

Goal Hero "Sokky" hits the Final Spot

It's a hen's tooth phenomenon: to send a hurling goalkeeper the wrong way with a penalty, yet that's precisely what Ballygunner's Stephen O'Keeffe did on Sunday, turning the tide of this Munster Final in so doing. "I had my mind made up during the week if one came in terms of where I was going to put it," said 'Sokky', amidst the post-match celebrations. "It wasn't even a question of changing my mind. I know he (Padraig Kennedy) was standing on that side, he was trying to outfox myself, I suppose, but I'd my mind made up that it was going to go there so I said I wouldn't change my mind, standing over it. I think he wanted to go the other way and he didn't end up diving at all."

By the ninth minute, Ballygunner found themselves five points down, but there was never any panic in their ranks, according to their number one and joint captain.

"It mightn't have seemed like that in the stand but I think in the games that we played against Midleton and Ballyea, it was a very similar situation: you go down by four or five points but both those games taught us that 60 minutes is a long time and that we would get our chances. It was just a matter of taking them when they come and thankfully we got a penalty close to the end of the first half which actually gave us momentum to tack on another point before half-time and we went in at half-time in the lead, which was a really good turnaround."



Ballygunner's Stephen O'Keeffe rifles home his 27th minute penalty, by which time the tide of this Final had firmly turned in the Déiseamen's favour. | Photos: Noel Browne

Ballygunner's recovery turned into dominance not deemed likely given that this was a head to head series in which they trailed 3-0 prior to Sunday's success.

"The effort of anyone on the team can't be faulted," said the Waterford custodian. "We knew that everyone would run themselves to a standstill and just throw themselves into tackles and I think that maybe in the opening five minutes we just wanted it a little too much and that made us a little jittery on the ball or that maybe we were hitting the ball just a little too fast. But I think after the (first Na Piarasigh) goal went in, we realised that this wasn't the way we should have been playing

and that we should have been settling ourselves a little more on the ball. We started to use our heads and pass it to the man in the right position, you know, the little things that mightn't be too glamorous but make a massive difference when it comes to putting a few scores on the board."

To beat Na Piarsaigh, given the Limerick club's remarkable record in this competition until Sunday, made this particular success an even more impressive landmark, O'Keeffe conceded. "I'd be lying if I said it didn't put that extra bit of sweetness on it, to beat Na Piarsaigh in a Munster Final because they're an absolutely fantastic team, and I'm not trying to plámás them just because we won. In my opinion, they've been the best team in the country over the past five years and what they've done in Munster has been sensational so to beat the team you consider to be the very best does make it that little bit sweeter, definitely...and now we're into an All-Ireland Semi-Final, a brand new experience for all of us but it's one that we're really going to look forward to."