at any grade of camogie.

In attack Aoife Hannon could start at centre-forward and goal scoring machine Catriona McGlone will take up her customary position at full forward.

The make up of the rest of the forwards is anybody's guess. Sharon Williams has done nothing wrong since she came into the team to suggest that she won't be picked.

Last year in the open spaces of Croke Park, Ruth Geoghegan caused Ballyhale Shamrocks lots of trouble at times and she'd clearly love to do so again; while Nicola Morrissey is another player who knows how to torment the opposition.

The remaining two places in the team could be fought out for by Laura Buckley, Johnanna Houlihan and Aisling O'Brien who played in goal last year and came on late in the win over Oranmore Maree playing on the edge of the square.

So who will win on Sunday? Piltown go into the game having won the All-Kilkenny League, the Intermediate League, the Kilkenny Intermediate Championship and the Leinster Championship in the last 12 months.

Lismore head into this Croker showdown having won an All-Ireland Intermediate Club Final, the County Senior Championship and the Munster Intermediate Championship. They also appeared in the County Senior League Final where they lost narrowly to Saint Anne's.

Croke Park can be a daunting experience for newcomers, all the more so in the more cavernous atmosphere created by a smaller attendance. The side that makes best use of the space and procession they enjoy generally comes out on top.

Many of Lismore's players will have played there before with both club and county and know what to expect. While they did not win there last year, not did they lose, but the hunger to win an All-Ireland title in Headquarters is a huge motivating factor for their panel.

Something has to give next Sunday or, who knows, maybe on another day and probably once more in Clonmel. But Lismore's greater familiarity with Croker from a playing perspective may give them an edge and help secure a second successive All-Ireland title.