

Déise denied at the death

National Football League Division 4

**Waterford 0-9
Wicklow 1-7**

Having risen from the blocks slowly, Waterford's senior footballers ignited in the closing stages of the first half in Dungarvan on Saturday last to put themselves well in the frame for victory in this Division Four opener. Yet the undoubted levels of endeavour and spirit ultimately weren't sufficient to haul the hosts over the finishing line. It's a narrative those of us who've catalogued the fortunes of Waterford football for most of the past decade have become all too familiar with. Another win that got away. A Wicklow side who'd proven so profligate in the opening half calibrated the sight after the interval, overturning a six-point half-time deficit to take the spoils by the minimum thanks to an injury-time free by goalkeeper Mark Jackson.

A division which appears tougher than ever to emerge from has already taken on a steeper ascent for Benji Whelan's new-look Déise side. The trip to Limerick on Sunday next has already taken on knock-out dimensions for Waterford, with players and management alike cognisant of how slight the margin of error is in this particular competition.



Waterford captain Brian Looby races to gather possession as Wicklow's Darren Hayden closes in.

| Photos: Sean Byrne

"I thought we took the fight to them very well in the second half, considering the conditions," said the new bainisteoir on a damp, windy night at Fraher Field. "Realistically, we were probably lucky to get out with such a lead in the first half considering we only came into the game with 10 minutes to go in the first half; they'd missed a number of kickable chances, I would have thought. That said, Wicklow were always going to come at us strong but I was very happy with our second half performance. We probably tired a bit towards the end; we probably carried the ball a little bit too much into contact which cost us with a couple of turnovers. But overall, I think we've made strides. We need to just keep learning from these experienced and that's the route to getting better and that's what we're about."

Having struggled to gain a foothold for much of the first half, Waterford closed it out in great style, rattling over five points in the space of nine minutes.

Playing with the wind, the Déise took the lead after four minutes through Conor Murray. Wicklow's Darren Hayden equalised 15 minutes later in what proved the Garden County's only score of the half, during which they stuck eight wides. Jason Curry, via his Sugar Ray Leonard pre-free kick shuffle, restored Waterford's lead in the 24th minute and between then and the break the hosts finally injected some rhythm into their play. Debutant Sean Whelan Barrett, who warmed excellently to the task, struck a brace of points, as did Jason Curry (two further frees) in addition to a single from the ever-willing Aidan Trihy. Despite

dominating territory and possession for most of the half, Wicklow trudged into their dressing room a half-dozen points in arrears and Waterford looked set to record a morale-boosting victory.



Deise wing-forward Dylan Guiry sets off on another attack.

Wicklow were altogether more accurate in the second half, adding only two further wides to their tally while critically tagging on 1-6 to their score. Patrick O'Connor opened their account six minutes in, before Anthony McLoughlin turned over a free two minutes later. Come the 47th minute, the visitors goaled through Patrick O'Connor, who was played in by Anthony McLoughlin, who'd benefitted from Waterford captain Brian Looby losing his footing while attempting to cut off a deep ball down the right flank (0-7 to 1-3). O'Connor was next to score again in the 51st minute after Waterford had failed to capitalise on a well-worked upfield move and were fortunate to see Anthony McLoughlin's 55th minute free cannon high off Aaron Beresford's right-hand post and away to safety.

After Déise substitute Feargal Ó Cuirrín had pulled a decent scoring chance to the left of the Town End posts, Wicklow sub Gearóid Murphy produced the score of the night in the 59th minute when he superbly turned over a free from an acute position wide on the left flank.

But Waterford found an immediate response from Player of the Year Tommy Prendergast, to the delight of the majority of the 469 paying customers. Shane Ahearne pulled another decent chance for the hosts wide of the target in the 61st minute, which was compounded by Mark Jackson finally finding his range with a free four minutes later to send Wicklow ahead once more. With Wicklow's discipline letting them down (they ended the game with two players in the sin bin), Jason Curry availed to restore parity in the 68th minute and a second successive League draw between these sides was on the cards.

But in the first of three additional minutes, Jackson once more strode from between the sticks to rifle over a 35-metre free to secure a first League win in two years for Wicklow and leave Waterford just short of the result they craved. "Everything is vital in Division Four football," Benji Whelan conceded. "But there's absolutely no doubt in my mind that we're good enough to go up to Limerick and produce a performance, and if that performance merits a win, then that's great. From my point of view, we came in here to improve this group and once this group continue to improve, then I'm doing my job and that's what we're about at this point in time. Results will follow."