

All Too Easy As Wexford Await



Antrim's Ciaran Johnson being pursued by Waterford's Colin Dunford.

National Hurling League Division 1B

Waterford 4-30
Antrim 0-10

Sunday's all too easy victory over Antrim was a reminder of the importance of Waterford earning an immediate return to Division 1A hurling.

A 32-point victory is not something that too many Deise fans will be crowing about this week, even though a third successive League win was enormously satisfying.

But to see Antrim, managed by Deise native Kevin Ryan, in such a pitiful state, given how competitive the Glensmen were during the managerial reign of the late Jim Nelson, will be of concern to all who love the game.

Hurling needs Antrim. Hurling also needs Offaly, who pulled off a surprise in Limerick on Saturday night, doing Waterford a big favour in so doing.

Hurling appears to have won back Wexford, thankfully, even though every Deise fan will hope we get the better of them next Sunday, in what is now a decider to determine who gains automatic promotion.

And hurling needs Waterford, who have undoubtedly made progress and gained welcome momentum under Derek McGrath's managership this Spring.

The hosts, who in recent campaigns have struggled to open up opposition back lines, appear to have cracked that troublesome nut, with Jake Dillon, Colin Dunford, Stephen Bennett and substitute Maurice Shanahan starring alongside the talismanic Pauric Mahony.

Mahony, who has truly emerged as a leader in this Waterford team this season, is playing with enormous confidence at present. And he's not the only one.

And while the goals have come against less than stellar defences, the overall level of goalscoring opportunities created is unquestionably a step up on the previous three campaigns.

The jinking Dunford is making a splendid nuisance of himself when it comes to challenging corner-backs. Jake Dillon's link play in attack has been further enhanced over the winter and his strength in possession makes him difficult to shake off the sliothar. The redeployment of Michael 'Brick' Walsh has been a huge success, and his Bonner Maher like tendency to draw backs and free up space for other forwards could prove critical come the summer.

And in Maurice Shanahan, should confidence hold and in Stephen Bennett, should his hips prevent him from so otherwise doing, Waterford possess attackers other than Mahony with the capability of peppering a scoreboard.

In spite of the hammering that was inevitably meted out to them, Antrim started brightly during a combative opening 10 minutes, with Paul Shiels converting a brace of frees, while Pauric Mahony replied in kind in the second and eighth minutes respectively.

Stephen Bennett ought to have found the net in the seventh minute when he broke through the Antrim inside line, only to be brilliantly denied by goalkeeper Chris O'Connell's outstretched boot.

As the half wore on, Waterford's superiority became readily evident, and the match was effectively over as a contest by the 25th minute. Colin Dunford's incisive 18th minute pass picked out Bennett, who made no mistake at the second time of asking.

By half-time, Waterford led comfortably by 1-10 to 0-5 as Antrim mustered a solitary score from play off the stick of substitute Conor Johnston, while Shiels converted their remaining scores.

Pauric Mahony once more led by example for Waterford in the opening half, striking seven points, three of those from play.

After the break, Waterford put the foot down as a deflated Antrim side were effectively on the bus home mentally long before Diarmuid Kirwan's full-time whistle.

The Deisemen ran up a haul of 3-20 in the second half, with 2-5 of that grabbed by substitute Maurice Shanahan, who was introduced in the 42nd minute.

But what will have pleased Derek McGrath was the application and enthusiasm of several players including Jamie Barron, Martin O'Neill and Tadhg de Búrca, who worked with tremendous industry throughout the match, even after the contest was long decided.

Waterford ended the match with 10 different names on the scoreboard, with Mahony again leading the way with 0-11, including five excellent points from play.

And while Maurice Shanahan ran up his tally when the game's competitive edge was decidedly blunted, to see him follow up on his six-point contribution in a challenge against De La Salle almost a fortnight ago is nonetheless encouraging.

Tom Devine rifled home a fine goal in the 65th minute, in between Shanahan's green flaggers in the 59th and 68th minutes respectively, as Waterford added 3-8 to their tally in the closing 18 minutes of this facile encounter. That Antrim managed only three points from play over the 70 minutes probably says all that needs to be said about the nature of this particular match.

But you can only beat what you're lined out against, and that's what Waterford did on a chilly Sunday afternoon down Keane's Road.

A League quarter-final awaits a week on Sunday, but the real prize would be gained in overcoming our neighbours on their own turf next weekend, a match Waterford can approach with justified confidence.

Waterford: Ian O'Regan; Shane Fives, Barry Coughlan, Noel Connors; Tadhg de Búrca, Kevin Moran, Philip Mahony; Jamie Barron, Martin O'Neill; Colin Dunford, Pauric Mahony; Stephen Bennett; Brian O'Halloran, Michael Walsh, Jake Dillon.

Substitutes: Maurice Shanahan for Brian O'Halloran and Tom Devine for Stephen Bennett (both 42 mins), Shane O'Sullivan for Martin O'Neill (46), Shane McNulty for Noel Connors and Paudie Prendergast (both 60).

Scorers: Pauric Mahony (0-11; 0-6f), Maurice Shanahan (2-5), Stephen Bennett (1-4), Michael Walsh (0-3), Tom Devine (1-0), Jake Dillon and Paudie Prendergast (0-2 each), Kevin Moran, Colin Dunford and Shane O'Sullivan (0-1 each).

Antrim: Chris O'Donnell; Ryan McCambridge, Neal McAuley, Aaron Graffin; Simon McCrory, Conor McKinley, Michael Bradley; Neil McManus, Ciaran Johnson; Niall McKenna, Tomas McCann, Paul Shiels, PJ O'Connell, Shane McNaughton, Ciaran Clarke.

Substitutes: Conor Johnston for Ciaran Clarke (23 mins), Conor McCann for Neil McManus and Eoghan Campbell for Tomas McCann (both HT) and Tomas Ó Ciaráin for Shane McNaughton (46).

Scorers: Paul Shiels (0-5f), Conor Johnston (0-2), Matthew Donnelly (0-2; 0-1f) and Ciaran Johnson (0-1f).

Referee: Diarmuid Kirwan (Cork)

Dermot Keyes at Walsh Park