

## Students Deliver A Masterclass



Referee Brian Gavin with WIT captain Jake Dillon and UL skipper David McNerney. | Photos: Noel Browne

### Fitzgibbon Cup Final 2015

This year's college competitions have not gone without controversy. Not for the first time there has been accusations of impropriety with teams being disqualified for playing illegal players and then reinstated on appeal and then naturally you have the appeal on the appeal.

I would have thought that all these clever persons with degrees would be capable of working out what constitutes being a full-time 'student'. Child's play surely but obviously not.

The Eamon Cregan managed Mary Immaculate College felt aggrieved and lodged an objection against their conquerors from Carlow IT. After initially being thrown out Carlow IT, managed by DJ Carey, were eventually reinstated and took their place in the quarter-finals before losing on the field.

There is little doubt that some colleges push the eligibility rules to the limit with a win at all cost mentality. The spirit of the games or rules are very much secondary and thus you regularly see these controversies.

It's quite similar to the recruitment policy of some secondary schools who poach county players from smaller schools to bolster their Harty Cup bid – all quasi-legal but far from the ideals on which our games were founded.

Thankfully no such cloud hung over either Waterford Institute of Technology or the University of Limerick in this year's Fitzgibbon Cup Final. This game which ended in a draw after extra time was an example of all that is great about hurling.



UL's John McGrath and WIT's Austin Gleeson tussle for possession in the Limerick rain. | Photos: Noel Browne

Played in atrocious conditions at the largely empty Gaelic Grounds, both teams produced the kind of gritty wholehearted performance that I marvelled at.

Both sides at various stages over the 80 minutes (60 + 20 et) looked to be down and out but somehow pulled themselves up by their boot straps and recovered to fight another day.

WIT were second best throughout the opening half and trailed by two points at half time despite playing with a gale.

When Nenagh Eire Óg's Tommy Heffernan goaled after 32 minutes to go four points ahead I assumed the wind assisted UL team would run out comfortable winners - but how wrong I was as the game was only just getting going.

Superb points from captain Jake Dillon, Tom Fox and Pauric Mahony reduced the difference to the minimum. UL rallied re-established a four point advantage with 10 minutes remaining.

Remarkably WIT summoned energy from God knows where and hit five points on the trot, three from Kilmacow's Johnny Hayes and Pauric Mahony (two) to lead with time up.

It was left to the 2013 Hurler of the Year winner Tony Kelly with the last puck of the game to convert a difficult free, from the sideline, 70 yards out, on the left hand side of the field, hitting it off his left hand side and bisecting the posts. Extra time.

WIT took two more haymakers from UL when both Jason Forde and Ballysaggart's Stephen Bennett goaled once again leaving the Limerick college four points to the good with just five minutes remaining.

Dazed and groggy but not out, WIT once again got off the canvas and set about reeling in their opponents.

The situation was now desperate. Pauric Mahony pointed a 65, a massive feat in itself giving the conditions and the advancing Martin O'Neill picked off two fine points from play to leave WIT trailing by just a point UL in a spin.

Corner back Tom Fox, for a second time, popped up with a point to from play to send the game to a replay.

Fox, from the famed Eire Óg Annacarty club in West Tipp and with a surname like that is surely related to former Tipp stars Pat and Kevin Fox, produced a man of the match performance that is sure to become part of Fitzgibbon folklore in the near future.

The essence of team is loyalty and honesty. This sense of team isn't derived from the colour of the jersey you wear.

These players are all from different clubs in different counties but the hours they spent together throughout their college life is what binds them together and helps them produce the kind of performance witnessed here.

The scene at the end of the game was one of mutual respect. Players from opposing sides strewn on the sodden turf prostrate from two days of combat and exhausted from their efforts.

Being able to reach inside themselves, find energy that didn't exist, to win the unwinnable ball and achieve the unlikely will serve these players well in the future.

Three times in this game WIT game back from what looked perilous situations and this week they remain just 60 minutes from another title. Having so many Waterford players involved augurs well for the present as well as the future.

These two teams have some of the best young hurlers in the country and if you can manage it at all I recommended you go watch the replay. To borrow a slogan, 'Nothing beats being there' and even TG4 can't fully capture the performance and efforts of these two great teams.

Brian Flannery