

Gunners Aim to Scratch Big Itch

Munster Club Senior Hurling Championship

Brian Flannery Reports

Ballygunner begin their quest for a second Munster club title this Sunday versus beaten Cork finalists Midelton at Walsh Park (1.30pm).

While the Gunners have dominated the senior championship in Waterford their quest for second Munster Club title is the pebble in the shoe that they can't quite shake.

Having secured a fifth Waterford senior title in a row Fergal Hartley's men look well placed for a deep run in this year's Munster club. The draw has been kind with a home tie this Sunday against a team that failed to win their own championship and are only in the competition due to the Cork champions Imokilly being ineligible to play as they are a group team.

Should Ballygunner as expected win this Sunday they have further home comforts to come against Clare champions Ballyea on Sunday, November 4th.



It's difficult to assess how strongly Midelton will compete having lost the Cork county final by 10 points and finding themselves involved in Munster club action by default. Conor Lehane and Luke O'Farrell are their marquee payers with the likes of Patrick White and Cormac Walsh others to look out for. Cork leads the way on the role of honour with 17 Munster Club titles in comparison to five won by the Waterford champions. Clubs like Glen Rovers, St Finbarr's, Blackrock, Newtownshandrum and indeed Midelton have a history rich in success in this competition.

Midelton annexed two titles in 1983 and 1987 and included some inter-county stars like John Fenton, Denis Mulcahy, Kevin Hennessy, Ger Fitzgerald and Pat Hartnett. The 1987 Midelton side added the All-Ireland crown to their Munster title. However you have to go back to 2009 for the last time the Cork champions triumphed in Munster when Newtonshandrum edged Ballygunner by two points.

In Ballygunner's six championship games in Waterford their average winning margin was seventeen points. It doesn't get much more impressive than.

In the final the Gunners absorbed Abbeyside's early onslaught and still managed to lead by three points at the break despite playing against the wind at Fraher Field. Former All-Star goalkeeper Stephen O'Keeffe had an armchair ride behind the dominant trio of Eddie Hayden, Barry Coughlan and Ian Kenny, although he did get the opportunity to briefly display his talents when repelling a late effort from substitute Michael O'Halloran. Wayne Hutchinson is playing as well as ever at right-half back with Philip Mahony continuing to be pivotal in the number six position.

Harley Barnes has fitted seamlessly into the half-back line with the youthful Mikey Mahony graduating to senior ranks with the minimum of fuss. Shane O'Sullivan is having a one of his best ever seasons and is a certainty for the club team of the year.

Paraic Mahony may have had his county final preparations interrupted by a niggling back injury but you wouldn't have known from his man-of-the-match performance. When Mahony moved to full-forward half-way through the opening thirty minutes of the county final he hit three points in succession to quell the enthusiasm of the challengers.

Billy O'Keeffe, Tim O'Sullivan and Barry O'Sullivan are foot-soldiers without whom their twin striking lieutenants of Brian O'Sullivan and Conor Power might struggle. Sunday may be too soon for Peter Hogan to make a starting return to the line-up but with the likes of J.J. Hutchinson, Stephen Power and David Walsh waiting in the wings Hogan may well be held for another day.

Fergal and co enter Munster club for a fifth successive season when only victory will sate their ambitions. This is a very experienced Ballygunner side with the majority of players involved over the last four seasons. Anything other than a Gunners victory on home soil would be a shock. Limerick's Johnny Murphy will referee Sunday's fixture.