

## The Great Experiment



The Waterford Under-21 team which defeated De La Salle in last Wednesday's challenge in Fraher Field, featuring an excellent second half cameo from Maurice Shanahan, who scored six points. Inset: Manager Derek Lyons. | Photos: Noel Browne

### **Under-21 Hurlers' build-up progressing well**

Waterford's build-up to their Munster Under-21 Hurling Championship clash with Cork on June 17th appears to be progressing well, as the team's series of challenge matches continues.

Following wins over Passage, Roanmore, Abbeyside and De La Salle (the latter on Wednesday last) and narrow defeats to Ballygunner and Dungarvan (last Sunday), Derek Lyons' men will face Tallow this Thursday evening at Fraher Field.

And should your schedule be free, I'd recommend a trip to Dungarvan to see how this talented group of players is clearly gelling and benefiting from this unique build-up to the Championship campaign.

Following Sunday's match with Dungarvan, Lyons and his management team of John Mullane, Tony Browne, Paul Keane and Donnacha Enright have now seen over 50 players in action.

To say they'd cast the net as wide as they can in terms of giving players from across the county the chance to prove their worth cannot be questioned, and word from some of those called up is incredibly positive about the management team's approach.

Speaking to The Munster Express after his team's 4-20 to 2-22 win over De La Salle (with Páidí Nevin in blistering form for the Gracedieu men), Derek Lyons cut a suitably satisfied figure given the progress made in recent weeks.

Any why wouldn't he, given the blistering form demonstrated by, to name but a few, midfielder Micheál Harney, and a forward unit including DJ Foran, Sam O'Neill and Jason Gleeson, with the latter lining out for the U-21 footballers in Clare tomorrow night.

"Tony (Browne) initially suggested that we might enter the team in the Sargent Cup, we spoke to the County Board about that and they said it wasn't really an option, so then we thought about playing challenges against all 12 senior clubs, which was the next best thing," he said.

“We were going to play them over a 12-week period, but due to that schedule, we realised we were going to be running up against Championship games and that wasn’t going to suit the clubs, so we tightened it up and went for a six-week window to play these matches, two matches a week, and it’s working great so far, but it’s onerous and demanding alright from an organisational point of view alright, but that’s just part of the challenge of how we’ve decided to approach it...”

“But it’s proving so rewarding in terms of giving us a look at how players react to things during game time as opposed to basing a player’s form purely on what he’d doing in training. If we’d did what tends to be done every year and held a trial in February, we wouldn’t have seen 30 of the 60 players we’ve seen so far; I mean the Jason Gleesons of this world (1-2 last Wednesday) that we’re looking at are not necessarily players we’d have looked at if we’d gone with the trial approach, but he’s now played three times for us and he’s a prime example of the benefit of going with it the way we have.”

The Dungarvan clubman added: “Another benefit has been the emergence of leaders on the field and the way in which certain players are assuming responsibility on the field of play. There’s lads standing up there, driving on and working well alongside players that they may not know all that well, but tonight I saw it again with the way we recovered from six points down with 20 minutes to go to win by four. You’re always looking for honesty from your players and we got a lot of that tonight.”

And there was no shortage of style too, with DJ Foran (2-1) and Sam O’Neill (1-3) in particular catching the eye with some fantastic wrist work and approach play.

“I was really impressed that the lads played themselves back into the game in the last 10 minutes; and it was pure hurling that got us back into the game. We want to move that ball quickly and sharply and get into positions where we can get scores; I mean DJ (Foran) banged in three against Passage, got two tonight and could have ended up with five, he’s really showing some great form.”

Lyons continued: “And this is a physically big squad of players. There’s a physique about the team which a lot of Waterford teams haven’t always had, and there’s been a lot of work put in over the last four years to develop these lads physically and there’s lads after progressing from minor level into powerful, physically imposing players, and that physique is part of the modern game now. You need that bit of bulk.”

While one can’t read too much into challenge matches, and I don’t think anyone is to be fair, the quick passing, the incisive ball delivery and the quality of Waterford’s finishing last Wednesday was impossible to ignore. This great hurling experiment has clearly been one worth pursuing.

**Waterford XV v De La Salle:** Seanie Barry (Lismore); Charlie Chester (Roanmore), Christy Breathnach (An Rinn), Jack Walshe (Portlaw); Aaron Coady (Mount Sion), Colm Roche (Shamrocks), Eoin Kearns (St Mary’s); Cormac Curran (Brickey Rangers), Micheál Harney (Bunmahon); Michael Kiely (Dungarvan), Brendan Phelan (St Olivers), DJ Foran (Portlaw); Jason Gleeson (Clonea), Sam O’Neill (Erin’s Own), Colin Dunford (Colligan).

Dermot Keyes