

Déise come within agonising whisker

Munster Senior Hurling Championship

Waterford 0-22

Clare 1-20

Clare left Walsh Park with a brace of points from this Munster Championship opener despite a superb late Waterford rally which so nearly made it a perfect day on home turf. Before a 11,012-strong attendance, under blue skies and in a carnival atmosphere, Waterford's unyielding determination hauled them back into a contest that looked beyond them at the break when trailing by six points.

Clare, with Tony Kelly in supreme form, looked as punch-drunk at the end of the second half as the hosts had in the closing minutes of the opening 35, when the Banner registered five of its six closing white flaggers. Ryan Taylor's point in the third minute of five additional minutes critically sent Clare two clear and despite a stunning Tommy Ryan point from Waterford's next attack, the Banner held on for victory as the hosts ran out of time.

Following Tipperary's win in Cork, Waterford will travel to Semple Stadium on Sunday next knowing that they will surely need at least a point to keep themselves in contention for a top three finish. But manager Paraic Fanning will surely take solace from the grit his team showed heading down the stretch, because they'll need every ounce of it in Thurles given that history and the odds are so heavily stacked in the Premier's favour.

Waterford opened the scoring through Austin Gleeson but two minutes later, Clare took a lead they would not relinquish between then and the interval. Shane O'Donnell, a bundle of energy and threat in the opening half, slipped the sliothar inside the 13-metre line to the unmarked John Conlon, who rounded Stephen O'Keeffe to steer the ball into an empty Town End goal.

Peter Duggan converted his first free a minute later and the home support were left gasping by Waterford's next attack when Stephen Bennett's deft flick from Kevin Moran's cross-field pass, inched wide of Donal Tuohy's left-hand post. Tony Kelly scored the first of three opening half points after six minutes, only for Conor Gleeson to immediately reply from wide on the standside flank.



Clare's Peter Duggan closes down Waterford's Tadhg de Búrca during Sunday's Munster SHC Round 1 fixture at Walsh Park.
| Photos: Noel Browne

Stephen Bennett opened his account in the eighth minute following a pinpoint Stephen O'Keeffe free, with Peter Duggan replying in kind 60 seconds later. Austin Gleeson, who was so dominant prior to a heavy knock on the quarter hour, doubled his tally in the 12th minute following Stephen Bennett's short free. Bennett turned over his first free four minutes later before Waterford lost captain Noel Connors through injury in the 18th minute.

Podge Collins and Tony Kelly sent Clare a goal clear before Stephen Bennett reduced the Deise's arrears with a 20th minute free. Shane Bennett shrugged off a heavy challenge to brilliantly find his range come the 24th minute. Ninety seconds later, Jamie Barron steered a fine point between the posts to leave just the minimum between the teams. But between then and the break, Clare went through the gears, scoring five of the half's remaining six points through Shane O'Donnell, John Conlon, Tony Kelly and a brace of superb Peter Kelly frees. Waterford's sole reply came from the stick of Mikey Kearney and by then it looked like there could be only one winner. But there were a few twists and turns yet to be negotiated in a match which produced a classic Munster Championship closing act.

A brace of Stephen Bennett points in the 42nd and 43rd minutes narrowed the margin before Peter Duggan, as sweet as striker as any at senior level, landed another free for Clare. But a further Bennett brace in the 44th and 47th minutes, followed by a stunning Austin Gleeson point raised the home voices to leave just a goal separating the sides. Duggan and Bennett traded further frees in the 53rd and 55th minutes before Tony Kelly produced another party piece point come the 57th minute. Clare substitute Aidan McCarthy made an instant impression when pointing 12 minutes from time before Stephen Bennett's 63rd minute free was deflected over the Clare crossbar to leave four points separating the teams.

Donal Tuohy dived to his right to send Austin Gleeson's 68th minute free wide before another free, this time off Stephen Bennett's stick, flew was deflected over the bar as the game entered its final regulation minute. Substitute Maurice Shanahan turned over a point in the 71st minute (producing the first Shanahan fist pump of summer 2019) before another Bennett free left two between the sides. Waterford's moment of the match was produced by Austin Gleeson when he brilliantly caught Stephen O'Keeffe's puck-out to send the ball between the uprights.

Just a point separated the teams, and one felt Waterford required the next score, with the boisterous home crowd doing all it could to will another point onto their heroes' tally. But Ryan Taylor's deal sealing score drained the air from the Waterford balloon to ensure Clare's trip home felt that little bit shorter. The tight turnaround allows little time for self-pity. Waterford know they can still turn this around, but it's going to need a greater edge in attack and a little more luck than they had in last year's fixture against Tipperary to make that possible. Let's hope a large travelling support make it to Tom Semple's field as Waterford bid to get their provincial campaign back on track.

Postscript: Credit to everyone involved in the staging of Sunday's game. From an organisational perspective, we got our first hint of what things will be like following the redevelopment of Walsh Park and it appears that, results aside, matters ran very smoothly. It was great to see so many people walking to the game, and to see a couple in Clare jerseys strolling along The Mall on Sunday evening underlined what our city has been missing out on for far too many summers: a greater connection with the Championship season.