

Time For A Giant Leap



Band of brothers: Waterford's footballers are seeking a first Munster Under-21 Championship win since 2006. | Photos: Noel Browne

Munster Under-21 Football Championship Quarter-Final (Clare v Waterford, Miltown Malbay, Wednesday, 7.30pm)

While the scheduling of Wednesday night's match in Miltown Malbay is, from a Waterford perspective, as questionable as it is entirely legitimate from a Clare viewpoint, one senses a motivated group has just been given a little more cause.

An entirely reasonable request to have this Munster Under-21 Football Championship fixture re-fixed for Sixmilebridge, Clare's other floodlit venue (which would have reduced the commute by 70 miles), was red lit by the Munster Council.

Imagine the Waterford County Board scheduling any reverse fixture, or, dare one suggest it, a possible replay, in Gaultier?

But even that isn't a fair example given that the road between Waterford and Dunmore East is a good deal better than the route between Ennis and Miltown Malbay.

So one can only hope that by the time the Waterford bus rolls into Dungarvan in the early hours of Thursday morning, that a bleary-eyed panel will have returned home as a victorious one.

And there are grounds for optimism about this Deise side, which is seeking to end a nine-year wait for a win at this grade.

Speaking to The Munster Express, selector and physical trainer John Cummins struck an upbeat note when reflecting on the team's preparations for this must win fixture.

"We're really pleased with the build-up we've put in, playing seven matches and winning five of them," he began.

"Taking it back a few steps from that for a moment, we got about 40 lads together after making contact with every club in the county in November, and by the end of that month we had our first get together.

“We put a lot of work in over the winter in terms of fitness, and that really helped to build up a sense of camaraderie among the panel, and you only get that from having regular get-togethers and sessions built up over a lengthy enough period of time. To me, there’s a club feel to this panel, and that’s often not the case, particularly at Under-21 grade where panels tend to get put together a lot closer to the immediate period before a Championship.”

John added: “But, as management team led by Ger Power, we made a conscious decision to get the group together at an untraditional time for a Waterford team at this grade and we feel it’s definitely paid off. There’s lads now who are training with friends, as opposed to merely team mates and that’s definitely a positive for the panel and can only help us achieve our objective of getting that Championship win against Clare. There’s a great atmosphere within the group and we’re very pleased with how our preparations have gone over the past few months.”

And with talents such as Tom Devine and Conor Gleeson coming, unsurprisingly, straight into the starting XV for Waterford, it’s clear that there’s some serious match winning talent in Waterford ranks.

“We want to beat Clare and then we want to beat Tipperary to reach a Munster Final,” John Cummins declared. “I think that’s a realistic target but we now that everything will have to well for us on the day in Miltown Malbay. But we’re prepared and we’ve certainly put everything in place as best we can in terms of achieving our objective and coming out of Wednesday’s match with a positive result.”

Those five wins from seven starts in challenges this spring has given rise to some justified optimism about a Waterford side that’s attempting to buck the county’s recent trend at this level.

And a recent 1-13 to 1-10 victory over Limerick in Mallow gave Ger Power and his fellow selectors much to be positive about.

“That was a big win for us,” commented John Cummins. “We know it all comes down to the Championship at the end of the day but there’s huge progress after being made, and it’s worth pointing out that a lot of these lads will be Under-21 again next year so we’re building and developing players, which is part of a management’s remit at this level.”

That Limerick win also produced some very interesting statistics, and while one can read too much at times into number crunching, the fact that Waterford scored 1-13 from 16 scoring opportunities says much for the players’ on-field decision making.

“And out of the 148 hand passes we had in that match, we only had four such hand passes that went astray, which is very encouraging. We’ve been seeing improvements through video analysis in every game, and then incorporating what we’ve learned from that analysis and bringing it into training. And we feel it’s working.”

Cognisant Clare’s strong full-forward line, and with Ger Power and Brian Looby getting a chance to see the Banner (albeit not at full strength) against UL’s intermediate side a week and a half ago, Waterford have clearly planned with admirable intent for this Championship opener.

“We’ve learned a bit from that and we’re confident that we can come up with a game plan to contain their forwards, while our forwards certainly have the skills required to exploit any weakness in Clare’s inside line of backs. And the fact that the lads are taking such good options when it comes to shooting shows how patient these players are and how much they’ve taken on board during training. I think we can score well and if we can keep Clare’s forwards at bay, then we can come away with a win.”

Between his day job as a teacher at St Paul's and his political commitments as a City & County Councillor, John's schedule is pretty hectic, but he's relished his step up to inter-county preparation.

"It's been very enjoyable, even if time is very tight alright, but when Ger contacted me, I felt it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. I think all of us on the management team have been impressed by the effort and application of all the players at training, and we ourselves were of the opinion that we either did things right or didn't do them at all. And from our first meeting in Lemybrien back in November, we've done all we can to ensure that this Waterford team is fully prepared for the Munster Championship.

"This is probably the best prepared Waterford team that we've ever had at this level and all we can hope for is that it will go well and that we'll come out on the right side of the result, and if it doesn't, it certainly won't be due to a lack of preparation, I believe."

The winners of this clash will face an away trip to Tipperary (presumably in Semple Stadium) the following Wednesday, March 18th, with a 7.30pm throw-in also scheduled for that semi-final.

But Waterford's eyes are solely fixed on lowering the Banner tomorrow night, which would make the lengthiest trip any inter-county team is likely to face in Munster this year, just a little less arduous.

Waterford (v Clare): David Whitty (Gaultier, Captain), Stephen Dalton (De La Salle), Conor Walsh (Rathgormack), Jamie de Barún (An Rinn); Jack Mullaney (Stradbally), Tom Devine (Modeligo), Jonathon Fenton (Bunmahon); Dermot Ryan (Nire), Seamus Keating (Ardmore); Michael Curry (Rathgormack), Ferghal Ó Cuirrín (An Rinn), Jason Curry (Rathgormack); Conor Murray (Rathgormack), Jason Gleeson (Rathgormack), Conor Gleeson (Nire).

Panellists: Aaron Jones (Gaultier), Brian Looby (Ballinacourty), Caomhán McGuire (Gaultier), Craig Burke (Tramore), Ferghal Ó Ceallaigh (An Rinn), Kenneth Brazil (Nire), Kevin Dwane (Ballinacourty), Killian O'Sullivan (Cappoquin), Liam Mulligan (Rathgormack), Lúcas Ó Cuirrín (An Rinn), Matthew Thompson (Tramore), Michael Troy (Modeligo), Niall Queally (Bunmahon), Patrick Fitzgerald (De La Salle), Paul O'Connor (Clashmore), Tadhg Bourke (Modeligo).

Dermot Keyes